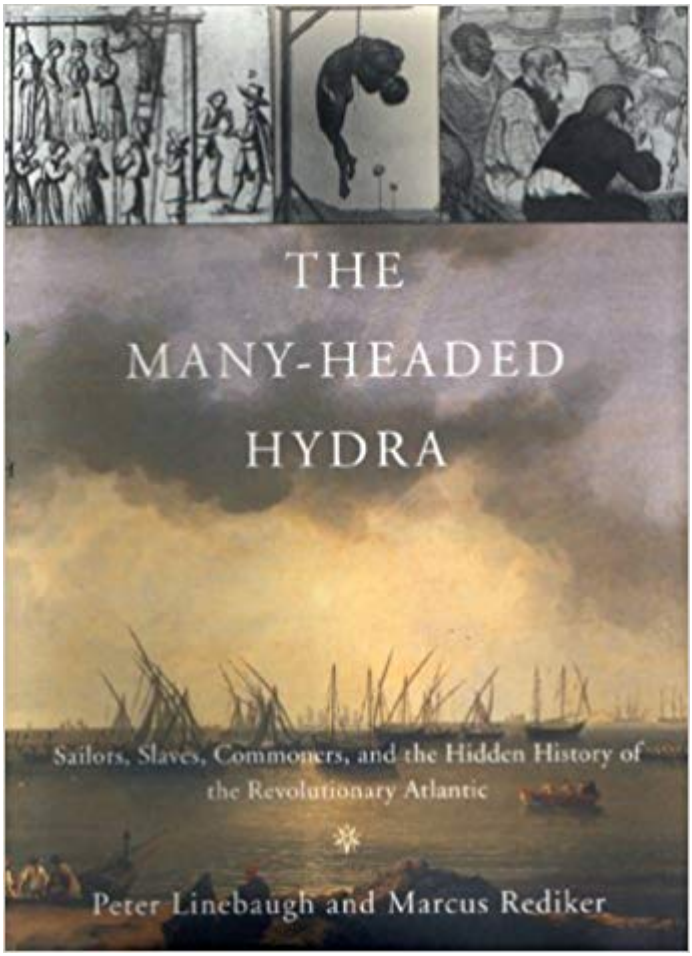
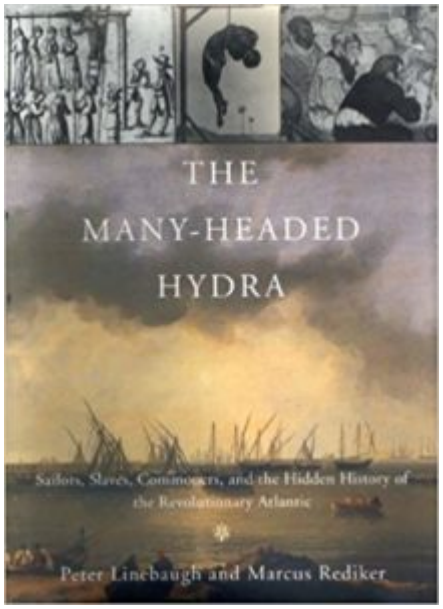
Lumpen-Proletarians of the Atlantic World, Unite!



In their 1848 *Communist Manifesto,* Karl Marx and Frederich Engels derided the "'dangerous classes,' the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society . . . [as] a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue." They conceded that it could under certain conditions be "swept into the movement of a proletarian revolution," but clearly doubted its potential. Marx and Engels never revised this contemptuous vision of the dispossessed. Never in their writings are expressed hopes for unity between the outcasts and enslaved Africans. Because of this lacuna, labor historians have generally neglected mariners, landless laborers, the unskilled, and the enslaved. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, two of the better narrative historians around, allude to this problem late in their vigorous study by censuring labor history as giving too much emphasis on the "white, male, skilled, waged, nationalistic, propertied artisan/citizen or industrial worker." This focus has "hidden the history of the Atlantic proletariat" (332) of the early modern period.

As the preeminent students of the late E. P. Thompson, Linebaugh and Rediker have, in their finely argued, wonderfully detailed resurrection of lost heroes,

elevated the “social scum” into a preindustrial, interracial, cross-gendered, working class and enormously broadened and restructured the avenues of premodern social history. Employing an elastic version of Ira Berlin’s method of time and place in social formations, Linebaugh and Rediker navigate readers around the Atlantic basin between 1609 and roughly 1820. Each chapter, moving chronologically forward, focuses on specific individuals or movements, whose actions propel the authors’ thesis of the revolutionary struggles of the dispossessed against an emergent merchant capitalism. Chapter 1, for example, is about the saga of the wreck of the *Sea-Venture* off Bermuda in 1609. Bermuda was thought to be a devil’s island; instead the 150 marooned survivors established a primitive communism on the bucolic isle. This event is sacked for meaning as Linebaugh and Rediker create a genealogy of the members of this instant society by examination of the enclosure acts of seventeenth-century England. In addition to standard historical references, the writers borrow heavily from literature. As they note, Shakespeare described this event in *The Tempest*. Such literary references abound in the book, enabling Linebaugh and Rediker to connect their argument with the artistic and ideological perspectives of discreet epochs. An added benefit of course is the beauty of antique writing, which raises their own gleaming discourse. The Shakespeare quotes are part of the duo’s strategy of examining the etymology of the language of rebellion and oppression.



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

Chapter 2 is a thorough exhumation of the uses and meanings of the term “hewers of wood and drawers of water. ” By this, Linebaugh and Rediker contend, was meant those who undertook the labors of expropriation: building the ports and the ships, providing the seafarers for Atlantic commerce, and daily maintaining

the households. Herein are described in close detail the actual work required for these massive tasks. Hewers of wood were male, drawers of water were female. Their labor was enforced by terror manifested by common hangings, torture, imprisonment, and transportation. Again, these are vividly described by careful quoting, a method which entices readers otherwise dulled by charts and tables in more traditional tales of the lumpen-proletariat.

A key goal of this book is to integrate early modern labor history racially. A third chapter excavating the story of "A Blackymore Maide Named Francis" at once details the toils of agricultural female domestics and then, uniquely, relates the saga of a black prophetess. Adjoining this narrative are instructive interpretations of Anne Hutchinson and fascinating alignments of witchcraft trials with the oppression of proletarian females. This adds political meaning to Richard Godbeer's examination of controversies over magic and the suppression of witches in early modern Europe and New England. Even stronger a contention about the interracial nature of the Atlantic proletariat is the next chapter on the famous 1741 Negro Conspiracy in New York City. Their thesis already announced in their widely regarded 1990 article in the*Journal of Historical Sociology,* Linebaugh and Rediker's evidence about the nature of the conspiracy vacillates between black revolt and the inclusion of white rebels. As in a later chapter about the mulatto Robert Wedderburn, an English radical of fifty years later, a key symbolic act is an interracial love affair between Caesar, a black rebel, and Peggy, an Irish woman.

At the very least Linebaugh and Rediker break the tradition of treating mixed-race love as purely exploitative and herein lift such a union into a brave act of defiance. I must admit that I remain unpersuaded about the degrees of interracial nature of working-class protest in this chapter, but do admire how Linebaugh and Rediker greatly advance historical discourse. The chapter oddly omits recognition of such recent studies of the event in Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone* and my own *Root & Branch,* which includes an argument parallel to the authors'. More familiar is Linebaugh and Rediker's coverage of proletarian instigation and involvement in the American Revolution. Building on the seminal work of Jesse Lemisch on sailors and recent work by Sylvia Frey on black revolutionary soldiers, the authors add a third theme identifying the abolitionist exchange of Granville Sharpe and Olaudah Equiano. More original is the following chapter on the rebellious plans of Edward and Catherine Despard, a mixed-race couple intent on seizing power and declaring London a republic in 1802. This spectacular event, they claim, inspired similar actions in Ireland, America, and in Jamaica, Nicaragua, and Belize. This is one of several forays by the authors outside of an argument bound by the British Empire. I think they would concede that there was room for more, but other scholars may follow their substantial leads.

Next they illuminate the narrative of the before-mentioned Robert Wedderburn. Linebaugh and Rediker substantiate the evangelical underpinnings of proletarian revolts seen briefly before in the story of Francis, the Pentecostal maid. In the final chapter, Linebaugh and Rediker's keen ability to locate traditions of

rebellion is most fully found in their resurrection of the political artistry of Thomas Hardy, Equiano, François de Volney, and William Blake. Any minor misgivings I might have toward this bulging narrative are overcome by my appreciation of their mastery of literary sources and artful synthesis of interpretation. A major new interpretation of premodern labor history, the book is a terrific read which touches upon many significant questions and genres found in the forgotten lives the authors invite us to revisit.

Further Reading:

For the quote from Marx see Hal Draper, ed., *The Annotated Communist Manifesto* (Berkeley, 1984), 15. For witches see Richard Godbeer*, The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England*(Cambridge, 1992). The previously published article is Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, "'The Many-Headed Hydra': Sailors, Slaves, and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century," in *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3 (1990): 225-82. For recent interpretations of the 1741 Negro Conspiracy see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of African American Slavery,* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998) and Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill, 1999), chapters 3 and 5 on the racial character of the American Revolution.

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