

Reviews

Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); 433 pp. ISBN: 0-8070-5006-7; hardcover; \$30.00.

One of the most recent developments in the methods of inquiry of American Studies is the turn toward postcolonialist and transnationalist perspectives on American cultural identity. Two geographic regions where these perspectives are especially pertinent are the borderland between Mexico and the US and the Atlantic world connecting the US, Europe, and Africa. Border studies is by definition preoccupied with demonstrating how multifarious American identities are created out of the encounter between Anglos, Native Americans, and Chicano/as in the southwestern US.¹ In African American Studies as well, these new perspectives have given rise to broader, diasporic interpretations of the experience of Africans in the Americas, nowhere more cogently expressed by what Paul Gilroy calls the intercultural and transnational formation of the black Atlantic. These new theoretical shifts go hand-in-hand with efforts to recover forgotten voices in American literature and history, exemplified not only by a growing number of specialized studies, but also in broader texts and anthologies such as The Social History Project's textbook *Who Built America?* and Gary Nash et al.'s *The American People*, and the constantly revised and expanded *Heath Anthology of American Literature*.

Even though there has been a sharp increase in works taking the concept of an interconnected Atlantic world as their theoretical framework, the idea has a long pedigree. As early as 1949, the French historian Fernand Braudel called for 'a history integrated by the sea.' To be sure, Braudel's subject was a smaller region, the Mediterranean world, but the idea of going beyond the narrow confines of the nation-state in analyses of regional development was immediately applicable to the Atlantic. From the path-breaking work of the Trinidadian C. L. R. James to the cultural geographer D.W. Meinig and Gilroy, to name but a few, the idea of 'America as a continuation' (as Meinig would have it), linked by the ocean to Europe and Africa, has slowly gained respectability.

However, as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker argue in *The Many-Headed Hydra*, the idea of the nation-state as a necessary framework for historical analysis still lives on. Such a conceptual framework obscures the intricate and many-faceted connections between various groups that populated the Atlantic during the constant criss-crossing of the ocean from the 16th to the early 19th century. Linebaugh and Rediker seek nothing less than to salvage what they call the 'hidden history' of the Atlantic from the murky waters of nationalist myopia. The many-headed hydra of the 'motley crew' of sailors, slaves, and indentured laborers that pose a threat to the Herculean power of emerging nation-states and capitalist accumulation functions not only as a symbol, but as a thesis.

Linebaugh and Rediker trace what they call the 'Herculean process of globalization'

1. See José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

over two and a half centuries, from the early 17th to the mid-19th century. They see this process unfolding as a series of power struggles between the Hercules of English capitalism and the many-headed hydra of those who made the development and expansion of English capitalism possible but also posed a challenge to it: sailors, slaves, and indentured laborers. They identify four stages of globalization: expropriation of commoners in the English countryside, their exploitation as indentured laborers (soon joined by African slaves) in the emerging English colonies across the Atlantic, the consolidation of the plantation economy, and the age of revolution. In the beginning, according to Linebaugh and Rediker, laborers exploited by the nascent capitalist classes were looked upon as hewers of wood and drawers of water, a slavish and docile work force that was submerged under the power of the ruling classes. However, during this 200-year period, the supposed docile laborers exhibited a will to resistance that soon had them labelled as a many-headed hydra that posed a direct threat to the New World Order of English capitalism. In meticulous detail, Linebaugh and Rediker chart the valiant and sustained efforts of the motley crew (the term evoking not only the interracial character of the rebellious masses, but their cooperation and lower class status) to actively challenge the growing might of the Herculean capitalist apparatus. In metropolitan uprisings, mutinies at sea, pirate interference of the slave trade, slave rebellions in the Caribbean, and urban insurrections in New York over the course of more than two centuries, the motley crew threatened the imperatives of capitalist globalization and unleashed an Age of Revolution that was later coopted and transformed into an American Thermidor by the Founding Fathers, but erupted again in the 1790s in Haiti, France, Ireland, and England.

The Many-Headed Hydra, like Rediker's previous study *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Cambridge, 1987), succeeds in dismantling the popular notion (told and retold in fiction and film) of the romantic narrative of man (always man) pitted against a hostile and unpredictable sea instead of looking at the confrontation of man against man on the sea. In the eyes of Linebaugh and Rediker, the ships sailing the Atlantic in the 17th century function both as engines of capitalism and settings for resistance. At times, however, it seems as if their notion of an Atlantic motley crew in revolt against the ruling classes takes on a romantic tenor of its own. For example, in their examination of the role of piracy in the disruption of the slave trade, Linebaugh and Rediker equate outlaw status with subversion, seeing pirates as proto-revolutionaries.

Nevertheless, Linebaugh and Rediker's study poses a strong, hydra-like challenge to the Herculean tenets of an historical profession stilled mired in nation-state perspectives: their Atlantic history is transnational and multiethnic. Having said that, I think that Linebaugh and Rediker at times make too much by giving the reader a sense of the pioneering nature of their uncovering of the hidden history of the Atlantic. They have clearly been inspired by works such as Jesse Lemisch's *Black Tar* (and so acknowledge in the copious notes). In a recent article in the *Journal of American History*, Robin D.G. Kelley points out that Black Studies, Chicano/a Studies, and Asian American Studies were 'disaporic from their inception.' Linebaugh and Rediker have clearly learned much from these theoretical perspectives.

Foregrounding transnational and polyglot resistance can result in a dangerous deemphasis of the power of the nation-state and its Herculean defenders. Peter Kolchin, in his

study of the history of American slavery, has pointed out that the turn in slave historiography to slave culture and resistance has, in the hands of some scholars, swung the pendulum from massive oppression and victimization to rich cultural expression and rebellious spirit so far as to almost elide the efficacy of slave-owner power. Similarly, C. L. R. James, who provides at least some of the inspiration for Linebaugh and Rediker's work, once admonished Herbert Apthelter for seeing conspiracy and rebellion every time two slaves spoke together. I mention this danger only to point out that Linebaugh and Rediker on the whole sidestep it, but nevertheless in tone at times seem overly captivated by the notion of a widespread, concerted resistance to the powers that be. They acknowledge that the ruling classes succeeded in suppressing hydrarchy, but argue that, like the legend, the many-headed hydra lives on.

The Many-Headed Hydra tells a fascinating and intricate hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic at the dawn of capitalist globalization. It should be recognized as an indispensable contribution to the transnational turn in American Studies and will hopefully lead to many more studies that reconceptualize early American history as part of Atlantic history.