

Introduction: The Iberian Atlantic and the Making of the Modern World

Fernand Braudel wrote that “Europeans... neither discovered America and Africa, nor first penetrated the mysterious continents.... Europe’s own achievement was to discover the Atlantic and to master its difficult stretches, currents and winds. This late success opened up the doors and routes of the seven seas. From now on the maritime organization of the world was at the service of white men” (Braudel, 1979, pp. 62-63). The Atlantic was the decisive axis of European expansion. Its mastery made European conquest and colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade possible, which, in turn, shaped the maritime Atlantic as a human and historical space. The vast spaces of the Atlantic were transformed into a hinterland of European commercial centers. Europeans, initially Iberians (largely backed by Italian capital), transformed Africa into a slaving frontier and the Americas into commodity-producing frontiers whose wealth was exploited through coerced and enslaved labor. This world was historically structured by the formation of empires, colonies, routes, forts, entrepôts and trading posts, and zones of specialized production, including plantations, mines, farms, and ranches. These channeled flows of people, goods, and ideas and organized space. In the Americas, in contrast to Europe’s long-distance trade with the rest of the world, populations and the production of key commodities were incorporated into the sphere of European control. A division of labor was created between Europe, Africa, and the Americas that sustained the formation and expansion of a capitalist world market, the process in which, in the words of Marx, “the modern history of capital starts to unfold” (Marx, 1976, p. 247).

Braudel’s approach to the Atlantic raises the question of the region’s broader significance as a historical space and the proper unit to understand it. For him and a number of other scholars, most notably Eric Williams (1944), who set much of the historiographical agenda over the twentieth century with the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*, the Atlantic was a key component of the development of capitalism. This perspective has not lacked opponents and from various theoretical perspectives. A number of Marxist scholars have isolated the relations of production and elected them as the defining element of the system, crudely projecting selected parts of Marx’s *Capital* into history. In its classic formulation, the cradle of capitalism becomes the English countryside, where for the first time capital confronted wage labor as a result of the gradual destruction of the peasantry. Other accounts include the Netherlands or even Medieval Italy in this narrative, but the approach

is one and the same: the confrontation between capital and wage labor is the essence of the capitalist mode of production (Aston and Philpin, 1985; Milios, 2018). As a result, there is no room in this bibliography for a discussion of the Atlantic world as a constitutive part of capitalism, since it largely depended on the expansion of slavery and other forms of coerced labor overseas. Another group of scholars has worked with quantifiable data and variables in order to show that the “contribution of the periphery was peripheral” to the development of Europe. The cliometric procedure is basically to create variables from the historical data that allow measuring the significance of international trade within total national income, usually reaching the conclusion that it was too low (Engerman, 1972; O’Brien, 1982). A percentage is thus considered to be an expression of historical relevance or irrelevance. Here the concept of capitalism disappears as it is conflated with the more general idea of economic growth, but these conclusions were nonetheless embraced by a number of Marxist scholars, who took them to be a confirmation of their nation-based interpretation of capitalism (stimulating their restricted focus on the class struggle within specific nations) (Cardoso, 1975). The more recent field of Global History, in some of its versions largely inspired by the same cliometric methods of the New Economic History, but at times reaching different conclusions, has reopened the debate on the relationship between capitalism and slavery by reaffirming the importance of the Atlantic world to European development. The most influential example here is Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence* (2000), which considers the Americas as a new kind of periphery that gave Britain the ecological relief necessary for industrialization. Other global historians, however, such as Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giraldez (2002), have dismissed the idea that the Atlantic comprised a specific unit within this broader history, calling instead for the analysis of what they consider to be a truly globalized market since 1571. Despite the differences between these historians, all of them dismiss the concept of capitalism as a Eurocentric invention, a theoretical step that has become very common in present-day historiography (Pomeranz, 2009; Flynn, 2020). One of the obvious dangers here is to further extend the unrepentant effort from economists to naturalize categories that are historically specific.

The Iberian world occupies a very strange place in the discussions outlined above. For a certain strand of Anglo-centric Marxism, the Spanish and Portuguese empires are the feudal Other against which capitalist England is usually compared. Recent efforts to include the history of slav-

ery into historical accounts of capitalism using this same theoretical framework have equally dismissed the history of Iberian expansion as a completely different affair. In his recent work, David McNally (2020, pp. 122-123) discusses the Iberian world in two pages before moving on to the history of modern capitalism within the British world, reproducing Smithian views of the Iberian empires that tell us more about the *leyenda negra* than actual Iberian thought and practices. Studies of neo-institutionalist inspiration do not fare much better. The classic distinction between a “first Atlantic” built by Iberian powers and a “second Atlantic” of northern Europeans by Pieter Emmer (1991) isolates the two over time and space as two self-enclosed units. The first was mainly feudal, despite some “capitalist enclaves” in the Brazilian sugar-producing areas of the Northeast, while the latter was truly capitalist, which for him is synonymous with the presence of markets. Despite a passing reference to the contraband slave trade from Curaçao to Spanish America, the Iberian world basically disappears in Emmer’s description of the second Atlantic. In sum, neither Emmer nor McNally are able to analyze the persisting importance of the slave Atlantic as a whole because they create isolated units of analysis: the Second Atlantic or the British Atlantic, both disconnected from the broader developments that made them possible. A number of global historians have in turn either diluted the Iberian world within an undifferentiated Atlantic (Pomeranz) or dismissed the Atlantic as a relevant concept in the face of global dynamics (Flynn and Giraldez). Moreover, the dismissal of the concept of capitalism has ultimately led to a projection of categories created by the history of capital to all of human history, in a clear example of what Immanuel Wallerstein (1997) once called “anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism.” The recent wave of works on the so-called New History of Capitalism offers an important counterpoint to this problem, but the excessive focus of these works on the nineteenth-century U.S. also relegates the Iberian Atlantic to an awkward place (thus reproducing some of the problems described earlier).

The field of Atlantic history, when understood not as a new form of imperial history (with self-enclosed Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and British Atlantics), has greatly advanced our knowledge of inter-imperial and trans-imperial historical processes, thus showing some of the specificities of the Iberian Atlantic and its continuing importance after the rise of North Atlantic empires (although criticisms of a persisting Anglocentrism within the field have also appeared) (Steele, 2007). The dismissal of the concept of capitalism nonetheless had some costs, especially for the understanding of the broader significance of those connections. The two main books representing the field make almost no reference to the debate on capitalism and slavery that had concerned an earlier generation (Bailyn, 2005; Greene and Morgan, 2009).

Inspired by the works of Fernand Braudel (1984), Vitorino Magalhães Godinho (1963), and Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco (1969), among others, we present this dossier as an opportunity to discuss the Iberian Atlantic

as a critical component of capitalism’s historical trajectory. Our intention is to further our understanding of both the unity and diversity of the Atlantic slave trade, Atlantic slavery, and Atlantic history by bringing particular studies into a common framework and creating a shared dialogue. Instead of an undifferentiated Atlantic over three centuries, we conceive the Atlantic as a historical region of the European world economy that was formed by the complex interrelation of global and local histories, including those related to the Iberian Atlantic system (Berbel, Marquese, and Parron, 2016). The most effective way to do this is to think of the Atlantic as part of what Braudel calls a “set of sets.” Rather than taking particular relations, processes, and places as isolated or discrete units with their own histories, such an approach focuses on the formation of specific relations within the broader framework of the Atlantic and the capitalist world economy. This offers a great opportunity to outline different aspects and the significance of the Iberian empires for the Atlantic world and, by extension, to the making of the modern world. In our view, this is a particularly important task when we see that the recent boom in studies on the history of capitalism has advanced very little beyond the Anglocentrism of an older approach. The Iberian Atlantic system remained fundamental throughout the early modern era and beyond.

All of the essays of the present dossier explore different aspects of three key commodity frontiers of the Atlantic world that were largely the creation of the Iberian Atlantic system over the long sixteenth century: precious metals, sugar, and slaves. All three were strongly connected and conditioned by each other. Iberian expansion financed by Italian capital over the long sixteenth century was a vector in the creation of a world market, the unfolding of the modern biography of capital. This differentiation of the Atlantic region began with the Iberian expansion. Portuguese control of the Cape Verde islands gave it control of the African coast, the South Atlantic routes, and the routes to Asia, while Spanish control of the Canary Islands gave it access to the Caribbean and the South American mainland. Sugar production accompanied this expansion. It surpassed the levels of production attained by the earlier Mediterranean sugar industry and continued to grow as new and larger frontiers of production were progressively established. In the Spanish Atlantic, it moved from the Canary Islands to the Caribbean, where it stagnated because of both the progress of the Brazilian sugar industry and the shift of the main focus of Spanish colonialism to silver production in the highlands of Mexico and Peru after the conquest of the American mainland. In the Portuguese Atlantic, sugar moved from Madeira to São Tomé to Brazil. The growing demand for labor and Portuguese domination of the African coast forged the fateful link between the slave trade, African slavery, and the sugar plantation. The main structures of the sugar complex were established as the frontier moved from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic islands, reaching its apex in Brazil and the Caribbean. The construction of the sugar frontier depended on a number of factors that shaped its forms and differences over time and space, including slave resistance, as

shown in the co-authored essay by David Wheat and Gabriel Rocha, which focuses on the extremely rich case of a plantation in sixteenth-century São Tomé. Dale Tomich in turn shows the connections, tensions, and contradictions between the mental and material forces that shaped the expansion of the sugar frontier in Brazil through a study of Antonil's classic book *Cultura e opulência do Brasil por suas drogas e minas*.

The Portuguese presence in islands such as São Tomé and Cabo Verde accompanied by the territorial conquest of Luanda and the establishment of a network of *presídios* into the African interior were in turn key components of the construction of the most efficient slave-trading structures of the early modern era, with Angola becoming the main source of enslaved Africans throughout that period. Details of this massive activity - which was responsible for the coerced migration of more than 600,000 individuals in West Central Africa over the long sixteenth century (1492-1640) alone - are still being uncovered by historians, and the contracts sold by the Portuguese crown that allowed for the taxation of specific activities and areas was a key component of it, as shown by the articles by Manuel Fernández Chaves and Maximiliano Menz. The Angola contract largely financed the Portuguese political and military presence in West Central Africa, which was in turn a fundamental component in the structuring and reproduction of slave trading operations in the region. The slaving frontiers of Angola became an indispensable part of the construction of the Iberian Atlantic system. One of the long-term consequences of the Treaty of Tordesillas was to leave most of Africa out of Spanish hands, thus making the Spanish empire dependent on non-Spanish merchants who had access to enslaved Africans. This role was largely fulfilled by the Portuguese over that period, who basically built and controlled the main structures of the traffic over the long sixteenth century. The main instrument for this was the *asiento de negros*, a contract that was sold to foreign merchants allowing them to introduce a number of enslaved Africans for a defined period of time. Such contracts were facilitated by the dynastic union of the crowns of Aragon and Castile and the kingdom of Portugal between 1580 and 1640. Thus it is not a coincidence that, as exemplified by the case discussed by Fernández Chaves, many of the merchants involved in the Angola contract were based in Seville and Madrid.

On the other side of the Atlantic, a large number of captives went not only to the sugar plantations of Portuguese America but also to Spanish America, as shown by Jennifer Wolff and Leonardo Marques in their contributions to the present dossier. While few enslaved Africans were put to work in the Peruvian and Mexican silver mines, they were key for the construction of the "economic space" of silver, cultivating foodstuffs, raising animals, manufacturing textiles, opening roads (and carrying commodities through them), building fortifications, ships, and cities, among many other key aspects of the silver trading routes (Sempat Assadourian, 1983). A number of them were certainly also taken to the sugar sector of Veracruz (which had a significant sugar production but

was mostly consumed within New Spain itself), one of the key points in the circuits of slave reshipment and circulation described by Wolff. It was also as part of this slave trade to Spanish America that Rio de Janeiro emerged as an important slave-trading port, playing a key role in the contraband network that connected Brazil to Potosí, as discussed by Marques.

The entrance of North Atlantic powers into the Atlantic eventually led to the breaking of the Iberian monopoly that had been established by the Treaty of Tordesillas, leading to the creation of a new historical structure, the North Atlantic system. The Dutch played a key role in this, as shown by the classic work of Alice Canabrava (2005), preparing the way for the establishment of Dutch, English, and French colonies in America. The creation of this system marked a new moment in the history of capitalism, and consequently, a restructuring of the relationship between slavery and capitalism, as described by Tomich in his commentary on the transformations of the sugar frontier over time. There is no question that a number of innovations marked this new time of historical capitalism. But much of this was built and continued to depend on the previous structures that had been established by Iberian powers in the long sixteenth century. The Caribbean plantations that emerged from this context carried many new elements, including new forms of labor organization such as gang labor, a more integrated plantation unit, and new technologies but it also carried elements of the sugar world that had been established by the Portuguese.

At the same time, the Brazilian gold boom, which transformed Rio de Janeiro, as shown by Marques, and intensified the slave trade in Angola, with the entrance of North Atlantic actors in financial aspects of this story, as shown by Menz, was also strongly connected to the world economy as a whole. It was both a product and producer of the broader reconfiguration of capitalism. A massive number of enslaved Africans were carried to the Brazilian interior to extract gold, as detailed in Corona Pérez's article; much of this gold (perhaps as much as two-thirds) was redirected from Portugal to Britain during the first half of the eighteenth century, playing a crucial role in the stability of the British pound and in the creation of crucial financial developments for Britain in the context of its wars against France for hegemony within the capitalist world-system, as classically described by Braudel. This stable financial environment allowed for the expansion of investments on both sides of the Atlantic. In this sense, slavery in the Brazilian gold fields was in some ways connected to the growth of plantation slavery in different British colonies (Marques and Marques, forthcoming).

In sum, the articles of the present dossier explore various aspects of the Iberian Atlantic system, in various scales and frameworks. While one will certainly find differences in the theoretical approaches and inspirations, we believe that all of them successfully highlight aspects of a world that was absolutely central to the creation and development of a capitalist world economy over the early modern period, and that depended on the expansion of slavery and other forms of coerced labor. The debate on

capitalism and slavery cannot remain confined to the British world or any other specific empire; it must be a debate on capitalism and Atlantic (in the wider sense of the word) slavery or it will always be incomplete. It is this truly Atlantic context - of which the Iberian Atlantic system was a crucial component - that explains the history of capitalism, something that has escaped much of the scholarship on the subject, even among those who present themselves as Atlantic and global historians.

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Dale W. Tomich

Binghamton University

e-mail: dtomich@binghamton.edu

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6405-2473>

Leonardo Marques

Universidade Federal Fluminense

e-mail: lm@id.uff.br

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1276-2769>

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