

THE CARIBBEAN AND THE ATLANTIC WORLD ECONOMY. CIRCUITS OF TRADE, MONEY AND KNOWLEDGE, 1650-1914

Adrian Leonard & David Pretel (eds.), *The Caribbean and the Atlantic World Economy. Circuits of Trade, Money and Knowledge, 1650-1914*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, 319 pp.

In the last two decades or so, Atlantic history arose as a cultural, geographic and historical paradigm that led scholars to focus primarily on transoceanic connections, empire-state building, and cultural difference.¹ By «inventing» a new field of historical study called the Atlantic –as David Armitage argued–² European historians focused on intra-imperial interactions between metropolitan centers and their new-world colonies. As a result of considering the unity of the Caribbean and by extension the Atlantic world as a by-product of European imperialism, Atlantic history was simply reduced to the rationale of an exploiting metropole. However, other scholars, such as Charles Tilly,³ drew the attention to macro-historical processes, particularly to the study of the development of the Atlantic World economy and its evolving global circuits (1-2). The aim of this collection of essays is to drive forward a broader Atlantic history that nonetheless falls into the trap of modernity, a concept that is generally missing from the major part of individual essays (with the exception of Oostindie's). Paradoxically, this concept ends up reinforcing the essentialisms it criticizes throughout the book, which on the other hand provides new insights on knowledge and economic exchanges not only in the American and African Atlantic Worlds, but also in the western European coastal nations which invented

1. Bailyn, Bernard, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2005; Bernard and Patricia L. Denault, «Introduction: Reflections on Some Major Themes», in Bailyn, Bernard and Patricia L. Denault (eds.) *Soundings in Atlantic History. Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500-1830*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 1-8; Elliot, John H., *Empires of the Atlantic World. Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007; Elliot, John H., *España, Europa y el mundo de ultramar (1500-1800)*, Madrid, Taurus, 2009, pp. 21-26.

2. Armitage, David, «Three concepts of Atlantic History», in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (eds.), *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2002, pp. 11-27; Armitage, David, *Greater Britain, 1515-1776: Essays in Atlantic History*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004.

3. Tilly, Charles, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1984, pp. 74-76.

them. Economic world history and historical sociology provide the theoretical and methodological insights to answer larger questions of European economic growth, divergence and industrial revolution.

At the turn of the 15th century the opening of newly discovered lands to Europeans allowed transition from a medieval to a modern economy. Colonization was part and parcel of the historical making of the Atlantic economy. As evolving to enlightened modernity, Europeans abandoned imperial mercantilist systems in favor of a more modern, open system of commerce that turned the Atlantic into the arena of world trade, commerce, finance, and agricultural and industrial production. If economic historians strove to understand the origins of the uneven material development by polarizing Atlantic economy (the advanced, industrial territories and the so-called «backward» ones), contributors to this volume do not privilege a single explanation (such as slavery) or a grand theory (such as entrepreneurial spirit) but a number of complementary explanations. Following Wallerstein's world-system model, they adopt a system approach based on Western institutions and politics (a metropolitan center) that exercised an overwhelming influence on the economic peripheries (7). However, prestigious Atlanticists, such as Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, have been long warning against historiographic dichotomy of core-periphery due to its oversimplifying nature.⁴ More often than not local dynamics have been understudied and therefore, stereotyped treatment of the «exploiting metropole» goes together with a few «peripheries», such those in the Caribbean, which became world leaders in sugar production and over time shifted to core when compared to other local «peripheries».

The reviewed volume places itself within this historiographical debate by challenging the (Eurocentric, empire-focused) core-periphery model that perceives the Caribbean as a passive recipient of core innovations (10). By bringing a cultural perspective to economic history, contributors seek to have a better understanding of the socioeconomic changes that occurred in the Caribbean and the European metropolises. In addition, most of essays explore the interplay between local conditions and long-distance networks which privilege an inter-imperial approach. These networks cannot be simplified to «centers» or «peripheries» because they are cross-national and cross-imperial (9-10).

The book opens up with an interesting piece by David Ormrod. He focuses upon the North Sea-Baltic trading system and its entry into the larger matrix of regional change under two headings: institutions and environment. As Ormrod has already pointed out, the North-Sea/Baltic zone was a world in itself containing its own core and periphery areas.⁵ As a result, a «balanced view of Atlanticization» should be taken into account.

4. Cañizares-Esguerra, Jorge, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006. See also Assis Kalil, Luis Guilherme & Luiz Estevam de Oliveira Fernandes, «Historia atlántica e intelectualidad: una entrevista con Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra», *História da historiografia* 7, 2011, pp. 14-28.

5. Ormrod, David J., «Institutions and the environment: Shipping Movements in the North Sea/Baltic zone, 1650-1800», in Unger, Richard W. (ed.), *Shipping and Economic Growth, 1350-1850*, Leiden, Brill, 2011, pp. 135-166.

One that makes clear that intra-European trade was much more important than transatlantic trade for both England and the Netherlands up to 1750. Reflecting upon K. Pommeroy's influential *Great Divergence* (2000), Ormrod argues that «abolishing the land constraint» allowed the land-intensive products of the Atlantic to bring unique advantages» to Britain, but at the cost of restructuring older trading systems. The momentum behind the rise of the Atlantic World, as Ormrod remarks, depended to European «change and adaptation» (31).

By combining marine archeology and extensive archival research, archaeologist Chuck Meide's contribution supports Wallerstein's insistence that relative relationships between centers and peripheries were not fixed. The study of a dataset of 1.431 shipwrecks lost in Florida led him to conclude that some areas, notably North America, transformed from a periphery to semi-periphery to a core power in their own right (38). In a similar vein, Adrian B. Leonard explores the trading change pattern from Rhode Island to the West Indies. In the 18th century, a prominent merchant of Providence, such as Obadiah Brown (1712-62), began to assume a central role in insuring merchant vessels and cargoes. This chapter provides an interesting cultural perspective by exploring the transmission of merchant culture and custom from the Old World to the New (137-160).

Nuala Zahedieh's chapter focuses on the impact of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) in the island of Jamaica, which scholars has long recognized as the cradle of colonial privateering. Particularly Zahedieh has been one of the first scholars to identify the close links between illegal trade and the rapid commercial growth of the colonies. In her essay she criticizes Patrick O'Brien's thesis (2011) and demonstrates that Britain's mercantilist warfare was not of benefit of trade. On the contrary, it instead damaged the very commerce it was intended to bolster (74, 291). By exploring inter-imperial trading relationships, she overturns the historiographical argument that the War of the Spanish Succession was self-financing (291). Knick Harley also questions another historiographic trend: that of Eric Williams. In his *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), Williams stated that the institution of slavery and the trade flows it engendered were the catalyst of the Industrial Revolution in England. However, Harley considers that Williams overemphasized the role of slave colonies, arguing that the northern mainland colonies would have found alternative export goods in order to fund their demand for European manufactures (182).

Manuel Covo's contribution centers in Baltimore's close connections with post-revolutionary France, demonstrating that far from isolated from the French Caribbean, the town's merchants were deeply involved with commercial vessels arriving from Saint-Domingue. Rather than considering Baltimore a French city, Covo demonstrates how those merchants, turned into historic actors, were actively carrying coffee and sugar from the French Caribbean and receiving numerous refugees from the Haitian Revolution (87-107).

Without denying that Dutch territorial and commercial expansion in the early modern period was not primarily directed to the Atlantic, but rather to Asia, Gert Oostindie's essay shows how the Dutch Atlantic was more important to the Republic than has gener-

ally been realized.⁶ Despite the loss of Pernambuco (1654) and the New Netherland (1667), the Dutch Republic emerged from its revolt against Spain as a decentralized state. Following Jan de Vries' hypothesis (2005), the Dutch West Indian Company (WIC), based on the innovative model of the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC), was not directed by a metropolitan state. Rather, it was open migratory, commercial, financial, and information networks what allowed Dutch actors «to play a more important role in the development of an increasingly integrated Atlantic World than one would expect on the basis of the small size of their homeland or the number and dimensions of their colonies» (109). In contrast, Martin Rodrigo's contribution focuses on the international flow of capital from the Spanish Caribbean, mainly Cuba, back to European centers such as Barcelona, Paris, and London. His contribution questions some of Kevin O'Rourke and Jeffrey Williamson's theses: first, that the first wave of capitalist globalization took place earlier than 1870; second, that after the second third of the 19th century «center-periphery financial flows were preceded and accompanied by capital flows from the periphery to the center» (235).

After his renowned monograph on sugar industry in Martinique,⁷ Dale W. Tomich delved into geographical and physical conditions of sugar production, in connection with the technology deployed to maximize it. Rather than studying geographical configurations, human labor and nature separately, Tomich argues that all these factors must be considered alongside political and institutional ones to have a better understanding of the sugar island's success. Similarly, David Pretel and Nadia Fernández de Pinedo analyze the interconnections between the Cuban economy and the historical processes of the greater Atlantic World. Starting from a macro-historical perspective, they link human agency and networks to shifting technology in sugar production. Of particular interest is the active participation of Cuban Creole elites in the modernization of sugar plantation, which functioned as the main promoter of the modernization of industry through the diffusion of foreign technology and the attraction of foreign experts in the mid-19th century Cuba (282). In doing so, they explore the interaction between global developments and the local perspective, specifically in non-Spanish Europe, the US, and Cuba.

Lastly, Inés Roldán de Montaud also focuses on Cuban sugar plantation economy, but from the perspective of finance. Existing studies of Barings' Brothers have routinely understudied the connections with 19th century Cuba. In recent years she has filled the gap by exploring the role these merchant bankers played in the process of mobilizing the island's agricultural export economy (239). As editors pointed out, her essay clearly illustrates the way in which transnational organizations superseded imperial links in the provision of capital which underpinned Cuban sugar production (12).

To sum everything up, this volume offers an up-to-date study of the scholarly debates

6. See also Oostindie, Gert & Jessica V. Roitman (eds.), *Dutch Atlantic Connections, 1680-1800. Linking Empires, Bridging Borders*, Leiden, Brill, 2014.

7. Tomich, Dale W., *Slavery in the Circuit of Sugar: Martinique and the World Economy, 1830-1848*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

on the Atlantic World economy, which includes not only the British empire but also France, the Dutch Republic, Spain, and the United States. In addition, it provides «a trans-imperial understanding of the complex web of connections on which the Atlantic economy rested». As Martin Dauntoun remarks in the afterword, unlike other approaches, which focus on only one empire, this volume is concerned with the interconnections between different empires, paying special attention to their differences of structure and policies.⁸

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8. Dauntoun, Martin, «Afterword: Mercantilism and the Caribbean Atlantic World Economy» (in this volume), p. 290.