

Major Problems in Atlantic History



DOCUMENTS AND ESSAYS

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The Varieties of Atlantic History

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We are all Atlanticists now—or so it would seem from the explosion of interest in the Atlantic and the Atlantic world as subjects of study among historians of North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa and western Europe. The Atlantic is even beginning to shape the study of literature, economics, and sociology on topics as diverse as theatrical performance, the early history of globalization, and the sociology of race. However, no field seems to have taken an Atlantic perspective with more seriousness and enthusiasm than history. Indeed, Atlantic history has been called “one of the most important new historiographical developments of recent years.” It is affecting the teaching of history at all levels, especially in the United States; it now has its own conferences, seminars and graduate programs; prizes are being awarded for the best books on it; even the first textbooks are being planned. Like the national histories it is designed to supplement and even replace, Atlantic history is becoming institutionalized. This might therefore be a good moment to ask just what Atlantic history is and where it is going, before it becomes entrenched and inflexible.

The attraction of Atlantic history lies, in part, in nature: after all, is not an ocean a natural fact? The Atlantic might seem to be one of the few historical categories

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that has an inbuilt geography, unlike the histories of nation-states with their shifting borders and imperfect overlaps between political allegiances and geographical boundaries. Atlantic history also seems to have a reasonably clear chronology, beginning with its first crossing by Columbus in 1492 (though of course he went to his death largely in ignorance of the implications of his discovery) and ending, conventionally, with the age of revolutions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There is thus a distinguished pedigree for identifying Atlantic history with “early” modernity, before the onset of industrialization, mass democracy, the nation-state, and all the other classic defining features of full-fledged modernity, a condition whose origins both Adam Smith and Karl Marx associated with the European voyages of discovery and especially with 1492.

The Atlantic’s geography should be considered flexible, for “oceans” are no less mythical than continents. The Atlantic was a European invention. It was the product of successive waves of navigation, exploration, settlement, administration, and imagination. It did not spring fully formed into European consciousness any more than “America” did, though it could certainly be found on maps—and hence in minds—two centuries before the full extent and outline of the Americas would be. It was a European invention not because Europeans were its only denizens, but because Europeans were the first to connect its four sides into a single entity, both as a system and as the representation of a discrete natural feature. The precise limits of the ocean were, of course, fluid: exactly where it ended was less clear than what it touched and what it connected as long as “the Ocean” was thought of as a single body of circulating water rather than as seven distinct seas. The chronology of Atlantic history should also be considered fluid. An Atlantic approach has already made inroads into nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. . . .

E. P. Thompson once remarked that whenever he saw a new god he felt the urge to blaspheme. . . .

If blasphemy is one response to the rise of Atlantic history, it is unlikely to provide good answers to these important questions. More profitable approaches can be found in genealogy—in the history of Atlantic history—and in anatomy—in the forms Atlantic history has taken and might yet take. . . .

The genealogical approach to Atlantic history exposes a white Atlantic with Cold War roots, a black Atlantic with post-Civil War origins in the United States, and a red Atlantic reaching back to the cosmopolitanism of Marx. Their radically different ancestries may, in themselves, have prevented any reconciliations between these different strains of Atlantic history until the advent of a supposedly post-ideological—that is, both post-Cold War and post-imperial—age. The emergence of multicolored Atlantic histories, and of histories of the Atlantic world that encompass more than just the anglophone north Atlantic, testifies to the success of cross-fertilization. Building on that success, I should like to turn to the anatomy of Atlantic history in order to propose a threefold typology of Atlantic history. Like all good trichotomies, this one is meant to be exhaustive but not exclusive: it should cover all conceivable forms of Atlantic history but does not preclude their combination. With that caveat in mind, then, let me offer these three concepts of Atlantic history:

1. *Circum-Atlantic history*—the transnational history of the Atlantic world.
2. *Trans-Atlantic history*—the international history of the Atlantic world.
3. *Cis-Atlantic history*—national or regional history within an Atlantic context.

My aim in what follows is to describe each approach, to account for its utility, and to suggest its relationship with the other two forms. I will pay particular attention to the third concept—*cis-Atlantic history*—both because it needs the most elucidation and because it may prove to be the most useful as a means of integrating national, regional, or local histories into the broader perspectives afforded by Atlantic history. I will also ask in conclusion what are the limitations of Atlantic history, both as an example of oceanic history and as a fashionable mode of historical inquiry in the English-speaking world.

1. Circum-Atlantic History

Circum-Atlantic history is the history of the Atlantic as a particular zone of exchange and interchange, circulation and transmission. It is therefore the history of the ocean as an arena distinct from any of the particular, narrower, oceanic zones that comprise it. It certainly encompasses the shores of the Atlantic, but does so only insofar as those shores form part of a larger oceanic history rather than a set of specific national or regional histories abutting onto the Atlantic. It is the history of the people who crossed the Atlantic, who lived on its shores and who participated in the communities it made possible, of their commerce and their ideas, as well as the diseases they carried, the flora they transplanted and the fauna they transported.

Circum-Atlantic history may be the most self-evident way to approach Atlantic history. However, of the three possible concepts of Atlantic history it is the one that has been least investigated. . . .

. . . Circum-Atlantic history . . . incorporates everything *around* the Atlantic basin, and it is mobile and connective, tracing circulations *about* the Atlantic world. There were, of course, many smaller zones of interchange around the fringes of the Atlantic basin, whether in West Africa, in western Europe, or around the Caribbean, which had possessed similar characteristics. Such lesser systems existed within more limited seafaring cultures which had developed their own identities and interdependence thousands of years before Columbus's voyages. The European achievement was to link these subzones together into a single Atlantic system. Within that system there was continuing interaction between the societies migrants had left and those they created together across the Atlantic: it is this achievement that allows us to say that the Atlantic was a European invention, while also acknowledging the contribution of non-European peoples to this development. In contrast, the Indian Ocean's subzones had been integrated long before the arrival of the Portuguese or other Europeans. Some commentators have seen the history of the early modern Atlantic as "a sort of precursor of globalisation at the turn of the twenty-first century." However, this overlooks the precocious integration of the Indian Ocean, not to mention that of the Mediterranean. . . .

Circum-Atlantic history is transnational history. Its conventional chronology begins in just the period usually associated with the rise of the state, that is, in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but it ends just before the epoch of the nation-state, in the mid-nineteenth century. Empires and composite monarchies, not states, were the characteristic political units of this era. The history of the Atlantic world has often been told as the sum of the histories of those empires, but such a history could necessarily encompass only European perspectives on the Atlantic system. A truly

circum-Atlantic history eludes the history of nation-states chronologically; it also overflows the boundaries of empires geographically, like the silver bullion that was drawn from the Spanish American empire into China, creating a link between the Atlantic world and the Asian trade that has been identified as the starting point for a truly global economy in the sixteenth century.

As the history of a zone, its products, and its inhabitants, circum-Atlantic history is therefore a classic example of a transnational oceanic history: classic, but not defining, because, unlike the Mediterranean of Fernand Braudel's account, it does not make up a single identifiable climatic and geological unit. As Braudel himself noted, "[t]he Atlantic, stretching from pole to pole, reflects the colours of all the earth's climates." It is thus too diverse in the range of climatic zones it straddles—from the Arctic to the Capes, and from the coastal regions of western Europe to the archipelago of the Caribbean—for geographical determinism to have any useful explanatory force. It resembles the Indian Ocean in that variety, as well as in the cultural and economic links gradually forged within it, but not insofar as those links long preceded the intervention of Europeans. And if the Indian Ocean was precocious, the Pacific was belated when judged by the standards of the Atlantic world. The Pacific also had expansive subzones which had been created by Polynesian seafaring cultures thousands of years before the entry of Europeans, but it, too, was ultimately a European creation, in the sense that it was Europeans who first saw it whole; it was also they who first distinguished it from its neighbor and tributary, the Atlantic. Yet, for all these significant differences, the oceanic histories of the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific share one important defining characteristic: that as specifically *oceanic* histories (rather than maritime or imperial histories, for example) they join the land and the sea in a relationship which is "symbiotic, but asymmetric": that is, the two are interdependent, but the history of the ocean predominates and is not the only object of study, as it would be in a strictly maritime history. The national histories of territorial states or empires are only part of this history when an ocean creates long-distance connections between them. Like all such oceanic histories, then, circum-Atlantic history is *transnational* but not *international*. That is instead the province of what can be termed "*trans-Atlantic*" history.

2. Trans-Atlantic History

Trans-Atlantic history is the history of the Atlantic world told through comparisons. Circum-Atlantic history makes trans-Atlantic history possible. The circulatory system of the Atlantic created links between regions and peoples formerly kept distinct. This allows trans-Atlantic historians to draw meaningful—rather than merely arbitrary—comparisons between otherwise distinct histories. Unlike the "symbiotic, but asymmetric" relations of land and sea traced by Atlantic history as an oceanic history, trans-Atlantic history concentrates on the shores of the ocean, and assumes the existence of nations and states, as well as societies and economic formations (like plantations or cities), around the Atlantic rim. It can bring those different units into meaningful comparison because they already share some common features by virtue of being enmeshed within circum-Atlantic relationships. Their common Atlantic history defines, but does not determine, the nature of the connection between diverse

entities; it may be excluded from comparison, as a common variable, but might itself become the object of study within a specifically circum-Atlantic history.

Trans-Atlantic history can be called international history for two reasons. The first is etymological and contextual; the second, comparative and conceptual. Both terms—"trans-Atlantic" and "international"—first made their way into the English language during the American War of Independence. . . .

Yet more than this common origin in the context of the American war identifies trans-Atlantic history with international history. Just as international history may be said to be the history of the relations between nations (or, in fact, states) within a larger political and economic system, so trans-Atlantic history joins states, nations, and regions within an oceanic system. Trans-Atlantic history is especially suited to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century histories of the Atlantic world, when state-formation went hand-in-hand with empire-building to create a convergent process we might call "empire-state-building." And it is particularly useful as an approach to the histories of those Atlantic states most prone to exceptionalism in their history—for example, the United Kingdom and the United States—but whose common features can be excavated and displayed more readily within a transatlantic frame of comparison.

Trans-Atlantic history as comparative history has most often been conducted along a north-south axis within the Atlantic world. It has therefore been performed more often as an exercise in inter-imperial history than as one in international history. . . . However, the potential for comparative trans-Atlantic histories along an east-west axis remains largely unexplored. When it has been undertaken . . . it has usually been within an imperial framework, often explicitly divided between centers and peripheries.

Yet the units of analysis could be larger and the framework more generous. . . .

Comparison as an historical tool may most usefully reveal difference, but it depends for its viability on some initial similarity. A history within the context of empire, and a history of resistance to empire, provides an obvious point of comparison between the United States and the Latin American republics, though their divergent institutional origins and distinctive traditions of religion, governance, and inter-ethnic relations also reveal intractable differences. Such comparisons can help to define more precisely the historical features of segments of the Atlantic world but only within the context of that larger trans-Atlantic perspective. Such precision of definition, taken one stage further, and out of the context of comparison, is the aim of the third and final concept of Atlantic history, "cis-Atlantic history."

3. Cis-Atlantic History

"Cis-Atlantic" history studies particular places as unique locations within an Atlantic world and seeks to define that uniqueness as the result of the interaction between local particularity and a wider web of connections (and comparisons). The term "cis-Atlantic" may seem like a barbarous neologism but, like "trans-Atlantic" and "international," it was also a child of the late eighteenth century. The parentage belongs to Thomas Jefferson, and the barbarism, not to the coinage itself, but to the very condition against which Jefferson defined the term. That barbarism—along

with feebleness and shrinkage—had been imputed to the fauna of the New World by European naturalists like the comte de Buffon. Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), had replied by adducing a wealth of information to rebut charges based (as he thought them) on mere ignorance and prejudice:

I do not mean to deny that there are varieties in the race of man, distinguished by their powers both of body and mind. I believe there are, as I see to be the case in the races of other animals. I only mean to suggest a doubt, whether the bulk and faculties of animals depend on the side of the Atlantic on which their food happens to grow, or which furnishes the elements of which they are compounded? Whether nature has enlisted herself as a Cis or Trans-Atlantic partisan?

Jefferson thus used the term to mean "on this side of the Atlantic," to distinguish it from the trans-Atlantic world of Europe, a meaning he amplified politically when he told James Monroe in 1823 that it was in the interest of the United States "never to suffer Europe to inter-meddle with cis-Atlantic affairs." The term was thus both a badge of difference and a marker of a novel American perspective just as it was defined in relation to the Atlantic Ocean.

Cis-Atlantic history, in the more expansive sense proposed here, is the history of any particular place—a nation, a state, a region, even a specific institution—in relation to the wider Atlantic world. . . .

Cis-Atlantic history may overcome artificial, but nonetheless enduring, divisions between histories usually distinguished from each other as internal and external, domestic and foreign, or national and imperial. The rise of nationalist history in the nineteenth century coincided with the invention of extra-national histories, whether of diplomacy or of imperial expansion. The boundaries between such histories have, until recently, remained mostly impermeable until the rise of postwar multilateralism, decolonization, and the creation of transnational federations, along with separatist sentiment at the subnational level, together helped to dissolve some of those boundaries. Larger narratives of historical development may be harder to dislodge. For example, the processes implied by the labels "early modern" in European history and "colonial" in the histories of British or Spanish America are distinct from one another: "early modern" implied a movement toward modernity, while "colonial" denoted subordination within an empire that would precede independence and the acquisition of nationhood and statehood. Latin American history rarely, if ever, has the label "early modern" applied to it, and attempts to encourage the replacement of "colonial" with "early modern" in North American history have not been entirely successful. The incompatibility of such master-narratives has been especially debilitating in studies of the period called, variously, "early modern" and "colonial," not least because it has obscured the continuities between processes usually kept apart, such as state-formation within Europe and empire-building beyond it. Like the comparisons made possible by trans-Atlantic history, so cis-Atlantic history confronts such separations by insisting on commonalities and by studying the local effects of ocean movements.

Cis-Atlantic history, at this local level, can be most fruitfully applied to the very places most obviously transformed by their Atlantic connections: port towns and cities. For example, Bristol's economy moved from a fifteenth-century dependence on the wine trade to its seventeenth-century concentration on Atlantic staples. This involved not only a radical re-orientation from east to west, and from Europe to the

Americas, but also upheavals in the social order, in the disposition of cultural space, and in the distribution of power. Similar transformations can be traced in other settlements around the Atlantic basin, whether on the Atlantic coasts of Europe and Africa, in the cities of the Caribbean, or along the eastern seaboard of North America. For example, crossing points within the Atlantic world gained new significance when imperial rivalries increased and local polities took advantage of the competition for their allegiance, as among the Kuna Indians of the isthmus of Darién. Wherever local populations encountered or collided with outsiders (not always Europeans), "middle grounds" of negotiation and contest arose like this which would not have existed were it not for the circulation and competition created by the thickening of the connections within the Atlantic system. Likewise, new economies arose to meet novel demands, whether by the wholesale export of the plantation system from the Mediterranean to the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or, arising more organically, by gradual specialization like that among the wine-producers of Madeira in the eighteenth century who created their eponymous wines in direct response to various consumers' tastes. . . .

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Braudel warned that "the historical Mediterranean seems to be a concept of infinite expansion" and wondered aloud: "But how far in space are we justified in extending it?" One might wonder the same about the Atlantic, and about Atlantic history. Circum-Atlantic history would seem to extend no further than the ocean's shores; as soon as we leave the circulatory system of the Atlantic itself, we enter a series of cis-Atlantic histories. Trans-Atlantic history combines such cis-Atlantic histories into units of comparison; the possibilities for combination are various, but not infinite, because adjacency to the Atlantic determines the possibility of comparison. Cis-Atlantic histories, though superficially the most precisely bounded, may in fact be those of greatest extension: such histories protrude deep into the continents of the circum-Atlantic rim, indeed as far as the goods, ideas, and people circulated within the Atlantic system penetrated. Cis-Atlantic histories of entirely land-locked regions would then be possible.

The three concepts of Atlantic history outlined here are not exclusive but rather reinforcing. Taken together, they offer the possibility of a three-dimensional history of the Atlantic world. A circum-Atlantic history would draw upon the fruits of various cis-Atlantic histories and generate comparisons between them. Trans-Atlantic history can link those cis-Atlantic histories because of the existence of a circum-Atlantic system. Cis-Atlantic history in turn feeds trans-Atlantic comparisons. Such a set of cross-fertilized histories might show that the Atlantic's is the only oceanic history to possess these three conceptual dimensions, because it may be the only one that can be construed as at once transnational, international, and national in scope. Global comparisons among different oceanic histories have barely been imagined yet, but they should be central to any future oceanic history.

Atlantic history has not yet suffered the death by a thousand textbooks that has befallen other fields. It has no agreed canon of problems, events, or processes. It follows no common method or practice. It has even begun productively to escape the early modern boundaries of c. 1492–1815 within which it has most usually been confined. Like the Atlantic itself, the field is fluid, in motion, and potentially boundless,

depending on how it is defined; that is part of its appeal, but also one of its drawbacks. It is unlikely to replace traditional national histories and it will compete with other forms of transnational and international history. However, as a field that links national histories, facilitates comparisons between them, and opens up new areas of study or gives greater focus to better-established modes of inquiry, it surely presents more opportunities than disadvantages. Atlantic history—whether circum-Atlantic, trans-Atlantic, or cis-Atlantic—pushes historians towards methodological pluralism and expanded horizons. That is surely the most one can ask of any emergent field of study.

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