

Narrative Resistance: A Conversation with Historian Marcus Rediker¹

Carl Grey Martin and Modhumita Roy

Carl Grey Martin: Tell us why you're here in Cambridge, Marcus.

Marcus Rediker: I'm here for a symposium organized by the Hutchins Center at Harvard University on new work on the Atlantic slave trade, and my part in it was to show my documentary *Ghosts of Amistad: In the Footsteps of the Rebels*, about a trip that I made to Sierra Leone in May of 2013 to talk to people about the memory of the *Amistad* case.

Martin: How is this moment significant in your overall career as a scholar of the Atlantic?

Rediker: It's significant because I'm here with you and Modhumita.

Modhumita Roy: No, no, in the shift from written work to making a film, a documentary.

Rediker: Is that what I was supposed to talk about? Well, one of the things that has interested me a great deal in recent years is to try to work in new forms; try to bring history to people in new ways. And so when I had this opportunity to make a film I called a friend in Pittsburgh, Tony Buba, who is quite a legendary filmmaker in what we might call working-class film. He's chronicled the destruction in his own community, Braddock, Pennsylvania, over the last forty years in one fascinating film after another, all about the human costs of deindustrialization.² Tony is someone who does "filmmaking from below," and because I do "history from below" I thought that this would be an interesting combination, if we could work together on this project on Sierra Leone, and he was eager to do it, and so off we went, and I must say, I have learned a tremendous amount in working with him. I have also done work of late with playwrights who are trying to deal with issues of race and slavery and memory, and to bring some of the difficult history we have to the stage.

Roy: Did you have any ideal audience in mind when making the film?

Rediker: What I hoped for the film, and still hope for the film, is that it will be most useful to teachers; and that kind of teaching could be done in almost any setting. We've had screenings in community groups, high schools, public high schools, universities, film festivals, the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] in New York, museums. I want the film to reach as broad an audience as possible, but especially to make it available to teachers. Right now we are putting together a study guide for teachers with questions and supplementary materials.

Roy: I suppose that when you were editing the film you had a certain audience in mind—or were you not thinking about that?

Rediker: Tony always thinks about that. He is committed to filmmaking as a democratic art form, and he wants it to reach the broadest possible audience. Frequently he would say to me, when I would make this or that suggestion, “No; you can do that in a lecture, you can do that in an article, you can do that in a book; you can’t do that in a film, not *this* film.” The film had to be carried by the imagery and has to be accessible to the broadest people. I’m grateful for that insistence. That’s one reason why I wanted to work with him.

Martin: While we’re talking about media, could you say something about the film really as the latest in a series of works that are narrative-driven, highly visual, and that definitely interlock? We go from merchant seaman vessel to the pirate ship to the slave ship to the *Amistad* rebellion...

Rediker: Most of my books have been published with trade presses without any presupposition of knowledge about the subject or the time period. And one of my editors actually gave me very good advice about this: she said, you don’t really have to change what you say, you just have to explain everything as you go. You assume that any reader who is interested in the subject will get it and think about it. So in that sense the film grows directly out of a book that I published, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (2012). I use history in narrative form to tell stories. I hope to present both history and film in a way so that most anybody could see him or herself in it. You know, George Rawick, the great historian of American slavery, once said about working-class history in general that if you write something in which an ordinary working person couldn’t see him or herself in that story, somehow you’ve failed.³ That’s a question of audience, of sympathy, of the subjects you choose to treat, and how you treat them.

Martin: Could you say a little bit about your working-class background?

Rediker: I do come from a working-class family with roots in the upper South. My family were workers. My grandfather was a miner, and he was a special influence: he was a great storyteller, and I have these memories of him as a child—

Roy: This is grandfather on your father’s or mother’s side—

Rediker: My mother’s side. That family is from Kentucky. My grandfather had big hands with coal dust in the cracks of his callouses; it couldn’t be washed out. As a child, I always hungered to hear a story from him. He would sit at the kitchen table drinking Maxwell House coffee out of a saucer, smoking a Lucky Strike. I realized he was going to tell me a story when he put his cigarette in the ashtray and raised his hands to orchestrate it. He told amazing stories, which were variously funny, moving, and they almost always had something *practical* in them that you could learn from. There was a moral to every story. It took me many years but I finally realized that the kinds of stories I like to tell, and the books I have written, have his Appalachian storytelling tradition behind them. He was an early, strong influence on the way I developed as a historian, especially my interest in history from below.

Martin: What is history from below? Is there a history to this methodology? Are there particular figures whom you might want to talk about?

Rediker: History from below actually goes by many names. It's called people's history, and of course the great practitioner of that was Howard Zinn, right here—⁴

Roy: In this country.

Rediker: In this country, right; it's an international tradition. It's also called social history, but it's a particular kind of social history. History from below is essentially an approach to the past that concentrates not on the traditional subjects of history, not the kings and the presidents and the philosophers, but on ordinary working people, not simply for what they *experienced* in the past but for their ability to shape the way history happens. I think that's key: look for an active engagement with history. C. L. R. James once said that working-class people learn history as they make history.⁵ The biggest influence on me came out of the British New Left: the work of E. P. Thompson and Christopher Hill.⁶ People in the U. S. were doing similar work—Jesse Lemisch, Stoughton Lynd: they often called it “history from the bottom up.” The tradition of writing this kind of history in the U. S. includes African American history, women's history, histories that are critiques of empire. There are similar traditions in India, for example, and in Brazil. It's international, it's powerful, but it's always subject to political tides, coming and going.

One of the things that's happened in recent years, especially in the Bush era, is that we saw this resurgence of popularity of the stories of the great white men. Presidential biographies came back. History from below grew up in the 60s and 70s as a challenge to that kind of history, so we won in certain ways but we lost in other. This very conservative adulation—mostly of slave-owners, in fact: think of Washington, Jefferson, the like—those books became bestsellers again. History from below is by no means a dominant way of writing history. It's always been alternative, anti-hegemonic, associated with different sorts of movements from below. That's how I got into history, to write about the past in that way. For my generation—I came of political age in the late 60s and early 70s—the version of American history that we had been taught was full of lies. This false-consensus history written during the Cold War: white-washed, elite, all top-down. And so in the midst of the civil rights movement, the black power movement, the anti-war movement, the student movement, we wanted a different history; we demanded a different history. And I do think that there have been powerful gains made by that movement based on those demands. History is not taught the same way now that it was taught fifty years ago. It's much more inclusive—it has its own problems, but there's no doubt that this movement for history from below has made a real impact in school curricula in this country and in many other parts of the world.

Roy: Would you say that there is a certain correspondence or symbiosis between the presence of left politics in any particular country and the kind of history that you're talking about being written? Thompson and others—I'm thinking of India, France, and so on— were either closely tied to the Communist Party or part of organized left movements.

Rediker: There's definitely a strong connection, but it can in fact work both ways, in this sense: there are many parts of the world that have a strong history of left-wing political parties, but the kind of history that those parties want is really a history of trade-union leadership and the

people who are closely associated with the party, not really a history of workers themselves. This is quite common in social-democratic countries and movements. Historians who come out of those labor history traditions are surprised when they encounter the history-from-below tradition because it's not the same story. Trade-union history can be great-man history just like the other, more conservative forms. History from below concentrates on ordinary people, the "class itself." And there's no question that the presence of left politics, and especially the presence of insurgent movements, are the forces that create and reflect the demand for the history.

Martin: It's worth pointing out that the trade union movement and trade-union history potentially reaffirm a wage labor-based history of working-class struggle, and I think that now we are trying to be more attentive to all the forms of informal labor or exploitation that exist outside of the wage contract. I'm thinking about *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* because that seems to be not only history from below but history upended: it's an invitation to take the worst of the worst, the figure who seems to be entirely despicable, and find there, if you attend carefully to what is actually said, that they had an anti-capitalist mission and set of values. Can you say anything about working-class movements outside of traditional industrialized work?

Rediker: It's important because some of the trade union histories were essentially the histories of white, male, relatively privileged workers; this is fairly common most everywhere. And if you want to think about the working class in a much broader sense—to include the waged and the unwaged, male and female, people of many different ethnicities and cultures—then you have to take a much broader view. One of the breakthroughs of history from below has been to democratize the subject of labor history as well as to democratize the broader narratives of history. Peter Linebaugh once said to me that pirate ships were the soviets of their day—organizations of workers who had seized power in the workplace.⁷ So that's how I approach the subject of piracy. I learned that people who became pirates were exploited, angry sailors who simply crossed the line into illegal activity, organized themselves democratically, and elected their captains in ways that were completely different from any other ship of the time, when maritime authority was extreme and hierarchical. They divided up their loot equally, again in stark contrast to the way that all resources were divided up in navies and merchant shipping. They carried out a subversive experiment.

The authorities of the day recognized the challenge, and they wanted to crush the pirates, to annihilate them, not only because they were attacking merchant ships—and certainly property was at the heart of this whole issue—but also because they were providing an example of how workers could live differently, live in a freer way. This response has continued in recent history: U.S. imperial power had to crush revolutions in Cuba, Vietnam, and Nicaragua not only because they represented an economic challenge but because they demonstrated to people that a model of domination could be ruptured, even destroyed, and that other ways of being in the world were possible. This is the kind of thing that I always look for in the past: what did working-class people do for themselves to live differently? How did they organize themselves? Self-activity is a big concept for me. This was developed by C. L. R. James, drawing on Marx. E. P. Thompson's version of the same idea is *agency*. What did workers do for themselves and how did they do it? What can we learn from that?

Roy: But is there not a danger in—and this is not to suggest that this is in your work or E. P. Thompson’s or anyone else’s—colloquial versions of a complicated idea of agency, so that now often we encounter the notion of agency as doing anything at all. Thinking about trade-union history, it’s not necessarily the case that we always only get stories of great white men, in this country, who organized trade unions. If you think about jute workers in India, that’s not a version of the great white man organizing: it is the story of a temporary moment of organizing and trying to make something better; and we learn lessons from that as well; and there what we have are certain kinds of collective agency for a collective goal but with a larger plan.

It doesn’t stop with, “I’m just going to go against the factory owner.” In my mind the distinction between insurgency and a revolution would be precisely along the lines of, *what’s the larger plan?* You can have these bits of organization where you are egalitarian, you’re sharing things, etc., but how do you upset capitalism? There you have to have a much larger concept of what it is that any group is doing *in relation to capital*, not necessarily in relation to *this* ship or *that* factory.

Rediker: Well, let me begin by agreeing that agency is one of the most abused concepts in historical writing. Agency now is individual; it’s any little thing anyone might do. That’s not the way Thompson used the term. Agency was always collective and it was also always understood in relation to some larger structure of power. This is also true of history from below in general: the phrase “history from below” is a rhetorical assertion of political sympathy but also of how history happens. But, at the same, time that can never be written without history from above. Historians from below study power.

Martin: In *Villains of all Nations* you talk about a “dialectic of terror” between the pirates and the British merchant elite, and the end result is that they are wiped out: the golden age of piracy is over by the 1720s. So power has to be recognized in its full viciousness, as much as we would admire the specific goals of those men. It is also part of the dialectical tradition to recognize that the individual act could be of great value when embedded in social structures and an awareness of the larger totalities. This reminds me of an important aspect of *The Amistad Rebellion* that received some attention in *The Nation*’s review of that book, in which the reviewer said that you put too much emphasis on the white abolitionists.⁸ That’s not the impression I got from the book, in which part of your argument was that the individual acts of insurrection on the ship were essentially the driving locus or motive, but that there had to be an engagement in the larger community to advance the goals of the abolitionists with the example of these men. Do you want to say anything about the relationship between the two?

Rediker: Let me begin with piracy. I’ve always been interested in the way in which the decks of a ship were real places, real historical spaces, you might say. Over the centuries sailors have captured their own ships and created autonomous spaces of power. You mentioned, Carl, what happened to the pirates of the 1720s: they got crushed, and hundreds of them were hanged in a vicious campaign of terror. They were not successful in building links to landed society that might have made their movement more powerful and lasting. There was a lot of sympathy for them in landed society—in fact there were instances of rescuing pirates from the gallows, so even the authorities, when they executed them, had armed guards everywhere because they knew that a lot of the working-class people watching the execution were sympathetic to those being hanged. But in the end you do have to keep the big picture in mind, and if something is

going to grow from resistance to insurgency to revolution, that's going to depend upon the multiplication of links in all different directions—across oceanic spaces, into port cities, into other places, other parts of any given living society—and what was important to me about the *Amistad* case was that here was another instance of a fairly small group of people seizing power in a tiny space: a little slave schooner off the north coast of Cuba in 1839. They captured it: so, what comes next? That happened, not infrequently: it was hard to capture a slave ship but when it did happen those people were almost always retaken, sold into slavery, or executed. Maybe the memory of the rising lives on in the lower decks. Anyway, to make a long story short the *Amistad* Africans sailed the vessel all the way up to the northern end of Long Island; they're captured by the U.S. Navy; they're charged with piracy and murder; they're thrown in jail. As soon as they're thrown in jail, abolitionists hear about this and they start flocking to the jail in order to talk to the insurrectionists. So, given the way in which slave resistance and abolitionism tended to develop together (this is not commonly discussed, actually, among historians: the history of slave revolt is rarely integrated into the history of abolition), I wanted to see how we could put those two things together, and it turned out that those two forces of antislavery—what enslaved people did in multiple forms on ships, on plantations, in urban areas all around the World; and the force of abolitionism as an organized movement—met in the jail of New Haven, face to face. Africans who had captured this vessel met with abolitionists of all kinds, from a wealthy man like Louis Tappan to a rank-and-file abolitionist by the name of Dwight Janes, a grocer on the docks of New London who got aboard the ship and wrote letters to Tappan and other leading abolitionists saying, we've got to get involved in this case. There they are face to face. And what happened inside that jail in the negotiations between the slave rebels and the abolitionists changed both parties.

This is an instance in which an autonomous action of seizing a ship ramified into a much broader social movement, and in the process helped to radicalize that movement by making it more real. There were a lot of abolitionists who had never met Africans before, who had never met someone who had taken the brave and dramatic action of seizing a ship; these abolitionists were quite impressed. My point is, in doing this kind of history you look for the moments when struggles from below take new forms as in the *Amistad* case, in which an initiative taken by a very small number of people resulted in the expansion and radicalization of a broader movement. That movement in turn made the most powerful people around the world discuss what had happened. Suddenly the queen of England and the queen of Spain and members of Congress and Supreme Court Justices in the United States all have to decide what they think about the seizure of that ship. History from below leads to unexpected outcomes: no one expected such a small event in a distant place to produce a huge international reverberation, but in this case it did.

Roy: But also, to Carl's point, you can't think of these insurrections in isolation—I haven't read the *Nation* review but it sounds like there's always a certain resistance in thinking about alliances: that these movements have to be pure and cut off from everything else; that it happened all by itself; and that the minute you introduce (particularly white) actors into the scene one immediately sits back saying, why are you putting white people in there? But surely any movement will have to have alliances across class lines, across all kinds of lines, and I like the way that you consider both the messiness of the process and the unexpected alliances that bring about that moment.

Rediker: One of the most important things about that event was that it took place within a much broader cycle of rebellion. Everyone who viewed the *Amistad* case knew of Nat Turner's rebellion and various maroon wars. These struggles had resulted in the first major wave of abolition in the British Empire. Slave resistance was everywhere in the 1830s. When the *Amistad* revolt took place everybody saw it as part of something much bigger. The abolitionists saw it that way; the Africans saw it that way; that was a part of its power. To situate the event in a larger field of struggle is important.

Martin: Because the context for this conversation is the theme of “scholactivism”: what are the opportunities and responsibilities of the academic, the scholar, within a fraught political world?

Rediker: Scholars and teachers have the same responsibilities as every other kind of worker. They should build more democratic workplaces, that's a first requirement. You want to develop relationships of honesty and truthfulness with the people you work with and teach. Scholars do have to make choices about for whom we produce knowledge. There are, as Noam Chomsky has pointed out, great material incentives to be completely conformist in what you do and think, and to write for the narrowest possible audience. If you do that you can get tenure and have a very good life. But scholars who want to combine learning with activism have a different imperative, which is to create knowledge that can be useful to struggles for justice that happen in a thousand different ways. We make our individual choices. For me it's always been important to have an activist presence inside the university and outside; in other words to have one foot inside the university but another foot standing on asphalt somewhere, so that you're in touch with the things that are going on in society that you feel need to be addressed. I've always thought it was important to be in touch with the sources of rage in society.

This is a big part of the prison activism I've done; this gets you to the heart of issues of race and class. My work on the campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamaal—the Black Panther who was on death row for so many years, falsely convicted of murdering a police officer—deeply enriched the intellectual work I was doing.⁹ While Peter Linebaugh and I wrote *The Many-Headed Hydra* I was going to SCI Greene, the prison where Mumia was incarcerated, meeting with him regularly, talking with him about the death penalty and other forms of terror. These issues were highlighted in all the research I was doing on executions and the use of terror to try to deter movements from below. These were all part of his experience in the Black Panther Party and I found that there were a great many parallels in the 18th and 19th centuries. Activism taught me what to look for—not only things that were important in their own right but things that resonate in the present and help us to see the connections between the past and present.

Roy: So the production of these kinds of alternative knowledges is one kind of activity: how might we begin to think about producing insurgent *subjects*? We spend a lot of time in the classroom: what is it that you're producing in the classroom with the students? Yes, I'm teaching Marx and C. L. R. James and so on; what is it that I'm producing?

Rediker: The first point is that we all work in conservative institutions that reproduce the capitalist division of labor. Our students are “produced” for contemporary labor markets. In that sense we are functionaries of capital; but that's not all we are, fortunately. In terms of what we can do in the classroom as teachers, that depends in my view on what's going on outside the

classroom, what kinds of movements are going on, what kinds of things are on the minds of students. Even during conservative times I have taught students who went on to become great organizers. It wasn't simply what I taught them; it was a whole set of experiences they were having. Several of them have done tremendous work in the American labor movement. I'm proud of them. They taught me as much as I taught them. The most important thing for me is to present a vision of the American past that challenges what most students bring to the classroom when they first arrive—not always, because some people have already encountered the ideas that I will present to them—and then to create a dialogue about what they have learned and why they have learned it.

One of the greatest moments in any class I ever teach is when a student raises a hand in anger and says, “Why have I never been taught this before?” I say, “That’s a really good question. Why do you think you were never taught this version of American history, from below? Why do you think you were taught the version that you were taught?” We then talk not just about ignorance but the *structure* of ignorance created in young minds by the powers that be. If you can get students to think about the politics of their own education, that will create the possibility for a breakthrough in thinking—to reevaluate what you’ve already learned according to new criteria. That happens best, I think, when forces outside the university are making people take decisions. In my lifetime the most powerful engine of rethinking was the Vietnam War. You had to decide how you felt about it, especially if you were a young male of draft age. You had to ask, “How do I feel about this war?” because you may end up being part of it. Outside forces shape what goes on in the classroom but in my view the best thing we can do is to be truthful with students, to tell them why we think as we do, to challenge the things that they have learned, and see what happens.

Roy: Yes, in the best possible scenario we challenge them, we teach them things that they otherwise would not have learned, and so on: but is this sufficient modeling of behavior, as it were? In other words, could students learn to be *activists* outside of the classroom and not just—and it’s not “not just,” it’s a lot—be challenged and to rethink and so on. One idea that a colleague and I have been batting around is to, at the end of the class, have the undergraduates actually do some piece of activism, if they’ve learned anything and feel this is unfair. And it could be writing letters to the editor or whatever it is but they actually have to engage in something in the so-called real world, and see how that is done. That sounds wishy-washy in some sense but I feel that there aren’t enough occasions when we can model a certain kind of behavior in the way that we model scholarship: this is how you *do* it, you go to the library, you look at these sources. But here are kids who don’t have the Vietnam War in front of them, nobody’s going to be drafted: what do they *do*? We give them all these ideas; what do they do next? I’m not sure what that “scholactivism” would entail, what else we might *do*.

Rediker: I don’t give assignments of activism although I’m always happy to see students take action of some kind. What I always try to do is to re-create in the past the moments when people had to make choices. I’m conscious of the fact that, teaching as I do at a state institution, I do have students who are making choices. For example, I have a quite a number of students who have been in the army. Many of these students joined the army in order to get educational benefits; they didn’t actually think they would see combat. What I try to do in the class is talk about the history that is part of an alternative way of thinking and to find out what students want to do with that. We have to present it to them as an option. I’m constantly presenting examples of

people who made choices. For example, I'm writing a book now about Benjamin Lay, who was an 18th-century radical abolitionist dwarf who performed guerrilla theatre against slave owners—here is a man who believed in direct action: “We know slave owning is evil and we must stop it right now.”

He was a Quaker—or at least he tried to be: they kept kicking them out of the meetings because he was so confrontational—but he put his body on the line constantly. There were a lot of Quaker slaveowners at this time and in one instance Lay came to a meeting dressed in a military uniform with a sword (they were all pacifists, but he wanted to make a point). He had taken an animal bladder and filled it with bright red pokeberry juice, put it inside a book with a secret compartment, held up the book in the Quaker meeting, pulled out his sword, and said, “Slave owning is the greatest sin in the world and this is what’s going to happen to all the people who own slaves!” He ran the sword through the book, the blood gushes down his arm, and then he runs into the congregation and sprinkles it on the slaveowners. There’s a choice and the students sit there astonished: “Somebody actually did that?” “Yes, he did that.” The Quaker leaders then they take him out in the street and they hope that they’re done with him but what does he do? It’s a rainy day and he walks back up and he lies down with his body right at the muddy doorstep where everyone’s going to have to leave the building. They’re going to have to step over his body as they come out.

I present this as a series of questions: “What would you have done about slavery? Would you have made peace with it?” Most people did. I also ask students to imagine that we’re on a slave ship together. We’re down in the hold of that ship; we’re chained two by two, and we can’t speak a common language; we don’t know where we’re going; and a violent crew cracks a cat-o’-nine-tails above our heads. What are we going to do? Inevitably a young man says, “I’m going to lead a revolt.” So I say, “Good, you do that. Now, as soon as you try to lead the revolt you are captured by the crew, you are tortured, to death, in front of all the rest of us; your head is cut off, thrown overboard. Now what are the rest of us going to do, in the aftermath of that?” A lot of students have never thought about being in a situation like that. Many are speechless, frequently for a long time. Someone finally says, “I’m going to try to talk to the person next to me.” “That’s a great start. How are you going to do that?” “Well, I don’t know, I’m going to try to find someone who speaks my language.” Then step by step they start see that there can be some kind of collective response to this situation. I try to present the drama of the past to students, a drama in which choices have to be made.

Martin: Could you say something about how the ethical and moral aspects of retelling history fit within some of the theoretical modes that are dominant? Postmodernism?

Rediker: That’s a tough question. I believe that the past can be known; that’s a place to start. I don’t believe that it’s all permanently unknowable and endlessly subjective and merely the creation of one arbitrary narrative after another. I believe that a real past exists and that we can know it. I believe that we can prove points about the past through evidence. We can’t know the past in totality but we can know important portions of it. So I’m not a postmodernist in any sense although I learned certain things from that tradition about politics of language. In that sense I do believe that there are important truths to be learned, not a single unitary truth but important truths, changing truths, provisional truths, and that it’s our job to speak about those—especially where they have to do with injustice.

Martin: One of the things that I think can be a real breakthrough in exploring the past is to locate the voice or the agent—it could be one or small group—that will shatter this assumption on the part of contemporary readers, learners, that the past was one thing; that, well, that's how people acted in those days. Students might say, "How can you judge these people for supporting slavery? Those values were everywhere." The voice of resistance is one of the things that the insistence on the irretrievability of the past blocks us off from. I don't have to generate a narrative in which everyone thinks a certain way: what I can do is tell you that that's not the only narrative there; so it's funny that the postmodern skepticism about falling into discursive modes all the time can mean actually erasing the heterogeneity.

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Rediker: Absolutely. History from below has always been about the recovery of lost voices. This is really central to the project: to go into the archives, to find through deep and rigorous research what working people thought about this or that problem; to recover voices of enslaved people; to recover the voices of poor women. This is crucial because it allows us to put the voice of Thomas Jefferson alongside the voice of an enslaved African; to put the voice of George Washington alongside that of a mutinous soldier. Let's see what they say to each other; let's create that dialogue. This is an important teaching tool, a method It can cause a creative dissonance in which people have to think about relations of power.

Roy: When Carl asked you about discourses, you said that you do believe that history can be retrieved in some ways. And that seems to me to be absolutely crucial in thinking about justice and moving forward—if we are thinking about scholactivism. Considering the very heterogeneity that is proposed by certain versions of postmodernism (that there are all these stories so you can't arrive at any one and so on), it seems that unless you have some sense of injustice having been done and continuing on, and unless you can name what that injustice is, what's the activism? We can't know, we can't retrieve, everything (and we don't need to), but we do and we can retrieve much through history from below and other such modes. That is the ethical imperative.

Rediker: To me, to say that it's all just subjective and un-decidable is the worst sort of abdication of responsibility.

Roy: In the '80s and '90s, not so much now, often the accusation against, say, Marxist analysis would be that we are too much into this grand—

Rediker: Master narrative.

Roy: Master narrative. But to say that they're only voices and not anything corporate is itself a grand narrative. And the second thing that seems clear to me through your work, whether you are actually naming it at every moment or not, is that what undergirds this whole thing is that you're looking at different expressions of resistance against capitalism; that that's the grand narrative, and we haven't escaped it. It's here in different forms, and why not name it? And that takes me back to thinking about the classroom and actually naming it and saying, we're talking about capitalism. Globalization may be one way of engaging it—you can say “postcolonial” but I won't—you can say “colonialism”—but really what we talking about is capitalism, and that seems to me to be in some very small measure a way of engaging *this* moment.

Rediker: That's an excellent point because in history the way that the mainstream dealt with the challenges of the New Left was through a strategy of partial incorporation: a little bit of class, a little bit of race, a little bit of gender, but don't mention capitalism. That was still the system that dared not speak its own name. It is critical to talk about the unity of all forms of injustice, and capitalism needs to be a part of the discussion. But this idea of whether something is thinkable at a given moment in time is one reason that I'm interested in Benjamin Lay, because Benjamin Lay in the 1730s was antislavery, class-conscious, gender-conscious, anti-death penalty, pro-animal rights, and vegetarian. Most people, I dare say, would think that that combination of beliefs was only possible since the 1970s. But there it was two and a half centuries before. When people want to say, “Thomas Jefferson was just a victim of his time,” and that nobody really

thought that way back then, I say: I'm sorry, here's the guy. And of course it is not only Lay, it's the people Thomas Jefferson "owned." They too opposed slavery, though they did not write philosophical tomes about it. The recovery of the alternative voices is part of the struggle for justice, part of democratizing the past, and a way to create hope for the future.

Martin: I'm reminded here of Benjamin, who is always a useful point of reference because he connected *materiality* to discourse, to text, to textual production.¹⁰ Who *has* access to text; how is text preserved? Those are very basic but important components to your work in that you rummage through old texts. You need access to where these may be; they're obscure; they may be hard to find; and there is more information potentially to be located, including in the writings of a Barlow¹¹ and others who are not the Jeffersons. So within the classroom setting are you talking about textual production, textual access, and that it's already stacked against the voice that is marginalized, or the non-literate person?

Rediker: To me one of the biggest problems with postmodernism was its sheer laziness, in pretending that other kinds of evidence about the past, and especially poor people, simply didn't exist, so therefore we won't bother look for it. I like to say, "Can the subaltern speak? I can't get 'em to shut up!" If you will search out their sources, if you will do the hard work of figuring out how a society creates documentation about poor and oppressed people, you will find their voices. They're everywhere. And this is really an operating principle of history from below. So to my mind all these things are of a piece. And to go back, Carl, to the point about the ethical dimension: it comes back to an issue of injustice, to issues of exploitation and oppression; and these have got to be ever-present in our analysis of the past. We must always evaluate what we are seeing in the past according to certain ideals that we hold about the present or the future. Now it doesn't mean that you don't take historical context into account as you judge people of the past; but it does mean that you want to understand how certain things came to be. You want to understand how labor became a commodity and slavery became a source of unimaginable wealth for many centuries. That's another way that movements help us: they raise these questions and they give us ideas to work with.

Roy: You said that you can't get the subaltern to shut up, and therein resides a very important aspect of perhaps what we do in the classroom or in scholarship: to make visible the grounds upon which intelligibility happens. It's not so much "Can the subalterns speak?" but what we *count* as speech. And it goes back to your film where you are going to these villages, talking to ordinary people, and even if we know that the stories have not been transmitted unchanged and uncorrupted down the generations, there is something there. And maybe there *is* nothing there, but you still need to go there, ask the subaltern of his or her knowledge of (or absence of knowledge of), which tells us something about the production of knowledge, our relationship in the world, and so on.

Rediker: A friend of mine said that this film is history from below *in action*, where you basically begin with a fairly simple proposition: if you go and talk to people you can learn a lot.

Martin: Modhumita helped me by saying "absence of knowledge" and what I want to say, in the context of the postmodern rejection of what we are attempting to do, is that there *is* the absence of truth in the contradiction that one can always locate in the old discourses: slave owners make claims about their superiority; or the capitalist makes claims about his difference

from the worker; or, if we go back to my area in the so-called Middle Ages, claims made by aristocrats and theologians about the “Three Orders,” the division of society into priests, warrior nobles, and agricultural workers. All of them are flawed attempts to justify oppressing others and *stealing* from them. And if we pay attention we find that discourse, that *aporia*, that lack, and that’s where a Derrida can be helpful,¹² in inviting us to imagine a gap or a flaw there. That’s one of the things that is incumbent upon us to do, to smash through the ideological façade and show that every claim that’s made by power turns out to be a faulty claim, because it’s premised on the idea that some people, or some beings, are more valuable than others. So there’s epistemological component.

Roy: Though I want to say this: it’s one thing to say that something is difficult, that it’s difficult to retrieve the past, to “read against the grain,” and so on. (And “reading against the grain” again would suggest that you have an overarching view of something, and therefore you know that this is reading against the grain. You have already decided that these are all extractive processes and rationalizations of extractive processes and we’re going to read between the lines and retrieve that.) It’s quite another to insist on a mode of investigation which focuses simply on the difficulty itself, that it’s *just difficult*, which becomes its own rationalization of going round and round about—

Rediker: The question of undecidability.

Roy: The question of difficulty. The other way of thinking about it is: it’s difficult: sure; some of it irretrievable: sure; but there are traces.

Rediker: You’ve answered better than I can. Historical texts are complicated productions. I try to situate each text in a field of power relations. I try to hear the struggles within and behind the document; to ask, what are the contradictions that gave rise to this document?, what can it tell us about the way power operates in a given society? It might be ruling-class self-justification or it might be an unruly commoner writing a threatening letter saying, “My writing is very bad, my lord, but my aim with a gun is very good.” You never know what you might find, but to me history from below is deeply premised on literally ransacking the past for sources about how people lived, how people thought, and how they coped with the situations in which they found themselves. I try to understand the logic by which they thought about their circumstances.

Roy: But undergirding that, would you say, is an acceptance—by that I don’t mean some passive acceptance—of, or building on, the premise that what we are looking at or for or trying to retrieve is millennia-long theft, pillage, terror? Absent that, what are we looking for other than, this is a nice story, this is an interesting letter...?

Rediker: We’re looking for creative responses to theft and terror. We’re looking for coping strategies. One of the things that has really interested me is how people behave in extreme circumstances. *The Slave Ship* is probably the most concerted effort I made to understand that. This is extreme, one of the most difficult situations for the human mind to even begin to understand—that lower deck of a slave ship. And yet in the end I was stunned by the variety of ways in which people resisted: from insurrections to hunger strikes to forming networks of fictive kinship on the decks. Even in those most extreme instances people find things to do. One of my favorites responses ever to that book was by a trade unionist in Birmingham, England, named

Salman Mirza, who came to a talk that I gave about the slave ship some years ago. In the Q & A he stands up and he explains, “I say to my mates, Look at these people in the lower deck of a slave ship! They fought back! Under those circumstances, they fought back! Surely we can do something!” I thought that was a comment about the omnipresence of resistance—and the need for more!

Martin: But there’s also the obligation to tell the narrative, to tell the story, because the other side to your venture into the past, to retrieve voices, is that someone has spoken and said something. A very basic principle of mine is to never speak on behalf of the power that constrains you. It’s doing damage to you, so say that you hate it; talk about it for what it is. We need to be saying when we can: this system is destroying us, or, I am abused by my conditions—or by the master or the captain, as many of those sailors do.

Rediker: Yes, sailors say it.

Roy: I want to bring it back to where we began, in thinking about trade unions—and Salman Mirza’s comment helps here: that of the many things for which we value your work one of them is to think about slavery as another system of labor theft—we often separate these things out and think of slavery (as it is, in many ways) as unique and different and so on; to think of the ship as a factory; to think of the production of not just wealth but ideologies has been very important to saying that this is a rotten system.

Rediker: One of the breakthroughs in recent years is that we have de-essentialized wage labor. And now we think about a spectrum of labor experiences, with a kind of absolute coercion on one end and some sort of relative freedom on the other end. The truth is that almost all workers experience some kind of coercion. We must think about the similarities between, for example, slave labor and free labor, but we must also think about the circulations of knowledge among people doing those two kinds of labor. Concepts, especially idealized concepts, can blind us to things that are happening. They get between us in the light, and for the longest time we couldn’t imagine slavery as a form of labor theft.

Martin: Maybe the concept of “wage slavery” really needs to put emphasis on the *slavery*.

Rediker: That’s a perfect middle ground between these two systems. Wage-workers used the power of the slave metaphor to make claims for themselves.

Roy: As did women, who said that reproduction is unpaid labor— and we haven’t gone there but sometime we might. Of course, this is never to let go of slavery as this most perverse of systems but to see the link, the continuum, and not to sever it from capitalism but to think about why slavery was necessary. Students often will simply say, “This is what white people did.” And I often ask them, “Do you think that they got up one morning, decided to get on ships and go off to Africa to do this?” Had they not (as *The Many-Headed Hydra* shows) perfected much of the terror before they went there and then had to ratchet it up?

Selected works by Marcus Rediker

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Notes

¹ Recorded at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the morning of 5 October 2015. The edited transcription, with footnotes and bibliography, was prepared by Carl Grey Martin.

² Tony Buba's films include *Voices from a Steeltown* (1983), *Lightning Over Braddock: A Rustbowl Fantasy* (1988), and *Struggles in Steel: A Story of African-American Steelworkers* (1996).

³ American-born socialist historian George P. Rawick (1929–90) was author of "Working-Class Self-Activity" (1969) and editor of the multivolume oral history *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (1971–77).

⁴ American-born historian and activist Howard Zinn (1922–2010) was the author of many works including *A People's History of the United States* (1980).

⁵ Born in Trinidad, C. L. R. James (1901–89) was the author of many works including *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938) and *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (1953).

⁶ E. P. Thompson (1924–93) was the British author of works including *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and "History from Below" (1966). Also born in England, Christopher Hill (1912–2003) wrote many works on 17th-century English history including *Antichrist in 17th-century England* (1971) and *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (1972).

⁷ Peter Linebaugh is author of *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1992) and, with Marcus Rediker, co-author of *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2001).

⁸ Nicholas Guyatt, "A Peculiar Revolt: On Marcus Rediker's 'The Amistad Rebellion'", *The Nation*, 7 November 2012; <http://www.thenation.com/article/peculiar-revolt-marcus-redikers-amistad-rebellion/>.

⁹ Mumia Abu-Jamal is a journalist and the author of works including *The Classroom and the Cell: Conversations on Black Life in America* (2011) and *We Want Freedom: A Life In The Black Panther Party* (2008).

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was a German–Jewish Marxist philosopher and critic who wrote many books and essays including "The Task of the Translator" (1923), "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), and "On the Concept of History" (1940).

¹¹ Edward Barlow (1642–1703) was an English-born seaman and the author/illustrator of a 225,000-word journal that documents the cruelty of the mercantile elite and the suffering of the working poor. See Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail*, ch. 2, for a précis of Barlow's life and thought.



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