

Atlantic History: Concept and Contours. By *Bernard Bailyn*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005. ix + 149 pp. Notes, index. Cloth, \$18.95. ISBN: 0-674-01688-2.

Reviewed by Peter A. Coclanis

No field is hotter in history right now than Atlantic history. With the possible exception of Jack P. Greene, no one has done more than Bernard Bailyn to underwrite, promote, and shape this field. No better introduction to the field exists than the book under review. And no introduction to any field in history is deeper, more thoughtful, or more enjoyable to read. And I say all of this as somewhat of a critic (albeit a friendly one) of Atlantic history!

Bailyn's two-chapter book is deceptively simple in organization and structure. As the title suggests, the study is concerned with the concept and contours of Atlantic history, and the author devotes a chapter to each. Although the first chapter—on the genealogy of the concept of Atlantic history—is excellent, the second, on its contours, is in my view more than that. Simply put, it is a masterly demonstration of the power of the historian's art.

The principal assumption behind Atlantic history is that during a certain period of time (Bailyn and most other advocates of the approach focus on the so-called early modern period lasting from about 1500 to 1800 C.E.) Europe, West Africa, and the Americas were sufficiently integrated economically, socially, culturally, and politically to be able to invite, indeed to demand, treatment as an integrated whole. According to this view, analyses based upon the notion that one could just as profitably study subjects such as the West African slave trade or the Portuguese seaborne empire in splendid isolation during this period are misguided. Rather, these subjects not only lend themselves to a broader perspective, but perforce are only understandable when considered in the broader Atlantic context.

If the field of Atlantic history has only become dominant in recent years, it has long, tangled roots, which Bailyn lays bare in chapter one. Bailyn argues that, strictly speaking, the origins of Atlantic history can be traced back to Walter Lippmann's 1917 editorial in the *New Republic* on what would later be called "the Atlantic community." The author is quick to point out, however, that the field qua field did not really begin to emerge until exigencies relating to the Second World War focused greater public attention on the profundity of the historical and cultural ties between Europe and America. In the postwar period, a variety of public-policy groups began to articulate what might be labeled an Atlantic agenda, while at the same time various cohorts in the academic community, acting through what Bailyn calls "the interior

impulses of technical scholarship” (p. 4), were also starting to see the efficacy of treating developments in the Atlantic world in a unitary way. Over time, the work of these discrete groups of Atlanticists amplified one another—probably unwittingly, or at least unintentionally—and since the 1960s and 1970s the “social situation of those who write history” (p. 4) has become increasingly conducive to the adoption of an Atlantic perspective, a preferential option for the integration of the history of the Atlantic basin, as it were.

Bailyn traces the contributions of these groups in glorious detail, and, in the process, rescues little-known organizations and long-forgotten scholars from the vastness of the past. In so doing, we learn much about the large cast of characters, individual and corporate, that contributed in one way or another to the development of Atlantic history. However impressive Bailyn’s account—and it is impressive—this reviewer was surprised not to find any mention of the contributions to this field made by scholars associated with Marxist and world-systems traditions, mostly notably by Marx himself and also by Immanuel Wallerstein. To be sure, one might plausibly argue that their concern was the rise, expansion, and elaboration of capitalism in the early modern West, rather than the integration of the Atlantic World per se, but nothing contributed more to such integration during the early modern period than capitalism, at least in my view.

Enough petty carping: let us move on to chapter two, Bailyn’s brilliant depiction—what I would call an analytical narrative—of the shape and contours of Atlantic history over the period 1500–1800. Bailyn sees the Atlantic World passing through three distinct historical phases over this long period, which phases did not occur at the same time throughout the hemisphere. He emphasizes the fact that Atlantic history should be seen as a *process* rather than as a condition, repeatedly stressing that the Atlantic basin during the early modern period was truly a protean space, a “world in motion,” as he famously put it in an earlier book.

In the first phase—a harrowingly brutal one, marked by ruthless barbarism and social disorder—Europeans, along with the subjugated (and often disoriented) Africans they brought with them, confronted Native Americans in various American arenas. There were few heroes in this time of confrontation, according to Bailyn, as Europeans and Native Americans alike generally tried, to the best of their respective capabilities, to annihilate one another. Gradually, however, “at different times in different places” (p. 81), Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans came to terms with one another in the Western Hemisphere, and order and stability—largely imposed by Europeans, or at least consistent in the main with their preferences—emerged. During this second phase of Atlantic history, the Americas and West Africa were increasingly integrated into an emerging “Atlantic system” dominated by Europeans, European Americans,

and selected legatees. Once order and stability were established, it is not surprising that we begin to see (to greater or lesser degrees) economic and social development, as well as institutional articulation and cultural elaboration in the American colonies. With such changes, classes of Creole elites came into existence, establishing the conditions necessary for Bailyn's phase three: the process of self-discovery and identity formation among said elites, which over time led everywhere in the Americas to demands (by elites and others) for greater respect, autonomy, and control. The process, in other words, led tortuously, but seemingly inexorably, to independence.

This, in a nutshell, then, is Bailyn's argument in his riveting second chapter. Although I have never felt completely comfortable with the Atlantic history bit—I believe that the approach artificially separates the Atlantic basin from the rest of the world, and, as a result, is too often marred by what might be called interpretive truncation—Bailyn makes about as good a case for Atlantic history as we are likely to get. Clearly, both *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* and its author merit the strongest praise, the greatest kudos, and the utmost respect by historians of all stripes.

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