

Reviews

The discovery of mankind: Atlantic encounters in the age of Columbus

By David Abulafia. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. xxx + 379. 32 illustrations. Hardback £25, ISBN 978-0-300-12582-5.

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An immense amount of impressive research went into the making of David Abulafia's *The discovery of mankind: Atlantic encounters in the age of Columbus*. It is based on extensive reading of primary documents in several languages, as well as the relevant archaeological literature. Yet, for all of this work, Abulafia runs into difficulties when he seeks to summarize his book's major accomplishments. In addition, he handles the identification of the parties to early modern Atlantic encounters in a manner that, while seemingly straightforward, ensnares his text in a host of difficulties.

In Abulafia's own account of his book's most important contributions, he presents established approaches and conclusions as distinctive, even novel. In the first paragraph of his preface, for example, Abulafia tells us that his book departs from the received 'literature on the early discoveries' by replacing a focus on 'geographical and navigational questions' with a focus on 'first encounters between Europeans and peoples previously unknown to them' (p. xv). Contrary to what this suggests, however, historians of 'the age of discovery' abandoned a focus on 'geographical and navigational questions' several decades ago and have, in the last three or so decades, built up a rich literature on 'first encounters', as evidenced by the work of Todorov, Seed, Sahlins, Pagden, Greenblatt, and Boon – to name just a few of the most obvious sus-

pects. Similarly, it seems anticlimactic for Abulafia to state, as he does in the book's final pages, that a major lesson of the age of discovery is that what 'Europeans' discovered in the 'age of Columbus' was not just lands but a humanity more diverse than they had previously known – except, alas, that theirs was 'an incomplete discovery', since 'not all [European] observers accepted that the newly discovered peoples were fully human' (pp. 312–13). In short, in his efforts to sum up his own work, Abulafia appears as someone who has completed a journey both arduous and fascinating – but without quite knowing what to make of it all. On my reading, what most deserves recognition in Abulafia's text is that it brings together, in a single narrative, accounts of encounters on islands in the eastern Atlantic in the fourteenth century and on islands in the Caribbean in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This narrative framing, in combination with the specifics offered about the different encounters, makes Abulafia's book a useful contribution to the collective scholarly project of mapping out the continuities and discontinuities between these two historical moments.

Nevertheless, one prominent aspect of the way in which Abulafia links the encounters of these different times and places warrants scrutiny, if not scepticism. In his text, Caribbean and Canary islanders alike are coded in social evolutionary terms (as 'primitive', 'Stone Age', or 'Neolithic'), while the seafarers who 'discovered' these various islanders are coded in continental terms (as 'European'). Thus, each encounter becomes a case of a more general type: the first contact between 'Europeans' and 'primitive' Others. But what, we should ask, justifies the use of these terms of identification? We should note that they are not historically motivated. Indeed, the two codes from which Abulafia draws did not emerge until several centuries after the encounters he is depicting, and the terms that he takes from these codes differ in their meanings, in non-trivial

ways, from terms of identification that were in circulation when the encounters occurred. For example, Abulafia's 'Europeans' identified Caribbean and Canary islanders as 'barbarians' (or, more precisely, as various cognates of this term). They did not, however, identify them as 'primitive' or 'Stone Age', for those were perceptions of a later historical moment – one that emerged only after the shift from a degenerationist to a developmental view of the overall trajectory of human existence through time. Thus, when Abulafia – in his discussions of how 'Europeans' perceived these various islanders – alternates between using 'barbarian' and such latter-day social evolutionary terms as 'primitive' or 'Stone Age', he mistakenly suggests an equivalence between these terms and 'barbarian', as this latter term was used and understood at the time of the encounters. He thus blunts, rather than sharpens, our understanding of the late medieval and early modern meaning of 'barbarian'.

While Abulafia's use of social evolutionary terms will jar with some readers, his use of 'European' is more likely to be overlooked, since this usage, although also anachronistic, is fully in line with accepted conventions of historical writing. Yet, however well established it may be to speak of 'Europeans' when depicting an era before the term became commonplace, the use of this term similarly blunts our comprehension of historical particularity. To see oneself or another person as a 'European' requires, at once, a sense of 'Europe' as a geographic unit and of its inhabitants as a 'people' – and these are anything but trivial or innocent notions. On the contrary, their emergence was part and parcel of the racialization of human variation. Projecting 'Europeans' back into the encounters of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries assimilates those encounters to the world that followed them historically and, in so doing, pre-empts examining how those encounters themselves contributed to the making of 'Europeans' and other racialized groupings.

While the terms of identification that Abulafia deploys are not historically motivated, a second possible basis for their use is that they depict the objective facts of the encounters, independent of how anyone living at the time understood them – in the same way that we can say that some item of food eaten at the time of the encounters yielded so many calories, even though no one then alive measured or recognized 'calories'. Yet, for the use of 'European' to stand in this way – as an objective truth, let us say – would require showing that racial/continental groupings do in fact exist independent of their fabrication as social facts. And this would require

addressing and dismantling the considerable scholarship that has shown us the historicalness of such groups in general and of 'Europeans' in particular. Similarly, for the use of social evolutionary terms to stand in this way would require taking on more than a century of anthropological critiques of social evolutionary theory – extending from Boas to Levi-Strauss to Sahlins – in order to demonstrate, for instance, that social orders that have a reliance on 'stone tools' are, beyond this, of a common type. None of this daunting work of social theory is attempted in this book, however.

As a final observation, I note that Abulafia joins those scholars who define themselves, at least in part, by using 'post-modernism' as a whipping-boy. Thus, following a now much-rehearsed formula, Abulafia offers as an exemplar of 'post-modernism' a brief quotation that is deeply incomprehensible – at least as he cites it. He then adds, as a punch line, that the surest means of understanding the quotation is to 're-read Hans Christian Andersen's "The emperor's new clothes"' (p. xvi). In fact, the more usual approach of historians – that is, checking the source, to see if the quotation makes sense in its original context – is a route that Abulafia himself pre-empts, since he cites no source and names no author. This is unattractively smug. More importantly, what is overlooked here is that even the most readable prose, when it is produced and offered without a careful scrutiny of its own terms of representation, can equally serve as a hindrance to an effective dialogue with the past. In the case of Abulafia's own book, for instance, there is a great deal of valuable material struggling to be heard over the confusion produced by just such pseudo-accessibility.

Imperial formations

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In recent years, the topic of empire has become all the rage. Major new syntheses from Anthony Pagden, Felipe Fernando-Armesto, and John Darwin