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Hercules, the Hydra and Historians

The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker¹ arrived at an important juncture in modern history, a conservative era bracketed by the 1990s when Francis Fukuyama in the wake of the end of the Cold War had proclaimed the end of history² and before 11 September 2001 and the onset of a global war on terror that echoes the anti-piracy campaigns of the early modern era. A *zeitgeist* of reaction prevailed and impacted negatively on the history of labouring peoples. Given the book's politics, it is no wonder that its publication provoked polemics as much as reasoned debate. Charges of "careless, egregious mistakes" made by "ideologically inclined writers" rang from one pole of the spectrum, to be met with claims of "red-baiting" from the other.³ Within the academy, postmodernism and the cultural politics of social identity had eroded the former certitude offered by such historical constructs as class and fragmented the entire social history enterprise. It is safe to say that the book has survived such *contretemps* and remains, a decade later, part of the canon for historians of the left, a touchstone for anyone wishing to engage the subject of global capitalism from a historical perspective.

The book developed a number of key themes that have endured. The idea of "the Atlantic" it put forward perhaps had the broadest

¹ Peter Linebaugh / Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, London 2000.

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

³ David Brion Davis, *Slavery—White, Black, Muslim, Christian*, in: *The New York Review of Books*, 48: 11 (5 July 2001), pp. 51–55; Peter Linebaugh / Marcus Rediker, Reply by David Brion Davis, 'The Many-Headed Hydra': An Exchange, in: *The New York Review of Books*, 48: 14 (20 September 2001), pp. 95–96.

impact. The authors certainly did not originate the concept, but in linking it to ideas of transnationality then at the forefront of historical inquiry and fusing it to a process of proletarian revolution that transcended the American and French exemplars, they made it a powerful construct of historical change. In their book, the Atlantic functioned as an economy, a labour system, and a locus for the “transmission of human experience.”⁴

The authors applied the mythological metaphor of Hercules and the Hydra to grapple with the complex class conflict of this era, Hercules representing the ruling classes, Hydra the proletariat. The elite gave rise to the proletariat through their forcible expropriation of land and labour; the rootless proletariat by its very existence and manifold acts of resistance posed a visceral threat to the new order. The Atlantic world in the era covered by the book, in the authors’ view, was characterised by the violent construction of a new system of economic and social relations, the bones and sinews of capitalism, but those the system sought to exploit and oppress contested its power. The study of this contestation and accommodation forms a classic expression of history from below. It is through its retelling that Linebaugh and Rediker make their broadest claim: that a self-conscious proletariat spanning the Atlantic formed in this period, aware of the inequities of the emergent capitalist system, equipped with models of understanding with which to challenge the assumptions of this order, and prepared periodically to resist with violence its dictates. Several criticisms have and can be made of the book’s main themes. The authors’ Atlantic is essentially an Anglo one. They overstate the existence and coherence of a proletariat and proletarian resistance. Their treatments are essentially sketches linked together by argumentation rather than historical evidence. I will explore these criticisms in what follows.

In adopting the Atlantic as their framework, the authors have chosen a massive canvas upon which to map their heroic subject, covering more than two centuries of history and incorporating the

⁴ Linebaugh / Rediker, *Hydra* (as cited in note 1), p. 2.

peoples of four continents. Such an ambitious creative effort inevitably privileged certain groups and particular events over others. There is a certain validity, therefore, to the criticism that theirs is largely an Anglo Atlantic World. This does not equate, however, to an assertion that the authors dismissed the experiences of people other than the English and those under their dominion. In fact, they are acutely attentive to different voices, but the scope of human effort in researching this history naturally limited their focus. The text functioned more as an initial sketch of a much broader representation of the Atlantic World allowing historians of different times and places to fill in the globe.

The notion of the Atlantic World is more limiting by its very conceptualization, however. Historical models that are geographically defined come with their own set of problems. The authors argue for this concept as a necessary corrective to the restrictive models of nation states, which are in need of interrogating. At the same time, the Atlantic as a concept can delimit historical inquiry in a similar fashion to the nation state, if with less political and historiographical baggage. Linebaugh and Rediker obviously are not geographic determinists. Their understanding of place is first and foremost as a space within which a process unwound at a particular point in time; specifically capital formation occurring in the so-called Atlantic World in the early modern era, and the class conflict it initiated. Yet, implicitly it closes the door to the extra-Atlantic theatres of this process, for example the Asian subcontinent. Moreover, the authors' privileging of the maritime and littoral within the Atlantic sphere over the continental interior places this model of the formation of capital upon a Procrustean bed. What was traditionally conceived of as the frontier, the place where Europeans, creoles and indigenous peoples encountered one another, goes missing. Trails and rivers constituted conduits of capital as much as sea lanes, and traders, soldiers and native peoples confronted its power structures as much as jack tars.

The Atlantic World as a heuristic device has the advantage of being less distracting or alienating to historians than when class and capitalism are foregrounded – after all the conservative historian Bernard Bailyn is a leading champion of the concept⁵ – but because of this pliability the concept loses some of its explanatory power. The authors use it in very specific terms, as a theatre in which unwound the historical process of what Marx termed the “so-called primitive accumulation”.⁶ But in forging together two distinct types of concepts, the spatial and the historical, the tidal pull of the Atlantic world washes over the historical explanation, leading to a certain imprecision as to cause and effect. Things happen *in* the Atlantic world not *because* of anything inherent to the Atlantic World. Talking in terms of place obscures the historical process, and this has ramifications throughout the book. In particular, mapping the struggles of the lower classes on the Atlantic gives them more coherence than perhaps existed. It implies a connectivity of experience, and the illusion of acts of resistance or revolt happening in a linear temporality advancing to a predetermined end in cycles of revolution and repression. More firmly grounding them in a model of primitive accumulation would make allowances for the occurrence of many unrelated acts of resistance to the commercialization of everyday life without necessitating their essential interrelatedness through a shared class ideology. The line does not have to be drawn between the Putney Debates and piracy, or the New York Slave Conspiracy and Tacky’s Revolt, for them to be significant historically and individual measures of the rise of capitalism.

The book’s motif of the hydra constitutes the next point of discussion. Two issues of possible contention to the concept of the proletariat as applied by the authors will be addressed: its very ex-

⁵ Bernard Bailyn is Director of the International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World at Harvard University and author of *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours*, Cambridge 2005.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, New York 1906, Part VIII, chapters 26–33.

istence; and the existence of a proletarian consciousness or political ideology of opposition. First, the question of what class actually presaged the working class in its classic 19th century form has long bedeviled historians of the left (at least those willing to conceive of a world before machinofacture and industrial class conflict). Edward Thompson addressed this conundrum in his article *Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?* in 1978.⁷ This article has proven very useful in my own understanding of class in the 18th century as it applied to the soldiers that I study, but at the same time it must be said that it posits an unfortunate framing of the problem, in that it effectively denied the existence of a labouring class at that time. The *Many-Headed Hydra's* reclaiming of a “pre-history”, so to speak, of the working class constitutes one great benefit of the book. The idea of the proletariat is instructive to an understanding of class experience in the Early Modern era in Europe and its satellites. It points to the seminal processes associated with primitive accumulation, makes sense of an entire array of experience, and allows the historian to recapture the agency of the protean working class. At the same time, the idea of a *motley crew* unified by a proletarian system of beliefs developed in opposition to their exploitation that circulated around the Atlantic and arced over time is very difficult to demonstrate, especially in a series of what are essentially case studies. The reader is asked to take on faith what the authors take as given. This does not mean that one cannot be convinced, just that more convincing is necessary. Proletarian resistance and accommodation are informed by congeries of ideas, some mutually exclusive, that both called into question the very logic of merchant capitalistic society and acquiesced to its persuasion or coercion. At best, the ideas that sparked outright resistance were latent, ephemeral when active, and not completely worked out in the ways we would normally expect of an ideology. However, must proletarian consciousness be the lit-

⁷ Edward P. Thompson, *Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?*, in: *Social History*, 3: 2 (May 1978), pp. 133–65.

mus test of the existence of class, and a whole host of proletarian experience yoked to an ideal of political action? This is a question that can be addressed to both the authors, who posit the revolutionary proletariat, and to their critics, who deny its existence, both hinging their positions on an organic model of class consciousness.

Several antidotes suggest themselves to what could be perceived as an overly idealised portrayal of proletarian agency. First, more needs to be made of the might of Hercules, who slew the Hydra after all. The authors make quite clear the power of the capitalist state in setting up their general model, and more specifically the actual unwinding of this power in each of their case studies. Nonetheless, one leaves this book more amazed by the actions of the proletariat than by those of the ruling class. It is essential to temper this wonder with a realistic portrayal of the cruelties of primitive accumulation. Without it, the book closes on the threshold of the 19th century with more hope about the future of the labouring class than perhaps is warranted, given what we know happened in the ensuing two centuries. Obviously, the primary objective of the authors was to reclaim the historical agency of the proletariat, necessarily so given the currents of historical writing against which they were swimming. Yet, they predicate proletarian agency on the expropriation and discipline visited upon them by the agents of capital. More can be made of these actions. At a time in which much of the historical literature on the English middle class dwells narrowly on the phenomenalism of emotion, taste, and manners, it is overtime that we are reminded of the brutal acts of theft and punishment that funded their lifestyle. Linebaugh and Rediker reminded us of this, but more needs to be done to paint the tragic picture. History from below such as theirs loses meaning without history from above.

Second, the historian needs to be prepared to cast the proletariat in a less heroic light than in *The Many-Headed Hydra*. Often members of this class participated in visiting the oppression of capitalism on others. My research on British soldiers in the Seven Years'

War offers an example. Often viewed as the “scum of the earth,” scooped up by the press or forced into the military by economic exigency associated with the changes wrought by primitive accumulation and paid a daily wage for their work, soldiers comprised a branch of the proletariat alienated from the means of production, their lives a factor in the labour exchange and subject to a work discipline even more harrowing than that of civil society. At the same time, their labour often involved the oppression of other members of the proletariat in the suppression of civil unrest, the waging of war, the subjugation of other peoples, often of a different ethnicity or race, in wars of conquest or colonisation, as they were alienated from their own class and made complicit in its suppression. Collectively, as an army, soldiers functioned as the armed expression of the developing capitalistic state, at once oppressed and oppressors.⁸ On the other hand, seeing only the proletariat’s role in oppressing others, as has too much been the case in whiteness studies,⁹ leads the historian into a liberal guilt trip that ends up obscuring the oppressed as historic subjects. Acknowledging some complexity to class relationships does not strip them of their essential power flows. And typically, I would argue, members of the proletariat are complicit to the extent to which they are made complicit.

To turn from criticism, the book has charted new directions in labour history that continue to need our attention. First, the timing of labour history. In covering two centuries of history in those dim days before 1800, the authors reminded many of us of an earlier era in the making of labour. Labour historians remain focused on the

⁸ See, e.g., my essays: *Class and the Common Soldier in the Seven Years’ War*, *Labor History*, 44: 4 (December 2003), pp. 455–481; *Klassenkrieg: Die ursprüngliche Akkumulation, die militärische Revolution und der britische Kriegerarbeiter*, in: Marcel van der Linden / Karl Heinz Roth (eds), unter Mitarbeit von Max Henninger, *Über Marx hinaus. Arbeitsgeschichte und Arbeitsbegriff in der Konfrontation mit den globalen Arbeitsverhältnissen des 21. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin / Hamburg 2009, pp. 85–114.

⁹ We can see this tendency at its root in David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, New York / London 1991.

modern, particularly the 20th century, as a quick review of the table of contents to labour history journals attests. The fixed pupils of most labour historians keep them from seeing the great train of history of working people and perpetuates a particular interpretation of class experience as being industrial-based and union centred. If anything, the contemporary experience of labour characterised by the dwindling power of unions, employment in service industries, transnational labour migrations, the multiracial nature of the labour force, but in particular, the seeming omnipotence of global capitalism backed by state power, echoes the era of the 17th and 18th centuries. In many ways, the primitive accumulation of that era repeats itself today as capitalism shifts from an industrial to a technological base. Second, there is the book's geositioning of labour history. By circumnavigating the Atlantic in their quest for labour experience, Linebaugh and Rediker struck a blow against national exceptionalism in the writing of labour history. They unrolled the map on the historic formation of modern capitalism and class experience. It should prove harder for academics to proclaim *terra incognita* and remain rooted within the boundaries set by the nation state. Third, there is the peopling of labour history. The multinational, multiracial, multicultural motley crew that was the Atlantic proletariat allowed for a much more diverse treatment of labour than had been the norm. Throughout the 1990s, labour history came under assault for supposedly being sexist, racist and ethnocentric, even worse, *declassé* due to the end of the Cold War and irrelevant in a postmodern world. Many labour history texts struck an apologetic stance, as navel-gazing, self-excoriation and turncoatism abounded. Linebaugh and Rediker turned this criticism on its head, drawing together the separate strands of difference and uniting them with a class model that did no disservice to other identities. Cultural politics became class politics. Finally, *Hydra*, did not apologise; instead it expressed righteous anger and an unwillingness to excuse or ignore the violence done working people over the past 400 years. Labour historians had treated labour too

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much as a proper noun: organised labour operating in a world bound by unions. Linebaugh and Rediker made labour a verb again; all those people who had to toil to exist, the vile acts committed against them and their periodic transcendence through the work of resistance. Historians need to continue taking such action to reclaim the past as a means of explaining social injustice today, in the process becoming one of the many heads of the hydra.