

Reply

Peter Linebaugh

Volume 14, 1984

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt14deb02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Linebaugh, P. (1984). Reply. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 14, 173–182.

- Creole, how?
- I'll answer:
- here am I
- Eiffel Tower is much higher,
- but has no spirits, has no spirits...⁹

I would like to express my appreciation to Joanne Burgess, Christiane Malet and Michel Prairie of UQAM, as well as to my colleagues at the MBHP, for their criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.

Reply

Peter Linebaugh

SWEENEY'S CRITIQUE OF "Atlantic Mountains" is to be welcomed because that essay introduced many historical hypotheses about the movement of people and ideas among four continents during two centuries whose epic importance cannot be established in the space of a short essay, but perhaps may be tested as a result of the discussion that Sweeney has begun, and which hopefully others will be stimulated to pursue. "Atlantic Mountains" was intended to do no more. He finds the essay "both wrong and dangerous." He does not convince me that it is dangerous, and nor am I yet persuaded that it is "wrong." In this reply I shall take up only a few of his points in order to introduce some new evidence which, I believe, encourages us to pursue some of the leads indicated in "Atlantic Mountains."

That the human societies of all four corners of the Atlantic became linked during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through international trade is well-known. That the historical development of each area — Europe, Africa, North and South America — became irrevocably transformed as a result of enlarging trans-oceanic trade is scarcely less well-known. To these known truths, "Atlantic Mountains" introduced two hypotheses for discussion. First, it argued that the international cooperation suggested by trade statistics is an incomplete description, though for some purposes useful, because it ignores the human relations that become fetishized when exclusively presented in terms of trade or the value of trade. With the oceanic transportation of sugar, tobacco, gold, silver, cochineal, logwood, pitch, tar, woollens, iron, swords, muskets, rum, and molasses there occurred necessary connections among the many different modes of production and civilizations of the Atlantic. The means of communication among them, the oceanic sailing vessel, ought also to be regarded as a "mode of production," connecting the continents by trade, and by means of that trade bringing the peoples of the continents together by

⁹ As cited and translated by J. Voorhoeve in "The Art of Reading Creole Poetry" in Hymes, *Pidginization*, 325.

the objective cooperation of their labours.¹ In this sense of "mode of production" more is owed to the meaning suggested in Marx's *Capital* than in his *German Ideology*, because in the latter the term is close to "civilization" or "social formation" while in the former the meaning is almost technical, as a theoretical description of the evolution of the labour process.² Second, "Atlantic Mountains" attempted to provide an explanation for the evident arrested development of English capitalism between the English Revolution of the 1640s and the revolutions of the 1790s. It did this, partly, by considering the explanations offered by Thompson and Hobsbawm, and suggested that theirs had differing emphases that separately were inadequate but that when joined were still of great interest. The essay argued that the active principle of delay was located within the inertial resistance of living labour that was able, in England, to make itself unavailable for the degree of exploitation required by the new capitalist mammon which thus was faced with a strong incentive to take its adventures elsewhere.

A corollary to these hypotheses suggested that the revolutionary experience of parts of the English working class was generalized to other parts of the Atlantic labour that was set in motion by capital directed from London. The experience was profoundly modified by these encounters, and in new forms returned to England to become modified yet again. The essay sought to describe a kind of "double helix" of two complementary but opposing forces: a winding chain of capital and a living rope of labour whose dialectic within the Atlantic points of production and reproduction alone can explain "delays in development" or the transformation of experiences. This hypothesis owes much to C.L.R. James' dictum that "the truth of the labor movement" is only seen in relation to capital. On the other hand, the essay sought to avoid the Hegelianism of James' explanation of the dormancy of the embryonic conception of democracy proposed by the Levellers and the Diggers, an explanation that was largely an incident to his exposition of Hegel's "Doctrine of Essence."³

Sweeny accuses me of "astonishing reductionism" and of an "abandonment of class analysis" because I find some common interests, communi-

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, II, *The Process of Circulation of Capital* (Moscow 1967), chapter 6, discusses the transportation industry whose "distinguishing feature is that it appears as a continuation of a process of production within the process of circulation and for the process of circulation," but is actually an independent branch of production.

² Conference of Socialist Economists, *The Labour Process and Class Strategies* (London 1976), contains articles that take as their starting point these two senses of "mode of production."

³ C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (London 1980), 74 ff. Historically not as rich as Thompson or Hobsbawm's account of England's arrested development between the 1640s and the 1790s, it is still theoretically the most profound.

cation, and exchange of experience among dispersed people whose labour was exploited in quite different modes of production — the putting out system, the artisanal shop, the plantation, and the manufactory. That the living labour thus divided economically or formally was also divided by language, ethnicity, race, and religion makes it all the more astonishing to find cooperation among them. That cooperation was both objective and subjective.

Objective cooperation occurred through the labour process and in the labour market. Thus, international trade, when examined closely, will show myriad instances where workers of different regions, ethnicities, and modes of production had to interface with one another. The investigation of any international commodity — Bengal silk, Iroquois beaver, Virginia tobacco, Brazilian gold, Birmingham crucifixes, Honduran logwood, Jamaican sugar — will reveal to the patient and painstaking investigator the circumstances, the places, and the conditions of this interaction. Of course, it was generally a maritime interface by which we must include not only the rolling deck of the ship, but the shaky ground of warehouses, taverns, brothels, cellars, water-pumps, and the streets of the Atlantic maritime communities.

The objective cooperation arose also from the nature of the misnamed "labour market," in which a man or a woman might in a single lifetime have participated in several "modes of production." One great value of Marcus Rediker's essay, "'Good Hands, Stout Hearts, and Fast Feet,'" is that it presents, from the viewpoint of capital, seven distinct types of labour in the American colonies, labour as defined by both what kind of use-values were produced and what modes of exploitation were employed over them. He notes that despite these and other differences these workers shared experiences of terrorizing coercion in the trans-Atlantic traffic of human beings and a common counter-experience of their own making — mobility.⁴ The sources of evidence for the investigation of these workers arise from institutions designed to coerce them, viz., criminal records, military records, records of indentured servitude and of slavery, and the records arising from the suppression of their rebellions and insurrections. One does not wish to minimize the huge differences of experiences in the labour process, the hours of work, the kinship and reproductive networks, and the conditions of life and struggle among those organized in various Atlantic modes of production. A danger of regarding only the differences is that not only do we not see inter-connections (of many kinds, at many levels) but our categories of analysis can become limited, fixed, and finite, in a kind of "monochrome formalism."

Historians have begun to identify subjective forms of cooperation. Sweeny says that a "major structural leap" is made in asserting the "primacy of language as proof of communality of interest." Actually, the creation of new

⁴ Marcus Rediker, "'Good Hands, Stout Hearts, and Fast Feet:' The History and Culture of Working People in Early America," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 10 (1982), 123-45.

languages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflected or expressed realities of subjective cooperation which are more interestingly observed in action than in words. When Professor Peter Wood, the historian of the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina (1741), listens to "Gullah," a language of Charleston that enabled those who originated in the large maritime arc between the Scottish Highlands and Mozambique to communicate, he first shows us how Irish, African, Scot, who made the rebellion, had cooperated in many daily ways along the docks where they had "misappropriated" the products of their labours. As he argues, "Freed from old pressures and surrounded by new ones, men and women from three continents forged intimate relationships based upon diverse traditions and precarious circumstances."⁵

On St. Patrick's Day of the following year in New York City, the English Governor's mansion and fort were burnt to the ground in a rebellion of African, Spanish, Irish, and Amerindian. By occupation the rebels included coopers, carpenters, sailors, soldiers, prostitutes, scholars, musicians, servants, hunters, slaves, and health specialists.⁶ They spoke several languages, and the judges at their trials had to ask the rebels several times to translate one another's testimony. Cooperation of people of different trades, languages, traditions, origin, and religion, not to mention race or ethnicity, is certainly a major theme in American colonial history that prepared the way for the American War of Independence. To attempt to understand such "creators of social wealth" in their unity of social action against the oppressive forces that appropriated their labour can only be considered "reductionist" by those whose categories of class analysis have not only become refined but fixed and inflexible, so that they have come to mistake their analytical categories for that which needs to be explained, and which gave rise in the first instance to the categories themselves.

Sweeny writes that "the central argument of the article is historically wrong." He refers to the corollary I mentioned, that the levelling, antinomian, and libertarian ideas of what Christopher Hill called "the revolution within the revolution" of the 1640s, were generalized through the Atlantic community by means of the ship. The truth of this view requires examination of two themes. The first is the social history on the western side of the Atlantic of antinomian, millenarian, and communist ideas and practices in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In "Atlantic Mountains" this was only indicated by producing evidence of female preachers at staid Congregationalist meetings, or of the tensions of early Quakerism. Professor Rediker's article actually began with the description of a Virginia insurrection of 1663 in which such ideas were present. Other American colonial historians doubtless will have other examples and not only from insurrectionary or theological settings, but from daily ones

⁵ Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York 1974), 169 ff.

⁶ Thomas J. Davis, ed., *The New York Conspiracy* (1971), reprints the court proceedings of 1741, published in 1744.

like the tavern, the market, and the cock-pit. The second theme requiring examination is that of the material manner of the transmission of the English revolutionary experience, which brings us to the ship.

The fleet of the royal navy was responsible for the largest running outlay of revenue from the mercantilist state. Successive naval historians have shown that the credit monies, the administrative bureaucracies, the taxation policies, and the new methods of labour discipline (codified in the Articles of War, 1661) that came to characterize the state of the 1690s arose very largely to meet the requirements of English navalism. That is a first point. A second is that the ship carried commodities produced in various modes of production, and sailing itself became not only a concentration of mass labour, second only to the plantation, but also international labour. Third, as the chapters of any historical monograph on the manning requirements of the navy and merchant marine of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century navy will show, the sailors of the time were a species of waged labour whose activities on their own behalf — mutiny, slowdowns, strikes, and desertion — derived their power from the centrality that their labour had in this period of "merchant capital."⁷ No less than the "grandfather of political economy," William Petty, a "discoverer" of the labour theory of value, regarded soldiers and sailors as the "pillars of the commonwealth," a judgement exact in every sense but its characterization of wealth.⁸ Fourth, this "deep-sea proletariat" posed problems of recruitment that were incompletely solved by violence and coercion. The experience of the press-gang and resistance to it, perhaps more than any other dispute of eighteenth-century class relations, reverberated through Atlantic maritime communities, stirring memories of the democratic heritage of the English Revolution. Sixth, the comparison between the ship and the factory is neither figurative nor "poetic": the organic composition of the capital, the introduction of time discipline, the forms of on-the-job discipline, the heterogeneity in the division of labour, the mass of human cooperation, and the principle of confinement are characteristics each shares, enabling us to penetrate beneath apparent differences.

"Atlantic Mountains" regarded this mode of production as a setting for the struggles against exploitation whose proletarians conducted their particular "self-activities." The two- to four-month voyage at sea was, according to A.L. Dillard, an erudite and lucid scholar of Atlantic languages, a decisive period of transition that would fundamentally shape the expression of experience in the New World.⁹ The origins of Methodism are partly found, in Wesley's own account, in his shipboard encounter with German pietism and Mora-

⁷ Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (London 1962); J.S. Bromley, ed., *The Manning of the Royal Navy: Selected Public Pamphlets, 1693-1873* (Naval Record Society 1974); John Ehrman, *The Navy in the War of William III, 1689-1697* (Cambridge 1953).

⁸ C.H. Hull, ed., *The Economic Writings of Sir William Petty*, I (London 1899), 260.

⁹ *All-American English* (New York 1975).

vian hymnody that took place on a heaving deck during an Atlantic storm.¹⁰ The transmission and modification of that libertarianism associated with the Levellers in the seventeenth century and with Tom Paine in the eighteenth century were partly maritime phenomena. "Atlantic Mountains" hazarded the hypothesis that many other experiences and knowledges were modified and enriched by the shipboard encounters with men and women of several continents, languages, and races.

Sweeny expresses doubt that even an African slave "chained to a rough hewn piece of wood . . . would . . . be able to either learn or create a language rich enough to express the poetry of the Bible or the political concepts of Winstanley." He derides the possibility. Yet, Olaudah Equiano's Autobiography permits us to be watchful for exactly such unlikely, unheard-of possibilities. He was an Ibo and enslaved as a boy. An American boy four or five years his senior, named Richard Baker, was his companion and instructor for many months on shipboard in 1756-7. Five years later another shipmate, Daniel Queen, taught Equiano how to dress hair, how to conduct business, how to read the Bible and *Paradise Lost*.¹¹ Like Ottobah Cugoano, a fellow organizer of an English back-to-Africa movement, Equiano was well-versed in the seventeenth-century religious idiom of freedom, in the complex legal notions suggested by the phrase "the free-born Briton," and in the debates about slavery and "free labour" of the 1770s. Here then were two men, both veterans of the Middle Passage, who mastered the oppressors' language; moreover, in learning that language through Milton they were studying a profound dialogue with the English antinomians of the mid-seventeenth century.¹²

The real issue, however, is not methodological; it is interpretative and political. Sweeny, even if ready to accept evidence of a very long tradition of Anglo-African interchange, does not indicate a readiness to see its implications. This was not the case with the first observers of the relationship between African and English dissidents. Aphra Behn, the English actress and writer, living in Surinam in the 1670s, wrote the first English novel. *Oronoko* is about a slave revolt in that colony. Its eponymous hero is a former African chieftain who leads the revolt. Among the characters he encounters in the complexity of class relations as described by Behn are some radical Quakers and sectaries who had been expelled by Cromwell during the English Revolution. A hundred years later during the cycle of anti-imperialist wars of the 1770s, a Surinamese slave named Neptune suffered a long, lingering form of capital punishment. A witness to this gruesome event describes how two American sailors intervened to prevent some cruel humiliations from being

¹⁰ John Wesley, *Journal* (Everyman edition 1906), 20-34.

¹¹ *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vass, the African, Written by Himself* (1789).

¹² Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London 1978). Hill argues that *Paradise Lost* is a "deeply political" poem "wrestling with the problem of the failed revolution, the millennium that did not come," 362.

visited upon Neptune. We wonder who the sailors were.¹³ What had been their knowledge of events of that year in the northern hemisphere?

By the second quarter of the eighteenth century the African population in London had an importance noticed even by children. *Tommy Thumb's Little Song Book* (1744), for instance, records this skip-rope rhyme:

As I went by a Dyer's door,
I met a lusty tauny moor
Tauny hands and tauny face
Tauny petticoats
Silver lace.

Skipping around eighteenth-century Atlantic seaports, we find that in Surinam well before Yankee Doodle rode to town, children were playing to:

Mamma Nanni go to town
Buy a little pony
Stick a feather in a ring,
Calling Massa Ranni.

"The ostensible central argument of the article is historically wrong," Sweeny writes referring to the "African boomerang" that returned to London to provide historical experience of slave rebellion and insurrection to the "making of the English working class." Since writing "Atlantic Mountains" new evidence has come to light permitting us to view the Afro-American contribution to London and English working-class politics with more certainty and confidence. In conclusion, then, I would like briefly to describe two incidents that elsewhere I describe more fully.¹⁴ The first has to do with the Gordon Riots of June 1780, the largest European municipal insurrection of the eighteenth century that left almost 500 men and women dead or wounded. The targets of the insurrection were Parliament, Members of Parliament, the bank, the great mercantile companies, the Law Courts, and the many prisons of London. A result of this week of riot was a deepening of the division between the City of London and the executive. It stimulated a debate about "police" and order that became decisive to the new lineaments of state rule. It provided the English ruling class with an experience that prevented a situation from developing in England such as would occur in France during the summer of 1789 when the Bastille was attacked and opened. The attack on Newgate on 6 June 1780 — "Black Wednesday" — was the culmination and turning point of the riot. The attack was observed by William Blake who recorded an image of human liberation as a result, an engraving he entitled, "Albion rose from where he laboured at the Mill with Slaves." The attack was led by two Afro-Americans, Benjamin Bowsey and John Glover, who were enabled to come to

¹³ John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796). This account of the merciful American sailors became part of the nineteenth-century editions of the *Newgate Calendar*, thus entering one of the printed trajectories of Atlantic labour.

¹⁴ See Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Allen Lane: London, forthcoming), chapter ten.

England as a result of the American War of Independence.¹⁵ They were hanged for their actions.

A second incident illustrating the decisive contribution of the African population of London to the English working class arises from what has become the classic set-piece of the formation of the nineteenth-century "English working class," namely the March 1792 meeting of the London Corresponding Society (LCS). This meeting was the dramatic moment described at the beginning of Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. He began the book with the first rule of the LCS, "That the number of our Members be unlimited." The second sentence goes on to say, "This is the first of the 'leading rules' of the London Corresponding Society, as cited by its Secretary when he began to correspond with a similar society in Sheffield in March 1792." Sweeny does not need to be reminded of the importance of the year 1792, the year the French Republic was proclaimed, the year of the English invasion of San Domingo. Nor does he need to be reminded of the significance of the communication between a London cobbler, Thomas Hardy of the LCS, and a similar society in Sheffield, because Thompson invited us to see this as representing the conjuncture of two parts of the English working class — London artisanal radicalism based in "traditional" trades, and a northern, metal-working, more "proletarian" part of the class. Thompson's account of this historic meeting depends on the *Memoirs of Thomas Hardy . . . Written by Himself*, published forty years later in 1832. If instead of looking at his memoirs we look at the Letter Books of the LCS and what Hardy said at the time, an important difference appears that is not found in Thompson's account of the meeting. The link with Sheffield came about with the following letter of 8 March by Hardy to the Rev. Mr. Bryant:

I hope you will pardon that freedom which I take in troubling you with the following sentiments — nothing but the importance of the business would have induced me to address one who is an intire stranger to me only by report but hearing from Gustavus Vassa that you are a zealous friend for the Abolition of that accursed traffic denominated the Slave Trade I inferred from that that you was a friend to freedom on the broad basis of the Rights of Man for I am fully perswaded that no man who is an advocate from principle for liberty for a Black Man but will . . . promote and support the rights of a White Man & vice versa.¹⁶

So, in addition to "the rights of man" and the discussion Paine and the French Revolution started, we must add the discussion of the abolition of slavery to the intellectual background of English working-class radicalism. But of even greater interest is the name "Gustavus Vassa." This was the name provided to Olaudah Equiano by his first slave master. Earlier that year Equiano had been in Sheffield where he had first-hand experience with the furious scissor-

¹⁵ *The Proceedings . . . at the Old Bailey* (28 June 1780).

¹⁶ The British Library. Add. Ms. 27, 811. *The Place Papers*, I, (The London Corresponding Society).

grinders' strike. Earlier still he had suffered an accident in a Welsh coal mine, and earlier still he had been in Ireland. It was Equiano, then, a Nigerian, and an Afro-American ex-slave, who made possible the historic connection that Thompson celebrates at the beginning of *The Making of the English Working Class*.

The "internationalism" of the moment of March 1792 was acknowledged by the LCS. In April Hardy wrote,

There is an absolute necessity for us to unite together and communicate with each other that our sentiments and determinations may center in one point, viz., to have the Rights of Man re-established especially in this nation but our views of the Rights of Man are not confined solely to this small island but are extended to the whole human race, black or white, high or low, rich or poor.¹⁷

If anything, then, "Atlantic Mountains" failed in lending to the Afro-American "boomerang" the importance that this subsequent evidence requires that we give it. Far from being "historically wrong" the emphasis was not strong enough.

There were many other "boomerangs" through the north and south Atlantic. Those of the south Atlantic created novel civilizations and working-class cultures in Brazil. In the north Atlantic others besides Afro-Americans provided the living conduits of the transmission of experiences. The Irish diaspora of course would be almost as important as that provided by Africans and Afro-Americans. "Atlantic Mountains" and this "Reply" concentrate upon how those movements of people and ideas affected London, the hub of north Atlantic imperialism. Almost 50 years ago W.E.B. DuBois wrote of the slave trade, "It was a tragedy that beggared the Greek; it was an upheaval of humanity like the Reformation and the French Revolution. Yet we are blind and led by the blind. We discern in it no part of our labor movement."¹⁸ The evidence adduced in these essays has tried to open our eyes from the blindness DuBois indicated. It may be that with further evidence the interpretations that I have proffered will need modification. The evidence however is there — Afro-Americans leading the largest English municipal insurrection of the eighteenth century, a Nigerian teaching Thomas Hardy, the London artisan, and providing him with links to other parts of the "English" working class — and no amount of well-intended polemic from Sweeny arising from his moribund categories of analysis can either alter that evidence of eighteenth-century internationalism among the creators of social wealth nor bury "our labor movement" in ethnically or economically arranged cemetery plots.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York 1935), 757.

The Register

The Register is a biannual publication accepting submissions of a historical nature, including original research, bibliographical essays, book reviews and interviews. Works are welcomed in either French or English. Submissions should be within 2,500 and 12,500 words in length.

Submissions are available for:

one year	\$5.00
Two years	\$9.00
three years	\$12.00

All correspondence should be addressed to:
The Register, McGill University, 855
Sherbrooke Street, West, Montreal, Quebec,
H3A 2T7. Back issues available \$3.00 each.