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Transatlanticism: A fading paradigm?

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Abstract

In 2018, the first full year of the Trump presidency, it became abundantly clear that the transatlantic relationship had entered a period of intense discord, causing a series of pessimistic reports and commentary in the mainstream Anglo-American media. With this as the starting point, the article re-examines the study of the ‘transatlantic’ as a region. It engages with thinking of time (periodisation), space (scale), and discipline (methodology) in order to question standard assumptions and open up new avenues for research, identity-formation, and emancipatory commitment.

Keywords: Transatlantic; transatlantic region; borders

2018 was not a great year for talking transatlantically.¹ In January the *New York Times* ran an article entitled ‘Is the Transatlantic Relationship Dead?’ which focused on the widening debate in Germany on the significance and meaning of relations with the United States in the era of Trump (Sauerbrey 2018). The paper followed it up in March with another article, ‘The Post-WW II order is under assault from the Powers that built it’, emphasizing that we are witnessing a wider American and European populist-nationalist/populist-nativist revolt against established elites, the international organisations they have led, and the austerity and multiculturalism they have enforced on everyone else (Goodman 2018). In July *Foreign Affairs* published Graham Allison decrying ‘The Myth of the Liberal Order’ as a construction used to justify the application of US power around the globe since WW II (Allison 2018). In August the *New York Review of Books* followed up with the essay ‘NATO and the Myth of the International Liberal Order’ that pointed out that US criticism of European allies not contributing enough to collective defence had begun already in 1950, and that the US-driven expansion of the Organisation in the 1990s-2000s was based purely on political-economic grounds, not security or strategy (Wood 2018). The subsequent backlash from Russia, and the roots of NATO’s slide in credibility, were therefore easy to predict, but at the

¹This article is a revised and updated version of Scott-Smith (2017).

time ignored. In September it was *The Guardian*, with ‘The End of Atlanticism: Has Trump killed the Ideology that won the Cold War?’. Remarkably with surprise that Atlanticism has been something rarely defined despite its ever-present usage since WW II, the article commented that the term essentially referred to ‘an expression of the possibilities for idealistic American power’ (Schwartz 2018). And this is just a quick sample of the Anglo-American mainstream liberal media.

The ‘transatlantic’, as a taken-for-granted, meaning-laden term of reference for political, economic, and cultural ties in the northern hemisphere, is therefore an issue for popular debate. This brings to mind Alasdair MacIntyre’s oft-quoted words in *After Virtue*, when he spoke of the persistence of referring to morality even when its meaning has been emptied out. If we substitute ‘transatlantic’ for ‘morality’, the following passage takes on a special resonance:

What we possess ... are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of the [transatlantic], we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of the [transatlantic]. (MacIntyre 1985: 2)

Clearly we haven’t reached this point yet. But MacIntyre does make us aware of how political, economic, and cultural interests continue to maintain the transatlantic as the primary reference point for geopolitics, in the face of growing evidence to the contrary. ‘Human beings often choose self-delusion over painful reality’, Robert Kagan, the ‘liberal interventionist’ connected to the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, and (formerly) the Project for a New American Century, reminded us in the *Washington Post* in July 2018 in an assessment of Trump’s aggressive criticism of NATO allies, before concluding that ‘The democratic alliance that has been the bedrock of the American-led liberal world order is unraveling The world crisis is upon us’ (Kagan 2018). The transatlantic has been a central anchor for US internationalism since WW II – it if goes, what follows?

There is general agreement that we are in the middle of some form of turning point for transatlantic relations, even if we don’t know what we are turning towards. This could be a realignment of forces (political, economic, cultural), or it could be something more profound. Whatever it may be, we are living through the ending of a particular transatlantic century or modern transatlantic era, and we need to identify and dissect its central motivations, characteristics, and material and ideational consequences to understand how we got here. This has best been attempted by Mary Nolan in *The Transatlantic Century*. Nolan’s book actually points to the transatlantic century as being the American century, albeit with European characteristics. For her, the mid-century relationship rested on five central pillars: American economic power, American military power, a US-European commonality of Keynesian socio-economic policies and Cold War anti-communism, and Western Europeans’ attraction to American mass culture and acceptance of American political dominance. According to her perspective, ‘the emergence of an integrated and more autonomous Europe’ has caused all facets of American power to gradually fade since the 1970s, culminating in the current situation of major differences in attitude towards war, religion, and neoliberalism (Nolan 2012: 3).

Nevertheless, Nolan's treatise is very much a materialist understanding of the transatlantic, a classical approach that explains the relationship through socio-economic data and regional integration. She does move the spatial and temporal boundaries to the transatlantic – the starting point of the 1870s is earlier, and the inclusion of Russia is more encompassing than most accounts. But the possibilities for exploring the meaning and usage of the transatlantic in the cultural imagination, and how this has interacted with political designs, stretch far beyond this.

For a good example of that meaning, it is worth going back to the introduction of the term 'Atlantic Community' itself. Just over a century ago, in February 1917, *New Republic* journalist Walter Lippmann published a polemic that argued strongly for US entry into WW I:

The safety of the Atlantic highway is something for which America should fight. Why? Because on the two shores of the Atlantic Ocean there has grown up a profound web of interest which joins together the western world. Britain France, Italy, even Spain, Belgium, Holland, the Scandinavian countries, and Pan-America are in the main one community in their deepest needs and their deepest purposes. They have a common interest in the ocean that unites them. They are to-day more inextricably bound together than most even as yet realize. (Lippmann 1917: 73)

Lippmann was projecting a *common destiny* onto the nations bordering the North Atlantic. The transatlantic space represented in his formulation is not simply a national security priority, but a value-laden *teleological aspiration* – the realization of order, justice, stability, democracy, freedom, ethics, modernity, progress, and the defeat of authoritarianism, use of force, brutality, and deceit. It was unmistakably an *elite project*, since his fellow internationalists would need to educate the masses on this re-interpretation of national interest. After WW II, Lippmann's vision of a transatlantic 'grand narrative' reduced regional inter-state discord to temporary, secondary status that did not disrupt the structural linkages provided by security interests, economic ties and cultural-ethnic bonds. Lippmann's rhetoric obviously did not alone sustain an immediate orientation of US foreign policy eastwards, but he did provide one of the foundational arguments for the subsequent promotion of transatlantic relations as somehow organic, running through Clarence Streit's *Union Now* and Atlantic Charter movement and the many Cold War manifestations of Western unity. This also generated the idea of 'the West', the loose alliance of democratically-inclined states that made up 'international society' and that pursued a value-based approach to global affairs (Bonnett 2004). The traditional approach to the study of transatlantic relations followed these power lines and focused on the political and diplomatic history of the twentieth century. It fused with the rise of the United States as a global power, and the increasing political, economic and cultural investments that it made in Europe after WW II. The study of the transatlantic therefore became part of Cold War area studies, with NATO at its ontological core (Gress 1998).

This article will not engage in the debate that focuses on the material and institutional linkages – the levels of 'embeddedness' and vulnerability, as it were – that continue to bind North America and Europe. It will not address the extent to which NATO continues to be 'necessary', or whether the Transatlantic Trade and Investment

Partnership (TTIP) would have revived transatlantic leadership in the global economy. Instead, the focus is on transatlantic studies – the study of the transatlantic region as a particular, unique space – and how we might think of this field in a period when, from the perspective of diplomatic history, the transatlantic as a distinct region has been questioned.

In terms of scholarly communities, it is important to point out that there is a Transatlantic Studies Association (TSA), an international network of history, international relations, and cultural studies scholars, with an associated publication, the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*. The Association was founded in 2002 in the UK with a strong Anglo-American outlook, and this continues to represent the core of its organisation. The Association adopts a loose approach to its field of study, stating on its website that it aims to ‘bring together scholars for whom the “transatlantic” is an important frame of reference for their work in a variety of disciplines, including (but not limited to): history, politics and international relations, and literary studies’. The TSA continues to be an important space for cross-disciplinary dialogue but until recently it has not been a site for investigating what we mean with the term ‘transatlantic’, or how we could make use of new approaches to question, open up, or deconstruct its value (Iriye 1979). The strong Anglo-American dimension to the Association has provided stability, but has also implicitly perpetuated assumptions of a ‘special relationship’ and a special role for the UK within the transatlantic as a whole. This outlook has also stabilized in turn the ‘transatlantic’ as an ontological anchor; a necessary constant and not a debatable variable. Nevertheless, the 2022 special issue of the *Journal* that acknowledged a ‘transnational turn in transatlantic studies’ does point in a broader direction, with its intention to ‘focus on the role of individuals, institutions and ideas that have travelled back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean, largely independent of national governments, to shape political and cultural developments in Europe and the Americas’ (Mills and Post 2022: 2).

Borders: Time, space, discipline

The end of the Cold War and its epistemological orthodoxies brought about a transformatory potential for transatlantic studies, moving away from diplomacy towards lines of enquiry utilising sociology, international relations, (human) geography, cultural studies, and anthropology. The transatlantic region is not a continent and it has never benefitted from easily definable boundaries. It is a ‘discursive object’, a construction that reflects cultural, political and economic interests that have invested considerable meaning into it. The transatlantic is therefore as much an idea as a geographical space, and the idea is necessary to give meaning to that space. Lippmann presented one version of this project, a powerful one that resonated throughout politics and the public sphere during the twentieth century. But it was of course not the only one.

Talking of the transatlantic therefore requires some clarification of its limits in space and time. In terms of space, what makes a region a region? Since the 1990s there has been a vibrant debate in International Relations literature on this very question. Security studies has focused on the importance of ‘regional security complexes’ for providing order, while Ernst Haas’s foundation for a functionalist take on incremental institution-building has been revived (Solingen 1998; Buzan and Waever 2004;

Haas 2004). Much of this work has given a leading role to states in these processes (Börzel and Risse 2016). An alternative tack, fuelled by the rise of Constructivism and partly drawing on Karl Deutsch, focused more on the establishment of norms and socialization processes that generate collective identities, shared meanings, and a sense of mutual trust (Adler and Barnett 1998). Ideas, if made to ‘travel’ in effective ways, can alter perceptions of regional identity and so change the course of political behavior (Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Acharya 2004). Drawing on these insights, history has explored the construction of regional identities over time, and the agents of change that have organized the promotion of those identities for specific reasons such as racial or ethnic distinction, class and economic interests, social progress and modernity, or the desire for a peaceful international system (Cándida Smith 2017).

Here it is important to point to the difference between regionalism and regionalization. Regionalism, according to Francesco Duina, focuses on ‘cross-national spaces ... [with] legal and bureaucratic structures for the pursuit of codified shared objectives’. In his chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, he could only point to three such institutions in the transatlantic region: NATO, TTIP, and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), and the argument is further weakened by the fact that TTIP never actually came into existence (Duina 2016: 133). Strangely, he did not explore regionalization, which according to the editors of the *Handbook* refers to ‘bottom up, spontaneous and endogenous processes ... which involve a variety of non-state actors organized in formal and informal networks’. Such processes often occur ‘among geographically or culturally contiguous states and societies’ (Börzel and Risse 2016: 8).

In terms of time, the transatlantic is interesting from a regional perspective because of its division into two distinct historiographical periods, which introduces the issue of time, or ‘borders of periodisation’. Firstly, Atlantic history as a field has concentrated on the 15th to the 19th centuries, the time of empires, slavery, and democratic revolutions, with the transatlantic involving both Africa and Latin America as key nodes in the cross-oceanic material, financial, and human transfers. Secondly, there is the Atlantic Community era of the 20th century, called into being first by Lippmann and later chronicled by Mary Nolan, with its focus on Anglo-American common purpose, rule of law, democracy, and modernity. The assumption in traditional historiography was that there existed an identifiable division between the two, set by the end of the slave trade and the American Civil War during the ‘long mid-19th century’. These events did indeed provide the basis for a re-orientation of US foreign policy at the end of the 19th century, and the determination by internationalist elites such as Lippmann that the future power configuration in Europe – and the associated imperial power dynamics around the globe – was of central importance for the future of the United States. In this modern narrative, Africa and Latin America are often reduced to either walk-on parts (admittedly, Lippmann did mention ‘Pan-America’ in 1917) or complete invisibility, in contrast to their greater prominence in Atlantic history and their importance in relation to transnational studies of transatlantic identity and intellectual history (Gilroy 1993).

Yet the introduction of new, inter-disciplinary approaches has broken down the alleged distinct boundary between a pre-modern Atlantic World and a modern Transatlantic Century. This is especially the case with the introduction of transnational history, which does not take the nation-state as its prime historical actor or

epistemological foundation. Moving beyond 'methodological nationalism', transnational history introduces new actors and gives greater significance to material and intellectual cultures and the ways and means by which they travel across borders, causing changes in meaning, identity and behaviour as they do so (Beck 2003). Space can be reconfigured and agency redistributed. Systems of governance that do not fit within the framework of the state system, but that have nevertheless possessed influence, are granted greater significance, such as religious orders, or freemasonry. In terms of race, the 'exclusionist notions' of the 'white Atlantic' have been thoroughly challenged (Vaudagna 2015: 7). The Caribbean, long written out of history as no more than a transit zone for human and material capital, is a sub-region of the transatlantic that has now gained a status of historical significance and separate identity in the pre-modern Atlantic (Kummels et al. 2015; Roper 2018). In the modern transatlantic it has not yet gained such a status, it being often regarded as the recipient of other forces and networks, be they imperialist, criminal or meteorological. However, studies of Caribbean Black Power movements and their transnational linkages have countered this dominant narrative by highlighting the agency of Caribbean actors in crafting their own identity and political agendas (Quinn 2014).

In a collection of essays entitled *The Transatlantic Reconsidered* assembled by Susanne Lachenicht, Charlotte Lerg, and Michael Kimmage, the breaking down of the temporal border between the Atlantic and the transatlantic periods is explored in detail. Referring to the socio-cultural aspects of the transatlantic, Atlantic historians such as Bernard Bailyn have argued that the region has 'never been wholly discrete, self-enclosed or isolated from the rest of the globe' (Bailyn 2009: 3-4; Reinhardt and Reinhartz 2006; Polasky 2016). Individuals and networks could be analysed outside of interpretive frameworks that have nation-states at their centre, and transatlantic relations have become hybrid or entangled. The foundations of the modern transatlantic, built around the conjuncture of Anglo-American designs for world leadership in the first half of the 20th century, were fundamentally about racial difference and racial superiority, and this imperial mindset of global stewardship had its echoes in the Atlantic Community idea that was carried into the Cold War (Bell 2007, 2020).

Greater disciplinary diversity and fluidity has therefore challenged the borders of geography and periodization, and 'transatlantic relations' as a field of study, in terms of the actors involved and the meanings generated, have become more hybrid and entangled in terms of race, class, and gender (Adam and Gross 2006; Butler 2007; Haglund 2012; Honeck, Klimke and Kuhlmann 2013; Williams 2014; Heide and Pisarz-Ramirez 2016). As Lachenicht et al. argue, the pre-modern Atlantic World has been re-constructed from 'a politically motivated heuristic concept to offering a more up-to-date framework for inquiry' that explores the region as a sphere of intellectual discourse and mutual transfer, in doing so providing a model for the exploration of similar systems of exchange in the modern period (Lerg, Lachenicht and Kimmage 2018: 1-12).

This transnational turn has also been developing successfully in terms of re-investigating the modern period of the transatlantic century. Recent scholarship has emphasized the structural power of networks and the intricate developments in personal mobility, cultural transfer, and political advocacy through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the landmark study *Atlantic Crossings* by Daniel Rodgers forming an important foundation stone (Rodgers 2009). This turn has also involved a re-assessment of the League of Nations, not as an international institution dominated by

imperial powers that attempted to manage inter-state relations, but as a multi-layered network of expertise, informal governance, and transnational networks that spanned the globe (Mazower 2009; Rietzler 2011, 2014; Gram-Skjoldager, Ikonomou and Kahlert 2020). Approaching the transatlantic via networks has collapsed the border between the pre-modern and the modern as scholars have looked for antecedents and origins to later movements (Adam 2012; Scroop and Heath 2014). We are now enquiring after ‘multiple Atlantics’, overlapping, sometimes aligning with each other, sometimes diverging (Lachenicht 2018).

Research into the Cold War transatlantic and beyond has also taken a transnational turn, giving rise to a so-called ‘new Cold War history’. International Organisations have been re-conceptualised from monolithic rule-makers to transitory meeting points for globally mobile experts, central nodes for the merging of policy-making and personal networks (Christian, Kott and Matejka 2017). Others have explored the role and relevance of ‘informal diplomacy networks’ such as Bilderberg, Jean Monnet’s Action Committee for a United States of Europe, and the Trilateral Commission. These approaches focus on the role of transnational elites in both supplementing and bypassing the state system, and the involvement of statesmen themselves, in the company of other elites from the media, business, and academia, in these informal networks (Grin 2008; Knudsen 2016; Gijswijt 2018). The German Historical Institute’s Transatlantic Perspectives project broadened the study of such networks to follow the migratory paths of emigres and forced migrants across the Atlantic and back from 1930–1980 to bring into focus how this large-scale interchange – literally, the study of ‘transatlantic careers’ and the organisations that enabled them – influenced long-term planning, institution-building, academic discourse, mutual perceptions and expectations.² Martin Klimke in *The Other Alliance* switched attention away from elites and institutions towards the mapping out of transatlantic protest movements during the Vietnam war, in doing so building a dense social dimension to the transnational interpretation (Klimke 2011). Diasporas and exiles are also recognized as forming another pattern of linkages across the transatlantic space, often becoming enveloped by state power designs while still pursuing their own political possibilities through activism, solidarity, and memory (Scott-Smith forthcoming).

The first wave of transnational history tended towards focusing on the progressive movement of liberal forces for the purpose of improving or supplanting the nation-state system. States were the privileged actors in terms of international treaty and law but the actual advance of specific causes onto the policy-making table relied on the activities of multiple interest groups, lobbying networks, and epistemic communities. Free movement of people and ideas were considered a good thing, and since most academics see themselves as being a part of such a cosmopolitan community, it is understandable that they often devoted the most attention to showing how these connections came about. The predominant view was that transnationalism represented progressive forces for good. Yet there has been a push-back against this liberal trend as others have emphasized the negative side to transnational connections and the ‘forces of internationalism’. Interconnectedness is not by default progressive, as research into the transnational right has shown (Reinisch 2016).

²See <http://www.transatlanticperspectives.org/about.php>.

The current conjunction of anti-establishment, anti-immigrant, nationalist-populist political movements on both sides of the ocean combining in their efforts to undermine the institutions of transatlantic order is a stark present-day reminder. Add the role of Russia in fomenting this discord for its own divide-and-disrupt strategy of survival, (Shane and Mazzetti 2018) and the rise of a transatlantic alt-right starts to look like a contributor to a potential re-alignment of political forces across (almost) the entire region. Should this trend continue, the result will not simply be the spread of illiberalism but the increasing *ungovernability* of the transatlantic region, a stark reversal of the vision put forward by Lippmann a century ago and repeated by countless others since, that placed the region at the *centre* of global progress. And while these political forces express their strength with a rhetoric of revival (Make America Great Again, Alternative for Germany), this is a zero-sum political game with a blatant return to enforcing lines of racial exclusion and rejecting cosmopolitan multiculturalism in the name of 'the nation', 'the West', 'civilisation', or whichever vessel may be appropriate for the campaign at any given time and place. Coalitions of the unwilling possess considerable force in today's politics.

It was these developments, along with economic stresses and an increasingly fragile consensus on security priorities, that lay behind the claim that the thirty years after the end of the Cold War represent a distinct 'transatlantic era' that is now coming to an end. In short, the period after 1989

appeared to present an opportunity for establishing a world order based on international law, democratic principles, free-market capitalism, and Western leadership, grounded on the fundamental relationship between North America and Europe. It was, in many ways, a repeat of the '1945 moment' when the United States possessed unparalleled power and influence, only this time with a greater European involvement. The era of transatlantic dominance in global governance seemed at hand. (Boxhoorn and Scott-Smith 2022: 1)

The argument is that political, economic, and socio-cultural interests are diverging on a structural level, such that it is not appropriate to refer to a temporary decline in transatlantic relations whereby a new President (such as Joe Biden after Donald Trump) can somehow reverse the trend. The 'transatlantic era' was exactly 'a definable era when those nations had the potential to define the contours of that global governance in its own image', and a combination of both internal (rise of right-wing populism, inequality, changing demographics, loss of cohesion) and external (rising powers and coalitions, new threats to national sovereignty) pressures was making this no longer a viable aspiration (Boxhoorn and Scott-Smith 2022: 2). Evidence for this view was vividly present at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020, the central theme for the discussions being an omnipresent 'Westlessness' in terms of losing control of the global agenda not only on peace and security but also in the provision of global public goods (Scott-Smith 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic that soon followed only exacerbated divisions both within the European Union and between the EU and President Trump's United States. The attack on Ukraine by Russia in late February 2022 initially appeared to revitalise Western unity and solidarity, with support for Ukrainian war refugees combining with a large-scale supply of arms to repel the invader. By late 2023 the context had changed, with the United States Congress in

political gridlock and electorates across the transatlantic region beginning to question the need for a long-term conflict with Russia. In other words, what looked at first like a transatlantic revival based upon repelling a common threat, instead in a relatively short time became a source of discord due to the underlying structural trends towards fragmentation and divergence.

Some Conclusions: Where to go from here?

From an IR perspective, the focus for many continues to be on the crucial nature of US-EU relations for the systems of global governance. The 1990s and early 2000s were designated the era of 'New Transatlanticism' as the two 'adversarial partners' sought to manage their deep economic and financial ties and coordinate via international institutions in a period of relative political divergence (McGuire and Smith 2008; Simoni 2013; Buonanno, Cuglesan and Henderson 2015). Scholars search for the 'deep policy networks' in fields such as biotech, energy, climate change, and intelligence that indicate channels of expertise are still functioning effectively. As Gabriella Paar-Jakli has shown, these kinds of actors are not only valuable as conduits for change, but also for plugging 'structural holes' in the fabric of state-centred governance (Paar-Jakli 2014).

A step further examines what is referred to as the 'transnational transatlantic', reflecting on the ongoing, and in many ways increasingly important, role of non-state actors in giving meaning to transatlantic relations in an era when the state-based anchors of treaties and alliances are starting to look weaker. As stated above, this involves using the 'transatlantic turn' to highlight additional forms of governance practiced via the non-state sector. A prime example of such an actor is the German Marshall Fund, which invests heavily in developing a transatlantic expert dialogue in policy-relevant fields, but does so simultaneously with network-building that blends the transatlantic with the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Africa. The rise of city diplomacy, related to the increasing importance of cities in forms of governance that link the local, national, regional, and global, is another area where paradiplomatic connections are pointing the way towards a different understanding of the transatlantic and its shifting socio-economic, political, and policy ties (Scott-Smith 2018, 2023).

In their study of regionalism, Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse define a 'regional order' as involving 'various combinations of regionalization and regionalism in a particular region Encompassing both bottom-up processes of economic, political, social, and cultural exchange (regionalization) and formal as well as informal state-led institution-building (regionalism)' (Börzel and Risse 2016: 9). Louise Fawcett has likewise remarked on how 'our understanding of regions naturally flows into a concept of regionalism as a policy and project whereby states and non-state actors cooperate and coordinate strategy within a given region' (Fawcett 2005: 24). These are neat, political-science type definitions, but they do not capture the fluidity of a region such as the transatlantic, where borders in time and space are becoming more ill-defined.

But it is also necessary to move away from a focus on top-down, elite-focused, expert-based initiatives in the study of the modern transatlantic (a turn that the earlier Atlantic History achieved some time ago). There is the transatlantic of the dispossessed, a bottom-up perspective on those who have experienced the repressive application of capitalism, racism, and discrimination within the US-European

core. The historical baggage carried by the transatlantic narrative, in terms of haves and have-nots, victors and victims, should be brought from the margins to the centre of investigation. Paul Gilroy wrote *The Black Atlantic* as a way to undermine and reconstruct European white identity and the nation-state as the prime vessel of historical meaning (Gilroy 1993). As we know all too well, systems of inequality are deeply embedded in the home of liberal freedoms. As Walter Mignolo argues, social behaviours and world views marked by ‘coloniality’ are always just under the surface (Mignolo 2005; Lachenicht 2018, 2019). Likewise, Walter Benjamin reminds us that ‘There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’ (Benjamin 1968). The transatlantic should be reclaimed as a space for a critical engagement with unequal social, economic, and political structures of power, not in terms of divisiveness as the transatlantic alt-right proclaims, but in terms of what Charles Postel refers to as ‘the historical traditions of democratic political mobilizations of the working people for a more just, equitable, and humane society’ (Postel 2017). The many forms of social solidarity and protest crossing the Atlantic, from the peace and anti-nuclear movements of the Cold War to Occupy, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo as the most prominent examples in the post-Cold War, illustrate Postel’s point. It is the job of historians to expose and preserve those ties through the centuries that have made the transatlantic as much a space for mobility and emancipation as for hierarchy and order.

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