

## On Board The Slave Ship

### Interview with Marcus Rediker

Ivan JABLONKA

#### **Books & Ideas: How did you get the idea of writing a book on the slave ship?**

**Marcus Rediker:** The idea for this book first came to me while I was visiting someone on death row. I have been involved as an activist against the death penalty for many years. I believe that governments should not be allowed to kill their citizens. In the United States the death penalty and the prison system in general are heavily racialized. In other words, minority people are vastly over represented both in the prison population and on death row.

So, in talking with Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is actually very well known in France,— and on whose case I have worked for many years – he described to me the moment when he first got an active death warrant, meaning, he was given a slip of paper with his date to die on it. That was a moment of connection between race and terror. He was a member of the Black Panther Party, he was persecuted by the Philadelphia police for many years, he was someone that they really wanted to kill for political reasons. At that moment, I realized that I could study the origin of that connection. The relationship between race and terror began on the slave ship; I could study that. It took me a long time actually to do it, because it was such a daunting challenge. But, in a very real way, the origins of this book lay in a meeting on death row in Pennsylvania.

It has been important to me personally that a lot of prisoners have taken an interest in this book. I have gotten a lot of letters from people in the Pennsylvania prison system, asking if I would donate copies of *The Slave Ship* to the prison library – and of course I was always happy to do that.

I once had the opportunity, while I was a visiting scholar at Cornell University, to take part in their “prison education program”, at Auburn prison. I went to speak with a small group about a different subject, about piracy, but toward the end of that meeting, a senior and well-respected prisoner asked if I would come back and speak to a larger group about the slave ship. And I said “of course I would” but I didn’t actually believe that it would ever happen. And as I was leaving, that particular day, one of the prisoners came up to me and said: “You know, we think of this place as the modern slave ship.” I knew, that; it spoke directly to the continuities of history. When I finally did manage to give the lecture, despite a lock down that intervened in between (some prisoners thought it was because of the lecture itself because they were so eager to hear it). I spoke to about eighty people. After the lecture, a prisoner stood up and asked one of the best questions ever to me. He said – and he was, by the way, a so-called “white prisoner”: “OK. So, we know that violent incarceration is central to the story

of America, from the beginning – on those slave ships – to right here, right now, where we are in Auburn Prison. How do we understand that? What does that mean to American history?” We spent the remaining time discussing that question. It was certainly one of the best discussions of the book I have ever been privileged to have.

**Books & Ideas:** You remind us that 14 million people were enslaved from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the onset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. About 5 million died during the expropriation in Africa, the Middle Passage, and the first year in the Americas. This is a monstrous tragedy, but, as you explain in the opening of your book, statistics erase the violence of abduction, enslavement, torture, and early death: hence your ethnography of the slave ship, hence the “human history” you wrote. Did you want to bring humanity back in a history dehumanized by numbers and charts? Is the violence you recount an antidote to another violence, the “violence of abstraction”<sup>1</sup>?

**Marcus Rediker:** The fourteen million people who were enslaved in Africa resulted in about five million deaths and a middle passage through which nine to ten million were delivered alive in the Americas. This was an instance of extraordinary brutality and violence that was central to modern history. So, the question is: “Does the statistical approach to this great subject – the transatlantic slave trade – participate in that violence, by masking the human tragedy, by (in a way) sanitizing the reality?”

The answer that I gave to this question, in my book *The Slave Ship*, is: yes, it does and it has. And interestingly, the modern statistical methods that were associated with investigation had their origins among merchants – who calculated the tonnage and the cargo – and the statistics of their own time. This was done in part to insulate themselves from the human atrocity that they were creating. So, in a very real sense, I think it is necessary for us to have a human history in order to struggle with the continuing human consequences of the slave trade. I truly believe that we live with those consequences every day and every country in the west, and certainly in all of Africa, all countries that were in any way involved in the slave trade.

**Books & Ideas:** Everybody knew that slavery gave way to a world of violence, humiliation and terror, and you show that this started as soon as the Africans would set foot on the deck. Violence was embodied by the “cat” (e.g. the whip), the thumbscrew, handcuffs, and even the sharks that surrounded the ship. But slaves also rose in revolt. Despite the dreadful violence aboard the ship, did the slaves have any agency?

**Marcus Rediker:** It is very important for everyone to understand that the slave system was based on violence and terror from the beginning to the end -- from the moment of enslavement in West Africa, on the ship, through the voyage and on the plantation. Extreme violence was used by slave ship captains and their crews to control these millions of Africans in transit to the new world. The forms of violence included the cat o’ nine tails, thumb screws, other instruments of torture, manacles, shackles, neck ringa – what I called “the hardware of bondage”. Things were very important to the operation of every slave ship.

Yet, one of the most important findings of my book is that despite the calculated effort to terrorize, the Africans on the lower deck fought back, under the most extreme circumstances imaginable. In fact this is the only redeeming quality of this entire tragic story. The fact that despite the terror – even the use of sharks that circled the ships, to whom dead bodies were

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism*, Blackwell, 1987.

thrown overboard every day – none of this actually cowed the fighting spirit and the will of these Africans to be free. And the clearest sign of this is that even under those circumstances where they had no chance of winning, for example, if they should rise up and capture the ship, they did not know how to sail it! They still kept fighting. Sometimes they engaged in mass suicides so that their spirits might go home to Africa. So there is a powerful expression of agency from below against this logic of extreme violence and terror that was meant to rule all of those captive people.

**Books & Ideas: *Benito Cereno*, Herman Melville’s novella, was published in 1855. The narrative takes place in 1799 and recounts how the African slaves overthrew and killed part of the white crew. Do you see any parallel between your narrative and literary accounts?**

**Marcus Rediker:** As I wrote *The Slave Ship*, I was conscious of maritime literature – writers like Herman Melville, who had paid close attention to life at sea, who had himself been a sailor for several years and who wrote the novella *Benito Cereno*, based on his knowledge of a slave revolt that had taken place around the same time. The slave ship haunted the writers of its day, just as it was haunting entire societies both then and now. I would also mention a truly brilliant novel of the slave trade written by the late Barry Unsworth called *Sacred Hunger*, which won the Booker Prize in 1993. It is a really magnificent tale of the slave ship, in fact it was so good that I would not allow myself to read it while I was trying to write my book, for fear of being demoralized by how well he had managed to capture the reality of sailors, slaves, and the horrors of the ship. The history of slavery has had a profound influence on and through literature, fiction, and poetry. This was true, actually, of the romantic writers in the late eighteenth century. Coleridge and Wordsworth were both close friends of Thomas Clarkson. So, we see that the magnitude of this trade itself creates rumblings, echoes, all kinds of effects in all of the arts – painting, poetry, music and fiction.

**Books & Ideas: The abolitionists started to be active in the 1770s. How did they lead their strategy? What arguments and methods did they use?**

**Marcus Rediker:** How abolitionists fought the slave trade was a very important part of the story. Beginning in the 1770’s and then formally in the 1780’s, they created an organization to try to break the slave trade. One of the remarkable things about it was how quickly they succeeded in Britain in gaining a national consensus that the slave trade needed to be abolished.

But they had a dilemma: many people in Britain had some relationship to the slave trade but very few people understood its actual operation. So what the abolitionists felt they had to do was literally to make it real to people. How can we make the slave trade real? They came up with a brilliant answer, by having one of their number go to Liverpool, take all the measurements of a slave ship called the *Brooks* and then draw a diagram with all the bodies of the enslaved Africans symmetrically arranged to give a sense of “what the horror might be”, of having so many hundreds of people crammed into such a small space. William Wilberforce had said “the world has never known so much misery in such a small space”. So, by handing this image from one person to another, they succeeded, I think, in exciting a sense of opposition, a sense of outrage, a sense that this was morally wrong, that it was a human tragedy. The image actually became a very important part of their successful campaign.

Now, we must also remember that most of the abolitionists were middle-class or upper-class people. They themselves did not know exactly how the slave trade worked, so Thomas Clarkson, who plays a very important part in my book, actually went to Bristol and Liverpool and walked up and down the docks to gather evidence from sailors who had worked in the slave trade, they were the ones who educated him, allowed him to understand the horrors – in truly real and personal ways – and that, then, gave him the capacity to educate the public at large about those horrors. In a real sense, there was not only abolition but abolition from below, through these dissident sailors who told their stories to people like Clarkson.

**Books & Ideas:** You often underline the scarcity of evidence, the lack of autobiographies and narratives pertaining to the slaves' feelings and experiences. Nonetheless, you succeeded in explaining the slaves' hardships and suffering: some of them would drown themselves to escape their executioners. Would you say that through your book, you struggled against silence and oblivion? How do historians struggle against such oblivion?

**Marcus Rediker:** The biggest single challenge in writing *The Slave Ship* was finding adequate sources. Adequate sources – I should say – of a particular kind because the business side of the trade generated a massive amount of evidence. But these tend to be the dry, statistical, inhuman kinds of evidences that I wanted to try to overcome. So the question was, what other kinds of evidences could be found? I had the advantage of having worked in maritime archives for about thirty years before I began this book. So, I had a flying start. I had already encountered, and read and studied, a lot of court cases involving slave ships. I had read travel narratives, I had already gathered a great deal of evidence. In fact, I would say that this is not the kind of subject someone could just one day begin and say “I am going to study the slave ship”. This research background made it possible.

That said, part of horror of the slave trade is the systematic destruction of African identities. I'll give you one example of how that worked: we know that a million people, “a million souls” as they were called, passed through the port of Ouidah in Benin. Of that one million people, we have first person testimony from precisely two of them. So, the destruction of culture, the destruction of names, of histories, of backgrounds is a big part of the story and I must tell you that I actually spent several years thinking about whether to do this project because I wondered if I could do justice to those people, who were trapped on the lower deck.

I finally decided that it would be better to try and fail than not to try at all. But, in the process of doing work, and in educating myself about African societies from which these people came, I found it was possible to reconstruct the West African cultural logic of their experience and especially their resistance. We do have articulate story tellers like Olaudah Equiano – who left a remarkable account of his time in the slave trade – but I found that it was possible to put together other stories and to see how some of these African people thought about their own experience.

**Books & Ideas:** You stated that “to focus on the slave ship increases and diversifies the protagonists of the drama and, from the prologue to the epilogue, complicates the drama itself”. So, would you say that the hero of the book is the anonymous slave, or the ship herself?

**Marcus Rediker:** The kind of history I do – and I have written for my entire career as historian – is called history from below. It is sometimes called “people’s history”, it is a kind of social history that stresses the power of those normally left out of the narratives, to affect the course of history. So, in some ways, this book, *The Slave Ship*, was the ultimate test for history from below – literally from below decks! Is it possible to recover the thought and the action of those people about whom there was so little evidence? Can we really understand their lives, their constrained choices – what they did, how they did it, and what impact they had on the evolution of slavery as a system?

I knew we had hundreds of studies of the plantation – which was clearly one of the central institutions of modern slavery – but only three or four studies of the other major institution of slavery, that is, the slave ship. You can’t have plantations unless you have slave ships! Why were there so few studies of slave ships? It became an interesting question and I felt the need to fill that void with this ethnography of the ship, to show that historical processes happened at sea. Cultural formation happened at sea, race formation happened at sea, class formation happened at sea. We have to understand those processes because they were crucial to who the Africans were and who they would become.

One of the arguments of the book is that, looked at from the African side, you can say that what develops among those people on lower deck is a kind of Pan-African consciousness, because people of many different cultures were coming to terms with each other. But, looked at from the western Atlantic side, it is the origin of African American culture. I do believe that the heroes of the story are those people who suffered the terror, fought back, and endured. I do believe that is the most important moral message that the book can offer. I also think that it is also important that all the countries involved in the slave trade pay reparations to the descendents of those people who suffered this extreme violence and terror.

**Books & Ideas:** You often resorted to empathy in order to depict the lives of poor exploited sailors, as well as those of enslaved children, women and men. Poor white sailors and poor black slaves are on the same side, but the captains are excluded from this empathic stance. We feel like you didn’t want to sympathize with them, and the reader can feel a kind of contempt, even in the case of John Newton. It is understandable from a moral point of view, but it may be considered an omission from an epistemological point of view: how would you explain this unequal treatment? Why did you exclude the ship captains from the empathy you have white sailors and slaves?

**Marcus Rediker:** In approaching the slave ship, one of my objectives was to understand the experience of all people who found themselves there: the millions of multi-ethnic Africans, the crews who themselves were a mixed multitude of nationalities – including, by the way, African sailors – and the ship’s officers, and especially the captains. In studying the ship as a social system, I wanted to understand the experience of all of those people, and I think I did. I think I explained how they ended up there and why. The reason why I had so much sympathy for the Africans is obvious: almost none of them chose to be there. This was an entirely coerced migration.

I found that a great many of the sailors were also there by coercion. They had been pressganged or they had been essentially run into debt by ship captains, and then forced to go on the voyage. Many sailors did not want to go to Africa because they knew that the death

rate was so high for sailors, who died in roughly the same proportions as the Africans. Most people don't know that. The west coast of Africa was a deadly place for European sailors. So I had a great deal of sympathy for those people because how many of them ended up on this ship. They too suffered and died.

I did explain why captains were there – by choice. And, they were lucratively reimbursed for making that choice. Sailors made almost nothing, Africans made nothing at all, but slave ships captains might make in a course of a single voyage the equivalent of three or four hundred thousand dollars by today's currency. Do I have sympathy for that? No, I don't. That was simply an economic choice on their part. But, knowing that did not cause me to evaluate their role in the ship any differently. In other words, I tried to understand what it meant to be a slave ship captain and one of my points was that his violence was not an individual moral failure; it was a requirement of the job. The violence practiced by the captain of a slaver was required by the division of labor in the international capitalist economy.

So, I like to think that, even though I clearly do show more empathy for some groups than others, I have adequately explained everybody's motivation for being there and their experience while there.

### **Books & Ideas: Does the slave ship belong to the past?**

**Marcus Rediker:** We make a fundamental error if we think that the history of slavery is safely in the past; that the slave ships are no longer sailing. They are with us to this very day, they are like a specter on the edge of our consciousness, haunting us, in ways that we can't fully understand; because this reality of the slave ship and of slavery itself lives on in deep structural inequality, in poverty, in discrimination, in racism. We forget how recently the institution of slavery was abolished. It was only a few generations ago. Historians are now beginning to think about the slave trade and slavery in new ways, not simply as an unfortunate part of our history, not merely as an atrocity.

A new phrase is being used: slavery is a "crime against humanity". This means the history affects not only its own generations but subsequent generations for many, many years. This is the legacy of the slave trade. We still live with its consequences and we must take action and try to overcome its painful, damaging history.

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