



Reflections on History from Below

Marcus Rediker*

“History from below,” as everyone knows, is a way to approach the study of the past. It has a long history of its own, stretching back to the earliest records of human history, including the Bible, the Koran, and other foundational texts. In 1935 Bertolt Brecht invoked its antiquity in the opening lines of a poem entitled “A Worker Reads History”:

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Was it the kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?

As Brecht made clear, history from below is about the people who built the world in which we live, the very ones who have for centuries been left out of the elite, top-down narratives of the past. In history from below, everyone is included, everyone counts.

History from below has deep international roots—“histoire par en bas” in France; “geschichte von unten” in Germany; “storia dal basso” in Italy—to mention three countries whose historians have made signal contributions. We see “sejarah dari bawah” in Indonesia; “kasaysayan mula sa ibaba” in the Philippines. The phrase in Kiswahili is “historia ya wawuja jasho,” in Turkish “aşağıdan tarih,” and in Arabic “tarikhe mardom.” From Mandarin Chinese, comes 由下而上的歷史, from Japanese, 民衆史, from Korean, 아래로부터의 역사, and from Bengali, নম্বিনবর্গরে ইতহাস, an influential variant called “subaltern studies.” In Great Britain and the United States history from below is also known as “peoples’ history,” “radical history,” or “history from the bottom up.” Throughout Latin America the phrases used are “historia desde abajo” and “historia a ras de suelo” (“history at ground level”). Brazilian historians have practiced “história a partir de baixo,” especially in their rich studies of slavery.

History from below is insurgent history, deriving much of its popularity and power from movements from below. The phrase had its modern origin in the

* University of Pittsburgh.

1930s, when Lucien Febvre, Georges Lefebvre, and A.L. Morton used it to discuss the history of working people in France and England. The term exploded into wider international usage in the 1960s and 1970s as various movements arose to demand new histories. In the US and many other parts of the world the civil rights and Black power movements demanded a consideration of the past that took seriously the issues of race and slavery. Anti-war and anti-colonial movements, especially those protesting the Vietnam War, called for rethinking the histories of empire and resistance. The women's rights movement made perhaps the greatest challenge to conventional histories, insisting that the larger part of humanity be included. All of these movements asked, who is a proper subject of history? Who is in and who is out? History from below, as a politicized type of social history, arose to answer these questions.

From these multiple activist roots, history from below has grown into a tradition of historical writing, one with many paths of entry. I myself came to the approach through a combination of African American and working-class history. A key text was *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), written by the radical Trinidadian scholar-activist C.L.R. James, who sought to raise the Haitian Revolution to the same level of historic significance as the French Revolution. Two other formative texts were written by E.P. Thompson and Christopher Hill, both members of the British Communist Party Historians' Group, active from 1946 to 1956. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, a study of class formation published in 1963, is regarded by many as the greatest history from below ever written. Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas in the English Revolution* (1972), offered a novel intellectual history from below of the Protestant radicals who attacked private property, patriarchy, slavery, and tyranny of all kinds, anticipating by more than a century the militants of the late-eighteenth-century "Age of Revolution." James, Thompson, and Hill all emphasized the history-making power of ordinary working people, establishing a central tenet of history from below. James called this power "working-class self-activity," while Thompson called it "agency."

There are, in my view, six essential elements of history from below. First, the project takes working people as *the primary subjects of study*. Second, history from below focuses on *power, oppression, and resistance*, which is to say, history from below is always connected to history from above. Third and fourth, history from below seeks to understand the *experience* and *consciousness* of working people, what they go through, how they think, and why they act in their social worlds. Fifth, historians from below always try to recover the *voices* of their subjects, to let them speak for themselves whenever and wherever possible. Sixth and finally, history from below sees working people not only as subjects, but as *makers of history*, as James, Thompson, and many others have taught us.

Let me illustrate these six elements concretely through my book *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist* (2017), a biography from below. Lay, who lived from 1682 to 1759, called for the

worldwide abolition of slavery two full generations before the emergence of an anti-slavery movement in the late eighteenth century. He was an ordinary working man—a shepherd, a sailor, and a glove-maker. He lived briefly in Barbados, the leading slave society of his era, where he witnessed, in horrifying personal ways, the raw *power* of the slave-owning ruling class and the *oppression/resistance* of enslaved people. Lay's experience of seafaring created a class *consciousness* in which he applied the sailor's ethic of solidarity to all exploited workers, especially bondsmen and women, and called for their emancipation. Lay also wrote a scorching book, *All Slave-Keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates* (1738), in which he raised his prophetic voice against slavery. He *made history* by helping to build a movement among Quakers, who founded the world's first anti-slavery organization in 1775 and a year later became the first group to abolish slavery in their own midst.

Most workers do not write a book as Benjamin Lay did, so the greatest challenge in writing history from below is usually finding sources. Many working people lived entirely within the oral tradition, their lives recorded only by outsiders who were frequently enemies, as in the case of the indigenous peoples of the Americas who suffered deadly invasion by Europeans. History from below must, therefore, be practiced by reading the evidence produced by the dominant classes—and reading it creatively, “between the lines” or “against the grain,” as many have noted. E.P. Thompson came up with an especially vivid description: we must hold our documents up to a “Satanic light” and read them backwards. He alluded to early modern witchcraft trials, in which it was alleged that witches could read backwards as part of their effort to turn the world upside down.

The challenge of sources means that those who wish to write history from below must figure out how the society they are studying produced documentation about poor people. I learned while writing my book *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World* (1987) that poor sailors turned up in court records, especially the High Court of Admiralty Papers in London where maritime disputes—mutiny, piracy, strikes, and wage conflicts—were adjudicated. I also learned that doing history from below means that every source counts, from sea shanties, to travelers' accounts, to government documents, diaries, journals, and merchants' correspondence. All must be mined for whatever precious clues they may hold about the lives of the oppressed. History from below is often a mosaic of carefully assembled fragments.

History from below is best presented through the most democratic form of communication—storytelling, based on popular traditions. This has been accomplished most brilliantly by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, who employed the forms and techniques of indigenous storytelling to narrate 500 years of the history of the Americas in his *Memory of Fire* trilogy. I also find useful an essay by Walter Benjamin entitled “The Storyteller.” He says that historically there have been two main types: the peasant-storyteller, a master of local lore, and the sailor-storyteller, who brings home wondrous tales from afar. Benjamin also notes that

every good storyteller tells a big story within a little story. I have studied enslaved people, indentured servants, domestic workers, sailors, and factory workers, but in each and every case my goal was to illuminate the larger theme of the blood-stained rise of capitalism.

History from below will always ebb and flow in relation to the power of movements from below. But it is at the same time a tradition that has been built, patiently and deliberately, over many decades and has survived, sometimes even prospered, during periods of relative quiescence and reaction. Younger scholars and activists can study this tradition of historical writing and use it to generate new visions of political possibility. History from below keeps alive the memory of struggles past, saying to those who fight for a different future, *you are not alone. Your struggles have long histories, from which you can take practical knowledge and inspiration.*



Marcus Rediker is Distinguished Professor of Atlantic History at the University of Pittsburgh. His “histories from below” have won numerous awards, including the George Washington Book Prize, and have been translated into seventeen languages worldwide. He is co-author, with Peter Linebaugh, of *La Hidra de la Revolución: Marineros, esclavos y campesinos en la historia oculta del Atlántico* (2005; new edition forthcoming from Traficantes de Sueños) and author of *Barco de Esclavos: La trata a través del Atlántico* (Madrid: Capitán Swing, 2021). He produced a prize-winning documentary film, *Ghosts of Amistad* (2013), directed by Tony Buba. He is currently working as guest curator in the JMW Turner Gallery at Tate Britain and writing a book about escaping slavery by sea in antebellum America.

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