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Linebaugh: metaphors, rebellion, and socialistdreaming

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Abstract
Writing in 1896, not long before his death, indefatigable socialist thought-maker and dreamer William Morris wrote that May Day is “above all days of the year fitting for the protest of the disinherited against the system of robbery that shuts the door betwixt them and a decent life” – and that system was capitalism. On another matter, the previous year he published a letter trenchantly criticising ‘experts’ and their plans to cull, tame and ‘manage’ the remnants of Epping Forest. This letter reflected an ecological awareness well ahead of the time, Morris cognizant of the complex unities of nature, the need to protect rare and threatened species, the subtle relationships between species, tall growths, undergrowths, thickets and space, the mutually supportive roles of different species for the life of the whole. In Morris, the Red and the Green were one.

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So why begin a discussion of Peter Linebaugh’s latest book, *The Incomplete, True, Authentic, and Wonderful History of May Day* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), here? Simply, and humour me, I’ve recently revisited Morris’ writings, in particular travelled with Guest through *News From Nowhere*, and Jack Lindsay’s fine biography of Morris (1975). Linebaugh writes in the tradition of Morris’ May Day, against the same system Morris railed against. Reading his book is like taking a radical ramble with Morris through the Epping Forest he sought to defend, if with a huge imaginative leap the ‘Forest’ is recast metaphorically as the vast human history of protest by the disinherited. Asked in 1991 by his wife, Dorothy Thompson, if he still described himself as the Marxist he once was, historian E. P. Thompson unhesitatingly replied “that he preferred to call himself ‘a Morrisist’”. Linebaugh studied under Thompson, and this book is a wonderful blend of many things, resonating with echoes of Marx and Morris and Thompson.

For readers unacquainted with Linebaugh, some background is relevant. Born in 1943, he is described in biographical notes as ‘a child of empire’, with the UK, US, Germany, Pakistan sites of his schooling; this is not unimportant, as a feature of his scholarly/historical work is an internationalist/transnational awareness and perspective. He was a student of British historian E. P. Thompson, hence the significant Thompsonian influence in his work, and has primarily taught in American universities. Various as author, co-author, editor, he has produced five substantial studies of British and Atlantic social history in the ‘history from below’ genre, notably *The London Hanged* (1992), a groundbreaking study of 18th century England, crime and punishment and the development of capitalism, and the game-changing study of Atlantic/Caribbean maritime rebellion, and radical political thought and action in the late 18th /early 19th centuries, *The Many-Headed Hydra* (with Marcus Rediker, 2000).

Linebaugh’s style of writing is accessible, and his books reach audiences beyond niche academia. A radical historian, he aims to write with social purpose and as a political act, his scholarship alerting
readers to the possibilities for action in their own time and situations. A great deal of his work has been published in freely available non-academic journals, online, and in pamphlet form, often having multi-platform/outlet publication. This is a scholarly historian who wants to be read, and who makes himself available to readers, at home in the academy and on the barricades. Overall, Linebaugh’s writings range widely across sources and disciplines, ignoring/defying the tendency for neoliberalised academia to stay within narrow and highly specialised intellectual enclosures. If in his life and work one discerns echoes of Thomas Paine and William Morris, it is not coincidental, for he has written authoritatively and sympathetically on both.

Those coming to Linebaugh’s *Incomplete* history of May Day expecting some sort of linear ‘total’ narrative history of May Day will be disappointed. For it is not this sort of history. Sure, the history of May Day is a constant presence in the book, but the word ‘incomplete’ in the title is an accurate description of the contents. For this is not a total/complete history, and ‘incomplete’ is also Linebaugh’s way of saying that May Day is a work in progress, and, as originally a festival celebrating the start of Spring and attendant rebirth, is constantly being reshaped, recast, reimagined, reborn. Linebaugh simply and robustly puts it thus in his introductory chapter: “May Day is about affirmation, the love of life, and the start of spring, so it has to be about the beginning of the end of the capitalist system of exploitation, oppression, misery, toil, and moil. Besides full affirmation May Day requires denunciation: the denunciation of capitalism, of patriarchy, of homophobia, of white supremacy, of war”.

Morris in his end-days wrote of May Day as a metaphoric/symbolic occasion for the celebration and renewal of anti-capitalist resistance and struggle, the opportunity to bring the past, present, and future together in focus and to rebirth/recharge anti-capitalist fervour, determination, organisation. So too does Linebaugh in this ‘incomplete’ history, with May Day the focus for ruminations on anti-capitalist radicalism, and socialist imaginings.

A short book (192 pages), *Incomplete* comprises eleven essays/ruminations authored by Linebaugh over the last thirty years, drawing on his immense scholarship, and salted with autobiographical intellectual/political fragments. Aside from the introductory chapter, these were written in association with public events/occasions, the majority published in the American online magazine *CounterPunch*, some published and distributed as pamphlets. The concluding chapter is his retirement speech from the University of Toledo in Ohio (2014), reflecting on radical history and being a radical/activist historian, and railing against the capitalist control of universities under which “universities are dying as commons of knowledge, as sites of social regeneration, even as places to read a book”.

It is difficult to summarise this book simply, because it is about the radical/revolutionary spirit and experience, populated with people and crowded with events, the focus both sides of the Atlantic, but globally too, the time-frame the present back to early geological times in a discussion of the agency of anarchist quarry workers in 19\textsuperscript{th}/early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Vermont. Ambitious yes, but Linebaugh has the scholarship, background, ability, spirit and wit to confidently, and joyously, traverse the terrain, exploring patterns and influences within diversities. Linebaugh brings the likes, for example, of William Morris, Marx, Malcolm X, the Shelleys, Joe Hill, William Blake, W. E. B. Du Bois together, alongside struggles diverse as those against the enclosure of the commons in Europe and those of the recent Occupy Movement, and movements diverse as the Mau Mau and SDS. It is a tour de
force underlining and endorsing the right to rebel against capitalism, and the imperatives to imagine and to work for socialist alternatives.

The art of Linebaugh is the ability to look backwards across diversities and detect and trace flows of radical thought, legacies of radical actions, and unexpected influences. His achievement is the development of an ecology of protest/dissent/rebellion, teasing out and demonstrating relationships and links and influences over time and across geographies, spaces, and diversities, between events and ideas and people in a way akin to the ecological understanding of nature. It is, in his hands, a political and historical understanding enabling one to see hope and achievement and worth when more rigid teleologies might only see inadequacies, shortfalls, and failures. Further, and importantly, he privileges that radical/socialist past, in effect mounting a counter-attack on hegemonic attempts by the current neoliberal stage of capitalism to render that past irrelevant and useless, to “silence alternatives” as Linebaugh puts it.

One can read history and the past in a nostalgic way, as a catalogue of what has been lost - the commons enclosed, the eight-hour day disappearing or never having appeared in the first place, the cancerous growth globally of repressive legislations, the militarisation of contemporary democracies eroding long held rights and freedoms - or one can read the past and take heart from it, and through solidarity, collectivity, and cooperation work for a better world and future.

If heart is taken, then renewed struggle, Linebaugh insists, has to be anti-capitalist, and Red and Green: Red, the socialist anti-capitalist struggle; Green the environmental struggle, because capitalism is a two-faced system, not only about the exploitation of human beings, but also about the exploitation of nature. The way forward, Linebaugh argues, is through solidarity forged in collectivity, of alliances, coalitions, the movement of movements, amongst people defined by, and aware of, their lack of control/power in the capitalist system, metaphorically “all toilers, not just the hands at any moment gripping the plough”, and by dissolving the “‘I’ into the ‘We’”.

No doubt each reader will take something different from this book, but for me it is important for demonstrating a number of things: how a radical historian can write in a scholarly, enjoyable public way without dumbing down either erudition or scholarship; how a radical scholarly/academic historian can engage, and have agency, outside of the academy. It is also a demonstration of how to write history that is alive, and how to reflect on the past, and learn and adapt from it. In short, Linebaugh goes a long way towards encouraging and fanning radical socialist dreaming and scheming in the present, dreaming not as escape but as opening a door to possibilities, and creating a light on the hill for the future.

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