

The Christopher Columbus Controversy: Western Civilization vs. Primitivism

[Michael Berliner](#)

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Did Columbus "discover" America? Yes -- in every important respect.

Columbus Day approaches, but to the "politically correct" this is no cause for celebration. On the contrary, they view the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 as an occasion to be mourned. They have mourned, they have attacked, and they have intimidated schools across the country into replacing Columbus Day celebrations with "ethnic diversity" days.

The politically correct view is that Columbus did not discover America, because people had lived here for thousands of years. Worse yet, it's claimed, the main legacy of Columbus is death and destruction. Columbus is routinely vilified as a symbol of slavery and genocide, and the celebration of his arrival likened to a celebration of Hitler and the Holocaust. The attacks on Columbus are ominous, because the actual target is Western civilization.

Did Columbus "discover" America? Yes -- in every important respect. This does not mean that no human eye had been cast on America before Columbus arrived. It does mean that Columbus brought America to the attention of the civilized world, i.e., to the growing, scientific civilizations of Western Europe. The result, ultimately, was the United States of America. It was Columbus' discovery for Western Europe that led to the influx of ideas and people on which this nation was founded -- and on which it still rests. The opening of America brought the ideas and achievements of Aristotle, Galileo, Newton, and the thousands of thinkers, writers, and inventors who followed.

Prior to 1492, what is now the United States was sparsely inhabited, unused, and undeveloped. The inhabitants were primarily hunter-gatherers, wandering across the land, living from hand-to-mouth and from day-to-day. There was virtually no change, no growth for thousands of years. With rare exception, life was nasty, brutish, and short: there was no wheel, no written language,

no division of labor, little agriculture and scant permanent settlement; but there were endless, bloody wars. Whatever the problems it brought, the vilified Western culture also brought enormous, undreamed-of benefits, without which most of today's Indians would be infinitely poorer or not even alive.

Columbus should be honored, for in so doing, we honor Western civilization. But the critics do not want to bestow such honor, because their real goal is to denigrate the values of Western civilization and to glorify the primitivism, mysticism, and collectivism embodied in the tribal cultures of American Indians. They decry the glorification of the West as "Eurocentrism." We should, they claim, replace our reverence for Western civilization with multi-culturalism, which regards all cultures as morally equal. In fact, they aren't. Some cultures are better than others: a free society is better than slavery; reason is better than brute force as a way to deal with other men; productivity is better than stagnation. In fact, Western civilization stands for man at his best. It stands for the values that make human life possible: reason, science, self-reliance, individualism, ambition, productive achievement. The values of Western civilization are values for all men; they cut across gender, ethnicity, and geography. We should honor Western civilization not for the ethnocentric reason that some of us happen to have European ancestors but because it is the objectively superior culture.

Underlying the political collectivism of the anti-Columbus crowd is a racist view of human nature. They claim that one's identity is primarily ethnic: if one thinks his ancestors were good, he will supposedly feel good about himself; if he thinks his ancestors were bad, he will supposedly feel self-loathing. But it doesn't work; the achievements or failures of one's ancestors are monumentally irrelevant to one's actual worth as a person. Only the lack of a sense of self leads one to look to others to provide what passes for a sense of identity. Neither the deeds nor misdeeds of others are his own; he can take neither credit nor blame for what someone else chose to do. There are no racial achievements or racial failures, only individual achievements and individual failures. One cannot inherit moral worth or moral vice. "Self-esteem through others" is a self-contradiction.

Thus the sham of "preserving one's heritage" as a rational life goal. Thus the cruel hoax of "multicultural education" as an antidote to racism: it will continue to create more racism.

Individualism is the only alternative to the racism of political correctness. We must recognize that everyone is a sovereign entity, with the power of choice and independent judgment. That is the ultimate value of Western civilization, and it should be proudly proclaimed.

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[Michael Berliner](#)

Dr. Berliner is the senior advisor to the Ayn Rand Archives. He was the executive director of the [Ayn Rand Institute](#) from its founding to January 2000.

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