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The Black Struggle Against Slavery

Slave Rebellions on the Open Seas

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Greg Grandin’s “The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom and Deception in the New World” and Marcus Rediker’s “The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom” share both subject matter—slave rebellions on the open seas—and an unabashed commitment to the Black freedom struggle. Beyond the fortuitous combination of topic and political passion, however, the greatest reward for any reader is how both authors make history come alive. Despite their remoteness in time and place, the stories they tell have an obvious affinity for the Black struggle today as a new civil rights struggle takes shape to secure the final victory sought by ancestors Babo and Cinque.

“The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom and Deception in the New World” is an exploration of the events that inspired Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno”, an 1855 novella about the ruse orchestrated by slaves fifty years earlier to convince Captain Amasa Delano, a distant relative of FDR, that their vessel remained under their ex-master’s sway. This excerpt from Melville should give you a flavor of this droll and macabre tale:

Three black boys, with two Spanish boys, were sitting together on the hatches, scraping a rude wooden platter, in which some scanty mess had recently been cooked. Suddenly, one of the black boys, enraged at a word dropped by one of his white companions, seized a knife, and though

called to forbear by one of the oakum-pickers, struck the lad over the head, inflicting a gash from which blood flowed.

In amazement, Captain Delano inquired what this meant. To which the pale Benito dully muttered, that it was merely the sport of the lad.

“Pretty serious sport, truly,” rejoined Captain Delano. “Had such a thing happened on board the Bachelor’s Delight, instant punishment would have followed.”

At these words the Spaniard turned upon the American one of his sudden, staring, half-lunatic looks; then, relapsing into his torpor, answered, “Doubtless, doubtless, Señor.”

If Grandin’s history is a fitting counterpart to Melville’s fiction, a work of high culture for the ages, we can see “The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom” as a necessary corrective to Stephen Spielberg’s pop culture film that like his “Lincoln” told a tale of paternalistic white intervention when the real history would have revealed something much more like self-emancipation.

There’s another important dimension to the history that will help scholars, both inside and outside the academy, understand the “peculiar institution”. Since both rebellions were carried out against Spanish masters, we are reminded of the global character of the slave trade—one that connected many different links in a great chain of commodity production. Whether a particular link was based on ostensibly capitalist property relations such as the Birmingham textile mills or “non-capitalist” relations such as those that obtained on sugar or cotton plantations, they were all necessary for the functioning of an emerging global economic system.

The slaves who rose up against Benito Cereno died an unceremonious death, largely as a result of the absence of an abolitionist movement to take up their cause in a geographically remote and politically inhospitable South America. Since the *Amistad* had the relatively good fortune to come under American naval control in the waters off New England, the basis for a broad-based solidarity campaign rooted in the abolitionist movement existed. Rediker amasses a wealth of detail to demonstrate its power, even if at times it manifested the same sort of paternalism that can be found in Spielberg’s movie. It was not as if Spielberg was making things up, it was more that he decided to leave key details out.

Amasa Delano was a Captain Ahab writ small. Although he had ambitions to strike it rich on the open seas, he never could raise the capital to finance whaling expeditions. Setting his sights a bit lower but about the same level ethically, he decided to hunt seals that were valued for their skins, the perfect material for the lady’s mittens and the gentleman’s wallets.

Aboard his ship, the *Perseverance*, Delano set sail for the west coast of Chile in 1800, an area dotted with islands overflowing with immense seal populations. In his account of his various sea voyages, a source of Melville’s novella, he shows not the slightest remorse for the bloody labor that sometimes involved a military-like assault on as many as 20,000 seals at a time.

As fate would have it, Delano encountered Benito Cerreño's (the actual spelling) *Tryal* in the waters near Santa Maria Island off the coast of Chile in 1805. Like the *Amistad* rebels, their brethren lacked the navigational skills to return to Africa on their own and thus ordered Cerreño to sail them home. In the same deceptive manner as the *Amistad's* Captain Ramón Ferrer, Cerreño stalled for time, hoping to encounter another ship that could intercede on his behalf.

The slaves who had taken over the *Tryal* had been through a prolonged ordeal, including a forced march through the freezing Andes toward a seaport where they would put on board a ship destined for Lima and sold to the highest bidder. They seized their opportunity on December 22nd 1804 after the ship had set sail. Led by Babo and Mori, they overpowered their guards, seized weapons and executed 18 sailors, stabbing and hacking some to death, throwing others overboard.

In a stunning command of his material, Grandin makes a strong case that there was every possibility that the rebels were committed Muslims. As such, they were forerunners of many of the fighters in the news today, even if they saw their struggle more in terms of simply returning home rather than global jihad. For the *Tryal* rebels, their religion was simply a way for them to stay united and to sustain morale in the face of insurmountable odds in the same way that Christianity served Blacks in the American south.

Grandin surmises that Babo and Mori were lettered men, possibly educated in madrassas. When they forced Cerreño to sign a contract granting them their freedom, they were following Islamic customs. Finally, the respect that the enslaved men and women had for Babo suggests that he might have been a *marabout* (cleric) or *faqih* (scholar) in his native country.

Grandin refers his readers to another slave revolt that took place just four years earlier on the *San Juan* as it was rounding the Cape Horn. This time they succeeded in forcing the captain to sail them back to Senegal and to freedom. When the Viceroy of Peru learned of this outrage, he urged the Crown to ban the importation of Muslim slaves into South America, writing that the teaching of Mohammad led slaves to "spread very perverse ideas among their own kind", adding "And there are so many of them."

Like many children of the Enlightenment, the two men most responsible for suppressing the rebellious slaves were all for the democratic republic but only if it was on the basis of white supremacy.

Hailing from Duxbury, Massachusetts, Captain Amasa Delano joined a rebel militia to fight the British. While traditional liberal and much Marxist historiography viewed 1776 as a noble revolutionary movement against British colonial tyranny, recent research questions this interpretation. In the provocatively titled "The Counter-Revolution of 1776", Gerald Horne demonstrates that slaves were drawn to the British side for no other reason than the Crown's opposition to slavery. Such a paradox illustrates the principle that history does not move in a straight line.

When Delano took control of the *Tryal*, his main goal was to be compensated for the value of the returned property—including the slaves. The judge who presided over the litigation between

Delano and the Spanish owners was one Juan Martinez de Rozas, an admirer of Napoleon who met secretly with freethinkers influenced by Voltaire and Rousseau. Rozas's opposition to the monarchy, like Delano's, was qualified by a belief that only white men had the right to be free. The captured slaves were represented in court by the 19th century's version of a public defender who argued that they had the right to rise up against their captors in the same way that Spanish prisoners of war had the right to murder British jailors. His reasoning was virtually identical to that of John Quincy Adams, the attorney for the *Amistad* rebels. Despite, or perhaps because of, his republicanism, Rozas found the slaves guilty of murder and had them executed.

If the stance of Delano and Rozas challenges conventional thinking about the clash between bourgeois democracy and slavery, there is even more to puzzle over in "The Empire of Necessity" when it comes to the social and economic role of slavery in South America. Over the past few years, a number of books have appeared that challenge orthodox Marxist thinking on the supposed incompatibility between capitalism and slavery. Perhaps it should be described instead as a new orthodoxy since in years past Eric Williams's "Capitalism and Slavery" probably spoke for most Marxists in making the case for their organic ties, especially in the supply of cotton to British textile mills.

In helping to reestablish Eric Williams to his rightful place in Marxist theory, Grandin describes a world that combined contradictory elements of free and unfree labor unlike anything found in the slave states. Grandin writes:

Slaves literally made money: working in Lima's mint, they trampled quicksilver into ore with their bare feet, pressing toxic mercury into their bloodstream in order to amalgamate the silver used for coins. And they were money, at least in a way. It wasn't so much that the value of individual slaves was standardized in relation to currency. Slaves were the standard: when appraisers calculated the value of any given hacienda, slaves usually accounted for over half its worth, much more valuable than inanimate capital goods like tools and millworks.

The world was changing fast, old lines of rank and status were blurring, and slaves, along with livestock and land, often appeared to be the last substantial things. Slaves didn't just create wealth: as items of conspicuous consumption for a rising merchant class, they displayed wealth. And since some slaves in Spanish America, especially those in cities like Montevideo and Buenos Aires, were paid wages, they were also consumers, spending their money on items that arrived in ships with other slaves or maybe even, in a few instances, with themselves.

Turning now to Rediker's "The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom", we encounter the same understanding of the links between "the peculiar institution" and global capitalism through his fascinating exegesis of an anonymous abolitionist pamphlet that circulated in England in 1792. Titled "Cushoo: a dialogue between a Negro and English Gentleman on the Horrors of Slavery and the Slave Trade", it allows Cushoo, an African slave, to explain why slavery is not only evil but in terms that anticipated Eric Williams's "Capitalism and Slavery":

In 1792, at the peak of a broad popular agitation against the slave trade in Great Britain, an abolitionist published an anonymous pamphlet, in which Cushoo, an African who had been

enslaved in Jamaica, engaged an English gentleman, aptly named Mr. English, in conversation. Cushoo had been owned by a friend of Mr. English. He begins by saying, “Ah! Massa Buckra, pity poor Negroman.” Mr. English responds, “Why, Cushoo, what’s the matter?” The matter, in short, was capitalism and slavery—more specifically, how a violent, exploitative global system hid its true nature in the benign form of commodities, especially slave labor-produced sugar and rum, the likes of which Mr. English and others around the world consumed, without understanding how they were produced and at what human cost.

For perhaps the first time in history a member of a mass movement for fundamental social change had made a simultaneous popular critique of the exploitation of labor, the commodity form, and the capitalist world market. In this scenario, consumers were unconscious vampires.

Nobody could have accused the Spanish owners of the *Amistad* as unconscious but vampires they surely were.

In chilling detail, Rediker describes a systematic brutality that characterized the slave trade, particularly the shipment to the Americas in the infamous Middle Passage.

The lower decks of a typical slave ship would be no taller than 48 inches, forcing the slaves to maintain a crouching position for weeks at a time. In Freetown, Liberia where a number of liberated slaves lived, it was not uncommon to see young men and women walking stooped over as if they had osteoporosis.

The men, women and children who would eventually board the *Amistad* came to Havana in 1839 after surviving the Middle Passage on the *Teçora*, a Brazilian vessel. From there, they were soon put on the *Amistad*, a smaller coastal trader that would transport them to their next destination, another part of Cuba where they might be put to work on a sugar plantation. The duress of the trans-Atlantic trip on the *Teçora* and uncertainty about their fate made them feel desperate and willing to chance everything in an onboard insurrection.

Chapter two, titled “Rebellion”, details the bold takeover of the *Amistad*, an event that Spielberg’s film portrays more as an atavistic massacre than an act of liberation akin to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Rediker describes the deep oppression that the slaves had to deal with, from being restrained by neck-rings that an African named Kinna described as how “dey chain ox” to being terrorized by whips, clubs, and fists. None of this is depicted in Spielberg’s film, which begins with the assault on the ship’s crew amidst yells of terror.

When the ship’s cook, a slave himself but one much more like a “house slave”, maliciously teases the captives that they will all be killed—gesturing with a kitchen knife drawn across his neck—they decide that they must rebel or die.

Despite coming from different tribes and speaking as much as fifteen different languages, the slaves united into a fighting force under the leadership of Cinque who was likely an experienced warrior. Since two of the 49 slaves were blacksmiths, it was easy for them to pick their locks and free the remainder of the men who formed a brigade armed with clubs, machetes and other

weapons gathered on deck. After a pitched and bloody battle, the Africans gained control of the ship and ordered Captain Ramón Ferrer to take them back to Africa.

Another major failing of Spielberg's Hollywood version of the trial of the *Amistad* rebels was the virtual disappearance of the mass movement that made court victories possible. As was the case with "Lincoln", it was intervention by enlightened whites that made the day—particularly the case made on their behalf by John Quincy Adams before the Supreme Court. While Adams surely was a hero, it was up to Marcus Rediker to pay homage to some dedicated but obscure abolitionist activists.

For Spielberg it is notables like abolitionist attorney Roger S. Baldwin (played by Matthew McConaughey of all people) who have major roles while a much more interesting grass roots activist like Dwight Janes gets ignored. Janes was a grocer by trade who made the initial contact with Cinque and his comrades. After meeting with them, he wrote letters to prominent individuals to stress the need for rallying around their cause. Janes invested so much time and energy into their defense that a reporter for the pro-slavery New York *Morning Herald* could barely contain his admiration when he referred to

"the Abolitionists are moving heaven and earth to effect their release; several members of the society have left town for Connecticut to see them, to employ the most able counsel in their behalf, and to contest every point inch by inch; and, judging from appearances, we should say that there are general preparations making in all quarters for a grand explosion in this matter of slavery and the slave trade."

It was people like Dwight Janes who upheld the republican ideals of 1776 but understood that they were meaningless unless they applied to all human beings. Twenty-two years after the *Amistad* rebellion and the vindication of its fighters, the United States would be tested by a civil war that would finally put an end to slavery. Now, 150 years after that monumental struggle, we are facing a new challenge to racism led by young people who would be inspired by the example of the *Trial* and *Amistad* rebellions. For them and for all Americans committed to the struggle for racial equality, Greg Grandin and Marcus Rediker's books could not have come at a better time.