

A motley crew for our times?

Multiracial mobs, history from below and the memory of struggle

An interview with Marcus Rediker

Radical Philosophy: A key concept of your work is ‘the motley crew’, which you mobilise to designate transversal alliances of sailors, slaves and pirates at sea. This seems a very productive notion for conceptualising insurgent collective formations that do not fit into the traditional categories of collective subjects. Could you explain the analytical purchase of that notion and how it emerged in your work with Peter Linebaugh?*

Marcus Rediker: In writing *The Many Headed Hydra* (2000), Peter Linebaugh and I searched for terms and concepts used by people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to describe collective proletarian subjects and class struggle at the dawn of capitalism – ‘motley crew’, ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’, ‘outcasts of the nations of the earth’, and, most importantly of all, ‘the many-headed hydra’. Classically-educated European rulers cast themselves as Hercules as they built a new global economic system, calling forth great violence against the workers who resisted them. It was no easy task to organise sailors, slaves, indentured servants, factory workers, commoners and domestic workers into a new world capitalist system.¹

What we especially liked about the hydra concept was how it embodied the motility of resistance: when one head was cut off, two new heads grew in its place. The basic forms of capitalist violence – expropriation, exploitation, discipline and punishment – generated new forms of resistance. This became a central theme of our book: insurgent actors might be defeated in one place, then exiled, after which they initiated new resistance, often in another form, somewhere else around the Atlantic. Radicals defeated in the English Revolution reappeared as rebellious indentured servants in Virginia. The ‘experience of defeat’, as Christopher Hill called it, was carried within radical diasporas around the Atlantic and helped to generate new struggles. Movements from below were more deeply connected than we knew.²

Out of this search for new concepts came the ‘motley crew’, a phrase that usually referred to the multi-ethnic workers aboard a ship but had a much broader application, especially in Atlantic port cities, where workers of all nations congregated. ‘Motley crew’ makes it possible to think the heterogeneity of the social subject in a way not determined by the nation-state. The ‘motley crew’ represented a new kind of mobile collectivity that contained its own social force.³

‘Motley crew’ is a useful concept for our times. In the eighteenth century, the ‘motley crew’ referred to a work group, a collective of people whose cooperation was essential to accomplish a particular task. That task could be sailing a ship, unloading a ship, or producing tobacco, rice

* This interview was conducted by Martina Tazzioli of the *Radical Philosophy* editorial collective in late 2019.

or sugar on a plantation. The 'motley crew' was an informal work group and a fundamental constituent part, an atom, so to speak, of class organisation. It was a temporary work group, frequently disbanded after its task had been completed. The collective of sailors who completed a voyage dispersed into taverns on the waterfront. But motley crew also operated at a second level, which was social and political. Various groups of working people came together in what was called a motley mob or a revolutionary crowd, a source of considerable power in eighteenth-century port cities. Let me give two examples. The motley crew was a driving force toward revolution in the 1760s, leading a series of protests in Boston, Philadelphia, New York and throughout the West Indies that eventually grew into the American Revolution. In 1768 sailors protested a wage cut in London, going from ship to ship, taking down or 'striking' their sails. This is the seafaring origin of the collective action called the strike. The motley crew wielded agency and power.⁴

RP: One reason for being interested in this concept is its significance for contemporary research on migration; that is, the possibility of using your analytical tools to understand these hybrid collective formations that cannot be described as 'populations' nor as 'the people', such as migrants who assemble at the border or wherever. These migrant collective formations, these migrant multiplicities, are usually described as non-political and are criminalised.

MR: This is an important point. Throughout history workers have been in perpetual motion, moving here and there, looking for something different, something better. This is, at a deep level, a matter of political choice. Such movement has been a powerful political force in world history for centuries. I was recently involved in a project called *A Global History of Runaways: Workers, Mobility, and Capitalism, 1600-1850* (University of California Press, 2019), about runaway sailors, soldiers, slaves, domestic workers and convicts in Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia. We found multiple traditions of running away, or absconding, moving from one place to another in ways that were self-determined – and therefore violently criminalised by authorities. Many of the runaways were multi-ethnic, i.e., motley crews; their actions were a subversive form of migration. It is not easy for us to think in conceptual or theoretical terms about people in motion. The anthropologist James Clifford has written an important essay about 'mobile cultures', in which he explains that almost all of anthropological theory is premised on the search for the 'sedentary primitive', peoples who were falsely presumed to be immobile and unchanging. But of course human populations have been in motion for millennia. Our task now is to generate new concepts that will help us understand people whose habits of thought and action have been shaped by motion.⁵

RP: Another term that you and Peter Linebaugh use in *The Many Headed Hydra* is 'multiracial mobs', which is evidently connected to the motley crew. Could you expand on how you use the term 'mob' by taking into account its political and historical genealogy, and the fact that the mob has been historically associated with unruly and non-political collective formations?

MR: The term 'mob' has a long history stretching back to the medieval and early modern eras. 'Mob' is a shortened version of 'the mobility', the collective of workers who made up a large part of urban social order. In the mouth of the upper classes, the 'mob', or 'rabble', a similar term, were always derogatory terms, insults against the unruly poor. In the 1960s and 1970s George Rudé, E.P. Thompson, and others shifted the discourse from 'mob' to 'revolutionary crowd', which has a completely different connotation, implying the power to make history. The terms 'mob' and 'crowd' are inherently political as they refer to people who gathered for the sake of protest:

against merchants who raised the price of bread, against manufacturers who created low wages and poor working conditions, or against the state who conscripted sailors through impressment and forced them into long stints of labour at sea. There is an insurgent dimension in this idea of the crowd. One of the contributions of *The Many-Headed Hydra* was to emphasise the diversity of social composition of these crowds. Crowds were democratically accessible; most anyone could join. Many who did had no other means for political expression.

I have long been interested in comparing the slave ship and the migrant ship. Of course, there are big differences between the two, in terms of the origins of the people on board. Many came from Africa past and present but by different routes and with different motivations. But in both cases the collectives aboard the ship made history – and we have been largely blind to it. It is a lasting bias in modern thought not to regard the oceans of the world as real places. We assume that history is made on land and in nations. One of the purposes of my research has been to show that large-scale historical processes happen at sea: class formation, race formation, cultural formation from below. In my book *The Slave Ship* I suggest that the lower decks of the slave ships created an early version of pan-Africanism through the assembly of millions of people made up of dozens of African ethnicities and nationalities. They learned to cooperate in new ways. If you look at the same process from the other side of the Atlantic, what's happening on board these slave ships is the origin of a new Atlantic African-American culture, featuring new ways of speaking, singing, relating to others and resisting. Such creativity happened on ships, at sea, a place usually considered to be a historical void. I came up with a word to try to describe the bias of seeing the seas and oceans of the world as empty spaces devoid of history: *terracentrism*. The bias restricts our understanding of change to landed societies, making it hard to comprehend history as made at sea on slave and migrant ships. When new groups of people come together on ships, their interactions result in new relations, new institutions, and social, cultural and political change. I have also applied this method of analysis to pirate ships, where poor sailors, 'the villains of all nations', pioneered democratic and egalitarian practices and traditions.⁶

RP: This is a crucial point to make, as there is a widespread tendency to dehistoricise what is going on at sea at the moment, to detach the bodies of the shipwrecked migrants from their stories as well as from the historical context. This process of abstraction is quite common in the public debate about migrant deaths in the Mediterranean.

MR: In his epic novel *Sacred Hunger*, Barry Unsworth depicts Liverpool merchant William Kemp talking with his son Erasmus about his slave ship, the *Liverpool Merchant*, anchored off the coast of West Africa:

In that quiet room, with its oak wainscoting and Turkey carpet, its shelves of ledgers and almanacks, it would have been difficult for those two to form any true picture of the ship's circumstances or the nature of trading on the Guinea coast, even if they had been inclined to try. Difficult, and in any case superfluous. To function efficiently – to function at all – we must concentrate our effects. Picturing things is bad for business, it is undynamic. It can choke the mind with horror if persisted in. We have graphs and tables and balance sheets and statements of corporate philosophy to help us remain busily and safely in the realm of the abstract and comfort us with a sense of lawful endeavour and lawful profit. And we have maps.⁷

This passage brilliantly captures the violence of abstraction that shapes how historical actors and subsequent generations think – and do not think – about the past. This violence sanitises the past, blinding us to the human realities of history. I wrote *The Slave Ship* in order to try to

grasp and convey in concrete, visceral terms what it meant to be on board one of those vessels. The same approach should be applied to migrant vessels.

RP: The other point that we would like to discuss is the reverberation that you stress in your books between the motley crew, the urban mob and other struggles happening elsewhere. We are interested in how you conceptualise these connections. There is indeed a huge literature about the connections among struggles, but these are thought in a quite horizontal, flat way, without accounting for the genealogy and the memory of the struggles, how these are reactivated in the present. Struggles and movements do not come out of the blue. And what is distinctive about your approach, it seems, is precisely your attempt to bring together a history and genealogy of the struggles on the one hand, and their transversality on the other.



MR: I really like this question because I think it is crucial for our era. I've always been interested in cycles of struggle that transcend the borders of nation-states. I learned in my earliest studies of sailors that mobile workers have been vectors of knowledge and experience. They connected struggles around the Atlantic as both participants and as carriers of ideas and traditions of resistance. We have usually considered protest and rebellion in national context or as geographically specific phenomena that could be compared but not connected. This is another way in which nationalism blinds us to the richness and power of history from below. Rare is the struggle that does not have a transnational origin, cause or reverberation, so we need to look for commonalities and connections. Take the Atlantic in the revolutionary 1790s as an example: scholars increasingly see the connections among the French Revolution, working-class agitation in England, the rise of the United Irishmen, and the most radical event of the era, the Haitian Revolution. Julius Scott's magnificent work *The Common Wind* shows how black sailors created autonomous networks of subversive communication in this revolutionary moment. Peter Linebaugh has recently created a powerful new history of the 1790s at the heart of which was a many-sided transatlantic struggle to recapture the commons.⁸

Add to this volatile mix a massive explosion of mutinies on naval vessels at sea, brilliantly analyzed in a forthcoming book by Niklas Frykman, *The Bloody Flag: Mutiny in the Age of Atlantic Revolution* (University of California Press, 2020). Frykman has discovered that as many as two hundred thousand sailors, literally 'motley crews', took over their ships and created a maritime crisis for Western European nations and their colonies in the 1790s. Workers moved from ship

to ship to ship, carrying the news of the revolution and abolitionism from England and the United States to Haiti and from Haiti back to France. The point is, these various revolutionary movements, which were previously treated as separate national events, had common personnel, ideas and structural causes as well as mutual inspiration. Many people around the Atlantic began to think, all more or less at once, 'now is the time'. Whether applied to the 1790s, the 1830s, the 1930s, the 1960s, or today, this notion of a cycle of struggle helps us to think beyond the nation-state and recover the linkages that have frequently been rendered invisible by nationalist histories.

In all of my work I have tried to escape the pervasive violence of nationalist history, which limits what we can consider as part of our history and blinds us to the huge segments of European and American history that happened overseas through empire and global capitalism. Oceans and other bodies of water allow us to escape the national and to rediscover previously marginalised actors and lost histories. The Atlantic is one such space but so are the Indian and Pacific Oceans as well as the dozens of seas from the Caribbean to the Mediterranean, Persian and Tasman. International workers in motion, who always fit awkwardly into national stories if they were included at all, are now, after the global turn in scholarship, increasingly seen as those whose labour connected the world's continents. Getting beyond the nation is critical to rethinking capitalism and many-headed resistance to it.

RP: In your work you also refer to 'the multitude' to designate collective formations. And yet, your way of understanding the multitude seems quite different from the way in which Michael Hardt and Toni Negri describe it.

MR: Peter Linebaugh and I used the word 'multitude' in *The Many Headed Hydra* in quoting historical figures who had employed it in a primary or archival source. But we thought 'motley crew' offered a better way of understanding movement, resistance and social composition. Multitude is an imprecise residual category, more an abstract embodied fear than an analytical concept. 'Motley crew' is in my view a sharper analytical and theoretical tool because it emerges from working-class self-activity. It comes from below.⁹ This is ultimately my life's project in writing history from below. Rather than take a concept from Machiavelli or Spinoza or Hobbes and apply it in a top-down way to the past, I look for concepts that bubble up from below and get us closer to the consciousness and action of insurgent subjects, the people who are actually moving and changing history. It is true, we don't always have first-person historical sources from these actors, but one of the principles of history from below is that one can, indeed must, read elite sources and discover within them a history of resistance and struggle. This helps us to understand the deeper causes of change as generated by social movements.

RP: How does your most recent book, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay*, connect with your previous work on collective subjects? In fact, in that book you centre on individual counter-conducts, to put it in Foucaultian terms, so there seems to be a partial shift from your previous focus on collective subjects.

MR: That book is the story of a radical eighteenth-century Quaker who was one of the first people to demand the worldwide abolition of slavery. He happened to have dwarfism and stood around four feet tall. He enacted guerrilla theatre against rich Quaker slave owners, sprinkling them with fake blood to humiliate them in public. He drew their wrath and was punished for his direct action: he was excommunicated by four different Quaker meetings, making him the most

disowned Quaker of his era. One thing that interested me about Benjamin Lay was that he was an ordinary working person; he was not an elite in any sense. He was born to a humble family in a small village in Essex. He worked as a shepherd. He sailed the seas for a dozen years. He laboured as a glover in a 'stinking trade'. And yet he made an enormous breakthrough in human thought.¹⁰

Lay imagined a world without slavery at a time when most people of European descent considered slavery to be as natural and as eternal as the stars, the sun and the moon in the heavens. I wrote Lay's intellectual history from below to explain how he made the break. I discovered that he was a self-educated philosopher: he read classical philosophy quite seriously and was inspired in both his ideas and his methods of agitation by the Cynic philosophers, especially the radical figure Diogenes, whose first principle was commitment to radical free speech, what the Greeks called *parrhesia*. Lay followed the injunction to speak truth to power in all circumstances.¹¹

Benjamin Lay applied this maxim in a direct way. He spattered blood on the most powerful people in the entire Quaker colony of Pennsylvania. Lay's combination of Quaker and Cynic ideas was further radicalised by his experience as a sailor, where he worked among a motley crew and imbibed the tradition of seafaring solidarity, and as someone who lived for a year and a half in Barbados, the pre-eminent slave society in the world at the time, where he saw enslaved Africans starved, maimed, tortured and executed for their resistance. Out of these experiences grew Lay's revolutionary worldview: he was a race-conscious abolitionist; he was a class-conscious critic of wealth and greed; he was a gender-conscious proponent of equality between men and women; he was environmentally-conscious, living in a cave and producing his own food and clothes to avoid participation in the capitalist market in which the commodity-form hid the labour and exploitation of workers. Lay came up with this idea more than a century before Karl Marx and immediately applied it to the struggle against slavery, pioneering the boycott of sugar because that innocent-seeming commodity was made, he knew, with the blood of enslaved Africans. Lay was also an advocate for animal rights; he considered all animals to be his fellow creatures. Human beings must not kill them. He was therefore also a vegetarian. He warned his contemporaries to beware rich men who 'poison the earth for gain'. Lay figured these things out almost three hundred years ago. He was a thinker of world-historical importance.

And yet he is almost completely unknown. His thought deserves to be studied alongside that of Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hobbes, and especially the 'enlightened' slave-owner Thomas Jefferson. Because Lay came from the wrong class, had the wrong kind of body, and espoused extremely radical ideas he has been left out of most histories, even those of abolitionism, to which he contributed so much.

Lay was a major reason why the Quakers became the first group to abolish slavery in their own midst. The Quaker yearly meeting announced in 1776 that one could not be a Quaker and own a slave. Slave-owning became grounds for disownment. Buoyed by Lay's radicalism, Quaker abolitionists as a whole had a tremendous influence upon Thomas Clarkson and the early abolitionists in England and upon the Société des Amis des Noirs in France. The revolutionary vector named Benjamin Lay had transatlantic influence. It is crucial that he fashioned his own critique of slavery (after 1718) more than two full generations before antislavery movements developed in the 1780s. Lay should be remembered as a major contributor to the struggle against slavery. He embodies many of the great themes of history from below.

RP: What do you think about contemporary political struggles and political organisations? How

do you analyse these in light of your analytical framework?

MR: I think that these methods of analysis certainly do apply to the contemporary world. I use them in thinking about where we are and where we may be going.

It is important to observe new and diverse radical collectives emerging in recent years in public spaces, for example, Occupy Wall Street in Zuccotti Park in New York or the movement that assembled in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Bernie Sanders has mobilised a political movement at the heart of which is America's multi-racial working class. The initiatives of motley crews of migrants – who might be better called fugitives or runaways – are making the seas and oceans of the world a primary site of struggle again. It used to be the case that subversive ideas required ships for their circulation; now they travel instantaneously by technology and social media, making it possible for movements in one place to learn quickly about what is happening in other parts of the world.¹²

Even though global politics is currently characterised by resurgent nationalism and racism, I see sources of great hope. I see a million people in the streets in Chile. I see Lula out of prison and energising new struggles in Brazil. I see Latin America moving leftward again. I see a creative, fiercely determined movement in the streets of Hong Kong. More people identify as leftists of one kind or another in the United States than at any time since 1917-1922. The feminist movement continues to advance. The struggle against climate change has fired the wills and imagination of many thousands of people.

I've just returned from a week in Paris where I talked with a lot of people about the Yellow Vest movement. Many consider it hard to understand; it does not fit our standard models for a social movement. Its puzzling complexity fascinates me. It is radically democratic and self-consciously leaderless. And it has terrified the ruling class of France more than at any other time since 1968. We must learn from it, not stuff it into older categories of analysis.

The result of these movements is that there are more people working in radical causes today than at the peak of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which was considered a more revolutionary time. But here is the difference: radical forces have fragmented, or should I say, *have been fragmented* by the ruling classes they challenged half a century ago, when a broad 'movement culture' made everyone feel they were part of a world-changing surge forward. Today the huge number of people doing one or another kind of progressive work do not often feel connected to each other. We must come up with new inclusive ideas and connect the dots.

In conclusion, we can take a couple of lessons from Benjamin Lay as we imagine a better future. Lay took the sailor's ethic of solidarity and applied it broadly – to enslaved people, indeed to all people, all animals, all living things, the environment included, all around the world. Only compassionate solidarity could save us from greed and oppression, he believed. We must build it.

Lay also believed in the power of agitation – something the left has largely forgotten. In every public meeting he drew a line and asked the people around him, which side are you on? Are you for slavery or are you against it? There is no middle ground. He agitated high and low. Many people despised him for putting them on the spot. But slowly the hearts and minds of rank-and-file Quakers began to change. As the great African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass stated in 1857:

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a

struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

Lay wanted it all and so should we – the land and the sea, the crops and the rain, the thunder and the lightning, and most of all the struggle and the progress. We need to be ever mindful of the struggles of the past, even, or perhaps especially, the ones that failed. I have tried to build an archive of struggles past from which we can learn, take inspiration, and realise that we are not alone. People have been fighting capitalism for hundreds of years. As C.L.R. James observed long ago, the self-activity of working people around the world will always be the greatest hope for human emancipation.¹³

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Notes

1. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).
2. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas in the English Revolution* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1972); *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1984).
3. Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).
4. Laura Harris engages with and significantly expands the concept in 'What Happened to the Motley Crew?' in her *Experiments in Exile: C.L.R. James, Hélio Oiticica, and the Aesthetic Sociality of Blackness* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 17–60.
5. Marcus Rediker, Titas Chakraborty, and Matthias van Rossum, eds., *A Global History of Runaways: Workers, Mobility, and Capitalism, 1600-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019); James Clifford, 'Travelling Cultures', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96–116.
6. Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 2007) and *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).
7. Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (New York: Doubleday, 1993); Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 2007).

8. Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Julius Scott, *The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2018); Peter Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).
9. I am indebted to Nandita Sharma for leading a comparative discussion of 'multitude' and 'motley crew' in a series of useful meetings in Honolulu in 2008.
10. Marcus Rediker, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf who became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017).
11. Michel Foucault emphasised the power of Diogenes and the Cynic philosophers in lectures at the University of California-Berkeley in the fall of 1983. See his *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).
12. A major new contribution on the politics of migration is Nandita Sharma, *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).
13. Frederick Douglass, 'The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies', (August 3, 1857), available through the University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project: <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4398>; C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980).