

Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra, Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*.
Reviewed by Sara Heitmann

Historians Peter Linebaugh, professor at the University of Toledo, and Marcus Rediker, professor and chair of the History Department at the University of Pittsburgh, challenge traditional top-down history in *The Many-Headed Hydra*. Many have studied imperialism, colonization, the slave trade, and revolution from the perspective of nations, rulers, and influential people. Linebaugh and Rediker instead consider the masses of oppressed and ignored people who together influenced history. Thus they look at the history of the Atlantic system "from below," studying a group of people, the "many-headed hydra," who, oppressed by the ruling class to build their Atlantic empire, organized as a "motley crew" to revolt, and thus influenced the ideas and practices of revolution throughout the Atlantic.

First the authors discuss the origins of the many-headed hydra and its oppression under that name by the ruling class. One of the main origins was the enclosure movement in England which privatized commons and evicted commoners in the process. Left without home or sustenance, these "idle" masses were sent in large numbers to Atlantic colonies to work. Other groups such as Irish, criminals, and religious radicals who did not live up to the standards of civilization were sent as well. The growing slave trade added Africans to the mix. So the English built their colonial empire on the labor of this new lower class. In order to control and keep down resistance to harsh conditions, terror was used in the form of brutal punishments like whipping, hanging, and "breaking on the wheel." This was justified by the image of the many-headed hydra, a mythological monster killed by Hercules, who grew two heads where one was cut off. Portrayals of the

working class as a dangerous monster, and as "hewers of wood and drawers of water" whose labor made them cursed, allowed for the use of violence to "cauterize the stump" and control the monster. But in spite of such efforts the hydra survived and continued to have its effect on history.

Linebaugh and Rediker use the term "motley crew" to describe the phenomenon where many sorts of laborers united against their common enemy, organizing to subvert the system in which they were caught. One place where this happened most often and most clearly was the ship. In order to strengthen the empire, England built a large navy. But sailors, often impressed into service, suffered lack of pay and life-threatening conditions. Though they varied from Irish to Native American to African, common experience and common enemies soon began to unite the sailors. Many deserted and became pirates, forming small communities on their ships and resisting the navy that had brought them into existence. Their "motley" tendency to unite cultures and races into one, even forming their own language, was their strength, for together they had the power to do serious damage. Piracy was eventually crushed, but the hydra was not killed. It would continue to exert its influence in the following years.

This revolutionary influence, spread by sailors and the sale of rebellious slaves, spread revolts through the Atlantic and helped give rise to the ideology and spirit of the American Revolution. In the 1730s a wave of revolution spread through Atlantic seaport cities such as New York. Sailors, soldiers, and slaves were abundant in these cities, and had a tendency to gather in pubs and plan revolts. New York especially bought many of its slaves from the Caribbean, where rebellions were often dealt with by selling the guilty to get rid of their influence. Instead, their influence went elsewhere, spreading the seed of

insurrection. In the American colonies, when relations with England began to deteriorate, seaport revolutionaries led the way in mobs and resistance against impressment, the Stamp Act, and so on. Thinkers such as Samuel Adams observed their efforts and derived ideas defending the right to violent resistance. This was a "breakthrough in revolutionary thought" which influenced not only the American Revolution but later ones as well. While moderates and patriots eventually suppressed the mobs, the influence of the hydra was significant. This "motley crew," controlled by the ruling class for their purposes, yet following their own agenda of resistance, left their mark on history.

The argument of Linebaugh and Rediker has truth to it, and is supported by an abundance of evidence and examples. This group of people was referred to by the ruling classes as the many-headed hydra, and had revolutionary influence. However, the authors in making this case make two mistakes. First, they have a tendency to idealize alternate ways of life, such as communism and piracy. They assume these were good without much evidence, and don't consider how destructive and violent pirates likely were. Second, while emphasizing the "bottom" of history, they come too close to discounting the "top." They claim that class warfare, and "not" the events of 1688 among the ruling class were "the true precedent" to the American Revolution. A more balanced view of history is needed, which looks not at just one cause, but at any that were significant, whether from above or below.