The field of Transatlantic Studies is to be complemented for its transgressions! The appearance of a self-conscious field of 'transatlantic studies' is a sign of the broader rediscovery of geography in the social sciences and humanities. For geographers this is to be praised, and the virtues of a focus on the transatlantic are clear when posed against much traditional historiography and geography.

Geography is, nonetheless, missing from the disciplinary declaration of independence and from the Journal associated with the Transatlantic Studies Association (TSA). For example, the TSA website declares: ‘The TSA was created in 2001 to bring together those scholars for whom the ‘transatlantic’ is an important frame of reference: historians, political scientists and international relations, sociologists, cultural and literary theorists’. No geographers. I did a search of the journal back issues and found exactly one article by a geographer.

Given this inattention to geography as a field, Transatlantic Studies should be scrutinized for its inherent spatial assumptions and errors – which, I should add, are common to all manner of scholarly work. As a geographer and outsider to the field, I would like to offer five critical alerts for consideration. Some of this may seem obvious, but I doubt that most of you have thought through the full array of issues raised.

I. The problem of place and space

The first difficulty faced by a field like Transatlantic Studies is that of defining and bounding the object of study. The transatlantic world is an open system, as are all geographic places or territories. Not only is this a matter of defining your field of study, it affects how the transatlantic world operates and how one thinks about it. This has four elements:

1. Place matters: Every place has its particularities, its unity and coherence, its boundaries, and this remains true even in an increasingly transgressive world system. This is no longer Vidal de la Blache’s lost world of local regions in France. But neither is it just a world of nation-states, as in International Relations theory. Focusing on countries makes life easier, but, as we know, there are other kinds of geographic spaces that matter and which cohere. The transatlantic world is one such 'place'.
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2. The coherence of places: That a Transatlantic World exists is not in question (no postmodern nihilists here, I hope). We all have a working image of it, just as one does of the front of a head versus the back. This can be a perfectly scientific starting point (trying to divide heads is pointless). Beware the temptation to define, clarify and nail down what is a loose and open-ended system. Europe is incoherent enough, and even nation-states are porous and works in progress. We have to live with this uncomfortable openness. But the boundaries of the TAW are always in question, as are the ties that bind within it. That is what your research work is necessarily about.

3. Spatial relations: Places don’t just have locations and they don’t exist in isolation. They relate to one another through all manner of ties, such as trade, warfare, migration, flows of capital, transit in ideas and policies. These ties/links need to be specified, however, and studied, not just asserted. It is not enough to say everything is connected, every place is globalized. Here, too, research is required, not assertion.

4. The eternal internal-external: In the unending dialectic of place and space, every place internalizes relations and elements of other places, both near and far. Wales is quite different from England but is also full of English culture, political practices, ideas, language and more. This is going to be true of the Transatlantic World: it exists in relation to its many internal localities and to an external world beyond the Atlantic.

II. The problem of scale

The dyad of place and space is only a starting point. Now we need to complicate matters by adding geographic scale. Most disciplines simplify the world by having only two scales: the national, because of clear political boundaries, and the global, with no boundaries to worry about at all. Transatlantic Studies wisely breaks with the modern obsession with the nation-state and the postmodern one with globalization, but the trick is to be able to juggle all manner of scales even as one highlights the role of the Transatlantic. As a first pass, there are three dimensions of scale to be taken into account:

1. Multiple Scales:
   - Cities & metropoles - as an urbanist I can’t emphasize enough the importance of cities in economies, culture and politics.
   - Subnational regions - this scale highlights uneven development within nation-states and problems of national disunity. Regionalism is well established within the EU, but less recognized in North America.
   - Multinational groups - this scale refers to the transnational, as in the cases of the Baltic/Scandinavia, Mediterranean/Southern Europe, US/Canada, US/Mexico, Central Europe/Central America.
   - Continental arenas - obviously refers to the EU, but also to NAFTA, the former USSR, and looser political organizations like the African Union.
   - Transoceanic areas - like the transatlantic world, but equally the transpacific world or the Indian Ocean arc.

2. Beyond Russian boxes: The geographic ties that bind places together crisscross boundaries, defying spatial coherence and orderly hierarchies. For example, the Transatlantic World of the past was made up of several European colonial systems reaching into the Americas; but those systems extended far beyond the Atlantic, as well. Or consider the disruptive effects today on the Transatlantic of such linkages as Euro-Asian pipelines, the British Commonwealth or the US-ASEAN alliance.
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3. Scale shuffling (scale jumping): Scales are dynamic geographic systems of territorial bounding, internal unification and disunity, international agreements and trade, corporate strategies and organization, and so forth. These are animated by politics, competition, and movements that push states, capitalists and other actors to shift scales in order to advance their goals and interests, avoid democratic control, class struggles, etc.

III. The Problem of Centers & Peripheries

A third potential error is misplaced and displaced centrality. The metaphor of center and periphery has a powerful grip on the minds of social scientists. At any scale, an obsession with centrality can be stifling. At a global scale, critics have long taken Eurocentrism to task, but the same may be true at lesser scales, whether it is always prioritizing the East Coast of the United States, Paris within France, or northwestern Europe within the EU. I want to point out two main ways in which Misplaced Centrality may affect Transatlantic Studies negatively:

1. Misplaced Centrality:
   - Displaced Eurocentrism: By unifying the Atlantic World, one may just be shifting the European core onto a wider (but quite conventional) North Atlantic 'West', without actually saying anything different about the nature of a Eurocentric world. This is what one author critical of Transatlantic Studies calls the 'narcissism of small differences' vis-a-vis the wider world. It also involves the danger of nostalgia by attaching too much importance to Europe among the many global relations maintained by the United States as the imperial power of our time.
   - North Atlanticism: I am struck by the rather sharp disciplinary boundary set up between North and South Atlantic Studies, whether in the more contemporary version of the Transatlantic Studies Association or the deeper historiography of the Atlantic world. This schism greatly reduces the power of the conceptual leap made by the field. I just do not see how the split can be maintained, given such overlaps as the leading role of Iberia in European expansion, the Caribbean as crossroads of slavery & empire, the Euro-American reverberations of the age of revolution, or the role of Latin America in the rise of the US commercial empire. Why not hold a conference with papers from both sides on what's gained and what's lost in preserving the north/south divide?
   - Multiple centers: In a world of many places, many scales, there are multiple core areas, and this is certainly true of as large a geographic arena as the Transatlantic World. One way of handling the problem is by reference to the idea of city-systems, which link together many urban centers; but, again, city-systems theory has often been too rigidly hierarchical, as in the obsession with 'world cities' in recent years. One needs to avoid excessive attention to London, New York, Washington and Berlin, as if they were a short-hand for national politics or economic affairs.

2. Centers and Peripheries:

I have to caution against the strong but mistaken bias in geographic thinking toward prioritizing core areas as where things happen and peripheries as where people are being had. It is not that simple.

   - Reciprocity of centers and peripheries - spatial interactions are not one-way relations. Peripheries are in conversation at all times with centers (unless we are talking about empty, neglected places, but key peripheries are not like that at all).
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- Peripheries as intensive sites - peripheries can be the most exploited places in a country or an empire, but they can also be the most focused sites of economy and politics, for the same reason. Need I remind anyone of the key role of sugar and slavery in the making of Northern European commerce and wealth?
- Peripheries as open, fluid & dynamic fields - peripheral areas are often newer, less established and more open fields of society, politics and economics, and hence quite likely to be the place where new ideas and practices arise first. Frederick Jackson Turner was not wrong to emphasize the frontier in the construction of the United States, even if he romanticized the pioneer trades and farmers.

IV. The Problem of Space & Time

A fourth problem in geographic thinking is temporality and socio-spatial dynamics, which I have touched on but not spoken to directly. This affects the Transatlantic Studies project in several ways:

1. Multiple trajectories: Places, at every scale, are dynamic, changing and moving through history. But they do not do so at the same rate or along the same path. Does anyone still cling to the old Modernization Thesis where the Backward Places of the world are simply playing historical catch-up? There is path dependency and place difference that persists through time, despite all the homogenizing tendencies of capitalism and global integration. Transatlantic Studies scholars are not unaware of this dynamic, but it complicates the field because one has to be carefully comparative/relational in local studies within the field and one has to take account of the stress and strain that these uneven developments continuously put on the coherence of the Transatlantic World.

2. Shifting Centers & Hierarchies: Northern Europe overtook the Mediterranean world; the Dutch and British empires overtook the Iberian and French; and the American overtook the European. Lyon surpassed Genoa, to be overtaken in turn by Antwerp, then Amsterdam, which then gave way to London as the commercial/financial center of Europe. This old principle of the Braudelian worldview needs to be taken to heart. Not only is it true that we need a sense of multiple centers and center-periphery interaction, we need to recognize that sometimes the geography of the world can be turned upside down, at many scales.

At the subnational scale, the shifts in urban and region hierarchies have often been dramatic. This is most clearly the case in more decentralized, federalized states like the US, Canada, and Italy, and of course the 20th century has repeatedly turned Germany topsy-turvy. But even the more stable internal hierarchies of Britain and France have been roiled by economic and political forces, such as the decline of the English north & rise of the French Midi.

This principle, at the largest scale, refers back to what I have said before about the relations between the North and South Atlantic and between Europe and the United States. Moreover, it speaks to the rise and fall of the Transatlantic World as a whole: the overtaking of the Mediterranean World by the Atlantic after 1500, the triumph of the North Atlantic over South Atlantic after 1700, the dominance of the USA over Europe after 1945, and now...

3. The rise of a Trans-Pacific World: Coming from California, I am always surprised by the relative neglect of the rise of the Trans-Pacific World in Europe. Economically, it surpassed the Atlantic over 30 years ago, even before the explosive growth of capitalist-road China. California is by far the largest state in the US at 40 millions, the world’s 8th largest economic unit, and the global center of high tech and the web world.
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V. The Problem of Nature

Geography is not just the study of places, scales and socio-spatial relations. It has always included a sense of 'man's role in changing the face of the earth', or socio-nature relations. What I see almost nothing of in Transatlantic Studies is what is commonly called 'environmental studies'. How did this get left out? An essential dimension of the rise of the Transatlantic World was the plunder of the Americas for natural resources and primary commodities.

I am afraid that this stems from more than a lack of geography and geographers. It manifests a larger failure of Transatlantic Studies to be grounded in more than cultural studies and international relations. This is where economics, environmental science, political sociology and urban studies should all come into play, but do not.

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**On Geographic Theory**


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