

and peninsulas close to the coast appear as ‘offshore interfaces of different slaving systems’ (p. 266) in the sense of a ‘global historical continuum’ (p. 7). Instead of the outdated distinction between ‘slave societies’ and ‘societies with slaves’, he then drafts a global history of slaving along three major ‘plateaus of slavery’, which became manifest at different places at different times and could develop further independently from each other (pp. 122 ff.). Thus, from early forms of very locally organized forms of kin and clan slavery, a first plateau of slavery evolved under the influence of the Mongols in the thirteenth century, producing supra-regional slave-trade economies across the trading bases in the Black Sea region (pp. 174–5). On São Tomé and the Canary Islands in the sixteenth century, and on Barbados in the seventeenth, bases were then laid for Atlantic capitalism and the development of the second plateau of slavery, the so-called ‘compounded forms of slave economies’ (p. 269). Finally, Zeuske diagnoses the gradual formation of a third plateau of ‘small, but globally existing slaveries’ since the beginning of the modern age of globalization in the 1970s. In this perspective – and this will have to be commented on by African historians – Africa moves into the centre of the analysis and appears not only as the ‘most important major player of slaving’ in world history but also ‘as teacher of the Europeans in terms of the capitalization of the bodies of war prisoners and kidnapped people’ (p. 269). Therefore, according to Zeuske, Africa belongs to the West even in terms of historiography (p. 37).

The second level of discussion to which the book refers is the ‘global turn’ in history and current debates on a ‘glocalization’ of historical research. Zeuske, who was born and raised in socialist East Germany and, after the collapse of the GDR, was appointed professor for Latin American History in Cologne in West Germany, combines old German traditions of *Weltgeschichte* (world history) with a new global history approach. He draws long lines of evolution back and forth between the early days of humankind to the present and at the same time constantly includes the micro-level of local actors: that is to say, the slaves in the first place and also the slave-holders, slave merchants, and their staff (p. 78). The mapping and analysis of macro-structures goes hand in hand with the micro-historical dimension of the actors’ perception (pp. 568–9).

The third level touches on the fundamental question of why we do historical research today. Besides a deep examination of primary sources and secondary literature, the book includes, last but not

least, a political statement calling upon historians’ social responsibility: ‘Historians should also always wonder: what has become of my “old history” today; where is the present of history?’ (p. 567). Taking note of the fact that Zeuske is not the only one who has recently tried to connect empirical historical research in a long-term perspective with a critical analysis of today’s society, it might be time that global historians put this very old question of historiography up for discussion again.

To conclude, I would like to make a suggestion. The author might think of publishing an extended essay or a slim volume summarizing the main arguments of his book in English. By doing so it would certainly help to clarify the argument if, instead of constantly jumping between time, space, and aspects of slaving, his history on the grand scale was told through five or six micro-historical in-depth analyses.

### The *Amistad* rebellion: an Atlantic odyssey of slavery and freedom

By Marcus Rediker. New York: Viking, 2012. Pp. 280. Paperback £20.00, ISBN 978-0-670-02504-6.

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In 1839 a correspondent of the ‘proslavery’ *New York Morning Herald* noted that

These blacks have created a greater excitement in Connecticut than any event that has occurred there since the close of the last century. Every kind of engine is set in motion to create a feeling of sympathy and an excitement in their favour; the parsons preach about them, the men talk about them, the ladies give tea parties and discuss their chivalry, heroism, sufferings, thews and sinews, over their souchong. (p. 111)

The ‘blacks’ in question were the mutineers from the *Amistad*, who had taken control of the ship and attempted it to sail it back to the west coast of Africa. While imprisoned in a New Haven jail they had become, as the correspondent complained, both a major spectacle and a focal abolitionist cause.

In *The Amistad rebellion*, Marcus Rediker offers a powerful re-telling of the story of the slave revolt aboard the ship and the events that it instigated. In many ways the book is a companion volume to his account in *The slave ship*; as Rediker notes, the *Amistad* rebellion ‘stood out as one of the very few successful uprisings ever to take place aboard a slaving vessel’ and he wanted to explore ‘this hopeful counterpoint to a gruesome history’ (p. 239). He develops key arguments from *The slave ship* through this account, most notably through his attention to the ways in which ‘fictive kinship’ was produced by slaves brought together in the horrific conditions of the ‘middle passage’ (see Rediker, 2007).<sup>1</sup> By this means, the book contributes to a re-imagining of the ‘middle passage’ as a site of ongoing struggles which were generative of new relations and identities. The book is also part of collective attempts to think about the importance of the diverse experiences of mutiny in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, offering a ‘fresh, sea-centred way of seeing the confluence between space, agency and political economy’.<sup>2</sup>

The first chapter of the book traces the origins of the mutineers, positioning them in terms of their West African/Sierra Leonean roots using material from trial records and testimonies by the mutineers themselves. This is particularly useful for asserting the dynamic trajectories of the mutineers and giving a sense of the importance of West African political cultures and traditions of resistance in shaping the mutiny and subsequent events. It also notes their transportation across the Atlantic ‘aboard the Portuguese or Brazilian slave ship *Teçora*’ (p. 19) before being transferred to the *Amistad* in Cuba. A second chapter engages with the rebellion itself, reconstructing the mutiny and following the mutineers’ attempts to sail and navigate the vessel. In Chapter 3, Rediker explores the movement which developed around the ‘mutineers’ on their landing in the US. The fourth chapter, ‘Jail’, investigates the time of the *Amistad* Africans in the New Haven jail, which Rediker describes as ‘the latest link in a transatlantic chain of incarceration’ (p. 122).

Chapter 5 traces the ways in which, through their time in prison, the Africans constructed a ‘new cultural

and political entity’ of the ‘Mendi People’, and also interrogates the politics of representation of the mutineers. The sixth chapter, ‘Freedom’, charts their final victory when a court found that ‘these negroes were never the lawful slaves’ of José Ruiz or Pedro Montes (p. 190). The chapter also includes fascinating material on debates about the ‘spectacularization’ of the Africans in shows put on to raise money for their return to Sierra Leone and on the tensions between missionaries and the Africans on their return to Africa. The concluding chapter explores some of the ‘reverberations’ of the mutiny, contending that ‘the *Amistad* Africans had become transoceanic symbols of insurrection against bondage’ (p. 227).

One of the most significant contributions of the book is to emerging debates and work on what Rediker describes here as ‘abolitionism from below’ (p. 104). As in *The slave ship*, he traces the importance of seafarers’ knowledge of different aspects of the slave trade in shaping abolitionists’ understandings of the actual experience and dynamics of slavery. There is a particular focus here on the ways in which the stories of the *Amistad* mutineers became known, circulated, and translated. Rediker recovers the role of two seafarers from the New York waterfront, Charles Pratt and James Covey, whose linguistic skills and knowledge of Mende enabled the ‘mostly Mende-speaking *Amistad* Africans’ to deliver ‘a full, detailed version of what happened aboard the “long, low, black schooner”’ (p. 136). In this regard, Rediker’s account effectively traces some of the solidarities and also the fraught intersections and exchanges which resulted as middle-class white abolitionists, seafarers such as Pratt and Covey, and the *Amistad* mutineers mobilized together.

Rediker teases out the diverse and multifaceted dynamics at stake in the formation of such solidarities. There are points, however, where I felt that some of these dynamics could have been explored in more depth, especially in relation to their final trial. Thus Rediker asks ‘what role had the Africans played in their own legal defense?’ (p. 193). He notes how the trial rested on intersections between the legal counsels of Roger Baldwin and John Quincy Adams – not on interpreters such as Pratt and Covey or the mutineers. He concludes that, while Baldwin and Adams brought their own perspective, skills, and stature to bear on the case ‘they ‘did say, by and large, what the “Mendi People” had wanted them to say’ (p. 193). It would, however, have been useful to engage in more depth with the dynamics through which different narratives were

1 See Markus Rediker, *The slave ship: a human history*, London: John Murray Publishers, 2007.

2 N. Frykman, C. Anderson, L. Heerma van Voss, and M. Rediker, ‘Mutiny and maritime radicalism in the age of revolution: an introduction’, *International Review of Social History*, 58, supplement S21, 2013, p. 4.

co-produced in the inhospitable environment of the court room. Elsewhere in the book Rediker gives a vivid sense of how the *Amistad* Africans transformed court-room spaces with a 'kind of guerrilla theater'. Thus he notes that, 'to make real the horrors of life below deck', Cinqué, one of the leaders of the mutineers, sat on the 'floor, acting out how they had been manacled, and shackled, their heads stooped low because there was so little room' (p. 59).

The legal debates over whether the *Amistad* Africans were 'legally held' as slaves emphasize that central to the tale of the *Amistad* mutiny is a set of debates about the geopolitics of the 'illegal' slave trade. This post-Abolition slave trade, increasingly seen as more important in scale and scope than has hitherto been acknowledged, is thus a key context for the book. As Rediker argues 'the trade thrived illegally, much of it in the 1830s beneath the American stars and stripes', as the US 'refused to sign an agreement that allowed British naval captains to inspect their vessels' (p. 49). Engaging with this 'hidden Atlantic' is fundamental to reconstructing the story of the *Amistad* rebellion. New archival material unearthed by Michael Zeuske in Cuban archives suggests that there may well be further dimensions to the negotiation of the geopolitics of the

illegal slave trade than is explored here. In particular, scant details exist of the slave ship *Teçora*, on which the mutineers are said to have made the Atlantic crossing. Zeuske goes so far as to suggest that 'US writers, merchants, and lawyers in the days of the *Amistad* trials' may have fashioned a myth of a ship named the *Teçora* to shift responsibility for 'the crime of enslavement and contraband trade from Africa' to 'the Spaniards and to a never-located "Portuguese" ship and captain'.<sup>3</sup>

Rediker notes that the memory of the *Amistad* waned in the wake of the American Civil War and 'saw no major revival until new social movements' such as the civil rights and black power movements 'exploded in the 1960s and 1970s' (p. 4). This book, with its focus on the role, agency, and political cultures of the African mutineers aboard the *Amistad*, and its assertion of innovative forms of 'abolitionism from below' forged in solidarity with the mutineers, makes a powerful contribution to the 'history from below' tradition. Rediker's focus on such 'abolitionism from below' demonstrates the continued ability of this tradition to disrupt the terms of academic knowledge and to challenge understandings of global social relations in both the past and the present.

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3 M. Zeuske, (2014) 'Rethinking the case of the schooner *Amistad*: contraband and complicity after 1808/1820', *Slavery and Abolition*, 35, 1, 2014, p. 159.