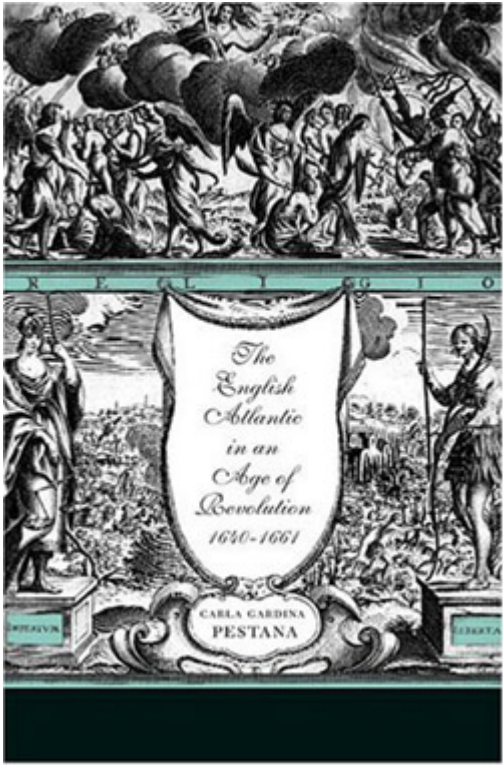
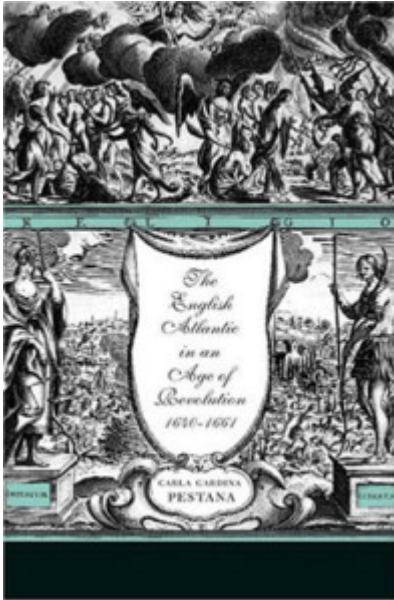


# The Atlantic World Turned Upside Down



Carla Gardina Pestana's *The English Atlantic in an Age of Revolution, 1640-1661* fills a surprising gap in the scholarly literature. The English civil wars and interregnum have inspired a truly massive historiography attesting to the importance of this period to British history. England's American colonies also changed profoundly over these years: some established slave societies, others forged new commercial relationships, and all grappled with new religious and political ideas. Surprisingly few scholars have tried to link the two, to tie events in the Americas to the revolution in England, and this is the overarching goal Pestana sets out to achieve.



### The English Atlantic in an Age of Revolution, 1640-1661

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Rooted in the New British History and Atlantic historiography, Pestana's book shows that the political, religious, intellectual, and economic forces that transformed Britain during these years also "gave shape to the English Atlantic" (1). Pestana includes examples from well-known colonies (Massachusetts, Maryland, Barbados) and less-studied places (Eleuthera, Antigua, Newfoundland) to capture the diversity of English settlements. Despite their differences, each English colony experienced similar strains and faced the same difficult choices during this relatively brief period. Pestana clearly shows that when studied as a whole, the English Atlantic world followed the same trajectory between 1640 and 1661. At the beginning of this period, the English Atlantic was "a world dominated by powerful nonresident men, peopled by recent English migrants, tied by commerce and affinity to England, with a fairly homogeneous faith" (15). When the monarchy was restored, Charles II took possession of a new kind of empire, one that was "[c]ommercial, diverse, inegalitarian, and prickly about its rights" (2).

For its scope and complexity, Pestana's argument is brief, lucid, and persuasive. In six chapters that draw on an impressive range of research in manuscript and printed sources, she discusses some of the period's most important themes, including religion, political ideas, and commercial integration. The chapters move chronologically, tying these themes to key

events like the Westminster Assembly, the regicide, and Oliver Cromwell's Western Design. By structuring her argument this way, Pestana ties the development of ideas to specific events and their reception in the English Atlantic. The Atlantic world described here is a world of connections, migrations, and ideas that flowed back and forth across the ocean. Although events in England dominate her narrative, Pestana is careful to point as well to the "modest ways the colonies influenced the changes overtaking their homeland" (4). This nuanced vision of Atlantic history places imperial and metropolitan actors at the center of the narrative (and rightly so) while stressing the diversity of the English Atlantic and the importance of local circumstances to the history of empire.

At the beginning of the 1640s, the unpredictable course of events in Britain and the unreliability (or unavailability) of news from home posed a challenge to the Atlantic colonies: which side to choose? Pestana argues convincingly that the policies pursued by each English settlement were based in a pragmatic appraisal of local circumstances and interests, which were best served by neutrality in the early 1640s. Neutrality was a "gesture of self-defense, even self-preservation" (30) that in most cases was effective in maintaining social stability and profitable trade.

New England colonists refused to intervene in the conflict directly but were hardly neutral on the subject of religion. Massachusetts in particular presented itself as a model for England, and between 1641 and 1649 an extensive pamphlet literature debated the virtues of New England's religious establishment (Pestana provides a list of these pamphlets as an appendix). But as England became more diverse and balkanized in its religious life, Massachusetts's refusal to tolerate unorthodox views alienated supporters. After 1644, Pestana shows, interest in the region as a model for England waned. Although Native Americans do not play a large role in Pestana's argument overall, one of Massachusetts's responses to these criticisms was to stress its efforts at converting Native Americans.

*De facto* control of the overseas settlements by Parliament had forged a rough consensus based on neutrality or tepid support for Parliament. The execution of Charles I in 1649 shattered this consensus and marked a decisive turning point in the role of the English state in colonial affairs. Some colonies, including Virginia and Barbados, responded to the regicide with open rebellion. With particular attention to Barbados, Pestana shows that this decision like so many others was influenced by local concerns. The Commonwealth, fighting wars in Scotland and Ireland, developed an interventionist and centralized style of imperial rule in response to such challenges. In 1650, the Council of State declared first an embargo of Barbados and then Parliament's power to regulate trade, which "inaugurated a new era, creating for the first time the prospect of a centralized administration of all colonies" (100). Backing up its claims with warships, the Commonwealth brought first Barbados, then Virginia, to heel, beginning a policy that would reshape the Atlantic world: "Trade and imperial policies that imposed economic restrictions and military demands on New World

settlements pointed the way toward the imperial future of commercial oversight and regular military contributions from often resistant settlers” (157).

In response to these demands, colonists developed a new language of rights and liberties based in what Pestana calls their “shared Englishness”: colonial elites described themselves as equal members of a society that derived status from land ownership. As part of this self-definition, colonial elites demanded “participation in local government, local control over a variety of decisions, and protection of property rights. In these concerns they were quite similar to county-level leaders in England itself” (166). Colonial elites, especially those in the Caribbean, used this language of Englishness to defend their trade rights in an Atlantic economy largely of their own creation, an economy built on free trade and unfree labor. The linkages between the “language of liberties” and African slavery was clear: planters’ “right to continued access to slave labor” was rooted in “the rights of freeborn English men” (191).

By the time the monarchy was restored, the English Atlantic world had changed profoundly: “The world of these colonists had literally been created during the years of revolution: their economic transactions, political activities, social milieu, and religious culture had all taken shape in the previous two decades” (213). And despite the provenance of these dramatic alterations in the Atlantic empire, the Restoration government did not try to roll them back. A standing committee oversaw the foreign plantations, the Crown did not reinstate proprietors, and Jamaica remained an English possession. Bowing to the “language of liberties,” the Crown kept local elites in power and confirmed their landholdings and legislative assemblies. “The Atlantic world had been transformed by its experience of revolution, and the king largely accepted those transformations” (220).

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