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Impact of the Atlantic World on the "Old Worlds" in Europe and Africa

Université de Nantes, France, June 7-9, 2010

An International Conference on the Impact of the Atlantic World on the "Old Worlds" in Europe and Africa from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries, will be held at the Université de Nantes, France, June 7-9, 2010.

The Atlantic world, formed between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, maintained tight relations with the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific. Its specificity, however, lay in the conjunction of three interrelated phenomena whose entangled effects were not found elsewhere: European colonization, the slave trade, and racialized slavery. This symbiosis led to the formation of original new societies in the Americas, which differed from the European, African, and Native societies from which they were born. Moreover, the societies of origin in the "Old Worlds," from which large numbers of people left for the Americas, were also forever changed in return.

If the new Atlantic history has benefited from an enthusiastic reception, it has also given rise to intense debate. One of the numerous criticisms, as voiced by Alison Games, is that the new historiographical current risks offering only "an expanded history of the colonial Americas." In order to verify the relevance of the Atlantic paradigm, this conference seeks to reverse viewpoints by focusing on the transformations in Europe and Africa that resulted from their integration in trans-Atlantic dynamics. While the new Atlantic history has mostly been investigated by historians of the "New World," and while specialists of North America clearly dominate the field, this conference seeks to reach out to historians of Africa and Europe in order to enlarge and enrich a still unexplored question. The goal is thus to gather together the whole community of historians potentially concerned with Atlantic history.

Since the Atlantic world was born of both European and African migrations, the conference will consider both continents together. Atlantic history begins with the Portuguese explorations along the coasts of West Africa from the outset of the fifteenth century. These travels led to the development of long-lasting phenomena: the beginning of the Atlantic African slave trade first to Europe then to the Americas, the creation of the big slave plantation model in the
African islands like São Tomé before its transfer to the "New World," and the formation of the first Creole societies in the Euro-African Atlantic world. However, Europe and Africa were not linked by the same imperial relations that united Europe and the Americas. The Atlantic slave trade developed precisely because the African kingdoms maintained their sovereignty. It is only from the middle of the nineteenth century that Europeans really began to colonize the interior of Africa, while the Atlantic slave trade was abolished everywhere. The comparison of the impact of the Atlantic world on Europe and on Africa will be one of the main questions of this conference.

Which Europe and Africa were affected by these transformations? No frontiers have been set a priori: the relative importance of the Atlantic world in geographical and social space with variable dimensions is another question that will to be explored during the conference. In addition, the inclusion of all social actors means that we will take into account individuals and groups from all social and ethnic backgrounds. One first series of interrogations will deal with the degree to which various Africans and Europeans' lives were affected by the formation of an Atlantic world. Who was concerned by and who cared about the Atlantic world? Was the Atlantic world part of the social imagination of European and African populations and societies? Who had knowledge of it; what was the quality of that information; how did they acquire it? Who were the individuals and groups that had imperial and Atlantic interests?

In order to analyse all the possible transformations of Africa and Europe that resulted from interconnections developed in the Atlantic world, the conference intends to exclude no historical field from the collective reflection, including political, military, economic, social, religious, and cultural arenas. Of course, it will be impossible to exhaust all of these research inquiries: the conference only aims to raise new questions as to how an Atlanticist perspective reveals new perspectives on European and African history.

The conference also does not wish a priori to put aside old debates, such as the demographic impact of European and African migrations on areas of departure, the role of the slave trade and colonial trade in the launching of the industrial revolution, the effects of the slave trade on African economies, or the transformations of consumption in Europe and Africa, if they are renewed with original perspectives, through, for example, the comparison between Europe and Africa. In regard to the impact of trans-Atlantic exchanges on European and African economies, several gateways are conceivable, such as the conditions and effects of the marketing of one product (European or American in Africa / American or African in Europe), the complexity of trade circulations and networks through various scales of analysis, the interlope on European coasts,
the rivalries between African states and European powers on African coasts, war not as a recurrent accident that disrupted Atlantic exchanges but as a means to restore trade balances and payments of the various colonial powers, etc.

As for the socio-cultural effects, papers might consider migrations of "Americans" from all backgrounds (the return of European migrants and the arrival of Natives, African slaves, and free people of color in Europe, as well as projects of colonization by former slaves and descendants of slaves in Africa), the slave trade to Europe, the settling of Europeans and the formation of Euro-African societies in Africa. It would also be very fruitful to consider the "New World" as a space of social experimentation for re-considering work, gender, and race on the other side of the Atlantic. Through a complex system of circulations back and forth, European and African societies were transformed by the development of racial ideologies and the racialization of political and social orders that went with the formation of an Atlantic world.

Finally, the conference will explore the nature of political relations linking Europe and Africa to the rest of the Atlantic world. Papers could re-consider, concepts of domination, empire, and the "colonial situation," or trace the evolution over time of these political forms and systems, before, during, and after the era of revolutions. Since the emphasis is on the "Old Worlds," particular attention should be paid to imperial institutions, colonial lobbies, debates related to the colonies, slave trade, and slavery, and to the abolitionist movements in metropoles. The role of imperialism in the development of modern states in Europe and the transformations of African kingdoms with their integration in trans-Atlantic dynamics will also be of interest.

If you would like to present a paper at the conference, please send a short CV and a summary of your paper (no more than 2,000 characters) in French, English or Spanish before October 31st, 2009. Papers will be selected before November 30, 2009. The papers may not exceed 60,000 characters or 10,000 words (including spaces, footnotes, and bibliography). They will be pre-circulated and thus must be sent to the organizers before April 30, 2010. During the conference, papers will be quickly summarized in order to give more time to the discussion, which will be initiated by a commentator. French, English, and Spanish will be the languages of the conference. Summaries, CV, and papers should be sent to the organizers by e-mail: Guy Saupin, CRHIA-Université de Nantes: guy.saupin@univ-nantes.fr Cécile Vidal, CENA-EHESS, Paris: cecile.vidal@ehess.fr.