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## THE RED ATLANTIC

David Armitage

**Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker.** *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2000. 433 pp. Figures, map, notes, and index. \$30.00 (cloth); \$18.00 (paper).

Until quite recently, Atlantic history seemed to be available in any color, so long as it was white. To be sure, this was the history of the North Atlantic rather than the South Atlantic, of Anglo-America rather than Latin America, and of the connections between North America and Europe rather than of those between both Americas and Africa. The origins of this history of the white Atlantic have been traced back to anti-isolationism in the United States during the Second World War and to the internationalism of the immediate postwar years, when historians constructed histories of "the Atlantic civilization" just as politicians were creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This Atlantic Ocean was the Mediterranean of a western civilization defined as Euro-American and (for the first time, in the same circles) as "Judeo-Christian".<sup>1</sup> It was therefore racially, if not necessarily ethnically, homogeneous. Such uniformity was the product of selectivity. Like many genealogists, these early proponents of Atlantic history overlooked inconvenient or uncongenial ancestors. Students of the black Atlantic, from W. E. B. Du Bois to C. L. R. James and Eric Williams, were not recognized as fellow-practitioners of the history of the Atlantic world, just as Toussaint L'Ouverture's rebellion was not an event in R. R. Palmer's *Age of the Democratic Revolution* (1959–64), for example.<sup>2</sup>

Atlantic history has recently become much more multicolored. The black Atlantic of the African diaspora has been joined by the green Atlantic of the Irish dispersal. The white Atlantic has itself become a self-conscious field of study rather than the defining model for all other Atlantic histories. And now Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker present the red Atlantic of expropriation and capitalism, proletarianization and resistance in *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Theirs is an avowedly motley history, stitched together from shreds and patches to create "a story about the origins of capitalism and colonization,

about world trade and the building of empires . . . about the uprooting and movement of peoples, the making and the transatlantic deployment of 'hands' . . . a story about exploitation and resistance to exploitation . . . a story about alternative ways of living, and about the official use of violence and terror to deter or destroy them" (p. 14). It thus has little in common with the traditional political histories of the white Atlantic and more with cultural studies of the black Atlantic, especially Paul Gilroy's account (in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [1993]) of the Atlantic as the crucible of a modernity defined by upheaval and dispersal, mass mobility, and cultural hybridity. It also has ambitions to describe the making of an Atlantic working class just as E. P. Thompson had earlier chronicled *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). However, Linebaugh and Rediker's chronology extends further back into early modernity than Gilroy's—stretching from the early seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries—and race and empire are as conspicuous in their history as they were absent from Thompson's.

Linebaugh and Rediker's title comes from Greek mythology—the second of Hercules's labors—but their thesis derives from a more recent mythology, the theory of "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation" in the first volume of Marx's *Das Kapital*. Marx described the expropriation of the agricultural producer by an emergent class of capitalist appropriators who thereby created a landless proletariat to form the industrial army of the manufacturing system. The classic form of this process could be observed in England, from the Reformation to the Industrial Revolution. Linebaugh and Rediker appropriate Marx's anglocentric focus, the stages of his narrative, and even many of its details. For example, their description of the sixteenth-century English "combination of expropriation, industrial exploitation . . . and unprecedented military mobilization [that] resulted in the huge Tudor regional rebellions" (pp. 18–9) would be unrecognizable to most historians of the Tudor era. The expropriatory process of enclosure all but halted between the 1520s and the 1570s, and thereafter took place more often by agreement than enforcement; "industrial exploitation" touched the lives of only a small proportion of an overwhelmingly agricultural population; military mobilization remained episodic and had precedents in the late-medieval Hundred Years' War; and politics, as much as economics, and the defense of traditional religion more than both, motivated regional revolt for much of the Tudor century. However, the Marxian teleology is fundamental to Linebaugh and Rediker's account; without it, there could have been no Atlantic capitalism, and without that there would have been no working class to beget "the revolutionary Atlantic."

Linebaugh and Rediker subtly modify Marx by depicting a proletariat that is multiracial, multiethnic, and multinational; by replacing the factory with

the ship as the forcing-house of the working class; and by giving resistance as large a part in their story as repression. Their story spans two centuries, from the wreck of the *Sea-Venture* off Bermuda in 1609 to the abolition of slavery within the British Empire in 1834. It touches on many points around the Atlantic basin: Bristol, London, Ireland, the Gambia, Barbados, Jamaica, New York, Virginia, Nicaragua, and Belize. It also thickens at precise moments: in the resurrection of a shadowy "Blackymore maide named Francis" from obscurity in mid-seventeenth-century Bristol; at the Army Debates of 1647 in Putney; during the New York slave conspiracy of 1741; in Boston during the early years of the American Revolution; in the failed revolt of the rebellious Irish aristocrat Edward Despard and his wife Catherine in 1802; around the writings of the abolitionist Methodist mulatto Robert Wedderburn; and in a concluding reading of the visionary poetry of William Blake.

Linebaugh and Rediker's chronology is on the face of it more precise than Marx's. In the course of the book, they describe the life-cycle of the hydra in some detail. The regime of terror and expropriation extends from 1550 to 1650. "[T]he mercantilist or baroque state" that overturned the achievements of the "English Revolution" began its awful work at the Stuart Restoration in 1660, or maybe with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (p. 83). Atlantic capitalism joined forces with the mercantilist state between the 1670s and the 1730s to create two forms of "hydrarchy", defined as "the organization of the maritime state from above, and the self-organization of sailors from below" (p. 144). The insurgent hydrarchy from below of the 1710s and 1720s inspired the slave-revolts and urban insurrections of the 1730s and 1740s whose consequences were felt until the triumph of capitalism with British victory at the end of the Seven Years' War, at which point "slaves and sailors began a new cycle of rebellion" that ushered in the "revolutionary crisis of the 1760s and 1770s" (p. 212).

However, the book's conclusion, "Tyger! Tyger!", presents four somewhat different acts in the tragi-comedy of the Atlantic commoners. The first act was tragic, encompassing the foundations of capitalism from 1600 to 1640, as "systems of terror and sailing ships helped to expropriate the commoners of Africa, Ireland, England, Barbados and Virginia" (p. 327). The second was a heroic tale of resistance, from the first stirrings of the "English Revolution" in the 1640s to its last flowering in the early 1680s: "the hydra reared its head against English capitalism, first by revolution in the metropolis, then by servile war in the colonies" (p. 328). The third was ironic, the overturning of the achievements of that long revolution from 1680 to 1760 in decades which "witnessed the consolidation and stabilization of Atlantic capitalism" but also an equal and opposite reaction as "pirates built an autonomous, democratic, multiracial social order at sea" and "a wave of rebellion then ripped through the slave societies of the Americas" in the 1730s and 1740s (p. 328). The final

act lasted from 1760 to 1835, as "the motley crew launched the age of revolution in the Atlantic" and inspired democratic upheaval and the abolition of the very instruments of expropriation of labor, the press-gang and plantation slavery, in the British Atlantic world (p. 328). The 1640s, 1670s, 1710s, 1720s, and 1760s could, of course, each have been elastic moments when both the grip of capitalism and mercantilism tightened and when its opponents seized the upper hand. The authors are scrupulous enough to recognize that events can only reluctantly be shoehorned into such schemas, but they are no less determined to find meaningful patterns in ultimately intractable processes.

*The Many-Headed Hydra* is therefore partial, in both senses. It is firmly on the side of its subjects, while their oppressors and expropriators remain menacingly nameless and faceless; it is also highly selective in offering detailed vignettes rather than a fully-documented survey of its subject. By confining themselves solely to the anglophone Atlantic, the authors mark a retreat from Marx's truly global vision of both the East and the West Indies as "open[ing] up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie" after the voyages of Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus.<sup>3</sup> *The Many-Headed Hydra* is also a literary history rather than a social history. The overarching Marxian narrative closes the gaps between a series of close readings of drama, poetry, pamphlets, political debates, and personal papers. The traditional records of social history, of the kind deployed earlier both by Rediker (in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* [1987]) and by Linebaugh (in *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* [1991]), are not much in evidence here, save to provide a passage for commentary or support for an exegesis. In such an ambitious work of bricolage as this, everything depends on the choice of materials, the plausibility of the interpretations of them, and the persuasiveness with which they are juxtaposed. On all three counts, Linebaugh and Rediker's reach exceeds their grasp.

Though *The Many-Headed Hydra* ostensibly "looks from below" (p. 6), almost all its sources come from above. The title itself is a case in point. The self-regenerating swamp-monster attacked by Hercules provided an apt emblem for rulers' fears rather than an inspiring object of self-identification for subjects or servants. Indeed, almost all the contemporary testimony the authors cite for the existence of a multiracial Atlantic working-class derives from the writings of magistrates like Daniel Horsmanden in New York, governors and loyalists like Thomas Hutchinson and Peter Oliver in Boston, or slave-holders like Thomas Thistlewood and Edward Long in Jamaica. Likewise, William Strachey, author of the account of the *Sea-Venture* from which the king's servant William Shakespeare derived inspiration for his royal-marriage play, *The Tempest*, proposed martial law for the Virginia

settlement. The "Blackymore maid" Frances is known only from the testimony of an elder of her church in Bristol, who recalled her piety (but little else) long after her death. The New York slave conspiracy is reconstructed almost entirely from Horsmanden's judicial account of the proceedings. The aristocratic Despard—subject of the book's most original chapter—would barely be known were it not for his place in the *State Trials* and the preservation of his personal papers by his family. In the end, almost the only two genuine plebeian radicals who speak in their own voices in the book are its two best-studied subjects, William Blake and Robert Wedderburn.<sup>4</sup>

Ingenious overreading of fragmentary sources or of second-hand and prejudiced testimony has, of course, long been a respectable technique for the recovery of hidden histories. However, egregious misreading, especially of well-known documents, rapidly undermines trust in the interpretations of less familiar texts. For example, Linebaugh and Rediker read Francis Bacon's *Advertisement Touching a Holy War* (1622) as a straightforward argument for the destruction of "West Indians; Canaanites; pirates; land rovers; assassins; Amazons; and Anabaptists" (p. 39). If true, this might be important early evidence of a multiracial, multid denominational, cross-gender alliance of the oppressed. However, Bacon's unfinished essay was in fact a dialog among such stock characters as a Catholic zealot and a Machiavellian "politique," none of whom could be identified with Bacon himself; it comprised an inconclusive debate on the ethics of foreign aggression against Spain or the Turks (which Bacon himself later opposed) rather than a battle-plan for ethnic extermination in the Atlantic world or "a call for several types of genocide" (p. 40). Such a reading without attention to context or genre would be more trivial than troubling if it did not then provide support for a supposed Baconian "theory of monstrosity and terror" repeated throughout the book (pp. 61–69, 91, 137, 341). Similarly, Colonel Thomas Rainborough's invective at Putney against the "slavish condition" of his soldiers is taken as proof that "the Putney Debates of 1647 revealed the English Revolution as an abolitionist movement" (p. 132). Rainborough's dialectical language of slavery and freedom had biblical and, especially, classical antecedents whose rhetorical impact was certainly amplified by, but did not therefore depend upon, the increasing variety of forms of unfree labor observable around the English Atlantic world.<sup>5</sup> It is also unlikely that "[f]rom Putney, after 1647, would flow the ideas of both freedom and slavery" (p. 112) because the Army Debates remained in manuscript until they were first published in 1891.<sup>6</sup>

Linebaugh and Rediker do provide examples of the circulation of ideas that might have provided a basis for class-consciousness, but do little to excavate the routes of transmission. Just as the image of the many-headed hydra itself testifies to a common classical culture among the educated, so the book's other recurrent motifs of the "hewers of wood and drawers of water"

(Joshua 9: 21, 23), of God's being "no respecter of persons" (Acts 10: 34, 35), or of the biblical jubilee reveal an even more widespread scriptural culture that reached across lines of class and denomination. The history of classical learning is clearly far from Linebaugh and Rediker's brief, but the history of biblical and theological knowledge is conspicuously absent from what remains a strikingly secular work, with only passing references to Thomas Edward's anatomy of heresy *Gangraena* (1646), Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), or Robert Wedderburn's Methodism. Classic studies of the transmission of political ideas, such as Caroline Robbins's *The English Commonwealthman* (1959) or Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (2nd ed., 1992), which could have provided models for the precise reconstruction of the pathways and networks of Atlantic radicalism, are also missing. Once again, it is only those sections of the book that treat the last third of the eighteenth century where such connections can be recovered with conviction, as also in the path-breaking work of Jesse Lemisch and Julius Scott which underpins Linebaugh and Rediker's account.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, the putative members of a self-conscious, self-identified, polymorphous Atlantic proletariat exist here largely in the nightmares of their rulers before the era of the Seven Years' War, when the shadows begin to take on substance first in the Stamp Act riots and then in the waterfront protests of the American Revolution.

Linebaugh and Rediker do not inquire whether interracial alliances across the lines of status, craft, or freedom were exceptional when they did occur or whether they always did so in the context of opposition rather than acquiescence. Their portrait of the pirate-ship's "multicultural, multiracial, multinational social order" (p. 162) in the early eighteenth century cannot be reconciled with the picture that emerges from work on more typical and enduring maritime communities that has stressed the resilience of racial barriers and the exquisite hierarchies of status that persisted even far offshore.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century (especially its second half), and across the British Atlantic world (and well beyond, especially in British India), the major matrices of interracial co-operation were not wharfside drinking-houses or floating pirate republics but the Royal Navy and the British Army. Wedderburn, like the most famous Afro-Briton of the period, Olaudah Equiano, was a graduate of the first school of war, while Edward Despard met his future wife Catherine, a black Central American woman while on service with the second. By providing white British working-class men with firsthand experiences of slavery or combat side-by-side with black soldiers, or by facilitating unions like the Despards', the armed forces could be agents of multiculturalism and of radicalization. However, they were most importantly the instruments of discipline and patriotism, forces that also gave rise to a multicultural, multiracial, multinational social order, admittedly one strati-

fied by race and class—within Britain, around the British Atlantic, and throughout the British Empire—but encompassing millions more people than the milieux examined by Linebaugh and Rediker. Any disinterested attempt to locate the making of an Atlantic, British, and, more broadly, imperial working-class in the eighteenth century would thus have to begin with the Royal Navy and, above all, the Army, not push them to the very margins of its analysis.

Marx directed attention to the “industrial army” rather than the regular army as the leading edge of social transformation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England (if not for Britain as a whole). The gradual but decisive replacement of a revolution in production by a revolution in consumption, and of the Industrial Revolution by an “industrious revolution,” has dethroned the Industrial Revolution as the motor of epochal change in British history. A whole train of Marxian logic would thus seem to have been thrown off the rails: no Industrial Revolution, no making of the English working-class; no English working-class, then no class-consciousness to provide a counterweight to capitalism in the making of modernity. While no one would follow that logic to announce the death of labor history, it is hard to resist the conclusion that *The Many-Headed Hydra* was meant as a solution to just this impasse within Marxist historiography. The Industrial Revolution may have been lost at sea, but that is just where Linebaugh and Rediker have found it again, only now for “factory,” read “ship,” for “manufacturer” read “pressgang,” and for “English working-class,” read “multicultural, multiracial, multinational proletariat.” The logic, if not the location, remains much the same.

*The Many-Headed Hydra* is ultimately a triumph of hope over evidence. It is thrillingly written as a fast-paced narrative punctuated by enthralling set-pieces. It presents a thesis as bold as any in contemporary historical writing and pursues it with remarkable single-mindedness. It is unlikely that all the characters and incidents presented here will be equally familiar to American or British historians, to specialists in both the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, or to students of both the white and the black Atlantics. This combination of panache, pertinacity, and panorama is undoubtedly impressive and certainly beguiling. Linebaugh and Rediker are also on the side of the angels: any reader would want their story of proletarian solidarity and resistance to be true, if only to palliate the discomfort left by the “[h]angings, burnings, mutilations, starvings, and decapitations [that] have filled every chapter in this black book of capitalism” (p. 329). In the end, though, they do not provide a reliable model for a new kind of Atlantic history, any more than the book theirs most closely resembles—in its pan-Atlantic scope, its focus on patterns of resistance and ideology, and its implacable tendentiousness, though not in its concentration on religion, or its honesty about looking “from



above"—J. C. D. Clark's *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (1994). Anyone seeking inspiration for a multicolored, multivalent, and multinational history of the Atlantic world—in much the same period, and treating many of the same themes—would be better advised to read the theater historian Joseph Roach's brilliant (but, among historians, little-known) *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996), whose texts are better chosen, readings more credible, and juxtapositions more truly revealing than those making up *The Many-Headed Hydra*.

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1. Bernard Bailyn, "The Idea of Atlantic History," *Itinerario* 20 (1996): 19–44; Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36 (1984): 65–85.

2. Robin D. G. Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision, 1883–1950," *Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 1045–77.

3. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, intro. Eric Hobsbawm (1998), 35.

4. See especially David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954); E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (1993); Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings*, ed. Iain McCalman (1991), 1–40.

5. Compare Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (1998), 59–77, on the prominence of the "neo-Roman" language of freedom and slavery in the English Revolution.

6. *The Clarke Papers*, ed. C. H. Firth, 4 vols. (1891–1901), I, 226–418.

7. Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York's Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (1997); Julius S. Scott III, "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986).

8. For example, W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (1997).