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Labour History as the History of Multitudes

Marcel van der Linden

Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press 2000)

LABOUR HISTORIANS STUDY the working class to examine its development, composition, working conditions, lifestyle, culture, and many other aspects. But what exactly do we mean when we use the term "working class"? Over the past half-century, the answer to this seemingly simple question has changed continuously. In the 1950s and 1960s it usually denoted male breadwinners who earned a living in agriculture, industry, mining, or transport. In the 1970s and 1980s objections from feminists instigated a fundamental revision that broadened the focus beyond the male head of the household to include the wife and children. Occupational groups that tended to be overlooked in the past, such as domestic servants and prostitutes, started to receive serious consideration. The chronological and geographic scope of the research expanded as well. Labour historians became interested in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and took a closer look at pre-industrial wage earners. Our overall perspective on the working class has undergone a paradigmatic revolution. The signs indicate that this first transition is merely a harbinger of a second one.

However broadly labour historians have interpreted their discipline thus far, their main interest has always been free workers and their families. They perceived such a wage earner in the Marxian sense as the worker who "as a free individual can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity" and "has no other commodity

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for sale."[1] This restricted definition has become a focus of recent debate. Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians studying the capitalist periphery had observed decades ago that the distinctions between free wage-earners and some other subordinate groups were very fine indeed. In the early 1970s, V.L. Allen wrote: "In societies in which bare subsistence is the norm for a high proportion of all the working class, and where men, women, and children are compelled to seek alternative means of subsistence, as distinct from their traditional ones, the *lumpenproletariat* is barely distinguishable from much of the rest of the working class."[2] Other scholars noted additional grey areas between free wage labourers on the one hand and self-employed and unfree labourers (slaves, indentured workers, etc.) on the other hand.[3]

The distinctions between free, self-employed, unfree, and sub-proletarian workers are also challenged by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in their book *The Many-Headed Hydra*. These authors deal less with the periphery of capitalism than with relations between the core region emerging in the 17th and 18th centuries (Britain) and its colonies across the Atlantic in North America and the Caribbean. They consider the members of the underclass, whose labour made nascent capitalism possible. These "hewers of wood and drawers of water" were a "multiplicity" of social groups and comprised "the multitudes who gathered at the market, in the fields, on the piers and the ships, on the plantations, upon the battlefields." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 6)

The Many-Headed Hydra has received quite extensive media coverage in the three years since it was published. Reviews have appeared in journals and newspapers such as *The Washington Post*; it has also led to discussions such as in the *New York Review of Books*.[4] Part of the reason why the book achieves such a strong impact is undoubtedly that it is very well written and covers enthralling subjects, such as pirates, mutinies, and conspiracies. To romance their readers, Linebaugh and Rediker exaggerate mutual solidarity within the underclass now and then, such as

[1]Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, Ben Fowkes, trans., (Harmondsworth 1976), 272. Similar definitions were applied by non-Marxists as well.

[2]V.L. Allen, "The Meaning of the Working Class in Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 10 (June 1972), 188.

[3]Two fairly arbitrary cases from the literature are O. Nigel Bolland, "Proto-Proletarians? Slave Wages in the Americas," in Mary Turner, ed., *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Kingston 1995), 123-147; and Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge 2001).

[4]David Brion Davis, "Slavery — White, Black, Muslim, Christian," *New York Review of Books*, 48 (July 2001), 51-5; and the subsequent exchange with Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in *New York Review of Books*, 48 (September 2001), 95-6. In addition to "high praise" and some interesting ideas, Davis' review contains anti-socialist rhetoric and extensive criticism, due in part to several factual inaccuracies. The review incorrectly suggests that *The Many-Headed Hydra* is primarily about slavery.

by suggesting that pirates were "class-conscious and justice-seeking" without mentioning that pirates also killed innocent people and participated in the slave trade.[5] Their romanticized descriptions do not, however, conceal that beneath the narrative of rebelliousness and bloody repression, there lies subject matter that is immensely important for labour history as a discipline. Linebaugh and Rediker transform our perspective entirely.[6]

The Many-Headed Hydra is a history of British capitalism in the North Atlantic region from about 1600 to the early 19th century. It is intended as a history "from below."[7] (Linebaugh and Rediker, 6) While most historians attribute proletarianization during this period primarily to "natural" increases in fertility, and overlook terror and violence, Linebaugh and Rediker agree with Marx that "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, played the greatest part." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 361) Their implicit core idea is that the emerging capitalism led to a demand for labour for various activities, such as building and manning ships, chopping down forests, and farming. Whether such labour was "free" or "unfree," "white" or "black" mattered little. The chief concern was to find people who provided their labour under economic or physical coercion. Linebaugh and Rediker refer to the entire motley crew of labouring poor as proletarian, regardless of their specific legal status. They quote approvingly from the work of Orlando Patterson, who wrote that "the distinction, often made, between selling their labor as opposed to selling their persons makes no sense whatsoever in real human terms." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 125)

While the composition of the Atlantic proletariat changed constantly, it had two consistent faces. To the extent that it tolerated subordination and exploitation, it was docile and submissive; during rebellions, however, it became a "many-headed hydra," as described in the myth of Hercules: a many-headed monster that

[5]See also the review by Robin Blackburn in *Boston Review*, February-March 2001. Available online as <http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR26.1/blackburn.html>.

[6]*The Many-Headed Hydra* had a very long gestation period. Readers of this journal have been familiar with some of the themes for a long time. See the following essays by Peter Linebaugh, "All the Atlantic Mountains Shook," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 10 (Autumn 1982), 87-121; and Marcus Rediker "'Good Hands, Stout Hearts, and Fast Feet': The History and Culture of Working People in Early America," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 10 (Autumn 1982), 123-44. See also Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, "The Many-Headed Hydra," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 3 (1990), 225-52.

[7]The feasibility of a historiography from below without a concurrent historiography from above is questionable. Perry Anderson once rightly observed that "it is the construction and destruction of States which seal the basic shifts in the relations of production, so long as classes subsist. A 'history from above' — of the intricate machinery of class domination — is thus no less essential than a 'history from below': indeed, without it the latter in the end becomes one-sided (if the better side)." *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London 1974), 11. Bryan D. Palmer shares the same observation in "Hydra's Materialist History," *Historical Materialism. Research in Critical Marxist Theory* (forthcoming).

appeared undefeatable because for each head that was chopped off, two new ones would grow in its place. (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2-3, and 328-9) At some points deference prevailed and at others rebelliousness, like an undulation of acquiescence and resistance. The authors identify four general periods in the history of capitalism. The first began in the early decades of the 17th century, when the foundations of British capitalism were established with the enclosures and other expropriation practices. The system spread through trade and colonization across the Atlantic Ocean. This trend coincided with the bloody emergence of the Atlantic proletariat in its many manifestations as servants, sailors, and slaves.

The English Revolution in 1640 ushered in a second period, in which the new proletariat began to agitate, as is clear both from radical-plebeian movements and from the rise of a buccaneering culture and colonial rebellions. The third period ranges from the 1680s until the mid-18th century. Atlantic capitalism consolidated via the "maritime state," an empire that revolved around the Royal Navy. This consolidation, however, met with several challenges from below, that climaxed in a conspiracy in New York in 1741 in which the participants were Irish and Hispanic, and in which Africans from the Gold Coast played a crucial role. The fourth and final period roughly begins from 1760 onward, and protest was once again the central element. That year a cycle of revolts began in the Caribbean and continued for nearly two decades. In 1776 the American Revolution began as well. Linebaugh and Rediker demonstrate that the American Revolution "was neither an elite nor a national event, since its genesis, process, outcome, and influence all depended on the circulation of proletarian experience around the Atlantic." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 212) In the 1790s a new cycle of revolts started on both sides of the Atlantic, climaxing in the Haitian slave uprising from 1792 onward, "the first successful workers' revolt in modern history" and the rise of the early labour movement in Britain. (Linebaugh and Rediker, 319)

Voluntary and forced migration and the permanent mobility of the seafarers ensured continuous circulation of revolutionary ideas. "This multiethnic proletariat was 'cosmopolitan' in the original meaning of the word." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 246) The authors illustrate their point with references to authors such as Julius Scott, who has demonstrated "that sailors black, white, and brown had contact with slaves in the British, French, Spanish, and Dutch port cities of the Caribbean, exchanging information with them about slave revolts, abolition, and revolution and generating rumors that became material forces in their own right."[8] (Linebaugh and Rediker, 241)

The response of the ruling classes to the threats from below was highly consistent. Their immediate reaction was brutal repression and terror. "Hanging was destiny for part of the proletariat because it was necessary to the organization and

[8]The reference is Julius Sherrard Scott III, "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution," PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1986.

functioning of transatlantic labor markets, maritime and otherwise, and to the suppression of radical ideas." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 31) Their long-term strategy was based on the "divide-and-rule" principle. On the one hand, the social composition of the proletariat was changed after each wave of protest. When servants and slaves in Barbados, Virginia, and other places started to run away together, for example, plantation owners tried "to recompose the class by giving servants and slaves different material positions within the plantation system." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 127) On the other hand — and largely parallel to these efforts — racist ideologies were propagated to complicate collaboration between the different components of the proletariat. In the early 17th century the difference between waged and unwaged proletarians was "not yet racialized." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 49) Over time this changed. "After each major uprising, the racist doctrine of white supremacy took another step in its insidious evolution." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 284, and 139)

With the onset of "the Atlantic's age of revolution" toward the end of the 18th century, an unprecedented rift formed within the multi-ethnic proletariat, dividing the different segments, such as the "respectable" artisans and skilled workers, the unskilled casual workers, and coloured unfree workers. To illustrate this process, Linebaugh and Rediker write that upon its establishment in early 1792, the London Corresponding Society (LCS), widely known from E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, professed universal equality, whether "black or white, high or low, rich or poor." By August of that same year, however, the LCS proclaimed: "Fellow Citizens, Of every rank and every situation in life, Rich, Poor, High or Low, we address you all as our Brethren."[9] The phrase "black or white" had been omitted. Linebaugh and Rediker regard the recent uprising in Haiti as the only conceivable reason for this sudden reversal. "Race had thus become a tricky and, for many, in England, a threatening subject, one that the leadership of the LCS now preferred to avoid." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 274) The proletariat thus grew more segmented. "What was left behind was national and partial: the *English* working class, the *black* Haitian, the *Irish* diaspora." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 286) "What began as repression thus evolved into mutually exclusive narratives that have hidden our history." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 352) In the 19th century the single story of the Atlantic proletariat was divided into several, especially "the story of the Working Class" and "the narrative of Black Power." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 333-34)

The highlights of Linebaugh and Rediker's argument are conveyed above. Like all good books, however, *The Many-Headed Hydra* has considerably more to offer than this summary suggests. As I mentioned, I am primarily interested in its more general methodological and theoretical implications for labour historiography. The book provides convincing evidence that the labouring poor across the At-

[9]Mary Thale, ed., *Selections from the Papers of the LCS 1792-1799* (Cambridge 1983), 18.

lantic exchanged radical ideas, and that slaves and free workers joined forces on many occasions. This revelation is of lasting merit. But Linebaugh and Rediker appear to be far more presumptive. They call for a comprehensive revision of current theory on working-class formation. The working class comprises everybody who performs dependent labour under capitalism, which includes slaves, wage-earners, indentured labourers, and other workers. Our "modern" interpretation, which holds that the working class consists exclusively of "free" wage-earners, is a product of historical repression. Labour historians, therefore, need to perceive their task in far broader terms than they have generally done thus far and should study *all* dependent workers from the 16th century to the present.

Linebaugh and Rediker do not truly substantiate their position. *The Many-Headed Hydra* is strong on narratives but considerably weaker in its theoretical analysis. In fact, the only reasons the authors mention for regarding waged and non-waged workers as members of the same class is their close collaboration in various struggles. Such coalitions are obviously not the only ground, though, since a great deal depends on whether the shared interests that underlie them are temporary or permanent.[10] The lack of analysis based on class theory is the main shortcoming of *The Many-Headed Hydra*. What unites that vast and multiform proletariat that many contemporaries referred to as "multitude(s)" (see Linebaugh and Rediker, 20, 39, 62, 84, 238, 283, 331, and 342)?[11] When Linebaugh presented a few basic ideas for the project in the early 1980s, Robert Sweeny rejected them in this journal as an "abandonment of class analysis."[12] In my view, this accusation is unfounded. Linebaugh and Rediker do not argue that class analysis is superfluous; rather, they do not perform it adequately.[13]

The crucial element in the perspective of *The Many-Headed Hydra* is that it forces us to abandon a "classical" *topos* of Western thought: the idea that "free" market capitalism corresponds best with "free" wage labour. This idea appears not

[10]In this context consider the theory of "relative class solidarity" in Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism. A System of Sociology* (1921; London 1926), 294.

[11]For reflections on the early-modern discourse on "multitude" and its complex connections with notions of "the working class," and present-day conceptions of the "multitude," see the French journal *multitudes*, since 2000 edited by Yann Moulier Boutang, especially Volume 9 (May-June 2002).

[12]Robert Sweeny, "Other Songs of Liberty: A Critique of 'All the Atlantic Mountains Shook'," *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (Fall 1984), 164. See also Linebaugh's "Reply," *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (Fall 1984) 173-81.

[13]Linebaugh and Rediker demonstrate, however, that even the distinction between "respectable" wage-labourers and "criminal" *lumpenproletarians* results in part from the course of history. Thousands "in Britain who found themselves living on the wrong side of laws that were changing rapidly to protect new definitions of property" became "criminals" and rebels when they defended their interests. (Linebaugh and Rediker, 187). Of course, Linebaugh dealt with this theme previously in *The London Hanged. Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New York 1992).

only in liberal theory but also in the work of authors such as Marx. In *Capital* we read that free wage labour is the only "true" capitalist way to commodify labour power. Marx states emphatically that "labour-power can appear on the market as a commodity only if, and so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale or sells it as a commodity."[14] Traditional interpretations of the working class are based on this idea. After all, if only the labour power of free wage labourers is commodified, the "real" working class in capitalism can only consist of such workers.

As historical research on labour relationships in colonial countries became more sophisticated Marx's thesis was questioned in increasing measure. Several authors have argued that unfree labour is fundamentally compatible with capitalist relations.[15] This conclusion is in fact rather obvious. Marx's thesis is based on two dubious assumptions, namely that labour needs to be offered for sale by the person who is the actual *bearer* and *owner* of such labour, and that the person who sells the labour sells nothing else.[16] Why does this have to be the case? Why can labour not be sold by a party other than the bearer? What prevents the person who provides labour (his or her own or that of somebody else) from offering packages combining the labour with labour means? And why can a slave not perform wage labour for his master at the estate of some third party? Asking these questions brings us very close to the idea that slaves, wage-labourers, share-croppers, and others are in fact an internally differentiated proletariat. The target approach is therefore one that "eliminates as a *defining* characteristic of the proletarian the payment of *wages* to the

[14]Marx, *Capital*, 271.

[15]For example, Philip Corrigan, "Feudal Relics or Capitalist Monuments? Notes on the Sociology of Unfree Labour," *Sociology*, 11 (1977), 435-63; Robert Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: Anomaly or Necessity?* (London and New York 1987); Götz Rohwer, "Kapitalismus und 'freie Lohnarbeit': Überlegungen zur Kritik eines Vorurteils," in Hamburger Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur, ed., *"Deutsche Wirtschaft": Zwangsarbeit von KZ-Häftlingen für Industrie und Behörden* (Hamburg 1992), 171-85; and several contributions in Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues* (Berne 1997).

[16]The term "selling" is not entirely appropriate for wage labour, as it consistently denotes a *temporary* transaction, which we would ordinarily describe as "leasing" rather than "selling." While this distinction may seem trivial, it can have major theoretical implications. See Franz Oppenheimer, *Die soziale Frage und der Sozialismus. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit der marxistischen Theorie* (Jena 1912), 119-22; Michael Eldred and Marnie Hanlon, "Reconstructing Value-Form Analysis," *Capital and Class*, 13 (Spring 1981), 44; Anders Lundkvist, "Kritik af Marx' lønteori," *Kurasje*, 37 (December 1985), 16-8; Michael Burkhardt, "Kritik der Marxschen Mehrwerttheorie," *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftswissenschaften*, 46 (1995), 125-27; and Peter Ruben, "Ist die Arbeitskraft eine Ware? Ein Beitrag zu einer marxistischen Marxkritik," in Heinz Eidam and Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik, eds., *Kritische Philosophie gesellschaftlicher Praxis* (Würzburg 1995), 167-83.

producer."[17] The main point appears to be that labour is commodified, although this commodification may take on many different forms.

It is definitely not a coincidence that the acknowledgements of *The Many-Headed Hydra* list Yann Moulier Boutang and his book *De l'esclavage au salariat* published in 1998.[18] After all, in his extensive study (elaborating on the work of Robert Miles and others), Moulier Boutang supplies arguments supporting the position that bonded labour is *essential* for capitalism to function, both in the past and nowadays. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who have also been inspired by Moulier Boutang, summarize a substantial portion of his theory as follows:

> *Slavery and servitude can be perfectly compatible with capitalist production*, as mechanisms that limit the mobility of the labor force and block its movements. Slavery, servitude, and all the other guises of the coercive organization of labor — from coolieism in the Pacific and peonage in Latin America to apartheid in South Africa — are all essential elements internal to the process of capitalist development.[19]

Marx called slavery "an anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself," which is "possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production," but "only because it does not exist at other points."[20] If Moulier Boutang and others are right, then Marx is mistaken here. In this case, "free" wage labour would not be the favoured labour relationship under capitalism, but only one of several options. Capitalists would always have a certain choice how they wished to mobilize labour-power. And bonded labour would under many circumstances *remain* an alternative.

If this conclusion is justified, then labour historians will indeed be expected to expand their field of research considerably. Linebaugh and Rediker write: "The emphasis in modern labor history on the white, male, skilled, waged, nationalist, propertied artisan/citizen or industrial worker has hidden the history of the Atlantic proletariat of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries." (Linebaugh and Rediker, 332) While this conclusion is easily justifiable, it is not broad enough in my view. First, the transcontinental proletariat is neither limited to the North Atlantic nor to regions where English is spoken. The multi-ethnic world of the sailors included Spanish, French, and Dutch fleets as well.[21] Second, the con-

[17]Immanuel Wallerstein, "Class Conflict in the Capitalist World-Economy", in Immanuel Wallerstein, *Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge 1979), 289.

[18]Yann Moulier Boutang, *De l'esclavage au salariat. Économie historique du salariat bridé* (Paris 1998).

[19]Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA, and London 2000), 122.

[20]Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy.* Martin Nicolaus, trans. (Harmondsworth 1973), 464.

[21]See Paul C. Van Royen, Jaap R. Bruijn, and Jan Lucassen, eds. *"Those Emblems of Hell"? European Sailors and the Maritime Labour Market, 1570-1870* (St. John's 1997); Roelof van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur. Duitsers in dienst van de VOC* (Nijmegen 1997);

cealed history obviously did not cease around 1835. Although the relative importance of "free" wage labour gradually increased, capitalism continued to accommodate various modes of labour control, ranging from share-cropping and self-employment to forced labour and outright slavery.[22] Finally, redefining the proletariat might lead to a revision of the "traditional" labour history of the 19th and 20th centuries. The discourse of exclusion that the metropolitan labour movements often invoked (rejection of *lumpenproletarians*, petty bourgeoisie, "inferior races," among others) merits reinterpretation and review.

Modest *and* ambitious in scope, *The Many-Headed Hydra* is a fascinating contribution to a new way of thought.

Pablo E. Pérez-Mallaína, *Spain's Men of the Sea. Daily Life on the Indies Fleets in the Sixteenth Century*, Carla Rahn Phillips, trans. (Baltimore and London 1998); and Herman Ketting Jr., *Leven, werk en rebellie aan boord van Oost-Indiëvaarders (1595-1650)* (Amsterdam 2002).

[22]See for example Fred Krissman, "California's Agricultural Labor Market: Historical Variations in the Use of Unfree Labor, c. 1769-1994," in Brass and Van der Linden, *Free and Unfree Labour*, 201-38; José de Souza Martins, "The Reappearance of Slavery and the Reproduction of Capital on the Brazilian Frontier,"in Brass and Van der Linden, *Free and Unfree Labour*, 281-302 and Miriam J. Wells, "The Resurgence of Sharecropping: Historical Anomaly or Political Strategy?" *American Journal of Sociology*, 90 (1984-85), 1-29.