

Interview: *Marcus Rediker*



Professor Marcus Rediker was born in Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1951. He graduated with a B.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1976. He went to the University of Pennsylvania for graduate study, earning an M.A. and Ph.D. in history. He taught at Georgetown University from 1982 to 1994, lived in Moscow for a year (1984-5), and is currently Professor and Chair in the Department of History at the

University of Pittsburgh. He has written (or co-written) nine books: *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1987), *Who Built America?* (1989), volume one; *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000), *Villains of All Nations* (2004) and *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007), *Many Middle Passages* (2007); *The Amistad Rebellion* (2012); *Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution* (2013); and *Outlaws of the Atlantic* (2014). He is currently writing about the life and times of the radical abolitionist dwarf, Benjamin Lay (1682-1759). This interview discusses major points of his work.

Hydra: Greetings Professor Rediker. It is a great pleasure to have you with us on the first edition of *Hydra*. Speaking of *Hydra*, it has been 15 years since you and Professor Peter Linebaugh published, for the first time, the book *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of Revolutionary Atlantic*, released here in Brazil in 2008. How do you see the historiographical repercussion of this work in various parts of the world? Is there any criticism of the book that you would like to address in particular? Considering the elapsed time of publication, are there any developments in your research that would shed new light on the book?



Marcus Rediker: Before all else let me greet the editors and readers of *Revista Hydra* and say how pleased I am about the formation of this journal. It is an honor that it takes its name from the book you mention, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, which Peter Linebaugh and I originally published in 2000. We are delighted that the book has friends in Brazil.

Hydra has had a rich life over the past fifteen years. It has appeared in English, French, German, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish editions, and I understand a Japanese translation is well under way. It was the founding text of the Bristol (UK) Radical History Group, a vibrant community-based association that has brought history from below closer to people's lives, not least through their bookstore, Hydra Books! The book has had an impact in South Africa, among both researchers and activists, and in India, where a "pirated" edition circulated through Jawarhal Nehru University in Delhi. It has found resonance in Australia, the Caribbean, and throughout Latin America, especially Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and Costa Rica. It has inspired and influenced art (Mike Nelson's "The Delivery and the Patience" and the Otolith Group's "Hydra Decapita"), music (from folk to electronic to punk), fiction (Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* among other novels), and drama (Paul Zimet's "Belize" and John F. Levin's "1741"). It anticipated and helped to advance a major new trend in historical scholarship over the past decade: the turn from national to transnational, oceanic, and global history. It has also played a role in various movements from below, ranging from anti-globalization to the campaign against the death penalty, to the struggle to reclaim the commons, to Occupy. The artistic and the political came together in an exhibition called "Hydrarchy" (the title of the book's fifth chapter), which opened in London in 2010 and Cairo in 2012.

My favorite criticism is this: it has been said that the book, which studied millions of people over a vast expanse of geographic space for two and a half centuries, did not do enough! We did the best we could for our time and training and now it is up to other scholars – in Brazil, for example – to expand the subjects, space, and chronology of transnational history, and indeed this is happening. One of our goals was to help to open up a new kind of history from below, beyond the



boundaries of the nation-state, for broader and deeper investigation. I think we have accomplished that.

H. Another work of yours that had great impact in Brazil is *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007), in which you use vast documentary evidence - mainly written in first person such as memoirs and autobiographies - to narrate the history of the slave trade from the point of view of the individuals who have experienced it. Since then we have seen, here, an increasing interest on reiterating or composing a “history from below” of the enslaved. Could you comment about the contribution of this approach to the academic works concerning the South Atlantic? Is there any of such work on the subject, thus, that you would like to highlight?

MR. The historical work on slavery by Brazilian scholars is among the best and most sophisticated to be found anywhere in the world. I am especially fond of the scholarship of João José Reis, Ana Lucia Araujo, and Luiz Felipe de Alencastro.

H. Upon reception and discussion of your work in Brazil, a criticism surfaced claiming that you were still very much guided by the history of the North Atlantic, utilizing the South Atlantic only to complexify the interpretations of your own area of interest, the North Atlantic. These criticisms have influenced your later works? How do you assess the recent analyzes that deal with the relations between the North Atlantic and South Atlantic, as well as the global and transnational perspectives?

MR. It is certainly true that the anglophone emphasis of *Hydra* was a limitation of the work, and of course the dynamics of discussion shaped my future work. My main move was not southward but rather eastward, toward Africa. Originally trained as a specialist in early American history, I studied West Africa intensively for my subsequent books, *The Slave Ship* (2007) and *The Amistad Rebellion* (2012).

We need to study historically specific circuits of labor and capital accumulation,



whether London-Gold Coast-Jamaica, Nantes-Senegal-San Domingue, or Lisbon-Angola-Salvador. And eventually we need to put these various circuits together to see how the entire system or Atlantic capitalism actually worked. That's the big task before us.

H. Can you comment about the research process that resulted on your work *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (2012)? How was it to return to a theme that, on one hand, bears some difficulty in terms of documentary evidence (such as rebellions offshore) and, on the other, is already well known to the public from deep rooted representations (such as Spielberg's movie)? Could you elaborate on the production process of the documentary that originated from this research, and the possibilities brought by audiovisual production to the historian's work?

MR. *The Amistad Rebellion* was a challenge because I moved significantly forward in time, into the nineteenth century, and because knowledgeable historians warned me I would not discover anything new. But I like challenges so I charged ahead. I found that there was a tremendous amount of available evidence on the African side of the story, some of it in sources many other scholars had already consulted. They had ignored this crucial part of the story because they, like Spielberg, were focused on the courtroom drama (especially the white, elite actors in the case) rather than on the revolt, the shipboard drama, and the Africans who made it happen.

I like teaching against Spielberg's film. It represents history from above in a clear and often compelling way. It is easy to ask people to view the entire story from the point of view of the enslaved Africans. In some ways, Spielberg's film made my work easier.

Then I decided to create a film of my own, *Ghosts of Amistad: In the Footsteps of the Rebels*, which chronicles a trip to Sierra Leone in 2013 to visit the home villages of the people who seized the Amistad in 1839, to interview elders about local memory of the case, and to search for the long-lost ruins of Lomboko, the



slave trading factory where the cruel transatlantic voyage began. I worked with director Tony Buba, well known for his work in “working class film.”

A conversation between Tony and myself entitled “Film-making from below meets history from below” can be found here:

<http://www.ghostsofamistad.com/about/from-the-directors-and-producers/>

It was a fascinating experience to work with Tony in a new medium. I think historians ought to explore all possible ways of presenting their work to the broadest possible public. Toward this same end I have also worked over the past year with playwrights Naomi Wallace and Randy Sharp, both of whom have written plays inspired by *The Slave Ship*.

H. In your latest book *Outlaws of the Atlantic*, you demonstrate the important role of the “outlaws” for the construction of the maritime world in modernity. How do you see the prospect of freedom of the enslaved regarding the construction of the proletariat and the so called ‘underclass’?

MR. I don’t like the concept “underclass” – maybe we should talk instead about the problem of the “overclass” – but I do like everything else about the question.

This book is a collection of lectures and essays spanning the last three decades, organized around the theme of maritime space, which we normally regard as the unreal space between the “real” – i.e., landed, national – places. My point is not only that important historical processes such as race and class formation happened at sea, but that the peoples working on or traveling across the seas exercised agency within that history. For example, the word and concept “to strike” originated when sailors “struck” the sails of their vessels in a wage dispute in London in 1768. Their collective labor at sea had created solidarity that permitted them to develop a new weapon in the struggles of working people worldwide. Freedom was not given from on high but rather created from below.

H. This question is about contemporary slavery or unfree labor. There are reports



of forced labor of Latin American immigrants in Brazil as well as of other workers in such conditions in other parts of the world. How do you see this issue, considering this new type of human trafficking? What are the boundaries between slavery and freedom today? How do you think a historian can look into this matter without falling prey to anachronisms? Taking into account your research on the dynamics of enslaved workers trafficking in the Atlantic, we would like to know your perspective on this matter.

MR. It is true, as Kevin Bales has long been arguing, that unfree labor in one form or another is widespread in the global capitalism economy. An estimated thirty million people, many of them in Brazil, are tied to their jobs by the threat or actuality of violence. This number represents more “slaves” than existed at the height of the Atlantic slave system of the nineteenth century, although it must also be pointed out that these contemporary unfree workers make up a smaller percentage of the world’s population than did their nineteenth-century forebears. Still, the liberal narrative that one day long ago all good people put an end to slavery is clearly false, because what actually happened in many instances was that the form of exploitation changed – from slavery to sharecropping in the American South, for example. Race-class oppression remained more or less constant.

I should add that I am critical of how some contemporary “abolitionists” play fast and loose with the definition of slavery and do not properly respect the history of the institution. Toward this end I have worked with a group called Historians against Slavery, whose goal is to make the best scholarship and wisdom available to activists who wish to oppose and eventually abolish unfree labor.

H. In your official web page you define yourself as a “historian, writer, and activist”. You also participate in the global movement for the abolition of the death penalty. How do you see the relationship between these various forms of action and intervention? And what is the role of the “activist” for the historian’s craft?



MR. Scholarship and activism can enrich each other. Here is a personal example: in the 1990s, as Peter Linebaugh and I were working on *Hydra*, I was involved in the legal defense campaign of Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former Black Panther who was on death row after having been falsely convicted in 1982 of killing a police officer in Philadelphia. I visited Mumia regularly at SCI-Green super-maximum prison in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania. I learned about prisons and capital punishment, and at a more abstract level about race and terror, and was sensitized to the importance in these practices and concepts in the long history of capitalism. The themes of *Hydra* reflect this learning experience.

Involvement in movements from below can teach historians how history works and how radical action has shaped past and present. But before we can understand those things we must learn to listen – that is, learn how to hear the voices in our historical sources of those who suffered violent oppression. Just as our knowledge of struggles past can help us make better decisions within present-day movements, we can expand our political imagination and our insight into the past by listening to people involved in contemporary struggles.

Finally, taking part in movements from below allows a historian to test his or her ideas about the past. Do ordinary working people in today's movements find your ideas useful? If so, how? What do histories of struggles past mean to those fighting in the present? Posing these questions helps to keep us honest, which is to say, grounded in reality.

H. Professor, thank you for the opportunity and for ushering in the interviews section of *Hydra*. Lastly, we would like to ask from you a few words for the new generation of historians who find themselves faced with a world in which systems of oppression and social inequalities become increasingly devastating. What is our role, as historians, in today's world?

MR. My advice to all historians, and to all citizens, is: *speak truth to power*. This Biblical phrase was employed by Quakers in the eighteenth century to emphasize the responsibility that all people have to fight injustice. I am now studying one of



those Quakers, a man named Benjamin Lay, who was one of the very first people, worldwide, to insist that slavery must be abolished, immediately, with no recompense to slave-owners. He was saying this in the 1730s, at a time when slavery was part of everyday common sense to most people in the world and long before an anti-slavery movement had arisen. Lay considered it his moral obligation to stand against slavery and to insist that it was wrong, even though he faced fierce opposition for saying so. He demonstrated the power of saying no. We need histories of the many people around the world who have said no to injustice. They can point us toward a better future.

