Book Reviews


Since the 1970s, when the history of Latin America and the Caribbean first appeared on university syllabuses alongside the history of the United States, Americanists, compelled in part by US exceptionalism, have tended to compare, synthesise and generalise within their own ‘areas’ rather than view the hemisphere through a single lens. Broader hemispheric comparisons have been few, confined to particular themes, such as slavery, immigration or frontiers, or to specific episodes, such as the revolutions of independence. The rise of Atlantic and global history has not corrected this myopia. Atlantic approaches usually confine themselves within colonial linguistic boundaries while global history has often betrayed its British imperial bias and paid little attention to the first European-led globalisation under Portugal and Spain while relegating Latin America’s influence on global history following the demise of the Iberian empires to a secondary league, dependent upon the drivers of the world economy in the industrialising North Atlantic.

This anthology offers a refreshing alternative to these approaches by providing an ‘integrated history’ of the Americas. Five essays develop particular themes: colonial capitalism, Revolution and Iberian constitutionalism, slavery and abolition, ‘indigenous independence’ and the great divergence in the Americas after 1850. Seven essays explore these themes in particular countries, four – the United States, Haiti, Cuba and Brazil – selected on grounds of their substantial slave populations, and three – Mexico, Guatemala and Peru-Bolivia – for possessing indigenous majorities. The overarching purpose of the anthology is to demonstrate how the first Iberian-led globalisation from c.1500, driven in part by American silver, sugar and slavery, contributed to the age of revolutions and profoundly influenced the course of the second globalisation, based upon Britain’s industrial strength.

Contributors were invited to explore the experience of colonialism, imperial reform, revolution and early state and nation building in particular regional contexts, and to explore processes and outcomes from the perspective not simply of elites – bureaucrats, miners, merchants, landowners and entrepreneurs – but of particular subaltern groups – indigenous gatherers, nomads and mission populations, indigenous agrarian communities, hacienda employees and their foremen, plantation slaves and ‘freed men of colour’ – who found in the long crisis of empire and early trials of nation building space for pursuing their own agendas. In part a socio-ethnic history of European settler capitalism in the Americas, the collection also gives prominence to political history and explores the relation of each country to the wider Atlantic and global contexts.

John Tutino is an exacting yet amenable editor whose intellectual concerns and stimulating dialogue with his contributors are evident throughout the book. His first two chapters lay out at length the themes and approaches which constitute this
‘integrated’ history, identifying three areas of recent historiography that he believes need to be addressed in order to ensure a proper place for the Americas in any broader global history. The first is the importance of American silver to the expansion of the global economy after 1500, due in particular to the little explored Asian demand for silver, the principal medium of exchange of the Chinese empire. For more than three centuries silver shaped the Andean and Mexican economies, gold performing a similar function in Brazil from the 1700s and in the United States after 1848. Anchoring this collection, as with all of Tutino’s influential work on Mexican rural sociology and political movements, are his four decades of research on the Bajío region, agricultural and manufacturing heartland of New Spain’s silver mining districts, quite the wealthiest region of the Americas in 1800. The decline of silver production in the Andes from the early eighteenth century and the sudden collapse of Mexican silver mining after 1810 had enormous repercussions not simply for the American but for the global economy, hastening China’s decline and spurring the rise of British dominance based upon industrialisation, the gold standard and paper currency.

The second theme which Tutino deems necessary to address in order to achieve an ‘integrated’ history is popular protest and rural insurgency. Here he links the patterns of agrarian and communal protest of the indigenous and mixed-race peasantries of the Mesoamerican and Andean highlands with the slave protests and uprisings of the Caribbean islands and the Atlantic seaboard. Two devastating events, the slave uprising in Haiti in 1791 and the priest-led popular uprising in Mexico in 1810, transformed the international environment for America’s two most profitable commodities, enslaved labour and silver specie. The anthology traces the onset and consequence of these events in particular regions and in the wider Atlantic and global contexts.

The third theme that Tutino introduces as a leitmotiv for the anthology, marking a refinement of his own approach which until recently has privileged the economic and social determinants of historical change, is the interplay between Atlantic colonial rivalry and warfare (‘war capitalism’), political conflict within empires and liberal constitutional innovations emanating both from the American and French revolutions and from Hispanic traditions of popular representation and sovereignty. The contributors have been provided, then, with a scaffolding of economic, social and political perspectives upon which to construct their contributions to an ‘integrated’ history of the Americas which takes account of specie, currency and commodity flows, the precarious fortunes of regional economies upon which colonial projects rested, patterns of resistance among mixed-race peasantries, indigenous communities and African slave populations exposed increasingly over the eighteenth century to economic and political shocks, and, finally, the lure of liberal constitutionalism, popular sovereignty and early nationalism. How do the contributors perform against Tutino’s challenging agenda?

Following Tutino’s schema, the anthology proceeds through three parts. The first, ‘Hemispheric Challenges’, comprises two chapters. In ‘The Americas in the Rise of Industrial Capitalism’, the editor develops a dense, lengthy but important exposition of how the first globalisation shaped the second. In ‘The Cádiz Liberal Revolution and Spanish American Independence’, Roberto Breña elegantly distils recent bicentennial literature on ‘Hispanic liberalism’ with particular emphasis on how its success as a replacement for absolutism derived from its ability to draw on a Spanish ‘historical nationalism’ as much as on British or French precedents.

Part II, ‘Atlantic Transformations’, contains four chapters on countries whose economies were based to a lesser or greater degree on African slavery. In ‘Union, Capitalism, and Slavery in the “Rising Empire” of the United States’ Adam Rothman beautifully
and succinctly tells the story of how a string of coastal trading colonies that in 1781 signed a ‘peace pact’ became over the next half century, as a result of successful Indian and foreign wars, a continental empire. Rothman’s choice of ‘The War of Northern Aggression’ to refer to the ‘Mexican/American War’ shows how the US historian has embraced the spirit of the volume. In ‘From Slave Colony to Black Nation: Haiti’s Revolutionary Inversion’ Carolyn Fick demonstrates how a close reading of political events, giving due attention to local actors, constitutional initiatives and regional socio-economic differences, can shed new light on the Haitian Revolution and its critical importance to our understanding of American and Atlantic history. In ‘Cuban Counterpoint: Colonialism and Continuity in the Atlantic World’, David Sartorius show how hard local elites, backed by metropolitan authorities, worked to protect Cuba from the joint contagion of Haiti and Spanish constitutionalism in order to ensure the stability necessary for the expansion of the island’s sugar- and slave-based economy. Even progressive Cubans, such as the Proudhon-inspired Ramón de la Sagra, justified the removal from Cuba of the constitutional freedoms enjoyed in metropolitan Spain for fear that they might become ‘a seductive spectacle for an unhappy race that can neither understand nor enjoy them’ (p. 185). Sartorius focuses on debates and projects for the island devised by Cuban creoles and Spanish administrators, curiously omitting – given the popular tenor of the volume – reference to protests, conspiracies and constitutional initiatives hatched among the mixed-race and African-Cuban population. In ‘Atlantic Transformations and Brazil’s Imperial Independence’ Kirsten Schultz starts with excellent synthesis of Portuguese colonialism in the Americas, stressing the importance of the Methuen treaty in providing a protective shield for Portugal’s revolution in government during the eighteenth century. She then traces Britain’s part in securing Brazil’s conservative independence and emergence as a stable continental power based upon export agriculture and slavery, in the face of unsuccessful provincial uprisings, the resistance of indigenous polities and the ‘insurgent geography’ of Afro-Brazilian resistance to slavery.

Part III, ‘Spanish American Inversions’, contains four chapters in which the consequences of the end of colonialism and decline of silver production are discussed in countries with indigenous majorities. In ‘Becoming Mexico: The Conflicative Search for a North American Nation’, John Tutino and Alfredo Ávila, leaving to one side the functionalism characteristic of so much of Tutino’s work, provide a very clear and readable (another improvement on Tutino’s former work) analytical narrative of Mexico’s troubled passage from silver-rich colony to mid-century prostration at the hands of the United States in the ‘War for North America’ (the second renaming of the war of 1846–8 in the volume). In ‘The Republic of Guatemala: Stitching Together a Country’, Jordana Dym provides a meticulous regional explanation of how Guatemala emerged as a nation-state separate both from Mexico and the rest of Central America, by focusing on the political underpinnings of the complex ethnic and regional balance between the ladino East, the Creole Centre and the indigenous West. This chapter ends too abruptly; a look forward at the Liberal period under Justo Rufino Barrios would give Dym’s excellent analysis added resonance. In ‘From One Patria, Two Nations in the Andean Heartland’ Sarah C. Chambers provides an elegant and lucid account of Peru’s troubled eighteenth century, hesitant independence and divided early statehood, giving particular attention to the rival mixed-race caudillos and indigenous caciques who voiced competing regional and ethnic nationalisms. Finally, in ‘Indigenous Independence in Spanish South America’ Erick Langer draws on recent ethno-history in a bold and brilliant analysis...
of the consequences of the collapse of the colonial state from the perspective of the indigenous populations of Andean highlands and adjacent lowlands, concluding that ‘[D]uring this period, while new nations often struggled, many indigenous peoples enjoyed unprecedented independence’ (p. 351). In the epilogue, ‘Consolidating Divergence: The Americas and the World after 1850’, Langer and Tutino look ahead at the how the inversions and divergences explored in this ‘integrated’ history of the Americas fared under the second period of European imperialism and its aftermath in more recent times.

Seasoned teachers of the history of the Americas will find much in this anthology that echoes and clarifies their own efforts to map out hemispheric patterns and plot wider connections. Students of the Americas, particularly those at more advanced levels, and specialists of other regions and disciplines will benefit from the effort the authors have made to create an ‘integrated history’ of the Americas that views events from a broad social and economic perspective, takes proper account of contingency, particularly the impact of organised violence and warfare, and addresses both the commonality and the diversity of the historical experience of the hemisphere. Further testimony of the care and thoroughness with which the volume has been conceived is provided by the clear and beautiful maps, expertly drawn by Bill Nelson, that enrich the analysis of each essay of this excellent anthology.

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A holistic understanding of Atlantic slavery requires scholars to comprehend the vastly different types of slaveries that constituted it. While recognising the centrality of rural plantation captivity in the making of the Atlantic World, the editors of The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade compellingly argue for the importance of cities in shaping the lives of African-descended peoples who rapidly built the Black Atlantic world in the era of plantation slavery. The volume thus explores the textured ‘world of forced cosmopolitanism and desperate cultural adaptation’ (p. 6) through 12 case studies based in urban settings across Europe, Africa, the Portuguese and Spanish mainland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic, focusing especially on the eighteenth century. As the introduction posits, the ‘relative liberty of the city’ (p. 6) afforded opportunities for independence and mobility for African captives and their descendants that troubled the attempted hegemony of early modern European domination.

The volume is divided into four parts with a total of twelve chapters. Part I explores the complex emergence of African identities in three spaces of the urban Black Atlantic: Freetown, Sierra Leone, Ouidah in present-day Benin, and Bahia, Brazil. David Northrup’s essay examines the identity formation of liberated Africans in nineteenth-century Freetown through the dual process of creolisation, with the adoption of English-language, Christian and Western schooling practices, and Africanisation, or the ‘awareness’ of distinct African ethnic ‘nations’ produced in the aftermath of the Middle Passage. Robin Law’s chapter documents the making of Ouidah as a multi-ethnic, pluralistic major port city with heterogeneous European, African and