

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

MARCUS REDIKER



MARCUS REDIKER IS an American historian, author, left-activist, and Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh. A Kentuckian by birth (b.1951), of Welsh, Scottish, Dutch, and Cherokee ancestry, Rediker grew up in Nashville and Richmond, and comes from a low-church Protestant (essentially Baptist), Southern family background of miners, tenant farmers, and factory workers. His brother is a factory shop steward, and Rediker was a factory worker for three years after dropping out of tertiary studies. Returning to study, Rediker graduated PhD (University of Pennsylvania, 1982), and has authored or co-authored four books: *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1987), *Who Built America?* (1989), volume one; *The Many-Headed Hydra* (with Peter Linebaugh, 2000); and *Villains of All Nations* (2004). He is now writing a book entitled ‘The Slave Ship: A Human History’, which will be completed in time for the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade. Rediker has lectured and taught extensively in the US, Europe, Japan and Australia; his work has been translated into French, German, Greek, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish, and generated robust academic and public controversy and debate.

Intellectually, Rediker owes a great deal to British historians Christopher Hill and E.P. Thompson, a debt evident in his significant contribution to global labour history, *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000), co-authored with Peter Linebaugh. The focus of this book is the Atlantic maritime world during the period from about 1609–1835, its social and cultural milieu, its role in the development of capitalism,

and its role as a crucible of ideas about democracy and social justice. The emphasis is on the men and women, the dispossessed and oppressed, of all races, traditionally excluded from dominant historical narratives. A rich, eloquent, literary narrative, the book details resistance to capitalism during the period on both sides of the Atlantic, trawls historical records, literature, art and theology to bring the story to light, and in the process demonstrates how the lives, ideas and social experiments of this Atlantic proletariat changed the course of human history.

Rowan: *One of the things that interests me about historians is why they write, what they think they’re doing with history, and to what end. What makes researching and writing history something more than just an activity one does to fill in the time between birth and death? I’ve seen your historical work variously referred to as “history from below”, “peoples’ history”, “labour history”; how do you characterise the sort of history you write, and what you are aiming to do with it?*

Marcus: Those terms emerged from various historical contexts, but they suggest a similar sensibility. ‘Labour history’ appeared with the worldwide labour movements of the late nineteenth century and hence signifies a moment of class power – a declaration that the history of working people is central to the development of modern society. But labour history slowly grew conservative, concentrating narrowly on the history of unions and their leaders, until the ‘new labour history’ exploded in the 1970s.

‘Peoples’ history’ is a populist-democratic term used by Howard Zinn and others; it suggests an

oppositional history, a history not of kings and statesmen, generals and factory-owners, not, in the American context, of the likes of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, but rather a kind of earthy history of the working majority – those rulers’ subjects, soldiers, workers, and slaves. It entails a more inclusive approach, which is critical to any kind of radical history.

I prefer the phrase ‘history from below’, which arose in France, England, and the United States, and is sometimes called ‘history from the bottom up’. Its poetic anthem was written by Bertolt Brecht, ‘A Worker Reads History’ (1947):

*Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with the names of kings.
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?*

‘History from below’ conveys a writer’s strong identification with peoples’ struggles, and a desire not only to chronicle, but to advance them, commit them to memory, and use them to help make a better future. The Welsh historian Gwyn Williams said we should all try to be “peoples’ remembrancers”. The idea was, if you can recapture lost struggles in ways that are meaningful to the present, you can transmute the past into the present and future. Another aspect is that the actions taken ‘from below’ affect everything that goes on in any given society. Working people therefore make history; they are ‘agents’, they practice ‘self-activity’. This is the kind of history I have always tried to do.

The history I write and teach is closely linked to what a generation learned in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the history we had been taught was full of lies. It was not only elitist, history from above, it was whitewashed, bleached-out, no colour but white, no black or brown, no red, no radicalism of any kind. It was a bland history of consensus, pretending that all Americans had always agreed on the important aspects of life; it was a fearful Cold War history that regarded conflict in American history as pathological, ‘un-American’. Then came the civil rights movement, the black power movement, the antiwar movement, and the women’s movement, among others, to demand new kinds of history. Like many others of my generation I studied history to try to answer that demand, to write history from below, to write the history of all those who had been left out of the repressive, top-down, consensus approach to history.

The hope was to increase the growing power of social movement, but by the time many of us finished our studies, the movement was in decline. Some turned away from history from below and did work that was more attuned to conservative times. But a lot of people kept on doing what we had set out to do, contributing what we could, even though what had originally inspired us was now in defeat and disarray. I wanted to answer the false history that I had been force-fed as a child, to put something more honest and humane in its place. It has been my main purpose ever since, to teach and write that kind of history.

R: *In your work generally, but specifically The Many-Headed Hydra, the book you wrote with historian Peter Linebaugh, there is obviously an intellectual debt to Christopher Hill and E.P. Thompson; indeed, Linebaugh studied under Thompson, and Hydra is dedicated to Christopher and Bridget Hill.*

M: Christopher Hill (1912–2003) and Edward Thompson (1924–1993) were, in my view, two of the greatest historians of the twentieth century. It is an honour to be able to say that they were our teachers. They chronicled class struggles in new and creative ways, and in so doing they demonstrated the power of engaged scholarship. *The Many-Headed Hydra* is in many ways an effort to expand, renew, and in a real sense to connect their work, to show that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English radicals they wrote about had a much broader and more influential Atlantic history. It is also implicitly a critique of the way in which Hill and Thompson conceived their own subjects too narrowly, within the nation-state. So yes, Hill, Thompson, and the British Marxist tradition are important.

Another major influence was a group of black Marxist writers: W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Walter Rodney. These historians had no illusions about the nation-state, because the African diaspora was from the beginning much broader. What Peter and I wanted to do in *The Many-Headed Hydra* was to bring these two traditions together – to take the depth and sophistication of British ‘history from below’ as practiced by Hill and Thompson, and put that alongside and in conversation with the more internationalist writing of Du Bois, James, and Rodney. We felt both traditions would be strengthened by the connection.

R: *Looking at your background, there is a religious dimension; you come from a low-church Protestant, essentially Baptist background, and from your CV it is apparent that you do a great deal of community work with Baptist, Unitarian, and dissenting Protestant organisations, some of them with a lineage back to the Abolitionist movement; I look at Hydra, dealing as it does with the intellectual cauldron where politics and theology, and theology and politics, mix, and I'm wondering if those Baptist traditions are still there, and do you regard yourself in some religious way?*

M: No, I am not a religious person. I am an atheist, but one who has a moral conception of the world. My life has been shaped in various ways by religion. The influence you note in *Hydra* is liberation theology, a creative body of thought and action that came out of the political struggles of the dispossessed in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. I encountered it when I got involved in solidarity work (Nicaragua, El Salvador) just as Peter (Linebaugh) and I were working on *The Many-Headed Hydra*. We then discovered that seventeenth-century radicals and contemporary liberation theologians were using the same passages of the Bible. The Book of Isaiah, for example, brims over with revolutionary meanings; the Book of Acts declares that all true Christians share everything in common. These notions have a profound genealogy illuminated by Christopher Hill in *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*. He showed that the ideas of seventeenth-century religious radicals were the forerunners of modern communism. These people wanted variously to abolish private property, wage labour, slavery, patriarchy, all forms of subjection. Hill and liberation theologians thus helped me to see peoples' history and religion in a way strikingly different from what I had experienced in the conservative Southern churches of my youth.

R: *Your website (www.marcusrediker.com) has a section titled Activism where you detail your political involvements since the anti-Vietnam War days of the 1960s, and state your belief that "the struggle for a better future must be a struggle to find new, more inclusive, more egalitarian ideas, in the past and in the present". You explain that in peoples' history or history from below, we can find inspiration and can use it to work towards a more just and humane future. You go on to say, "I have tried to combine scholarship and activism, the study of movements*

from below with the making of movements from below". This reminds me very much of the approach to scholarship and activism of the American Quaker labour activist Staughton Lynd.

M: Staughton Lynd and his equally activist wife Alice Lynd are friends of mine, we live near each other, and we have worked together on a number of causes in recent years. Staughton is one of the best examples I know of a scholar-activist. Over the years, as he has taken part in the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, the labour movement, and the prisoners' rights movement, he has written books that are both scholarly *and* popular, books that explain movements and are useful to people who work in movements. Good Quaker that he is, he 'speaks truth to power'. I think he is one of the most important radical activists and thinkers in recent American history, and I am happy to know him.

Staughton proposes that the intellectual, the writer, or the historian should accompany working people as they make their own history. There is a Spanish word for this, *acompañar*, which means to accompany or travel with someone, to be present and to offer solidarity, to be a *compañero*. I think it is a healthy antidote to the attitudes of many intellectuals, who, at bottom, really want to tell others what they should be doing. This approach requires listening to the movements of the present, trying to understand what people are saying, what kinds of demands they are making. It requires learning what people are doing on the ground as they try to organise different sorts of resistance. The movements may be small, but they are about the future. This approach creates open dialogue within the struggle. Everyone is simultaneously teacher and student. It is democratic, it is respectful, and it is creative.

R: *In recent years you have spent a great deal of time and energy campaigning against capital punishment in the US, and throughout the world. Why this focus and preoccupation?*

M: I have long believed that one of the greatest powers any ruling class has is the power to kill its own people; this is a foundation of repression. We do not grant rulers the right to kill us and we have to fight their desire to do so; if they can't kill us, then that's an important limitation on their power. It might mean that we can keep them from killing other people too. While I've been opposed to the

death penalty for a long time, my real education on the subject began in 1994, when I bumped into an activist named Jamila Levi, who was working on the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal. Mumia is a former member of the Black Panther Party who was sentenced to death in 1982 and has been on death row since that time.

I was living in Philadelphia on 9 December 1981, when a police officer was killed, and Mumia was blamed for it. I didn't believe at the time that he had done it. I knew him as a tough, radical journalist and radio commentator in a city governed by Frank Rizzo, the Mayor and ex-police chief, a home-grown fascist in his way, who with the Police Department had long waged war against the black neighbourhoods of Philadelphia. I knew Mumia as one of the very few people who had the courage to stand up against this violent repression, and I knew that Rizzo and the police were gunning for him. So when he was charged with murder, I immediately suspected a frame-up. But I soon left Philadelphia and lost track of the case, although I knew that he was eventually convicted and sentenced to death.

Jamila Levi challenged me to get involved in the case. I started reading the legal records, organising around and speaking about the case, and soon I began to visit Mumia on death row. It turned out that he was imprisoned at SCI-Greene super-maximum prison in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, about fifty miles south of where I live in Pittsburgh. To make a long and complicated story short, we rapidly built a powerful national and international movement, and Mumia became the world's most famous political prisoner.

Going into that prison to visit Mumia on death row shaped my work on *The Many-Headed Hydra*. Here I was writing about violence, terror, and death in the origins and rise of capitalism, and of course these are the facts of daily life on death row. Mumia is, by the way, someone who passionately loves history; my many conversations with him helped me to understand more deeply the historical documents I was studying. His experience of violence and terror – the state was, after all, trying to kill him, the movement was battling to keep him alive – helped me see how violence and terror operated in times past. My experience with him and the movement deepened and enriched my scholarship, and hopefully made it more connected to, more useful to, real struggles. I am happy to say that prisoners unknown to me write regularly to request copies of *Hydra*.

R: *The CV posted on your website details a significant output of major book reviews, chapters, academic and general articles. Four books aside, it seems to me this output is overshadowed by the conferences, panels, discussion groups you've listed, suggesting that you place emphasis on, or devote a large part of your life to, communicating face-to-face with people, and to the spoken word.*

M: Absolutely. I love the spoken word; always have. And teaching is why I got into academic work in the first place. I was working in a factory in Richmond, Virginia, got laid off, and went to night school at Virginia Commonwealth University, where I encountered an inspirational teacher named Alan Briceland. He took an interest in me, and demonstrated to me the power of committed teaching. This coincided with my reading of Christopher Hill's book *The World Turned Upside Down*.

It turned out that I liked the research and writing too, not least because they helped me to speak and teach more broadly. I have been fortunate to travel, to meet with people around the world, to see how they think about the past, about peoples' struggles, about how these relate to the present. My mother, who is no longer alive, would say that there is a bit of the itinerant Baptist minister in me. There is no small irony in this, because when I was a kid I fought fiercely to escape the church at every opportunity. I now see that it is in me still.

R: *What's it like from the inside, being an American left radical, engaging with a new Cold War, where the fear of terrorism has replaced the fear of communism?*

M: Being in the belly of the beast so to speak? It is a difficult and dangerous time. The Patriot Act portends great ugliness ahead, loss of civil liberties, more repression and violence at home and abroad. I remember Donald Rumsfeld saying, with a glint in his eye, that the new War on Terror would be a lot like the old Cold War, only it would last much longer. He was hoping for a new source of social discipline, and a blank cheque for the Right to do things they've wanted to do for a long time. It is a grim period politically, but I am an optimist at heart. I see possibilities.

Howard Zinn and Staughton Lynd also travel a lot and speak to various progressive constituencies around the US. They say that there are more people

working on left-wing causes in America now than there were at the peak of the movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. But these many people and local movements don't have a sense of being connected to each other. Concerns are fragmented: environmentalists don't work on women's rights, feminists don't work on labour questions, labour activists don't work on . . . you get the idea. So one of the great challenges for people involved in social movements is to try to come up with broad, new,

inclusive ideas, which will connect the dots and produce a new movement culture, to combine all these people and energies and maximise our power to make history and make the future.

This interview took place at the University of Wollongong, on 19 July 2005, and was facilitated by the Hegemony Research Group at the university. The audio tape of the interview was transcribed by Renee Kyle, postgraduate student, University of Wollongong.

Rowan Cahill is a labour movement historian and journalist.

The Gun-Slave Cycle

The prisoner sits
across from me
in the cramped airless cubicle
behind the plexiglass
hands gently folded
during this middle passage
between life and death
wrists ringed by steel
forged by
Smith & Wesson

It is an old story
of guns and slavery

Into the lower decks of the ships
the European merchants loaded
chests of "fine gunns walnut Tree Stocks"
"trading guns"
"buccaneer guns"
musket balls
blunderbusses with shot
boxes of flints
"caskes of powder"
branding irons
"3 doz'n and 2 padlocks"
chains and neck-rings
manacles and leg-irons

The hardware of bondage
to bind the cargo
plantation-bound

The guns for an African king
to wage unjust wars
to produce the next shipment
in the gun-slave cycle

Like manufacturers of old
Smith & Wesson
makes the guns
the handcuffs
and the profits
on an ancient metal circuit
of violence and misery

— State Correctional Institute-Greene,
Waynesburg, Pennsylvania

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