

# The Legacy of the Atlantic Program

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We came here -- Rich, Emily and I -- in 1974-75. We started teaching in 1975, so that 1995 will be the 20th anniversary of the Department of Anthropology. The department was created partly with the initiative of the History Department, and the Dean of Arts and Sciences, George Owen. Hence the department really came into being in some kind of adjunct or linked relationship to the Atlantic program.

The Program's purpose, as I understood it, was to elevate the study of social relationships historically by integrating work being done on Africa, the Americas and Europe. For those of us who were connected with it at the outset, it represented an attempt to go beyond departmental limitations in order to look at issues taking shape at the junctures between disciplines -- or that transcended or surmounted disciplinary boundaries. Because it was intercontinental, even though it had a geographic orientation, it managed in some ways to escape geography. It wasn't "area studies" in any old sense and none of its parts was considered as a "culture area."

The Atlantic Program facilitated interdisciplinary cooperation at a number of different levels. The Methodology Seminar in Anthropology and History was co-taught about every other year. Historian John Higham taught it once or twice with Katherine Verdery of the Anthropology Department, Rich Price taught it with David Cohen, I taught it with Richard Kagan. Students would read a dozen monographs, half in history and half in anthropology and report on them, discuss them in class.

I regard the seminars conducted under the auspices of the Atlantic Program as a high point in my own educational experience. Bringing together, as we did, in one room people from three, four or more disciplines to hear papers that were still being written, that were still in process, was immensely valuable, not only for the writers, but also for the participants. We heard a lot of views ventilated and though some seminars, of course, weren't successful, many were.

Students in both history and anthropology were also encouraged to present their summer research findings, and many faculty presented papers. It was common to use the seminar as a kind of sounding board for all kinds of papers. For students, faculty and outsiders, I think it was really effective.

Over the years we've also had a whole series of scholars who wanted to be here and came with their own money, as Visiting Fellows. In just the past

two years, for instance, we've had two Caribbean specialists, Gert Oostindie from the Royal Institute in Leiden and Jean Besson from Goldsmiths College in London. They came and stayed for several months, writing and interacting with us. Both made presentations to the Atlantic seminar, and Jean generously offered to teach a course in Anthropology. Next year we're hoping to have Stephan Palmie from the University of Munich, and Christian Krohn-Hansen from the University of Oslo. Myriam Cottias of the C.N.R.S. (Paris and Martinique) may be with us in the next month or two, as well. All of these folks are Caribbean specialists. We've been able to encourage people to come spend time here as they wish in this fashion, because it actually adds to what we're able to do.

The Atlantic Program also sponsored conferences. Most of them were very modest and, I thought, very good conferences -- usually one-day workshops. These would bring eight or ten people together, there would be papers and discussion all day long, breaks for lunch and dinner and then everybody would go home. Those worked very well; it was an inexpensive, effective arrangement, pioneered by David Cohen.

The limitations of the Atlantic Program, I suppose, had to do principally with a kind of conceptual problem that is difficult to explain concisely. One could say -- and this has been my view of it all along -- that the Program represented a particular epoch in the history of the world economy; and because it did, it had to do with a particular relationship among societies and states, a relationship that over time has continued changing. Since, let's say, the zenith of this Atlantic system or this Atlantic economy -- which I would place somewhere around the middle of the 18th century -- there has been a continuing rearrangement, renegotiation, reordering of relationships among regions and continents, and among states. In a sense, then, the Program had committed the participants to a particular historical and geographical frame which is not always easy to leave behind.

That is not to say that the students who took part in the program were restricted in any way in their choice of theme or sphere. But if we take certain specific problems -- for instance, say someone is interested in the Manila galleons and the relationship between Mexico and the Philippines -- our focus may not have been the best way to address it. Now that, of course, was a spin-off from the Atlantic system -- a consequence of discovering the New World and all the rest -- but it could hardly have been called "Atlantic." Or if someone were interested, for example, in the diffusion of cultivated plants from the New World to the Pacific area, to Asia -- these kinds of interests couldn't be handled as effectively in our Atlantic formula, as they might be in some other.

Hence one way in which the Institute can serve a very effective purpose, I think, is by surmounting that historical time frame, and looking at the evolution of the world economy and its parts in the post-18th century epoch. The Institute can provide a more open framework or context within which to look at issues that are not strictly Atlantic in nature.

The Institute could open up a different range of possibilities in terms of disciplines as well. The Atlantic Program operated very much on a cooperative basis between History and Anthropology, though Anthropology was and remains far smaller than History. In any event, most Atlantic activities were limited largely to those two fields.

The extent to which other disciplines will be involved in the future depends on how seriously people regard the mission of the Institute. My own feeling, for instance, regarding the anthropological side of things, is that anthropology is rooted very heavily, in its traditional strength, in ethnography. I have the feeling -- I know it's not shared universally -- that ethnography continues to be an important part of the field. I think it would be unfortunate if there came a time when it was thought that ethnography could be completely replaced by textual analysis. I imagine that in the list of topics that the Institute has developed, there are grounds for lots of research that could draw on the skills and insights of people in the humanities and the other social sciences.

If you take a person with interests such as my own, for example -- I'm very interested in the way native economies, including market systems, assimilated over time to larger economic systems. If one looks, for instance, at the open markets in West Africa, in Indonesia, in India, one can see how, over time, those markets are eventually taken up in some way by larger currents.

I think that's the kind of thing that could be studied comparatively in interesting ways: in what fashion has the evolution of market systems differed, say, in the New World from what has happened in the Pacific? The culture history of commodities is another example. I'm very struck by the fact that there remain so many important commodities for which we don't yet have a culture history. We're just beginning to get histories of coffee, of maize, of other such products. But generally those histories haven't yet been written. In areas such as these, the comparative evolution of market systems, the cultural histories of commodities, the Institute can make a massive contribution, surmounting geography and history in a new way.