



Susanne Lachenicht (ed.)

EUROPEANS ENGAGING THE ATLANTIC

Knowledge and Trade, 1500–1800

Europeans Engaging the Atlantic

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Europeans Engaging the Atlantic: Knowledge and Trade, c. 1500–1800

An Introduction

Susanne Lachenicht

1. Defining the Area – Atlantic History Revisited

Atlantic History became popular when – after the Second World War – American historian Robert Palmer and French historian Jacques Godechot “re-invented” the already existing concept of one “Atlantic World” or “Atlantic Community”. In the 1960s, Atlantic Studies seemed closely linked to a geo-political concept: the North Atlantic area where freedom and democracy had been established, mostly through the American and French revolutions and the ideas of the Enlightenment, had to be protected against a world reigned by its enemies: communism and socialism. However, from the 1990s historians Bernard Bailyn (Harvard) and Jack P. Greene (Johns Hopkins) developed a different concept of Atlantic History which sought to move beyond justifying Cold War connections and its historical predecessors.

In his *Soundings in Atlantic History. Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500–1830*, Bernard Bailyn explains that the Atlantic World “was never entirely autonomous, never wholly discrete, self-enclosed or isolated from the rest of the globe”. There were extra-regional contacts, other worlds “impinging on and often shaping developments” in the Atlantic World. (Bailyn 2009, 3)

“The question is not whether Europeans, Americans, and Africans had contacts and involvements in other regions of the globe – of course they did – or even whether those extra-Atlantic links did not at times significantly affect events in the West [...]. The vital question is whether experiences in the Atlantic realm – in trade, in governance, in social and cultural life – were not essentially different from those elsewhere on the globe, and whether the early modern Atlantic world did not have distinctive characteristics that shaped the course of world history” (Bailyn 2009, 3–4).

What were those experiences that distinguished the Atlantic World from other early modern worlds? Bailyn holds that

“only in the Atlantic did Europeans find a maritime sphere without competition – without the adversaries of the eastern oceans: Arabs, Chinese, Malays, and other maritime traders and pirates” (Bailyn 2005, 6).

As a result Atlantic historians claim A) that it was Europeans that opened up Africa and the pre-existing African slave markets (previously feeding North Africa, the peoples on the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean) to the Atlantic. Europeans fostered African slave trade in terms of numbers and treatment of slaves, unknown to Africans and slave traders before the arrival of Europeans on the West Coast of Africa. B) Unlike the experience of European expansion in the East, most colonial empires established settlement colonies or colonies in the Atlantic World where Native Americans and Africans were to a large extent integrated into the imperial systems. C) Forced and voluntary migrations as a consequence of European expansion in the Atlantic brought about contacts, creolization, exchange and interconnectedness of peoples, goods and knowledge – European, African and American – on a scale not known in the Atlantic World before the 1400s. D) Colonization, slavery, indentured servants and the exchange of agricultural and botanical knowledge fostered proto-industrial processes of production, first in the Caribbean. This, as Atlantic historians argue, brought about the process of industrialization in Europe and, consequently, major changes in politics, societies, economies and cultures worldwide.

Atlantic History did not start out with a coherent concept of space, inquiry or methodology. As Bailyn writes, Atlantic History “emerged from a plethora of scattered, localized studies and casual terminology to become a defined subject” (Bailyn 2009, 1). And – “the Atlantic region [can be considered] as a coherent whole” (Bailyn 2009, 2), in which “otherwise limited, local studies gain heightened meaning at a more general plane of significance”. Coming from this “very set of localized studies”, Atlantic historians, as Patrick O’Brien writes, suffered “from a shock of recognition, as populations we assumed to be insular, and whose events we therefore explained in terms of local dynamics, are revealed to be above-water fragments of [...] submarine unities” (O’Brien 2006, 5). Atlantic History, therefore, is about putting together, linking and comparing pieces of an ever-growing jigsaw, which helps us understand processes of change, of crucial change, in a very dynamic area of the world, that of the Atlantic

(and beyond) from the 1400s to the nineteenth century (or as some would claim – despite crucial change in the nineteenth century – to the twentieth century) (for a discussion see for example O'Rourke/Williamson 2002 and 2004).

Atlantic History today is, as I have put it elsewhere, an organizing concept for the study of the Atlantic Ocean rim. It emphasizes interregional and international comparisons and draws attention to historical phenomena that transcended national borders. It is the history of “discoveries”, of the building of overseas empires such as the Spanish, the Portuguese, the first British and the French, of migrations including the forced migrations of African slaves, of new and old economies, of the so-called Atlantic revolutions and nation-building, of the exchange of knowledge, mentalities and goods and of perceptions. Furthermore, Atlantic History is about the effects all of this had on peoples, societies, politics, economies, the environment and cultures. Change in the Atlantic World not only had repercussions in a circum-Atlantic perspective but also for the so-called back-countries or hinterlands. Change in the Atlantic World was also brought about by regions which were not or only loosely connected to the Atlantic basin.

The field of Atlantic History has been very productive for about a generation now. It has generated original studies, new ways of investigating familiar objects and also tools for looking at objects hitherto overlooked by traditional, nation-centred historiographies. It has also generated much methodological reflection. The field of Atlantic History is vast and ever-increasing. Atlantic History is just one framework which allows us to look at interconnectedness and relations. As an “open concept”, with its claims of “horizontal, trans-national, trans-imperial, and multicultural views” (Bailyn 2009, 2), it invites researchers to move beyond the Atlantic World and apply “Atlantic ways” of enquiry and analysis for other world regions or other areas of other times.

However, a closer look at Atlantic History still reveals a set of problems which have to be overcome:

- 1.) A large number of Atlantic studies focus on the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese or Dutch Atlantic. They come across as imperial or national histories; many works exclude necessary links and connections between and within those “different” Atlantics and/or ignore that some of the studied phenomena cannot be dealt with within imperial or national frameworks at all. With regard to trade and commerce histori-

ans often consider one port city, island, colony or bilateral relations (for example Clark 1981; essays in Knight/Liss 1991; Morgan 1993; de la Fuente 2008). While research topics need to be well defined and restricted in scope, some of these essays and books miss to emphasize that trade relations were more complex and multilateral than these studies suggest. Other books on trade and commerce within the Atlantic World such as David Hancock's *Citizens of the World* focus on one national, ethnic or religious group or imperial setting and ignore the merchants' multiethnic and multireligious ties and networks that functioned beyond a national or imperial framework. Some studies transcend these frameworks, though. Claudia Schnurmann's *Atlantische Welten. Engländer und Niederländer im amerikanisch-atlantischen Raum, 1648–1713* or Jonathan Schorsch's *Swimming the Christian Atlantic. Judeoconverts, Afroiberians and Amerindians in the Seventeenth Century* are but two examples of Atlantic commerce and trade and interreligious and interethnic relations respectively that move beyond the imperial history paradigm. Nonetheless, national academic traditions, institutions and their well-defined disciplines, areas of study and descriptions of job profiles, as much as a lack of language skills, still seem to hinder trans- or supra-regional area studies – those of the Atlantic World included – from flourishing as much as they could and should.

- 2.) Many studies in Atlantic History are less interdisciplinary than their research topic would require them to be. Scholars studying colonial bodies are lacking medicinal or literature studies knowledge, theory and methodology; scholars of religious minorities would need more economic or theological expertise. During a talk at Bayreuth University in July 2012, Nicholas Canny (NUI Galway) and Philip D. Morgan (Johns Hopkins) made it evident that while some efforts have been made, Atlantic History and Atlantic Studies have to open up more to other disciplines in order to understand the scope of change occurring within the early modern Atlantic World, disciplines such as medicine, botany, literary studies, geography, musicology, anthropology, ethnology and architecture.
- 3.) Questions of whether people within the Atlantic World thought of themselves as being part of one Atlantic World have rarely been addressed. Atlantic History comes with an intrinsic 'etic' perspective, as anthropologists might want to call it. Historians of the Atlantic World often leave aside the 'emic' perspective of those who formed the body

of the Atlantic World. For people living within the Atlantic World, Native Americans for example, the Atlantic might have mattered less than other concepts of space, area and belonging. Atlantic Historians have to be careful not to define “areas” from their own geo-political (in the case of Atlantic Studies particularly euro-centric) perspective. Their definition of an “area” might have very little to do with areas, centres and peripheries, boundaries and frontiers as experienced and defined by peoples’ lives or as knit together through increased exchange of knowledge, people and goods.

- 4.) Furthermore, comparisons between non-European or other European expansions, such as the Austrian Habsburg and the Russian, and the European expansion in the Atlantic World have seldom been drawn. For a long time, this has also been true for an integrated view of Atlantic and Global History. Those studies which did integrate the Atlantic experience into Global or World History (for example Cañizares-Esguerra/Seeman 2007) challenge and re-confirm the uniqueness of the Atlantic experience.

Some of these problems could be overcome by joint research projects and centres, by international co-operation and the opening up of research fields and disciplines to each other – and by acknowledging the limits of one’s own expertise, which could lead to looking for relevant research partners. Many important initiatives have already been undertaken. In 1996, Bernard Bailyn founded the Harvard Atlantic History Seminar, inviting younger scholars of Atlantic History from all over the world to present and discuss their research projects. One of the aims was to gain knowledge about other “localized Atlantic studies” and the Atlantic World at large; another, to integrate this knowledge, also in terms of available sources, into the respective research projects. In 2009, Oxford University Press started a series of commented bibliographies on Atlantic History, with more than 100 entries at present. Together with co-editors Ellen Hartigan O’Conner (Davis), Simon Newman (Glasgow), Cécile Vidal (Paris) and myself, editor-in-chief Trevor Burnard of Melbourne University not only covers as many aspects of Atlantic History as possible but tries to integrate non-English publications on all aspects of the Atlantic World. Also in 2009, I founded together with French historian Lauric Henneton (Versailles-Saint-Quentin) the biennial Summer Academy of Atlantic History (SAAH). It invites PhD students from all over the world to present and discuss their research with an equally large number of tutors, established scholars in the field, who

come – as much as the PhD students – from different academic institutions, traditions and countries and who have not only Atlantic but also European, African and Asian Studies as their background.

2. Whose perspective? Of Backcountries and Hinterlands, of Centres and Peripheries

Some scholars of early modern worlds might still feel that continental European voices within the Atlantic World have been overlooked in a research field dominated by North American and British scholars. Historians such as Hermann Wellenreuther claim that Atlantic History has often overlooked regions beyond the Atlantic Ocean rim and their relevance for the Atlantic World. Others fear that the Atlantic Ocean has become just another centre or a “black hole” which not only moves the histories of those peoples not immediately adjoining the Atlantic to the periphery geographically but also makes their histories geo-politically, economically or culturally less relevant. Atlantic History, not the least through its historical and ideological origins, might contribute to just another hierarchy of more and less important or “civilized” cultures and societies: the Atlantic Empires and their metropolises would be treated as centres of interest and meaning, all other regions would become peripheries, backcountries or hinterlands.

Centres and peripheries are relational terms: central or peripheral for whom and whose activities? The critique of Atlantic History not only invites Area Studies and Global History to claim an equal interest in all regions, peoples and cultures worldwide but also encourages a balanced treatment of their entangled histories. Atlantic History thus becomes only one area of the world that has always to be understood in relation with other equally important areas (for a discussion see for example Gould 2007a and 2007b).

The critique of Atlantic History, its seeming hierarchies, has been particularly pronounced with regard to the histories of Africa and the Americas, less so with regard to Europe and Asia. Historians of Africa such as Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton have claimed that, for the early modern period, Africa and African slavery cannot be solely understood in terms of the Black Atlantic (Thornton 1983; 1992; Heywood and Thorn-

ton 2007). African societies and cultures, North African and Sub-Saharan societies, economies, political systems and cultures have to be studied in their own right but also with regard to their many links within Africa, with the Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Indian Ocean worlds. Early studies such as David Northrup's *Trade without Rulers. Pre-Colonial Economic Development in South-Eastern Nigeria* have already dealt with political systems, commerce and trade in West Africa prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, to some extent at least (see for example Eltis/Jennings 1998). Other studies, making the African hinterlands more prominent, followed, such as Austen's and Derrick's *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers. The Duala and their Hinterland*, Curto's *Enslaving Spirits* or Shumway's *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, to name but a few. Up to the present day, an ever increasing plethora of studies have therefore drawn on the political, economic, social and cultural history within Africa, between East Africa, the Middle East, India and China, between North Africa, the Middle East and the northern parts of the Mediterranean. These fields of research have helped to decentre the Black Atlantic, or more precisely, have made the western world understand the history of Africans and Africa as more than just the Black Atlantic. Furthermore, they put the Atlantic World into perspective: for African slave traders trading slaves for alcohol in Luanda, its hinterland and "African formations inland" (Curto 2004, 11, 15) or Italian merchants and North African slave traders selling slaves to the Ottoman Empire, the Atlantic Ocean marked the periphery, not the centre of their spheres of interest.

For the Americas, the terms hinterland or backcountry for the areas beyond the Atlantic Ocean rim are well established (for example Beeman 1984; Hofstra 2004, 5–7). A number of more recent studies has made evident how important the hinterland was for the advancement of imperial Spanish, English and French interests, the wars of these Atlantic Empires and, consequently, the American Revolution (for example Hoffmann/Tate/Albert 1985; Hofstra 1998b; Ward 2003; Furstenberg 2008; Skinner 2008). The work of Warren Hofstra (1998a; 2004), in particular, led to a better and more integrated view of centres and peripheries, of shifting borders and boundaries in the Atlantic World in the process of colonization moving westwards. Some studies have also made evident how Atlantic economies depended on the backcountry, in North, Meso and South America, how much these hinterlands stimulated commerce and

trade, social and cultural change in the Atlantic World and beyond (for example van Young 1979; Brown 1986).

While the terms hinterlands or backcountry are well-established for areas beyond the Atlantic Ocean rim in Africa and the Americas, they are not common for Europe. States and empires that were not among the Atlantic empires such as the Holy Roman or the Russian Empires have rarely been treated as hinterland or backcountries. This is also true for the regions within France, Spain or Portugal that did not border the Atlantic and that could be considered hinterlands. Many studies, however, have made evident, how much peoples from these parts of the European continent impacted on and were connected with Atlantic worlds. Particularly prominent are studies on Atlantic migrations (for example Griffin 2001; Häberlein 1993; Fogleman 1996; Wokeck 1999; Fertig 2000; Lehmann/Wellenreuther/Wilson 2000). Historians have also drawn on the interconnectedness of trade and commerce of Southern and Central Europe and the Atlantic World, on activities of merchants or producers from the Holy Roman Empire, in particular from Silesia or Westphalia, or the southern European “backcountries” (Grafe 2012; Weber 2002; 2004; 2006; Schulte Beerbühl 2007; Jeggle 2011).

Some historians of early modern trade and commerce choose not to restrict the geographic area of their research topic a priori. Rather, from the study of primary sources, these historians construct merchants’ empires, spheres of interest, which also allows us to see how these merchants defined and shifted centres and peripheries (Butel 1974; Gasch Tomás 2012; Grafe 2012; Schulte Beerbühl/Vögele 2004). Butel’s study (1974) puts Bordeaux at the centre of his merchants’ activities. From Bordeaux, these merchants’ empires stretched to the Antilles, Canada, the Indian Ocean islands, the Hanseatic cities in Northern and Eastern Europe (the Netherlands, northern Germany, England, Ireland, the Baltic Sea, Russia) but also included centres of production and markets in what we might call the French backcountry. Butel analyses infrastructure, the legal, economic and social framework of these merchants’ empires which transcended and often ignored national and imperial frameworks. Bordeaux merchants linked French (ports and “hinterland”), Central and Northern European, Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds with each other. It allowed the transfer of knowledge and goods: grains, wine, slaves, sugar, timber, weapons and other. Again, this approach puts the Atlantic World into perspective. For these merchants, the Atlantic World as a coherent whole was no category

of theirs but – if at all – simply one, though important, part of the world they knew, in which they moved and made sure that their goods were sold.

3. The Purpose of this Volume

While this volume uses the Atlantic World as a category for analysis, the chapters' authors mostly write from their early modern protagonists' emic perspective. Most essays of this volume deal with what – from an Atlantic historian's perspective – could be perceived as the European hinterland or backcountry, with voices from regions such as Swabia, Franconia, Westphalia, Bavaria, Austria and northern Italy; it presents Catholic, Protestant and Jewish views on “New Worlds” or the Americas. With no obvious direct link to the Atlantic Ocean, these regions' economies, peoples, ideas and politics were nonetheless connected with what we call the Atlantic World. In this volume, these voices and contributions will not be understood as coming from the hinterland or backcountry. Rather, their *Engaging the Atlantic World* makes evident how these early modern Europeans made sense of what they might have coined “New Worlds”, and later the Americas, how much they integrated these “New Worlds” (including our “Atlantic World”) into their known world, how they defined centres and peripheries. This approach puts the Atlantic into perspective or even decentres the Atlantic World. The volume shows that the Atlantic World was important to Europeans. The question is: to whom? to what extent? and how?

In presenting new and fresh case studies on European knowledge about “New Worlds” and trade and commerce with the latter, the purpose of this book is to further contribute to a better understanding of A) how, when and why Europeans made sense of the Atlantic World (see chapters by Bérard, Schliwski and Becker) and/or B) how they tried to connect with Atlantic trade and commerce (Häberlein, Lévai, Overkamp). With case studies discussing these issues from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the volume will C) show how European engagements with the “Atlantic World” evolved, how much the latter mattered to Europeans in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and how much “the Atlantic” was (or was not) part of their worlds or just one part of one world with many centres of interest.

Julien Bérard's essay on Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, a sixteenth century view of the world known to Europeans at the time, illustrates how Ortelius gathered and forged knowledge about "New Worlds", and how he made his results available to Europeans beyond Antwerp. It also makes evident that Ortelius had an integrated view of the Americas: they had to become part of what Europeans knew, from the Bible, the authors of Antiquity and sixteenth century sciences. The Atlantic World as a separate world did not exist for Ortelius. Furthermore, the centre of this one integrated world was Europe, and more particularly Antwerp.

Mark Häberlein's chapter on the Augsburg Welser and Atlantic sugar in the sixteenth century shows how this famous trading house sought to integrate knowledge and trade opportunities into their existing merchant empire in Europe (Germany, Spain, Portugal, France, Flanders and Italy in particular), the Mediterranean, North and West Africa and East India. Häberlein's reading of the Welser business papers illustrates how and why this firm failed to successfully engage with "New Worlds" or the larger Atlantic World: due to a lack of knowledge, contacts and interest in foreign markets. Engaging with "New Worlds" was one option among many others, certainly not of primary interest to the Welser firm. Their world was still "the old": Europe, East India, and the islands off the West Coast of Africa.

In his *Joseph ha-Kohen and the Discovery of the Americas* Carsten Schliwski discusses how Sephardi refugees in sixteenth century northern Italy made sense of the "discoveries" of "New Worlds". From the number of books published in Hebrew or by Jewish authors, it becomes evident, that the Americas – for learned Sephardi Jews in Northern Italy and Southern France – were not at the core of their fields of interest. This is in stark contrast with the number of Sephardi Jews and conversos settling in the Atlantic World from the sixteenth century onwards (see for example Israel 2002; Studnicki-Gizbert 2007 and Kagan/Morgan 2008). The surviving learned books in Hebrew show, however, that similarly to "confessionalized" writings and imageries such as Theodor de Bry's anti-Spanish depictions of the Americas and American Indians, Jewish authors joined Europe's discourse on the Americas. This discourse was highly impregnated by confessional and religious divide, by persecutions of minorities back in Europe. The intellectual "appropriation" of the Americas, confessionalized historiographies and religious propaganda were inseparable.

European confessional and religious conflicts translated into the ways religious groups thought of the “discoveries” and the Americas (on confessionalized “descriptions” of the Americas see for example Canny 2012).

This also becomes clear from Rainald Becker’s contribution. While the interest in collecting Americana grew throughout Europe, especially from the later seventeenth century onwards, most scholars have focused on Protestant institutions such as Göttingen or Halle universities and their production of knowledge about the Americas (for example Wellenreuther 2008; 2013 a) and b)). Becker shows how southern German Jesuits, Pietists and princely courts used perceptions of the Americas in order to promote their confessional and educational cause, at home and abroad. Americana in southern Germany thus served Catholic and Protestant claims in the “New World” and back home. They helped divide the world in Protestant and Catholic spheres of influence and thus formed another essential part in what some scholars have dubbed spiritual geopolitics (see for example Lauric Henneton in a talk at the AFEA conference in Angers in 2013 and the conference on *Spiritual Geopolitics* to be held in Vincennes/Paris in March 2015), especially from the later seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century.

By the late eighteenth century, the emergence and consolidation of the “Atlantic World” (Canny/Morgan 2011) had progressed; new empires such as the United States of America formed and attracted interest even among European empires that had not really engaged the Atlantic World to a large extent. Csaba Lévai’s piece on diplomatic history narrates the failure of Early Republican and Habsburg attempts to establish official trade and commerce. It raises the question how much failure in officially engaging with the Atlantic (and the rising global) economy enhanced the disintegration of European and Near East empires, such as the Holy Roman, Habsburg or the Ottoman empires.

While European interest in the Americas grew exponentially from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the available knowledge about the Americas did not guarantee successful economic engagements. Firms such as the one of Abraham Frowein failed to successfully engage the growing Atlantic economy for trading tapes and ribbon. Anne Sophie Overkamp provides new insights into how Westphalian manufacturers and merchants of linen tried to gain and make use of knowledge that should have enabled them to integrate their established trade and commerce into the Atlantic

economy or – to put it differently – to further integrate European and Atlantic markets.

The contributions of this volume thus seem to confirm the process of the emergence and integration of the Atlantic World as outlined in Canny/Morgan (2011). By the mid-eighteenth century European interest in Atlantic trade and commerce, in knowledge about the Atlantic World had affected almost all parts of continental and Central Europe. Peoples and economies from the so-called hinterlands knew, not least through the endeavours made by the protagonists of this volume's chapters, about Atlantic Empires and tried to make sense of and profit from it.

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