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'The Many-Headed Hydra': An Exchange

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Issue

Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, reply by David Brion Davis

To the Editors:

We write to protest David Brion Davis's misleading review of our book, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* [NYR, July 5]. Readers should understand that scholarship is not the issue. Most of the "errors" Davis lists are simply differences of judgment or interpretation. He writes, moreover, that the book is "based on impressive research." No, his attack is essentially political.

David misrepresents the book from the beginning. It is not, as he implies, a history of the origins and growth of African slavery in the Americas, although the enslaved are an important part of it. Rather it is a history of the origins and rise of capitalism in the English-speaking Atlantic and more especially a history of the resistance to this process by sailors, slaves, indentured servants, women workers, peasants, and those dependent on common rights. The book seeks to recover two hidden histories. First, the endless mutilations and executions, the terror, and the killing labors used by the ruling classes of the day against European, African, and American workers in building Atlantic capitalism. The violence was greater than most historians have been willing to acknowledge. Second, and more hopefully, the connections among the multi-ethnic workers of the Atlantic as they resisted the violence. The linkages were more important than most historians have been able to see—because of the blinding effects of concepts of race, class, and nation that have guided most accounts of the past. Davis fails to explain the first theme and unfairly summarizes the second.

Davis writes: "Because the Hydra's heads include romanticized pirates as well as prostitutes, religious zealots, bandits, highwaymen, and criminals of all sorts, one tires of the authors' perspective of 'looking down from below' . . ." We do not doubt that Davis is terribly tired of history from below and all of these poor people, but a deeper truth is that he never considered them especially worthy of his attention in the first place. Davis has long been known in his own work to privilege top-down intellectual history over bottom-up social history: written texts over other kinds of evidence; white and well-to-do historical actors over darker and poorer ones. Indeed, in his book, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (1975), slavery appears to be a problem for many people, but not the slaves themselves, whose resistance to an inhumane system seldom registers. Moreover, proletarian abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano, Robert Wedderburn, Lydia Hardy, or the workers of Sheffield find no place in his 576 pages.

Equally revealing in his review is his emphasis on the claims of pro-slavery newspaper writers that Equiano was not born in Africa, over and against the discovery by the Nigerian anthropologist, Catherine Obianju Acholonu that Equiano is remembered in an oral history of his family in the very region in Africa where he said he was born—"Essaka," in his spelling, now Isseke. Against Davis's view that cultural and intellectual changes among the middle and upper classes launched antislavery movements, *The Many-Headed Hydra* argues that people like Equiano and Wedderburn—and the mass rebellions that stood behind them—were central to the development of abolitionism and the larger intellectual history of the Atlantic. Davis should have told readers that *The Many-Headed Hydra* challenges his own assumptions and interpretations.

Davis also complains that *The Many-Headed Hydra* raises "the possibility of perfectionist 'alternatives' to the flow of history. The authors seem blind to the fact that it was precisely such alternative visions, from communism (which they applaud) to the Thousand Year Reich, that were repeatedly used to justify the most appalling crimes in human history." In order to engage in this little piece of red-baiting, Davis must falsify what the book actually says. It does not use the word "perfectionist" and it is not, as he claims earlier in the review, about utopia (which means "no place" in any case). It is, rather, about what working people actually did for themselves—their persistent efforts, against great violence, to organize practical alternatives to capitalist forms of social organization, ranging from the common field to the radical religious conventicle, to the maroon village, to the pirate ship, to the political club. None of these is the forerunner of Stalinism or Nazism, and to suggest otherwise is a grotesque ideological distortion. Davis's vehemence has given away his political preconceptions. As John Matshikiza, director of the Goree Institute in Senegal, says, "Only when lions have historians will hunters cease to be heroes."

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David Brion Davis replies:

When historians are criticized for making a succession of careless, egregious mistakes, the more ideologically inclined writers often dismiss the criticisms as “political.” Yet it is not a difference in “interpretation” when one writes, as Linebaugh and Rediker do, that the British Parliament “agreed to abolish slavery, but only ‘gradually’” in 1792, forty-one years before the actual parliamentary bill was presented and passed; or that Virginia’s royal governor, Lord Durham, issued his famous proclamation to slaves in 1774, instead of November 1775; or that the *Gambia Castle* was a slave ship, when the authors were sent proof some two years ago that the ship carried only ivory and other produce when it was taken over by mutinous sailors; or that Denmark Vesey “led thirty people into open insurrection. ...[a] revolt, which expressed the power of transatlantic pan-Africanism,” when it has always been known that the potential insurrection was crushed after two slaves revealed the supposed conspiracy to their owners. (In the coming October issue of *William and Mary Quarterly*, Professor Michael Johnson, of Johns Hopkins, presents strong evidence that the Vesey conspiracy was imaginary and that tortured slaves told alarmed whites what they wanted to hear before the whites began hanging dozens of suspects.)

In truth, *The Many-Headed Hydra* is riddled with similar blatant errors from the start to the finish. An expert on Bermuda and the wreck there of the *Sea-Venture* in 1609, the subject of Chapter One, has given me a long list of mistakes and misconceptions which show, like the chapters which follow, that Linebaugh and Rediker have selected and distorted sources to fit their own ideological purpose. Thus, contrary to one of their major arguments, pirate ships were far from being “multiracial maroon communities.” As one of the leading authorities on the slave trade observes, looking at 474 cases of shipboard slave revolts, there is not a single example of a vessel not completing its journey as a result of joint action between crew and slaves.

Linebaugh and Rediker seem to be saying, even in the letter above, that their version of “history from the bottom up” can ignore all the conventional criteria of accuracy. This point is well illustrated by their charge that I have relied on old pro-slavery newspapers when I raised the question whether Olaudah Equiano had originally come from Africa. In actuality, I made it clear in a footnote that I was drawing on Vincent Carretta, probably the world’s leading expert on Equiano. Apart from borrowing heavily from earlier accounts of the African slave trade in his *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano listed “Carolina” as his birthplace when he was baptized in England in 1759; he was later listed as “an able seaman, aged 28, and born in South Carolina” in the muster book of the ship *Racehorse*. The “oral tradition” of his African origin comes from Catherine Obianju Acholonu, who claims that people in her part of Africa commonly lived to the age of 150. I’m told on good authority that she has not achieved agreement even on the location of “Essaka” and is not taken seriously by either ethnologists or anthropologists.

As for my failing to describe the major subject of Linebaugh and Rediker’s book, I wrote, in words very similar to their own, that the book combined “the plight and resistance of slaves with the aspirations of religious radicals, sailors, and various oppressed groups in a survey of the Atlantic world from the 1500s to the early nineteenth century.” I added that “the title refers to Hercules as the symbol of the rising capitalist state attempting to behead the repeated outbursts of revolt generated by a proletarian Hydra.”

In view of these words, it is a blatant untruth to say that I imply that the book is simply “a history of the origins and growth of slavery in the Americas.” Since I was also reviewing Lamin Sanneh’s *Abolitionists Abroad*, which begins with the Arab enslavement of black Africans, I focused the overall essay on Mediterranean, Atlantic, and African slavery. But I even raised the question, ignored by Linebaugh and Rediker, regarding the consequences for other forms of exploited labor of selecting and isolating chattel slavery as a wholly unique evil. I also stressed that the subject matter of *The Many-Headed Hydra*, meaning the history of the Atlantic world “from the bottom up,” was “of tremendous promise.” But because of their disregard for factual accuracy, to say nothing of a simplistic and romantic Marxist framework that merges all victims and rebels of every kind into a continuous, coherent, and heroic “proletariat,” I found the present work a deeply “disappointing book.”

Any reader of my own *Problems of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, which in part turns on questions raised by E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, will know that Linebaugh and Rediker’s description is a hostile caricature and total misrepresentation. (The book does include Spitalfields silk weavers as well as Toussaint Louverture and Haitian guerrillas.) And their use of the vicious slur, “red-baiting,” refers to my commonplace observation that the pursuit of twentieth-century utopias (which

literally turned out to be “no places”) became a justification for the worst crimes against humanity from the time of Lenin to the time of Mao and Pol Pot.

In 2001, long after the fall of communism and the revelation of the murder and starvation of millions, this is hardly an extremist or controversial statement. Of course the deadly failure of communism in no way lessens the historical and contemporary crimes of capitalism. But the rigid ideological stance of people like Linebaugh and Rediker blocks the way to new coalitions and new ways of curbing and mitigating the worst effects of global capitalism (including new forms of slavery). As for “politics,” as distinct from good history, this is the key question for those of us well to the left of center.

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