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### Thirty-Five Years Of Atlantic Port Cities

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**Alejandro de la Fuente, with the collaboration of César García del Pino, Bernardo Iglesias Delgado.** *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. xiii + 287 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3192-2.

**Patrick O’Flanagan.** *Port Cities of Atlantic Iberia, c. 1500-1900.* Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. Illustrations. x + 332 pp. \$144.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-6109-2.

**Reviewed by** Robert DuPlessis (Swarthmore College)

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### Thirty-five Years of Atlantic Port Cities

In an influential 1974 article, Jacob Price compared the major port towns of the thirteen British North American colonies, suggesting typologies of trading functions and merchant communities, and sketching relationships among commercial, occupational, and demographic development.[1] Though Price was an early practitioner of Atlantic history, he did not present this essay within an explicitly Atlantic framework. A decade later, however, it served as the reference point for a symposium that defined port cities in the Atlantic world as an identifiable group, and, in a subsequent volume (*Atlantic Port Cities: Economy, Culture, and Society in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850*, edited by Franklin W. Knight and Peggy K. Liss [1991]), offered a collection of papers on Caribbean and Iberian American ports that investigated themes that Price had raised.

Recent books by Alejandro de la Fuente and Patrick O’Flanagan contribute, if diversely, to this historiographic tradition. Both are concerned with the effects of state policies on Atlantic port city development. But while de la Fuente deals, like most authors in the Knight and Liss collection, with a single port in Spain’s American colonial empire, O’Flanagan follows Price in comparing half a dozen ports, albeit in the Iberian mother countries rather than in the New World. De la Fuente focuses, too, on a narrower period—a crucial half century rather than four—and on a port that had a strategic as well as a commercial vocation, whereas the ports that O’Flanagan surveys were preeminently trading centers. Together, the books provide much fresh material about the “first” or Iberian Atlantic that, as de

la Fuente rightly notes, has too often been slighted in favor of the later, largely British Atlantic.

Based on the systematic exploitation of some of the earliest surviving Cuban primary documents— notarial archives, parish registers, and town government records—de la Fuente’s *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century* provides remarkably broad coverage of a town undergoing dizzying transformation of its economy, demography, social structure, politics, urban form, and racial order. Some of the processes investigated in this important book grew out of conscious imperial policy. But much occurred beside, beyond, and even against crown intentions, as Havana residents boldly exploited opportunities created by imperial strategic goals to turn their marginal small town into a large and crucial node of Spanish American geopolitics and trade.

Before about 1550, Havana was in decline. Once the conquest and settlement of the Spanish American mainland were largely complete, the city was no longer needed as logistical base for areas to which it now was peripheral. But its prospects brightened when metropolitan officials began to formulate a more coherent imperial policy for its New World possessions. In it, Havana was destined to play a central role as the fortified entrepôt where convoy fleets would gather and be serviced before venturing eastward across the Atlantic. From the 1560s, Havana was the only place in the Americas where vessels assembled from all over the Caribbean to sail to Spain. The development of the fleet system rapidly transformed Havana, placing it (again, alone of American ports) at the nexus of three commercial

networks—transatlantic, intercolonial, and insular—that exported colonial goods, distributed imports and colonial foodstuffs, and increasingly engaged in slaving.

Helpful though these factors were to the city’s development, de la Fuente insists that Havana became more than a commercial, communications, and strategic hub dependent on imperial favor. Instead, the presence of the fleets and the hundreds or thousands of people who operated and serviced them encouraged entrepreneurial initiatives among town residents, who established livestock and sugar plantations and opened a shipyard and foundries. So whereas the typical American port emerged to serve agricultural or mineral hinterlands, the sequence was reversed in Havana. There, “the port made the hinterland” (p. 9).

Imperial planners had not envisaged these developments. Yet, de la Fuente argues, Habañeros were repeatedly able to gain crown assent and at times financial assistance by claiming, not without reason, that economic expansion would augment their city’s military strength. More important, their enterprises became Atlantic, rather than merely insular or colonial, in scale. The shipyard, for instance, soon the largest in the New World and one of the biggest in the entire Atlantic, depended on materials and workers from throughout the Atlantic.

*Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century* is a major accomplishment. The rich notarial records allow de la Fuente to uncover migrant origins, market and manumission prices of the enslaved, intermarriage patterns, and much more. The text is replete as well with shrewd observations. The author notes, for example, that broad participation in so-called dishonorable trading on the part of elite free residents made it impossible to recreate a traditional hierarchical Castilian society of orders. Scholars with a variety of specific interests will find much of value in every chapter, but perhaps the most impressive concerns the social, economic, and cultural aspects of racial ordering. De la Fuente’s findings lend support to anti-essentialist, creolist interpretations that emphasize the forging of new practices and new identities among enslaved people, but he also notes that participation in brotherhoods, rituals, and other Christian practices helped the enslaved carve out “a cultural space in which African practices could be re-created” (p. 167).

“Havana was not just a place in the Atlantic but

an Atlantic place,” de la Fuente concludes. “The sea was the engine of the local economy and a key factor in the organization of the economic, social, and institutional lives of the residents” (p. 223). He briefly compares Havana to Cartagena, another center of Spanish Caribbean trade, and argues (briefly) that its dual role as military outpost and transatlantic trade emporium was critical for its divergence from ports like Veracruz or Portobello, which remained simply transit points for inland cities. Many readers may wish that the Cartagena comparison in particular had been extended, for it would surely be enlightening to examine differences as well as similarities between leading colonial ports to whose history state policies were so critical.

While works on subjects in the category “Atlantic port city” have usually, like *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century*, focused on the Americas, there is also a venerable tradition of studies of Old World ports and their engagement with transatlantic exploration, commerce, and communications. Huguet and Pierre Chaunu’s monumental study of Seville is surely the most massive as well as one of the earliest.[2] Excellent, not to mention more concise, works are available in English, too.[3] Scholars of Old World Atlantic ports mostly concentrate on individual cities. In David Armitage’s typology, they are “cis-Atlantic” investigations of “particular places as unique locations within an Atlantic world” that “define that uniqueness as the result of the interaction between local particularity and a wider web of connections (and comparisons).”[4] But cis-Atlantic history also encompasses (again in Armitage’s formulation) “regional history within an Atlantic context,” as in the historical geographer Patrick O’Flanagan’s *Port Cities of Atlantic Iberia, c. 1500-1900*. [5]

O’Flanagan focuses on two groups of Iberian port cities: “metropoles” (the port complexes centered on Seville, Cádiz, and Lisbon) and “the second tier” (Oporto, Corunna, and Santander). The former, he argues, gained economically, demographically, socially, and culturally from imperial commercial monopolies. Privileged hubs for transatlantic shipping and trading, they assembled manufactures from all over Europe and beyond, together with foodstuffs and raw materials from their hinterlands, and received every manner of colonial import. These activities gave rise to large communities of foreign merchants, artisans, and enslaved people. As transit points for people going and coming to the New World, metropoles were cosmopolitan, O’Flanagan contends (though

he concedes that urban culture remains little studied). Yet if exclusive commercial privileges endowed metropolises with distinctive attributes, they also bred a dangerously narrow dependency on colonial trade. As a result, metropolises' prosperity foundered soon after the abolition of monopolies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

To be sure, Lisbon was spared the worst of the troubles that struck both Seville and Cádiz—but thanks to its role as political capital, not to its port activities. The contrast with Havana—another port nourished by state policy—is striking. Privileges bred stagnation or worse in Atlantic Spain and Portugal: O'Flanagan emphasizes that port infrastructure, which should have been a primary focus of development in the commerce-dependent metropolises, was sadly neglected by both central states and municipalities; that overland routes between ports and interior remained primitive; and that financial institutions emerged in a hit-or-miss manner. In Havana, on the contrary, privileges generated opportunities that were eagerly exploited by colonial entrepreneurs.

The flip side of privileged metropolises was, of course, discrimination against second-tier ports. Excluded from direct transatlantic trade for three hundred years and restricted to supplying raw materials and people to the metropolises as well as redistributing colonial goods, their demographic and physical growth was retarded. As soon as free trade was introduced, however, immigrants flocked to them, industry and foreign trade boomed, and a rapid restructuring of the urban and mercantile hierarchy turned them into the dominant Atlantic ports of the peninsula—at the expense of the metropolises whose privileges had long choked them.

None of O'Flanagan's conclusions are surprising, though they do provide detailed confirmation of interpretations—dominant since at least Adam Smith—about the negative impact of monopolistic state policies on economic development. O'Flanagan's book is more useful for the wealth of information and the extensive bibliography that it contains. Unfortunately, the detail often overwhelms the main themes, which disappear from sight for pages at a time. Worse, the book has been poorly edited. Not only is the writing repetitious and often obscure, but the text is also replete with misspellings, grammatical mistakes, and punctuation errors. At such a high list price, the publisher owes the reader a much better product.

These two books assist in the ongoing expan-

sion of Atlantic historiography beyond its still largely Anglo-American confines. They also speak to the renewed interest in the central role that European empires played in constructing the early modern Atlantic world. Thanks to its painstaking and imaginative exploration of the interaction of Spanish imperial policies regarding transatlantic colonies, opportunities provided by Atlantic trade, and local responses within the colonies, de la Fuente's book is a particularly significant contribution. Conversely, while Atlanticists will appreciate the empirical material that O'Flanagan has made available, they will be disappointed that he makes little effort to put his findings into the context of recent conceptual or substantive work in Atlantic studies. Despite his book's title, its main concerns lie in European urban rather than Atlantic history. Hence it is hard to discern why the Atlantic specifically, rather than commercial monopoly that happened to involve colonies on the other side of that ocean, mattered to the Iberian ports' development.

On the evidence of these studies, cis-Atlantic history is flourishing. Now, perhaps, historians of port cities can take a page from their colleagues concerned with commerce, who have begun to write fine histories of merchants and trading communities that stretched across the Atlantic.[6] Taking a similar “trans-Atlantic” approach—one that, according to Armitage, envisages “the history of the Atlantic as a particular zone of exchange and interchange, circulation and transmission”—might yield interesting material on relationships between linked trading cities, such as La Rochelle and Quebec, Seville and Havana, Bristol and Kingston, and of what knit—or failed to knit—the Atlantic together across time and space.[7]

#### Notes

[1]. Jacob Price, “Economic Function and the Growth of American Port Towns in the Eighteenth Century,” *Perspectives in American History* 8 (1974): 121-186.

[2]. Huguet and Pierre Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique, 1504-1650*, 8 vols., 11 pts. (Paris: A. Colin, 1955-59); a shorter version is Pierre Chaunu, *Séville et l'Amérique aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977).

[3]. See, e.g., John G. Clark, *La Rochelle and the Atlantic Economy during the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); David Harris Sacks, *The Widening Gate: Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450-1700* (Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1991); Kenneth Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

[4]. David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, ed. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (New

York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 23.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 16.

[6]. For example, see Sheryllyne Haggerty, *The British-Atlantic Trading Community, 1760-1810: Men, Women, and the Distribution of Goods* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), for Philadelphia-Liverpool connections.

[7]. Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," 16.

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