https://doi.org/10.14195/1645-2259_25-1_23

ELTIS, David (2025). ***Atlantic Cataclysm. Rethinking the Atlantic Slave Trades***. Atlanta: Emory University, 442 pp., ISBN: 9781009518970.

David Eltis's *Atlantic Cataclysm* is a landmark work that synthesizes decades of research into the transatlantic slave trade, by overturning conventional narratives to present a nuanced analysis of its historical context. Unlike many contemporary treatments of the subject, Eltis eschews the political correctness that has often colored discussions of slavery, opting instead for a rigorous and dispassionate examination of the evidence. His book situates the transatlantic slave trade within the broader history of global slavery, demonstrating that the forced movement of human beings was not a unique feature of the Atlantic world but part of a much older and more extensive phenomenon.

One of the book's most striking contributions is its comparative approach. Eltis places the transatlantic slave trade alongside other historical instances of enslavement, such as the Roman Empire's massive traffic in enslaved peoples, which at its peak saw the importation of 300,000 to 400,000 individuals annually—three times the highest annual total recorded for the transatlantic slave trade in 1829. He also highlights the persistence of slavery within Europe itself, noting that Icelandic children were sold in the Bristol region as late as the early fifteenth century and that English captives taken by Irish raiders were sold into Mediterranean slave markets before 1100. Additionally, he explores the exploitation of women in European slave markets to illustrate that the oppression associated with slavery was widespread and deeply ingrained institution across multiple societies, rather than a liability which uniquely affected blacks.

Further Eltis contends that the Atlantic slave trade was not an aberration but rather a maritime extension of longstanding land-based slave systems which was more thoroughly documented than other historical episodes. He undercuts the common perception that African captives brought to the Americas were experiencing slavery for the first time. By 1865, at least 10 million people had lived under slavery in North America, with over 90 percent of them being born into bondage rather than captured and sold. This reality reinforces the understated fact that black enslavement predates chattel slavery in the *New World*. Instead, Eltis explains that blacks experienced various forms of enslavement prior to the transatlantic slave trade.

A crucial aspect of *Atlantic Cataclysm* is its thorough debunking of the idea that Africans played a passive role in the trade. Eltis presents compelling evidence that African rulers and traders exercised tremendous agency in

determining eligibility for enslavement. European merchants had to respect these rules or risk losing access to the trade. The Royal African Company, for example, was sometimes required to return captives who had been taken in violation of African norms. This dynamic contradicts the simplistic notion that Europeans imposed the trade unilaterally on Africa; rather, it was a negotiated and regulated enterprise in which African elites were active participants. Failure to comply with African rules could even result in the imprisonment of Europeans,

Eltis also dismantles the argument advanced by Walter Rodney that European merchants used the slave trade to dump inferior goods on the African market. Instead, he offers evidence that Africans were discerning consumers who rejected subpar goods. Moreover, the terms of trade were often favorable to African sellers. The Industrial Revolution, by driving down the costs of manufactured goods, improved African purchasing power rather than diminishing it. Toby Green's neo-Rodneyian claim that European traders extracted capital and surplus value from Africa through the trade is similarly refuted. Eltis argues that the transatlantic slave trade was no more profitable than other branches of long-distance trade. While some individual merchants and planters amassed great wealth, overall profits from the trade were comparable to other high-risk ventures in Europe's expanding economies.

Eltis provides striking economic data to support his argument that the transatlantic slave trade did not play a decisive role in European economic development. Africa accounted for only 3.6 percent of British exports between 1784 and 1786, and by 1824-1826, this figure had declined to less than 1 percent. Even when including exports to the West Indies as part of the broader "slave sector," the total share of British exports linked to slavery was 14 percent in the earlier period and 11 percent in the later period. Moreover, the timing of economic growth in Europe does not align with the supposed benefits of the slave trade. France's domestic economic productivity surged after plantation activity in the Caribbean collapsed following the Haitian Revolution. Likewise, Portugal, despite its extensive involvement in the slave trade, remained an economic backwater by 1850, with sluggish per capita GDP growth.

Another myth that Eltis decisively eviscerates is the claim that the transatlantic slave trade fundamentally transformed African slavery. He notes that West Central Africa had the longest association with the external slave trade, supplying 45.7 percent of all captives sent to Atlantic destinations over nearly three centuries. If the trade had dramatically altered African societies, its effects should have been most visible in this region. However, Eltis finds little evidence

that the nature of slavery in West Central Africa changed significantly during or after the transatlantic trade. Even after the end of the trade, there is minimal evidence of captives being widely employed in commodity production. Coffee production in Angola, for example, expanded only gradually.

With equal passion, he rebuffs the popular argument enunciated by economist Nathan Nunn that diminished trust in African societies is a pervasive legacy of slavery. He points out that most captives were acquired through warfare rather than raids, as Nunn suggests. Further, the very structure of the trade depended on trust: African and European traders had to maintain stable relationships to ensure the continuous exchange of captives for goods. Additionally, the benefits of the trade were not concentrated solely among African elites. Trade records show that non-elite Africans also profited, with many receiving payments for small groups of captives—sometimes just one or two at a time. The sheer number of Africans involved in buying and selling captives suggests that participation in the trade was far more widespread than typically acknowledged.

Embracing controversy, he addresses the contentious issue of compensation for slave owners following abolition. Modern critics often condemn the British government for compensating planters but fail to recognize the pragmatic reasoning behind this decision. Planters had legally recognized property rights in enslaved individuals and compensating them was a way to secure their cooperation in the abolition process. Even some free black communities, such as the Accompong Town Maroons in Jamaica, petitioned the British colonial government for compensation for their freed slaves, though their request was ultimately denied. Unlike planters, however, the Maroons lacked a powerful lobbying presence in British politics, and their interests were largely ignored.

Finally, *Atlantic Cataclysm* sheds light on the fate of Liberated Africans—individuals rescued by British anti-slavery squadrons from illegal slave ships. Many of these individuals were transported to the West Indies, where they worked as indentured laborers. Eltis examines their experiences, highlighting the complexities of post-abolition labor systems and the challenges faced by formerly enslaved people in integrating into new societies.

Throughout the book, Eltis underscores the role of rising literacy and the absence of a censorious press in fostering widespread awareness of the horrors of the slave trade. Public morality shifted as more people became informed about the brutality of the trade, ultimately leading to abolitionist movements that succeeded in ending first the transatlantic slave trade and then slavery itself.

In sum, *Atlantic Cataclysm* is a masterful synthesis of historical scholarship that overturns many entrenched myths about the transatlantic slave trade. Eltis's meticulous research and balanced analysis make this book an essential contribution to the field. By placing the transatlantic trade in its global and historical context, he not only deepens our understanding of the past but also challenges us to reconsider simplistic narratives about the role of slavery in shaping the modern world.

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