

Peter Birke / Max Henninger

Continuum of Struggle – Continuum of Defeat?

Six Questions Concerning the Methodology of Peter Linebaugh's and Marcus Rediker's Study *The Many-Headed Hydra*

We propose using the next issue of *Social History Online* as a platform for discussing certain aspects of Peter Linebaugh's and Marcus Rediker's book *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*.¹

The Many-Headed Hydra, a historical study building on a quarter century of research into the origins of global capitalism and the history of insurrection in the north Atlantic region, was first published in 2000. The German edition (2008) has provoked an overwhelmingly positive response, with most reviewers focusing on issues of revolution and class.² In his review of the original English edition, Marcel van der Linden has pointed out that Linebaugh's and Rediker's reconstruction of the prehistory of what we have traditionally considered the working class responds to both the old call for a broader perspective on labor's everyday history and the more recent call for a global labor history.³ As another reviewer has written, Linebaugh's and

¹ Peter Linebaugh / Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Boston 2000.

² An overview of the numerous German-language reviews can be found on the homepage of the German publisher, Assoziation A: [http://www.assoziation-a.de/rezension/Die_vielkoeufige_Hydra.htm] (accessed 1 December 2009).

³ Cf. Marcel van der Linden, *Labour History as the History of Multitudes*, in: *Labour/Le Travail*, 52 (2003), [<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/llt/52/linden.html>] (accessed 1 December 2009), pp. 1–4; van der Linden makes reference to a number of other English-language reviews.

Rediker's reversal of conventional temporal schemes forces us in many ways to engage anew with the concept of class: "*The Many-Headed Hydra* ends where 'normal' labour history begins – with the birth of the 'proper', 'full-grown', 'mature' working-class – which is actually a product of defeat. The uprooted peasantry, the transitional class of ex-peasants and not-yet-proles is not dismissed [...] as 'primitive rebels' [...]. When they finally lost, the point of their defeat was taken as the beginning of a 'proper' working class which is [...] defined as working and also by separate national, white and male histories. [Thus] the separations between labour history, black history and woman's history are also products of defeat."⁴

Efforts to craft a labor history that does not privilege modern wage labor and its historical articulations are still in their fledgling stage. They seem to us to be not just methodologically "innovative" but also crucial in terms of our ability to engage with present and future social conflicts. Linebaugh's and Rediker's understanding of the proletariat as a "multiversal"⁵ historical agent emphasizes the diversity of emancipatory struggles such as it has become increasingly evident in recent years. Consider, for example, the development of post-Maoist China, where processes of class constitution and class fragmentation overlap, with an older working class partly continuing to be employed in the state sector and partly being forced into precarity and unemployment even as a younger class of migrant workers emerges from the crisis of family-based agriculture. Or consider the demands for income, successful reproduction and personal liberties that explain much of the clandestine migration into the European Union and the United States. We might also mention the still very tentative struggles over precarious employment in the OECD countries and the nascent neo-feminist critique of the discrimination and paternalism women continue to

⁴ Review in: Do or Die. Voices from the Ecological Resistance, London 2003, pp. 322–329; p. 328.

⁵ On the notion of multiversality or of a plurality that refuses to be reduced to unity, see Karl Heinz Roth, *Das Multiversum. Globale Proletarisierung – Gegenperspektiven*, volume 2 of the project "Globale Krise – Globale Proletarisierung – Gegenperspektiven", Hamburg 2010 (forthcoming); see also Roth's article in this issue.

be exposed to both on the labor market and in the sphere of reproduction.

It is precisely because we agree with many of *The Many-Headed Hydra*'s reviewers on the book's "provocative" and "stimulating" character that we feel Linebaugh's and Rediker's hypotheses and challenges to conventional wisdom need less to be echoed than to be critically examined. *The Many-Headed Hydra* sometimes resembles a container within which reflections on Marxist and labor historiography's shifting premises can be placed. It is because these reflections can lead us in a number of different and even contrary directions that we want to encourage debate on the consequences of Linebaugh's and Rediker's approach to labor history. Our concern is not just with the verification of certain concepts or conclusions; it is primarily with methodological issues. One reviewer has lauded Linebaugh and Rediker for crafting a stimulating narrative, only to add that their account often "strains credibility".⁶ Such responses seem to us to illustrate the need for a debate that focuses less on the literary appeal of Linebaugh's and Rediker's study and more on its methodology. In what follows, we raise six questions that seem to us to be of special importance. Further questions could (and should) of course be raised; we make no claim to formulating an exhaustive or definitive catalog of the methodological issues at stake.

1. The Obstinate Serpent

Is the concept of action evoked in *The Many-Headed Hydra* ahistorical? Some reviews emphasize the "cyclical continuity" of revolts and revolutions. Such a notion is suggested by the central motif of the many-headed snake, whose heads regrow each time they are struck off – the "obstinate serpent crawling from the shipwreck".⁷ We find similar

⁶ Sukhdev Sandhu, Revolution at the Docks, in: The Guardian, London, 27 January 2001, [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/jan/27/historybooks>] (accessed 1 December 2009).

⁷ One review links Linebaugh's and Rediker's narration of the 1741 New York insurrection to this phrase from the work of Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire: Tobias

combinations of the notion of “cyclicity” with organic metaphors (images of growth and regeneration) in other passages of the book. To be sure, the possible violent prevention of processes of proletarian reconstitution is not denied; witness the image of the hydra’s neck stump being cauterized to prevent new heads from growing. Nevertheless, one wonders whether the hydra motif does not, ultimately, ellide the difficulties and ambivalences of organization. To what extent can revolts and revolutions plausibly be interpreted in terms of a process of perennial reprise? Linebaugh and Rediker point to ostensible discursive continuities between the various insurrectionary movements portrayed by them. But is this sufficient for postulating more than a superficial link between one insurrection and the next? Would it not be wiser to speak of an analogical relationship between the discursive elements evident in the various uprisings? Might ostensible continuities in the language used by the insurrectionaries not occlude changes in the underlying referent?

2. The ‘Motley Crew’ – A Historical Subject?

Does the history Linebaugh and Rediker reconstruct really justify the assumption of a unified subject, active across the north Atlantic region for several generations? One reviewer notes that *The Many-Headed Hydra* tells the story of a “historical subject whose existence can by no means be safely presupposed”, it being “one of the book’s central *hypotheses* that one can in fact speak of an Atlantic proletariat as an ascertainable historical subject”.⁸ Aside from the issue of whether or not interconnections between the various revolts and revolutions narrated by Linebaugh and Rediker can be empirically verified, we wonder about the expediency of postulating a “motley” but ultimately unitary subject (the “multiethnic proletariat”). Here too, questions concern-

Mulot / Vassilis Tsianos, Die störrische Schlange aus dem Schiffswrack, in: Kulturrisse, 1 (2009), [<http://igkultur.at/igkultur/kulturrisse/1240414253/1242831931>] (accessed 1 December 2009).

⁸ Patrick Eiden, review in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 10 January 2009, [<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2009-1-022>] (accessed 1 December 2009).

ing continuity arise. Mulot and Tsianos speak of an “egalitarian tendency”, calling it the “leitmotif in the history of insurrection, seafaring, the colonies, and the black Atlantic” and adding that this tendency was rendered newly visible in the 20th century “thanks to the rise of black politics and black studies”, with Linebaugh and Rediker now tracing its development “over a period of more than two centuries”.⁹ But, as Mulot and Tsianos emphasize, equality is not a *subject*. Nor is it a *property* of a definable class formation; it is a political *demand* that always arises from within a historically specific *context*. Other contexts allow for other demands, including demands for classification and exclusion – non-egalitarian demands that could just as well be shown to constitute a “leitmotif” in the history of insurrection.

3. Complicity in Oppression

The question concerning the collectives Linebaugh and Rediker present us with is related to a criticism that recurs strikingly often in responses to *The Many-Headed Hydra*, even if it is usually formulated in a restrained manner: namely that there is a tendency in the study to underplay or even deny the reality of oppressive and violent relations within the proletariat (the violence of pirates, or violence against women, including the forms it takes within the family). How, if at all, have the subjects of revolt and revolution negotiated this problem since the age of enclosures in England? The attempt to explain violent relations within the proletariat in terms of “collective psychology”, evident in a number of reviews,¹⁰ strikes us as unsatisfactory, as does the claim that violent interaction should simply be accepted as an integral component of the working class’ common sense, as something superable only by means of a gradual, long-term learning process.

⁹ Mulot / Tsianos, *Serpent* (as in note 7).

¹⁰ Cf. Thomas Wagner, *Der Pirat – ein Demokrat*, in: WOZ. Die Wochenzeitung, 11 December 2008, [http://woz.ch/artikel_17285.html] (accessed 1 December 2009).

4. Whiteness and Racism

In their comments on the problem of racism, Linebaugh and Rediker trace the development of an intuitively accepted image of the racially defined Other back to the “terror” exerted from the commanding heights of a nascent global capitalism.¹¹ The category of whiteness, they point out, received its “modern” definition around the year 1800, in the midst of counterrevolution. Does this explanation not downplay the community-building effects that distinctions such as the one between “Irishmen” and “Africans” unfolded within the British Empire? Does defining the dynamics of racism primarily as a product of counterrevolution do justice to the simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary nature of racism? Is racism purely a problem of division, a ruling strategy, as claimed by the editors of *Wildcat* in their instructive review?¹²

5. Masters, Slaves, and Other Individuals

As *The Many-Headed Hydra* draws to a close, its narrative increasingly transforms into a collection of exemplary life stories. The book’s final chapters are devoted to individual action and its embeddedness within the history of rebellious collectives. We wonder whether these chapters do not see Linebaugh and Rediker unintentionally contributing to a revival of some of the more questionable elements of traditional labor history. Does Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s portrayal of exemplary historical individuals such as Edward and Catherine Despard or Robert Wedderburn,¹³ all of whom personify the struggle against slavery, not ultimately subscribe to the very concept of political representation the authors successfully distance themselves from in earlier chapters (e. g. in their comments on the lack of historical sources by

¹¹ Linebaugh / Rediker, *Hydra* (as in note 1), p. 332.

¹² Review in: *Wildcat* 70 (summer 2004), pp. 76–78.

¹³ Linebaugh / Rediker, *Hydra* (as in note 1), pp. 248–286, 287–326.

which to learn more about “Francis”)?¹⁴ Surely it is no accident that doubts concerning the “credibility” of *The Many-Headed Hydra*’s narrative have tended to turn on the “motley” origins and biographies of the historical individuals presented by Linebaugh and Rediker: “As with all partisan histories, Rediker and Linebaugh’s account sometimes strains credibility. Their portrait of life aboard pirate ships in the 1720s veers towards the utopian. So eager are they to champion the radicalism of the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano that they omit to mention that he came from a slave-owning family in Africa, and that he bought and set to work a number of slaves longer after he himself had been freed.”¹⁵

This leads us not to a moral problem, but to the issue of ambivalence. As we have already pointed out, relations of class, national origin, and gender do not give rise to “pure” historical constellations; such relations are always situated in a space of genuine diversity that makes the decisions taken by individuals and groups valuable and meaningful, but which frequently does not allow for a clear distinction between “emancipatory” and “regressive” options. Is it possible to root a concept of “class” within this diversity of subject positions? Does engagement with historical individuals such as Equiano, the Despardes and Wedderburn allow us to arrive at a sustainable concept of class? Or must every concept of class remain at a level of abstraction that leaves us unable to engage with the empirically diverse social and political constellations within which historical subjects emerge and struggle? And if so, then how, if at all, might the resulting gap between the empirical and the theoretical be bridged?

6. Continuity and Rupture

Is the optimistic note on which Linebaugh and Rediker conclude their study justified? Is the continuum of anticapitalist struggle they present us with not also a continuum of defeat, such that fatalism would be as

¹⁴ Linebaugh / Rediker, *Hydra* (as in note 1), pp. 71–103.

¹⁵ Sandhu, *Revolution* (as in note 6).

justified a response to their narrative? We would not want this question to be discussed in terms of personal temperament, but rather with reference to the concept of revolution. Does the promise contained within this concept, that of historical closure and of the definitive transcendence of a given set of social relations, not jar with Linebaugh's and Rediker's manner of narrating history? And if so, then do we need a new concept of revolution or an altogether different notion of transcendence? Does Linebaugh's and Rediker's analysis of the English and American revolutions amount to a disavowal of the concept of political revolution? And do their remarks on the "American Thermidor"¹⁶ imply a dichotomy of social and political revolution by which social revolution remains perennially abortive because it is coopted and institutionally contained as soon as it begins to develop momentum?

¹⁶ Linebaugh / Rediker, *Hydra* (as in note 1), p. 238.