

Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal edited
by Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan

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The modern study of Atlantic history, it is generally agreed, was conceived in the late 1960s at John Hopkins University and has been in the ascendancy over the past twenty years. As Peter A. Coclanis notes, Atlantic theory can no longer be dismissed as ‘faddish’ or ‘fashionable’ as it once was. Rather, the hypothesis that in the early modern period much can be illuminated by approaching the Atlantic as a site of interactions and exchanges between apparently disparate areas would appear to be in rude health, with university departments, postgraduate courses, textbooks, seminar series and international conferences devoted to the field. Yet, the editors still detect much ‘angst’ amongst researchers about its direction and future and, thus, Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan have assembled a collection of essays from noted scholars to interrogate the concept. This is a ‘critical appraisal’ designed perhaps to temper some of the proselytising enthusiasm for which Atlantic historians have drawn censure. Therefore, although offering a robust and spirited defence of Atlantic theory in their introduction, they offer a generous amount of space amongst the essays for doubters and naysayers.

The essays are divided into three sections, the first deals with the Atlantic from separate European imperial perspectives. The Spanish Atlantic most notably in South America, the Portuguese between Africa and Brazil, the Dutch in the Caribbean, and the

notable history of the French Atlantic with the Haitian revolution and the subsequent impact of Haitian refugees on the history of Louisiana are presented in clear, lucid essays which marshal the uneven historiography of the Atlantic within their respective academies, and argue for its potential usefulness. Trevor Burnard's essay on the British Atlantic, the study of which has been the most successful institutionally, strikes more of a warning tone. Although the general consensus across all the essays is that the main advantages of Atlantic history lie in its potential to escape the strait-jacket of nation-state historiography and in the re-positioning of Africans as central to the development of modernity (far more Africans crossed the ocean: 2.3 million to the British colonies alone between 1600 to 1800, compared to 1 million Europeans), Burnard takes care to detail the 'limits of British Atlantic history' (p. 127). The most significant of these are that 'British Atlantic historians display strong assimilationist and homogenizing tendencies in their relentless search for connections' (p. 128). Furthermore, he argues that the disconnection from nation-state history has resulted in a lack of explanation of how the Atlantic affected the internal histories of nations.

The second section takes a regional approach, considering the impact on the Atlantic continents of 'Indigenous America', Europe and, in what is the stand out essay of the collection, Philip D. Morgan examines 'Africa and the Atlantic World 1450-1820'. In this essay, Morgan assesses the controversial subject of African involvement in the slave trade:

By no means were all Africans victims or dupes. Indeed, a voluntary partnership best captures the relationship between African traders and rulers and European merchants and ship captains. (p. 225)

Morgan skilfully reads agency into the African slave sellers who ‘called the tune’ dictating the conduct of the trade, without exonerating blame from the European buyers. The picture emerges of a power struggle between classes and peoples within Africa. The multi-various kingdoms, states and peoples of Africa, despite their diverse attitudes and laws generally accepted enslavement (especially of prisoners of war) as a form of labour. Thus, Morgan illustrates that an internal ‘over-land’ slave trade had existed before the arrival of Europeans and, initially, the European traders tapped into this existing network. However, the ever-increasing demand for slave labour in the Caribbean and the Americas accelerated and warped that network, generating inner turmoil and warfare amongst African states. The centuries-old movement of people in Africa had never created a surplus reserve of slaves before the demands of the Atlantic slave trade. Despite its controversial nature, this essay portraying Africans as ‘active agents, voluntary partners, major shapers, if not actual originators of Atlantic trade’ (p. 240) seems ultimately more humanising and accurate than the picture of Africans as passive victims, as well as presenting an excellent example of the benefits of a sophisticated Atlantic approach.

Finally, the third section presents alternative theories which address some of the perceived weaknesses of Atlantic theory. Researchers of the native peoples of the Americas note that the study of the Atlantic tends to focus on contact zones on the shores of the ocean and is less useful for understanding the indigenous peoples further inland. Consequently, Peter H. Wood offers a ‘Continental Approach’, taking as his vantage point a spot above the North Pacific ocean gazing eastward across the North American continent, in which the colonial endeavours of Europeans on the Atlantic seaboard appear not as a heroic advance Westward but an encroachment from

the East. In response, Jack P. Greene queries why such a viewpoint must be cut off at a line north of the Rio Grande. He argues that a 'Hemispheric perspective', promoting broad comparative analyses across both North and South America and the Caribbean islands with a focus on comparative histories rather than seeking Atlantic connections, would be 'in virtually every respect...superior to a continental one' (p. 308). The third alternative approach is 'Global History' which itself is currently accused of being 'faddish'. It addresses the problem that the Atlantic was never a self-contained 'unit', yet Atlantic theory tends to overlook wider connections. For example, the importance of the 'East', where Columbus originally believed he was headed, is diminished.

Ultimately, it seems Atlantic history is here to stay, it should, however, maintain a flexible and open-minded approach. The 'competing perspectives' offered in this collection of essays are extremely useful to any student or researcher of the early modern period as they provide an opportunity for critical reflection on theoretical standards. Arguing for a continental or global approach to *replace* Atlantic theory seems less convincing than finding *complementary* perspectives. The Atlantic remains coherent enough to merit further study though it should not be seen as an enclosed and exclusive unit. The direction for the future will be to consider how the inter-connections, crossovers and exchanges which have been identified in the Atlantic are played out on a continental, hemispheric and global scale.