COMMONS AND OUTLAWS

By Rowan Cahill

Two historians: Peter Linebaugh, and Marcus Rediker. Together they gave us The Many-Headed Hydra (Beacon Press, 2000), a robust, at times poetic, scholarly history of the origins of radical thinking in the eighteenth century that eventually led to the American Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the Age of Revolution on both sides of the Atlantic.

In this account, the radical impetus and the ideas that spun the web of dissent and revolt during the period did not solely originate in the coffee houses and libraries and salons of the wealthy and the well-to-do and their circles, not from the lawyers, politicians, reformers, rebel colonial statesmen, intellectuals, the mainstay of traditional accounts of the period and era. Instead the egalitarian and revolutionary impetus came out of the taverns, the waterfronts, off the heaving decks of ships, out of the island refuges of pirates and escapees from slavery, courtesy of the outcasts of the Atlantic world and the Americas, the seamen, pirates, rebel slaves, indentured workers, and maritime workers of all kinds. In this account, the sea, ships, and seamen, the necessary components in the accumulation of capital in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were the disseminating agencies. Overall, a brilliant tour de force.

Linebaugh and Rediker deployed a vast, diverse and rich tapestry of sources in the weaving of their history, and rounded it off with a marvellously radical and refreshing discussion of the poet William Blake (1757-1827), tapping his poem The Tyger and letting its revolutionary energy flow. As Linebaugh recently commented regarding the anti-capitalist resistance, “our movement needs poetry”.

Two new books by these authors draw my attention. First up Linebaugh’s Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures and Resistance (PM Press, 2014), since this made it onto the shelves first. Stop, Thief! is a collection of mostly previously published essays on the idea of ‘commons’, the subjects eclectically ranging through the “U. K.” and the “U.S.A.”, from Karl Marx, to the poet Shelley, to William Morris, to E. P. Thompson, to Thomas Paine, the Levellers, the Luddites, through to the modern Occupy Wall Street Movement…and the ways in which the enclosure process was/has been variously resisted over time.

Eclecticism is to be expected in Linebaugh, so too Rediker. It was a feature of the sources/material in their Hydra study. ‘Eclecticism’ in their case should be qualified by use of ‘informed’ and ‘learned’, for their respective familiarity with, and understanding of, their sources and subjects are deep and expert.

Traditionally ‘the commons’ and their destruction/enclosure refers to a time/specific Western European historical process from the twelfth century through to the nineteenth century, related to traditional common spaces/common lands. In Linebaugh’s treatment it is this, in Britain and in America, but it is also more. The author conceptualises the destruction of ‘commons’ as “a universality of expropriation” that transcends time and space, continuing
today in processes like the privatisation of utilities, diminishing public places/spaces, to the ways life itself is being commodified and manipulated by racism, militarism, and consumerism.

Linebaugh’s essay collection is not only an historian’s reading of history, but intended also as a spiritual uplifting for modern dissidents and activists, a writing of history that liberates and encourages radical possibilities, the ‘resistance’ in his title not only referring to the subject matter of his text, but to the present and to the future. For Linebaugh, we are “losing the ground of our subsistence to the privileged and the mighty. With the theft of our pensions, houses, universities, and land, people all over the world cry, Stop Thief! and start to think about the commons and act in its name”. This acting, be it protecting or imagining/creating ‘commons’, is termed ‘commoning’ by Linebaugh. It is this historical vision, intent, and inspiration, that is at the core of radical history.

Rediker’s new book is Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail (Beacon Press, 2014). Its aim is to challenge what Rediker terms terracentric history, where the sea is regarded as an empty place, and ships and mariners essentially dismissable presences of little consequence, the land and land-bound people and their institutions the makers and shapers of history.

Rediker regards seamen as global vectors of communication, and sets out to restore to history the unacknowledged contributions and agency of a multiethnic (“motley”) mix of seamen, indentured servants, slaves, pirates, and other outlaws of their time who, from ships and waterfronts of the Atlantic and Caribbean during the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, variously affected “the lofty histories of philosophy, political thought, drama, poetry, and literature”, helping “inaugurate a broader age of revolution throughout the world”. In Rediker’s telling, this motley crew profoundly contributed to the shaping of the American Revolution and to the abolition of slavery.

As with Linebaugh’s Stop, Thief!, Rediker’s account is distinguished by the accessibility of the language, and an enjoyable narrative/discussion. Both authors, in the books discussed, model scholarship that is meant to be read and understood by more than niche audiences, and also model scholarly writing that is authoritative and convincing, free from the suffocating shackles and swaddling of obscure/confusing terminologies, and free from theoretical perambulations that often choke the meaning and intent of scholarly writing. Again, aspects of the art of writing radical history.

Rediker has been writing the histories of rebels and outlaws for all of his career as a historian, and readers who have followed his work will be familiar with aspects of his new book. But this is possibly the most forthright and political of his works, the author making the case that his Atlantic Outlaws have much to offer us in our era of capitalist globalisation. The outlaws of Rediker’s Atlantic are rebels, and criminalised, in the context of the emergence of modern capitalism, key factors in which were ships, exploited and disposable maritime labour, and slavery.
The import of Rediker’s study is that the rebellions and protests and alternative social structures and alternative cultures these outlaws variously engaged in, conceived, created, dreamed, well they mattered. In short, the outlaws had agency. And it is this affirmation by Rediker, that their rebellions mattered, and matter, that they had impacts on the cause and course of egalitarianism and social justice, that is the radical message. If Rediker is right, then rebellion and protest by ordinary people in today’s world against the injustices, austerities, and rapacious greed of the 1% that is part and parcel of the globalised capitalist juggernaut of today, are not without point. According to Rediker’s reading of outlaw history, the dispossessed and the marginal can have agency, indeed, mightily so.

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