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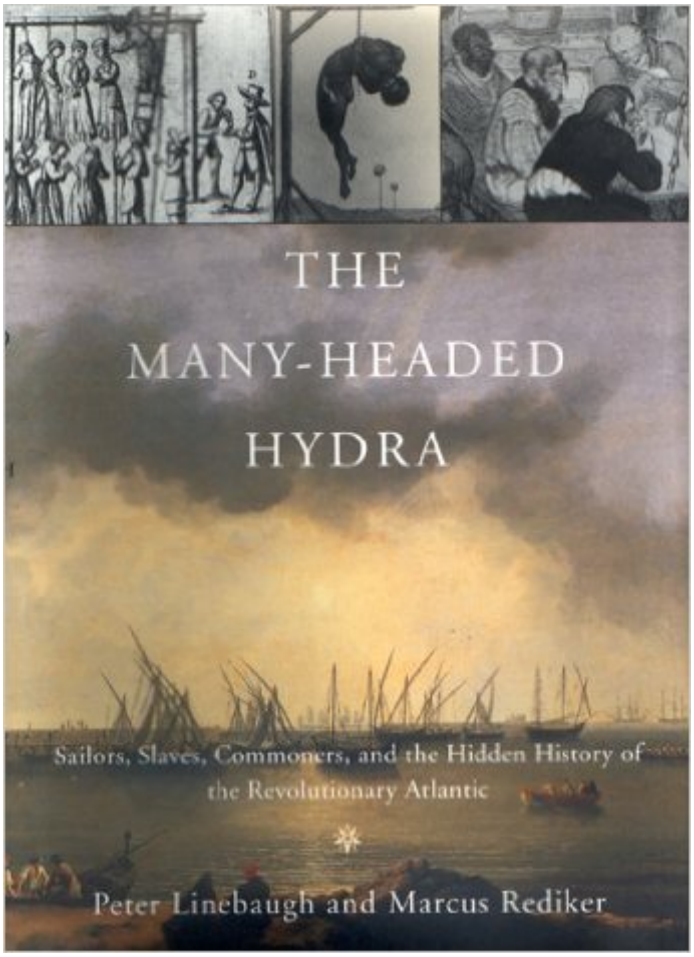
The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, And The Hidden History Of The Revolutionary Atlantic



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Synopsis

"For most readers the tale told here will be completely new. For those already well acquainted with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the image of that age which they have been so carefully taught and cultivated will be profoundly challenged."â ”David Montgomery, author of Citizen WorkerLong before the American Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, a motley crew of sailors, slaves, pirates, laborers, market women, and indentured servants had ideas about freedom and equality that would forever change history. The Many Headed-Hydra recounts their stories in a sweeping history of the role of the dispossessed in the making of the modern world. When an unprecedented expansion of trade and colonization in the early seventeenth century launched the first global economy, a vast, diverse, and landless workforce was born. These workers crossed national, ethnic, and racial boundaries, as they circulated around the Atlantic world on trade ships and slave ships, from England to Virginia, from Africa to Barbados, and from the Americas back to Europe. Marshaling an impressive range of original research from archives in the Americas and Europe, the authors show how ordinary working people led dozens of rebellions on both sides of the North Atlantic. The rulers of the day called the multiethnic rebels a "hydra" and brutally suppressed their risings, yet some of their ideas fueled the age of revolution. Others, hidden from history and recovered here, have much to teach us about our common humanity. "A landmark in the development of an Atlantic perspective on early American history. Ranging from Europe to Africa to the Caribbean and North America, it makes us think in new ways about the role of working people in the making of the modern world."â ”Eric Foner, author of The Story of American Freedom "What would the world look like had the levelers, the diggers, the ranters, the slaves, the castaways, the Maroons, the Gypsies, the Indians, the s, the Anabaptists, the pirates . . . won? Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker show us what could have been by exhuming the revolutionary dreams and rebellious actions of the first modern proletariat, whose stories~until now~were lost at sea. They have recovered a sunken treasure chest of history and historical possibility and spun these lost gems into a swashbuckling narrative full of labor, love, imagination, and startling beauty."â ”Robin D. G. Kelley, author of Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional! "The Many-Headed Hydra is about connections others have denied, ignored, or underemployed. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europe, Africa, and the Americas came together to create a new economy and a new class of working people. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker tell their story with deep sympathy and profound insight. . . . A work of restoration and celebration of a world too long hidden from view."â ”Ira Berlin, author of Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America "More than just a vivid illustration of the gains involved in thinking beyond the boundaries

between nation-states. Here, in incendiary form, are essential elements for a people’s history of our dynamic, transcultural present."â ”Paul Gilroy, author of The Black Atlantic "This is a marvelous book. Linebaugh and Rediker have done an extraordinary job of research into buried episodes and forgotten writings to recapture, with eloquence and literary flair, the lost history of resistance to capitalist conquest on both sides of the Atlantic."â ”Howard Zinn, author of A People’s History of the United States

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Customer Reviews

In 1741 at Hughson’s, a waterfront tavern in New York City, a motley crew of men and women, members of what Linebaugh and Rediker call the Atlantic proletariat planned a rebellion against the New York ruling class. They included among others radical Irishmen and women, Africans slaves, the wretched refuse created by the enclosure of the commons, the plantation system and the slave trade. The rebellion was uncovered by the authorities, its leaders were tried convicted, lynched or broken on the wheel, or sent off to slave in plantations in the West Indies. Newspaper accounts of the time described vast crowds gathering from all over New York and elsewhere to view a peculiar, emblematic and perhaps even prophetic phenomenon. The lynched bodies of two leaders of the rebellion, Hughson, an Irishman, and John Gwin, an African, were left to rot as a warning. In death, the white’s body turned black, and the black’s turned whiteAccording to the authors, this resistance in New York was not unusual. It was just one of many, many rebellions and uprisings in the Atlantic colonies by what the authors call the "hydrarchy," appropriating Francis Bacon’s scurrilous metaphor of the many-headed hydra which he borrowed from the myth of Hercules and used to

characterize dispossessed and extirpated peasantry of the Atlantic, a characterization used thereafter by the ruling class to describe those whom they enslaved to the exigencies of capitalism. As the authors say in their conclusion on pages 327-328: "In the preceding pages, we have examined the Herculean process of globalization and the challenges posed to it by the many headed hydra.

The Many-Headed Hydra will appeal to readers interested in history "from the bottom up". Most histories look at the past from the viewpoint of kings, queens, priests, and others "at the top". In this book, instead of hearing from popes and potentates, we hear the voices of many speakers for and from the poor and forgotten, the working men and women of the English commons, the factories, the tall ships, and the plantations.As the subtitle makes clear, this is mainly a history of sailors, slaves, and common people who are often ignored or downplayed in history books. The authors contend that these were the men and women mainly responsible for the rebellins and revolts and wars for independence fought in the Atlantic world from 1600 to 1800. In this book, the poeple who actually led the struggle, such as Crispus Attucks in the Boston Massacre, take center stage. The so-called leaders, from Cromwell to Jefferson, end up with supporting roles and sometimes even play the antagonists' part.Although the authors write in a lively, engaging manner, some general readers may find the going tough at some points. Both of the authors are history professors, and they clearly feel strongly about what they've written. They don't use lots of specialized historical terms, but they do use many words specific to the periods they are considering. I think they could've helped a lot by including a glossary of some expressions hard to find without an unabridged dictionary. (There's only so much that one can guess from context.)Also, general readers should approach this book as they would a good novel. For example, sometimes the authors mention people almost out of the blue, as if they'd already been introduced. In fact, they are participants from upcoming chapters.

When the World Trade Organization meets, we are used to seeing protests from people who think that the global economy is somehow wrong, that current capitalism is not the best way to protect workers or the environment, and that the world should somehow be put on the right course. Such opposition seems like a recent phenomenon, but according to _The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic_ (Beacon Press) by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, there has been protest against capitalism ever since capitalism began. Their book is a valuable history to show that the ideas of property and land use that we take

for granted were not inevitable.The book's title comes from the legend of Hercules attempting to slay the hydra; whenever he cut one of the heads off the fearsome beast, two would grow in its place. The use of the story from the seventeenth century on was not just a boast of knowledge of the classics or a mere rhetorical ornament. The hydra, over and over again, stood for the mob, dispossessed commoners, religious radicals, pirates, sailors, slaves and more. Essentially, in religious and political harangues, the many heads of the hydra stood for all the unseemly factions that were standing in the way of those with possessions to get more possessions. As the book shows, mentioning decapitation of the hydra was in many cases not a figure of speech, but was a call to actual capital punishment, or simple murder. The main subjects of the book (and the authors write many of them up as heroes) are the often obscure sailors, slaves, and women who were caught up in the eighteenth century's enthusiasm for revolution and liberty. There were several engines that drove the protest.

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