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Maritime Outlaws

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Abstract

For thirty-odd years, American historian Marcus Rediker (University of Pittsburgh) has been writing about the sea, deep-sea sailing ships, seafaring proletariats, and seafaring rebels, during the seventeenth through to the early nineteenth centuries. Internationally, his landmark study of sailors, mutineers, and pirates, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1987), is widely acknowledged as a major 'history from below', that genre of historical writing dealing with people traditionally written out of ruling class histories which glorify and enshrine the wealthy, the propertied, and the interests of the state.

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MARITIME OUTLAWS

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For thirty-odd years, American historian Marcus Rediker (University of Pittsburgh) has been writing about the sea, deep-sea sailing ships, seafaring proletariats, and seafaring rebels, during the seventeenth through to the early nineteenth centuries. Internationally, his landmark study of sailors, mutineers, and pirates, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1987), is widely acknowledged as a major 'history from below', that genre of historical writing dealing with people traditionally written out of ruling class histories which glorify and enshrine the wealthy, the propertied, and the interests of the state.

In the UK and US, 'history from below' grew out of post-WWII Left intellectual debates and political campaigning for a better world in terms of peace and social justice. The term denotes those histories and historians who take up the challenge of the question posed by Bertolt Brecht in his poem 'A Worker Reads History'(1935): "Who built the seven gates of Thebes?". Noting that in histories the credit is traditionally accorded to "the names of kings", Brecht then asked, "Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?", and in the rest of the poem continued to ask this question of other historic 'greats' and events, bringing into play the masses of people, unknown, uncredited, the labouring/participant makers who were the actual 'haulers'. History from below aims at bringing into history the haulers of Brecht's "craggy blocks of stone". As originally conceived, the intention was that this approach to history would feed back into the political and social processes out of which it emerged, and variously inform and inspire ongoing struggles, though this dimension can be lost in the practices of modern academia.

The classic and influential history from below is E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). The subjects of history from below tend not to leave evidential trails set in Brecht's metaphorical 'stone'. Study of Thompson's sources and footnoting reveal a key aspect of histories from below: the accessing and use not only of the primary and secondary sources of traditional histories, but scarcer sources, for example pamphlets, periodicals, papers not previously accorded historical interest, and documentations glossed over by previous historians in the pursuit of Brecht's 'names of kings'. Work by cultural historians has also added to the techniques, methodologies, and understandings available to contemporary historians 'from below'.

Rediker's latest book is *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Beacon Press, Boston, 2014; Verso Press, London, 2014), a reworking of papers, talks, and chapters from previous works. Following from historian Eric Hobsbawm and his concept of the 'social bandit' and 'social banditry', Rediker's 'outlaws' are in rebellion against the injustices of developing capitalism, engaged either consciously or unwittingly against the oppression and poverty they encountered, and crying out "for vengeance". *Outlaws* is dedicated to five historians from below who variously helped shape and influence Rediker as an historian: Jesse Lemisch, Staughton Lynd, Gary Nash, Edward Thompson, Alfred F. Young. If all these names are not part of the awareness of readers, they are worth

Googling, their biographies providing a richness and diversity of dissident intellectual activism and histories from below.

Outlaws challenges what Rediker terms *terracentric* history, where the sea is regarded as an empty place, one without a history, and where ships and sailors are regarded as presences of little consequence. In *terracentric* history, the land and land-bound people and their institutions are the makers and shapers of history.

For Rediker, sailors were global vectors of communication, and in *Outlaws* he seeks to restore to history the unacknowledged contributions and agency of a multiethnic (“motley”) mix of seafarers, 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”.

According to Rediker, this motley crew, their ideas and actions, profoundly contributed to the shaping of democratic and egalitarian thought on both sides of the Atlantic during the period, to the American Revolution in particular, and to the abolition of slavery. The radicalism of Rediker is his taking the radical impetus and the ideas that spun the webs of dissent and revolt during the period, out of the coffee-houses, libraries, learned circles, salons, of the wealthy and well-to-do, and away from the lawyers, politicians, reformers, rebel colonial statesmen, businessmen, intellectuals, the mainstay of tradition accounts. Instead he locates the egalitarian and revolutionary impetus in the taverns, waterfronts, the heaving decks, the island refuges of pirates and escapees from slavery, and assigns radical agency to the outcasts of the Atlantic world and the Americas--the seamen, pirates, rebel slaves, indentured workers, and maritime workers of all kinds.

Readers who have followed Rediker since 1987 through his five books previous books on maritime history from below, will be familiar with much of this material. But this does not diminish the power of *Outlaws*, which comes from the directness and literary quality, even poetry, of the writing. It is worth noting here that Rediker is not only an academic historian, and a social justice activist, but also a poet. While having its own integrity as an individual work, *Outlaws* can also be regarded as an introduction to Rediker’s broader scholarly output.

Outlaws is distinguished by its accessibility, and an enjoyable narrative/discussion style. This is scholarship that is meant to be read and understood by more than specialist audiences. It is authoritative and convincing, and free from suffocating specialist terminologies and the puffery that characterise much scholarly writing. In Rediker’s hands, the likes, amongst many, of Marx, Walter Benjamin, and Michel Foucault mix seamlessly with writers Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, buccaneer turned explorer William Dampier, and pirate Edward (Blackbeard) Teach. The seamlessness and diversity, the eclecticism, the rareness and thus freshness of many of his sources, the previous marginalities of many of those who people this history, and the way all of this is woven into a narrative, is part of the joy of reading this work.

In a time when academics, especially in the arts and humanities, are increasingly challenged by critics, paymasters, bean-counters, to defend themselves regarding their work and their relevance, and if reaching more than niche audiences with specialist material, saying something original and new, and changing discourses, are considered worthy academic/scholarly aims, then *Outlaws* is a model of scholarly writing. It is also the most

forthright and political of Rediker's 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, variously criminalised in the context of the emergence of modern capitalism, key factors in which were the deep-sea sailing ships engaged in commerce and slavery, and the naval vessels that protected them and their sea-lanes. Deep-sea sailing ships were the most complex machines of their time, highly organised hierarchical organisms/organisations of wood, rope, sail, and exploited human labour.

In Rediker's account, modern capitalism emerged and spread because of these machines and the labours of maritime workers. When and if these workers variously rebelled, they were vigorously and ruthlessly punished. Many of them were hunted down and executed when their rebellions against, and challenges to, the system were expressed in mutinies and/or piracy. Rediker documents the ways in which the cruel, often barbaric, and public punishments meted out to these rebels had less to do with the administration of legitimate justice than it did with protecting and maintaining a maritime system based on the horrendous exploitation of labour, and a rigidly hierarchical class-based system deployed both developing and expanding the capitalist system via merchant shipping and its naval protectors. In effect piracy and mutiny were savagely repressed/punished because they were, ultimately, crimes against property and the development of international commerce.

When pirates organised, they created seaborne communities the opposite of those in which they had been raised, press-ganged, trained; they elected 'captains', practised primitive democratic procedures, and the distribution of plunder was apportioned according to contracted shares. Their violence was a form of what is now termed 'blowback', arising out of and part of the maritime system of their times, and was often vengeful when dealing with the commanders and officers of captured vessels who practised the same. Rediker's research indicates some 5,500 pirates active in the Atlantic during the height of piracy, 1716-1726.

Central in Rediker's account is the maritime yarn, storytelling developed by maritime workers in an environment where illiteracy was commonplace, and a great deal of time was spent in close confinement 24/7. Yarning followed seafarers to land as well, and became part of waterfront cultures. For Rediker, the yarn was not only an entertainment and a socialising agency, but a means also of communicating information and experience. Rediker's debt here is to the role of 'storytelling' explained by Walter Benjamin (1936), and he goes on to demonstrate how maritime yarning spread radical, egalitarian, counter-authoritarian ideas, which in turn were transmuted and transformed into literature and political philosophy. As Rediker notes, even the term and tactic 'to strike', understood as the militant withdrawal of labour, had maritime origins in 1768 when sailors of London struck (took down) their sails and crippled the city-port in protest over working conditions.

The importance of Rediker's study is he shows how the rebellions, protests, alternative social structures, alternative anti-capitalist and egalitarian cultures his maritime outlaws variously engaged in, conceived, created, dreamed of, mattered. In short, the outlaws had agency, and they had impacts on the cause and course of developing egalitarianism and social justice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

If Rediker is right, and in my view he is, then rebellion and protest by ordinary people in today's world against the rampant injustices, austerities, and rapacious greed of the 1% that is part and parcel of the contemporary globalised capitalist juggernaut, are not without point. According to Rediker's reading of maritime history from below, the dispossessed and the marginal can have agency; indeed, mightily so.

