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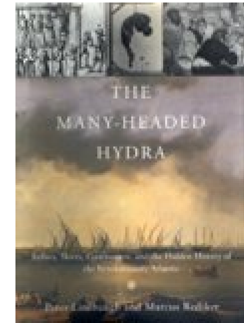
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Linebaugh, Marcus Rediker. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2000. 433 pp. $24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8070-5007-1; $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8070-5006-4.



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Published on H-Atlantic (June, 2003)

The Limits of the Revolutionary Atlantic World

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In the summer of 1776, nervous delegates to the Second Continental Congress stepped to the front of the room and, one by one, put their name to the revolutionary document declaring American independence from Great Britain. Present that day were a number of distinguished luminaries, including Benjamin Franklin who allegedly, at this juncture, uttered that now-famous phrase that this radical step was necessary because "we must all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." Truer words may never have been spoken (if, indeed, they were ever spoken) and the logic has not been lost on subsequent generations, including Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in their recent book, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic.* Linebaugh, professor of history at the University of Toledo, and Rediker, professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh, are both well-known scholars in the materialist tradition with a penchant for exploring history from the perspective of the voiceless, the oppressed, and the victims of modernization. In this joint effort, they collectively assert the argument that the modern Atlantic world was not simply a product of the ideas and initiatives of a handful of European men–it was contested and shaped from below by sailors, slaves, laborers, servants, and women. Indeed, the millions of oppressed, who by their actions took (or, at least, attempted to take) to heart Franklin's injunction to cooperate for their greater good, lest they be cut down by the forces of capitalism, empire, and racism, are the heroic core of this work.

Perhaps because of the nature of their subject, Linebaugh and Rediker eschew a conventional narrative in favor of a chronological series of intriguing topical studies. To open, the authors begin with a retelling of the shipwreck that led to the English discovery of Bermuda in 1609. Famously designated as the inspiration for William Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Linebaugh and Rediker use this event as a metaphor to reflect upon the origins of capitalism and colonization through several important themes that they believe characterized the modernizing Atlantic world: expropriation and exploitation, cooperation among different kinds of people in the construction of alternative societies, and the use of violence and terror by the state to put down the masses. From here, they move, in chapter 2, to a discussion that introduces one of their key themes, namely the unity of the oppressed peoples of the Atlantic world by their essential identity as "hewers of wood and drawers of water" (p. 40). In this chapter, Linebaugh and Rediker lean heavily on Francis Bacon's relatively unknown *Advertisement Touching an Holy War* (1622), a tract that promoted the destruction of West Indians, Canaanites, pirates, land rovers, assassins, Amazons, and Anabaptists as part of a plan, the authors claim, to heal the breach between King and Parliament.

In the third chapter the authors turn their attention to "a Blackymore maide named Francis" in order to highlight some of the radical associations among blackness,

gender, republicanism, and antinomianism. Indeed, this is the first of two chapters arguing strongly that slavery was central to the class divisions and debates that permeated mid-seventeenth-century England. In the fourth chapter, for example, Linebaugh and Rediker use the Putney Debates of 1647 to demonstrate how commonism and slavery were not only critical issues to the New Model Army in the English Civil War, they underlay an urban revolt in Naples in 1647, a Leveller protest in 1649, the plight of the Irish after Cromwell's invasion, servant rebellions in seventeenth-century Barbados, the elaboration of the English slave trade from the 1650s forward, and Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia in the 1670s. In many ways, this is an intriguing chapter, magnificently demonstrating the ways in which the authors are able to weave disparate tales with common themes into a mesmerizing tapestry.

In the fifth chapter, Linebaugh and Rediker shift back to the Atlantic world and aboard ship to address the emergence of the maritime state through the lives of sailors and pirates. Here they are interested in what they call the "hydrarchy," or the interrelated "organization of the maritime state from above, and the self-organization of sailors from below" (p. 144). People familiar with Rediker's previous work on the eighteenth-century maritime world will recognize some of his tried-and-true themes and ideas in here, but there are some new threads. For example, Linebaugh and Rediker connect the effort to suppress piracy with the desire to establish firm control over the slave trade in the early eighteenth century. The link between seamen and slaves, moreover, is continued in the next chapter when they characterize slave rebellions, particularly the 1741 New York conspiracy, as an aspect of popular resistance much more profound than the interest and activities of African peoples alone.

Linebaugh and Rediker also return to familiar, though interesting, ground when they treat the effluence of popular protest during the American Revolutionary era by emphasizing that "the motley crew shaped the social, organizational, and intellectual histories of the era" (p. 212). Unlike earlier crowd studies, however, Linebaugh and Rediker emphasize the multiethnic and multiracial characteristic of crowds and move well beyond British American port cities in North America to include the West Indies. The link between the West Indies, including Haiti, and British politics continues with a careful case study of the so-called conspiracy of Edward and Catherine Despard. Despard's Irish background, military service in Jamaica and on the Spanish main, union with an African woman (Catherine), and time in prison make him the ideal embodiment of the revolutionary potential of the Atlantic world. A subsequent case study of Robert Wedderburn, born into bondage in Jamaica in 1762, only adds to Linebaugh and Rediker's notion that the Atlantic world was a simmering cauldron of pent-up resentments. As their story goes, the many-headed Hydra was more than an oft-repeated metaphor, it was the defining reality of the Atlantic world.

In the end, Linebaugh and Rediker step back and survey what they have achieved. What they conclude is unsurprising: this is a history of the proletariat, but a proletariat that was classless, raceless, genderless, nationless, and impossible to identify with any (or against any) single religious persuasion. Rather, it was "landless, expropriated," "mobile, transatlantic," "terrorized, subject to coercion," "female and male, of all ages," "multitudinous, numerous, and growing," "numbered, weighed, and measured," "cooperative and laboring," "motley," "vulgar," "planetary," "self-active, creative; it was–and is–alive; it is onamove" (pp. 332-333).

There is much to admire in this book; its scope, ambition, and ingenuity make it worth reading. At the same time, there are some serious problems. To take but one example, Linebaugh and Rediker's heavy-handed treatment of slavery throughout the text is a testament to their tendency to ignore historical subtleties whenever they run against the grain of their thesis, which too often reads more like an agenda. In the first chapter they make the point that during the reign of Edward VI, vagabonds "had their chests branded with the letter V and were enslaved for two years" (p. 18). What they fail to mention, however, is that although this measure was enacted in 1547 it was rescinded two years later and no record survives of it being enforced while it was on the books. Later on, they allow the false impression to persist that "English participation in the slave trade ... began in 1563," in spite of the fact that, although there were four famous slave trading voyages during that decade and most Englishmen were by no means repulsed by the traffic in human cargoes, English merchants more often went to West Africa (before the mid-seventeenth century) in search of gold, ivory, and pepper than for human beings (p. 28).

To be sure, human bondage was a profound conceit and experience in Tudor and early Stuart England, and it appears regularly and in a number of guises in the sources. The authors are to be applauded for elevating this subject, particularly in light of the fact that many previous historians have not. Still, it would have been preferable if they had thought through two issues: first,

the use of the word "slave" (or "slavery") has to be understood in context and, second, the fact that Tudor and Stuart elites treated the lower orders callously, even brutally, does not mean that laborers and servants were in any way slaves. On the first point, Linebaugh and Rediker blur a number of issues when they determine that the Putney Debates in 1647 were a reflection on the issue of slavery. True enough. But, what we are not told is that mid-seventeenth-century political rhetoric regularly culled the language of slavery *not* because the commons was trying to throw off physical shackles but because a large swath of society (indeed, perhaps the vast majority) were asserting political liberty in language that was especially familiar. As Quentin Skinner has argued, classical Roman writers and, especially, the *Digest* of Roman law, were central to the developing "neo-Roman" discourse of slavery in early Stuart England. To us it may be paradoxical, but to seventeenth-century Englishmen, to be against slavery in the 1640s did not necessarily mean that you were in any way against holding human beings in a state of bondage in order to fulfill labor needs.

On the second point, Linebaugh and Rediker obfuscate when they use language to make a point that promotes essential misconceptions. For example, they argue that Bacon's Rebellion was "a war against slavery, waged by servants and slaves who entered the fray after being promised their freedom by Nathaniel Bacon" (p. 136). The authors even refer to Bacon's rebels anachronistically as "abolitionists" (p. 137). Again, there is some truth in this assertion. Bacon's forces did include a number of African slaves and indentured servants, many of whom held out to the bitter end. But the rebellion was neither a war about or against slavery; it was about access to land and a virulent hatred of the Indians. The misuse of the term abolitionist here is simply inappropriate, as it is when they refer to "the tradition of Spanish abolitionism" in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world because Spain encouraged slaves to escape from their bondage in the Anglo-Atlantic world (p. 205).

Perhaps I am missing the forest for the trees, but I do not think so. Ironically, because the authors have cast their net so wide to demonstrate their argument, they may have become a bit too indiscriminate in their use of evidence. It is clear in the end, however, that there were a number of forces, personalities, and voices throughout the Atlantic world that were victimized by the rise of European imperial states and opposed this long-term process at several key junctures. Linebaugh and Rediker should be complemented for their ability to elucidate the nature of the many heads of the Atlantic-world hydra. At the same time, the absence of a collective agenda or shared consciousness of a single body holding the hydra's heads aloft seems profoundly clear in spite of the authors' insistence otherwise.

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Citation: Michael Guasco. Review of Linebaugh, Peter; Rediker, Marcus, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic.* H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

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