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Nicolás Wey Gómez. *The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008. 616 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-23264-7.

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The Creation of Columbus's Tropics

The elegant and erudite book by Nicolás Wey Gómez is the inspiring answer to the question, formulated from the beginning in its subtitle: Why did Columbus sail south to the tropics? Wey Gomez's statements are argued against the traditional view that understood and still understands the discovery of America as the result of Columbus's plan of seeking a western route to the East, to the Indies. As Wey Gómez states in *The Tropics of Empire*, Columbus sailed south in order to find the human and natural resources that were supposed to be in the tropics. Wey Gómez's main thesis is based on the assumption that Columbus's turn to south obeyed a cosmographical tradition "that had long associated latitude with temperature, temperature with the nature of places, place with the physiology and psychology of peoples, and human nature with the "'place' that polities ought to occupy in a global world order" (p. 409). To develop his argument, the author rebuilds the cosmological ideas, the ancient and medieval intellectual traditions, which were re-elaborated, in part, as a consequence of Portuguese expansion into Atlantic Africa. This mixture of old and new ideas nourished Columbus's knowledge, his intellectual and political ambitions, and his imagination; this was the background that drove him to the south, to the tropics. Indeed, the relevance of this book lies in the fact that it is an amazing rich history of this intellectual background, which allows the author to offer a new interpretation of the Columbine enterprise and to debate and discuss several traditional Americanists' assumptions and theories. Moreover, the author links Columbus's project and interpretation of his discoveries to so-called early modern colonialism, understood according to Jürgen Osterhammel's definition as "a set of beliefs and practices associated with Christian Europe's great territorial expansion in the latter half of the fifteenth century" (quoted, p. 61), and to the origin of imperial legitimization discourses.

Wey Gómez's argument is developed through seven chapters, each devoted to one aspect of the lineage of the Columbus's geographical knowledge and its intellectual and political context. To begin, following the ancient and medieval traditions that the fifteenth century inherited, the author establishes the relationship between the concepts of place and political domain based on the hierarchical notion that temperate nations held natural lordship over the cold and hot nations. Nevertheless, not all hot regions of the globe, according to an ancient and venerable tradition, were reachable. However, an alternative tradition argued to the contrary. The latter tradition was embraced by Columbus but, to his misfortune, was not the hegemonic one. This debate is analyzed focusing on the arguments between proponents of so-called closed geography and those of open geography. The controversy climaxed in the Santa Fé *junta* that finally refused to approve Columbus's project. The supporters of closed geography were against his plan because they assumed that there were not inhabited and fertile lands in the south, but the abyss. Both traditions also explained the contradictory images of the tropics. According to the most popular tradition the tropics were believed to be a hot, uninhabitable, and infertile land populated by monsters and marvelous things and beings. On the contrary, the other tradition supported the notion that the tropics were a temperate, fertile, and populous part of the world. As Wey Gómez's argues, Columbus's view of the tropics had one foot in each tradition and this fact determined the conception of his enterprise: he was looking for fertile and inhabited tropics where monsters and marvelous things existed. After establishing this cosmological and more scientific framework, the author, especially focusing on Albertus' *De natural loci*, explains the adaptation of ancient and medieval geography within a cosmology which connected concepts of place with political theory. As Wey Gómez states, "we come to witness the transition in Albertus' argument from the idea that creatures

had a place in the cosmos according to their rank in the scale of perfection to the idea that peoples also were hierarchically distributed across the globe–indeed, that place implied position in a moral order" (p. 281).

After establishing the enlightening connections between geography, cosmology, and the origins of early modern imperial legitimizations, Wey Gómez drafts the political context of Columbus's project: the rivalry between Castile and Portugal for the control of Atlantic Africa. In order to explain this context, he analyzes the treaties and papal bulls that determined Iberian expansion overseas during the fifteenth century and Columbus's expeditions to America. From this intellectual and political background, the two last chapters are devoted to discussing Columbus's invention of American tropics and its peoples, focusing on his *Diario*. The author concludes that Columbus's distinction between latitudes drove him to believe–or state–that the Bahamas and the Caribbean were inhabited by people "politically subordinate in an incipient global order" (p. 341). According to Wey Gómez, closely following Bartolomé de Las Casas's criticism, these ideas not only meant the beginning of the destruction of the Western Indies but the origin of Spanish imperialism legitimization.

This is a seminal book that, like major historical work, establishes a dialogue with historiographical tradition in several aspects and key questions. Focusing on Columbus's theoretical knowledge, based on the scientific, technical, and geographical background of his time, and the information provided by the Atlantic Africa explorations, Wey Gómez overcomes Henry Vignaud's classical view based on the theory of the existence of an anonymous sailor who had, if we may use this word, pre-discovered America. Vignaud's theory has had more recent followers (Cecil Jane, Rómulo D. Carbia, Luis Ulluoa, Manzano Manzano, Coín Cuenca, Margarita Zamora) who stated that Columbus had never intended to reach Asia, but rather the islands of the high Atlantic. Moreover, contrary to this approach, sustained by some of these Americanists following Vignaud's theory, official documents issued to Columbus before his first voyage indicated geographically and politically contradictory destinations: Asia and the high Atlantic. Wey Gómez's thesis explains this contradiction since these documents spoke to the open geographical model that Columbus knew and followed the so-called golden rule of all exploration protocols; in other words, this apparently contradictory set of destinations could be invoked in different places and at different times.

The main goal of the book is to outline in very rich detail the intellectual origins of Columbus's enterprise, which is explained by discussing the traditional views of the Americanists following Vignaud's ideas and assumptions. One of the topics of the book, not the most relevant to the main thesis despite the fact that it appears in the title–*The Tropics of Empire*–is the relationship established between Columbus's ideas and what is called empire, imperialism, colonialism, or early modern colonialism, following works in this field by Anthony Pagden, Lewis Hanke, and Jürgen Osterhammel. More criticism of these concepts and some references to the so-called postcolonial turn, represented by authors like Jack P. Greene, could have improved a work that already is of great quality.[1]

The main sources of Columbus's ideas are known, thanks to his son Ferdinandus Columbus and Las Casas; the latter, as the author states several times throughout the book, was hostile to the Discoverer, whose enterprise he considered to be the beginning of the destruction of the Indies. The author himself explains that our understanding of the intellectual origins of the discovery has followed from these works, and acknowledges some of the problems with them. Nonetheless, there is not a proper criticism of these sources that are important for the argument.

The Tropics of Empire is, without a doubt, a brilliant book which marks a turning point in Americanist studies and the historiography of the intellectual origins of the Columbine enterprise that gave origin to the Atlantic empires.

Note

[1]. On this criticism and debate see David Armitage, "From Colonial History to Postcolonial History: A Turn Too Far?," *William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2007): 251- 254.

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