

period of censorship, the closing of schools and institutes, the exile of intellectuals and their substitution by peninsular Spanish ideologues.

Thus Puerto Rico enters the 20th century with a very weak and confused national identity; a fact that will not help Puerto Ricans confront the challenges of the new metropolis and of the new century. The work to recuperate this historical past as a tool, as a weapon, has been a very difficult uphill battle during the 20th Century; and in recent decades, in that more people express their restlessness and their discontent with the official outlines and dedicate themselves to the discussion, when we finally believed that the end of the century would find a Puerto Rico with an entrenched national consciousness and a dignified historiography of our people, we come against the 500th Anniversary celebration with the whole catalogue of archaic historical interpretations, demoralizing and decidedly insulting. On that note I believe we are facing a great test, we are in a moment to test our strength. We are going to see how much national consciousness we have succeeded in developing notwithstanding the debilitating forces, and what we can do to continue resisting the avalanche of misinformation represented by the official celebration.

Why do we oppose the celebration of the 500th Anniversary? What relevance do those events have for current Puerto Rican history? Because a history that does not apply to actual necessity is merely a useless intrusion.

Columbus's journey to the Antilles was part of a much larger and older process, that arose, in the latest, in the 14th century, from the middle ages, in a Europe that during the previous century was harassed by cycles of famine, by plagues, by demographic catastrophes, and by social disorder. And at the beginning of the 15th century, it began to evolve into a dynamic renewal, recuperation and restructuring. In the first place, it was a Europe that was growing demographically. It was a Europe that claimed the development of new political structures that could oversee the dismantlement of the feudal system and with the other challenges of the period.

Altogether this complex dynamic moved in diverse directions. First of all, Europe broadened its frontiers of activity, in searching for new means, new markets, and new lands to cultivate. In this way, Europe moved to the north toward a land that was as unfamiliar to them at that time as was Africa. And from the North it acquired its raw materials, like wood and skins, to exchange for manufactured products, in a manner that some authors

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have called colonial. They were precursors. The same phenomenon sent them to the Orient in search of spice, in search of luxurious items, both of them an opiate for a noble class in decadent development.

In the 15th century the expansion into Africa began led primarily by the Portuguese. They were motivated by the fall of Constantinople and the movement of the trade axis, from the eastern part of the Mediterranean, to the western part of the Iberian Peninsula and the Atlantic.

And we see how this precursed Columbus's voyage, how by 1434 the Portuguese had arrived at the Cape Bajador, (West coast of Africa) which had been the historic border of Africa. When the Portuguese rounded the West Coast and began to make contact with new

African peoples, they also initiated the traffic in Black slaves into the Peninsula. By 1471 they had rounded the Cape of Good Hope. Now they were on the road to India, an event that culminated in 1498 with Vasco de Gama.

Also we find a Europe that is reorganizing, that is restructuring politically; the restructuring which gave rise to the new modern states, led by certain monarchies that eventually would be absolute. And economically, breaking with the fragmentation and impossibilities of medieval commercial life, searching for new routes, developing financial means to facilitate trade. And most important of all, establishing a monetary system that made commercial trade possible. Europe began to throw out commercial nets in every direction. It was the beginning of the world economy.

Columbus's arrival in the new world was nothing but the final projection of this process. The moment was ripe, the antecedents established, the means polished. If it had not been Christopher Columbus, it would have been Juan Pérez. The moment was as ripe then as it is now for whichever astronaut to land on whichever new world; this would surprise no one.

In that 15th Century the expansion into Africa also intensified, fountain and source of all the necessary gold for Europe's commercial endeavors. But this African gold ran in a very closed commercial circuit; it came into Arab hands, and some was filtered to the Genoese, vanguard of the European mercantile, and some to the Portuguese. With the fall of Constantinople and its adverse effects on Christian Mediterranean trade, commercial activity was moving to the Atlantic coast setting the scene for the Portuguese and Castilian leadership in the competition for gold and other goods for trade. Columbus's trip was one

