
Led by a Franco-Brazilian team of scholars in the humanities, social sciences, arts and literatures, this joint research project is developing a digital platform for Transatlantic Cultural History to be published in four languages. In a series of essays exploring cultural relations between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, it presents a connected history of the Atlantic space since the 18th century, highlighting the cultural dynamics of the Atlantic region and its crucial role in the contemporary process of globalization.

Intellectuals

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South Atlantic - North Atlantic - Africa - Europe - Caribbean - South America - North America

The Atlantic Space Within Globalization - The Consolidation of Mass Cultures - The Steam Atlantic - Atlantic Revolutions and Colonialism

This section examines how the movements of thinkers and ideas around the Atlantic basin produced important work while adding new layers of interpretation to ideas with roots in other parts of the world. It also tries to determine, from a geographical perspective, what were the main poles of production and the main areas of intellectual circulation.

In the European cultural zone, the writer as social critic has a long and respected tradition. The works of Dante and Milton, Lessing and Rousseau, Stowe and Hugo vibrate with intense political passions that at times motivated each writer to pen some of their most famous works. At the end of the nineteenth century, Émile Zola's defense of Alfred Dreyfus, a French military officer falsely convicted of treason possibly solely because he was Jewish, led to the introduction and spread of a new term *intellectual* denoting writers and researchers whose knowledge and theoretical reflections were directed toward social and political change. The title of Lenin's famous and for many decades profoundly influential book from 1905 *What Is To Be Done?* tersely summarizes the ambition of many books that intellectuals authored. They were people with answers. Lenin's work recreated the political landscape of the twentieth century, but, in varying degrees so did other works, such as José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel. A la juventud de América* (1900) which proposed Iberian humanism as the basis for a reunified American continent, or Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962) which announced a new environmental movement had emerged to disrupt the contest between capital and labor that for more than a century had been the touchstone of social radicalism.

Intellectuals, even the conservatives, were modernizers in their efforts to combine theory and practice into programs for reshaping and thereby redeeming their societies. Intellectuals were definers of identity, providing the frameworks that made it possible for others to say, I am a socialist, an environmentalist, a feminist, a Catholic integralist, a nationalist, a pan-Africanist, etc., for they deployed theory to "explain" which social relations should be considered primary and which derivative. The rise of intellectuals as a social force occurred in every part of the world, but it is a keyword that articulates a potentially engaged social role for thinkers in European or Euroamerican contexts. For engaged thinkers working in indigenous American and African frameworks, "intellectual" fits awkwardly with the various concepts of knowledge keepers that predated the European invasions, such as the Nahuatl *tlamatinime* or the Yoruba *ogbontarigi*. Indigenous concepts of knowledge, tradition, and their social utility will play increasingly important roles on both sides of the Atlantic, although usually disguised within English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, or Spanish terminology.

The essays in this section examine how the movements of thinkers and ideas around the Atlantic basin produced important work while adding new layers of interpretation to ideas originating in other traditions with roots in other parts of the world. They also try to determine, from a geographical perspective, which were the main poles of production and the main areas of intellectual circulation. In the course of the three centuries this

project covers, key institutions for the circulation of ideas, particularly education and publishing, changed in fundamental ways as they expanded in scope and involved ever larger numbers of people in its core activities. Even if "intellectuals" usually spoke directly to relatively narrow segments of the population, their work increasingly affected the everyday lives of the many, large numbers of whom, particularly in a colonial and postcolonial world built around economic and political inequalities, could not respond on any basis of equality. Intellectual life increasingly has been a source of conflict and scandal in the body politic as it became clear that ideas were in fact weapons deployed in ongoing struggles between privilege and democracy, tradition and innovation, everyday knowledge and scientific rationality.

In most situations, the aim of intellectual work has been to answer questions and to instruct peoples in how to think about a given topic productively, meaning in a way that leads to new insights and to strategies for effecting change. As intellectuals moved around the Atlantic world, transnational displacement offered new ways of looking at old problems. Even as ideas disrupted institutional and personal rigidities, ideas altered whenever they entered a new country. As Freud's psychoanalytic theories spread across Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, Freud's ideas were applied to problems that Freud himself never addressed: the psychosocial underpinnings of colonialism (Frantz Fanon), race as constituent element in modern social hierarchies (Samuel Ramos), or the psychological dynamics of fights for national independence (Mário de Andrade).

As the essays on Gilberto Freyre and Fernando Ortiz indicate, connections between peripheral and metropolitan intellectuals raise many puzzling problems. Freyre, for example, came to the United States to study. While at Columbia University, he worked with Professor Ulrich B. Phillips, a historian whose work was notorious for its defense of slavery and racial separation in the United States. Phillips strongly influenced Freyre's thinking on slavery and race in Brazil, however, in ways that arguably turned Phillips's arguments on their head since Freyre identified racial harmony and inclusion as defining features of Brazil's national culture. Freyre's work flowed back north to influence the civil rights movement in the United States as the fight for full civic and social equality intensified in the mid-twentieth century. Because many around the world in the antiracism cause found solace in Freyre's arguments, did that mean that Freyre had "Brazilianized" what he learned while studying in the United States? Or were his arguments so tainted by the influence of a racist historiography from the United States as to distort Brazilian realities into a deceptive caricature of social relations that were deeply complex and often disturbing?

Intellectual debate, Antonio Gramsci argued, is essential for any revolutionary movement. Gramsci concerned himself exclusively with the movement of the working class to replace capitalism with socialism, yet his basic point is true for all social movements, whether based on theories of class relations, gender, sexuality, race, the nation, the environment, etc. Intellectuals provide others with basic conceptual tools needed to reimagine humanity, society, and the cosmos. While it is easy to trace this ambition in the work of thinkers working in higher education and in publishing, Gramsci introduced the concept of the "organic intellectual" to remind his readers that all humans try to understand their relationships to what surrounds them and they do so through one type of abstract thought or another. The difference between intellectuals and their fellow citizens, Gramsci wrote, was that "all humans are intellectuals, but not all humans have in society the function of intellectuals." To understand the cognitive and theoretical life of any society one needs to examine the work professional writers and teachers whose debates form the public sphere, but then to probe beyond the professionals to recognize other voices that never claimed the term, but might instead have thought of themselves with terms like *tlamatinime* or *ogbontarigi*. To explore the intellectual life of the Atlantic world as a cross-crossing of traditions is eventually to expand the frames by which intellectuals are understood, to find the processes by which established but perhaps dysfunctional ideas give way to a new way of thought striking enough that it starts to spread from lips to lips as well as across printed pages.

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[See on Zotero](#)

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