

# **“The World Turned Upside Down” Conference**

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Two major, overlapping blindspots have limited the perspective of mainstream American historiography. One obscures the creation, evolution, and role of a U.S. working class; the other conceals the relationship between events in North America and developments involving the rest of the world. The complacent celebration of a permanent American exceptionalism requires the neglect—or explicit rejection—of both these themes. Conversely, those now attempting to broaden the social vision of American history are becoming increasingly sensitive to its vital international context.

A valuable contribution to this ongoing work was the conference entitled “The World Turned Upside Down: Working People in England and America, 1660-1790,” held at the University of Pennsylvania on November 14, 1981. Sponsored by the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies and attended by some fifty to sixty scholars, the conference took as its point of departure Christopher Hill’s studies of those caught up in the world’s first experience with primitive capital accumulation. The two papers presented sought to relate the economic, social, and cultural processes which Hill revealed in England to contemporary developments in North America.

During the morning session, Peter Linebaugh discussed the fusion and transmission of radical democratic traditions from the British Isles to the Americas. His thesis was ambitious and wide-ranging; it is difficult to do it justice here. Briefly, however, Linebaugh described an English revolution which, while ending in the formal triumph of bourgeois forces, nevertheless set definite limits to capitalist development in that country. These limits reflected the resistance of dispossessed “sturdy rogues and vagabonds” (comprising “all those rejecting wage-labor”), whom Linebaugh considers to have been the most active section of the English proletariat. This relationship of forces drove English capital overseas in search of more tractable labor and more easily appropriated land. It also brought together large numbers of expropriated peoples from Ireland, Scotland, and Africa, and mixed them with emigrant Englishmen saturated with the most radical ideas of their country’s civil war. Ultimately destined for plantation labor, this conglomer-

ation of nations first came together on the Atlantic crossing; thus "the ship, if not the breeding ground of rebels, became a meeting place where various traditions were jammed together; an extraordinary forcing house of internationalism." A lively discussion followed the reading of the paper. All valued its international scope and boldness of conception; less agreement existed about the identity and historical significance of the "rogues and vagabonds," and especially whether they should be regarded as militant opponents of wage labor or merely fugitives from it. Such questions will hopefully be addressed when the paper appears in published form.

Utilizing as a springboard Richard B. Morris's 1946 classic, *Government and Labor in Early America*, Marcus Rediker opened the afternoon session with a survey of "Open Questions on the History and Culture of Labor in Early America." As the paper's title indicates, its principal purpose was to outline key topics requiring further consideration and exploration. Noting that production in the English colonies rested upon many different types of labor relations, for example, Rediker suggested that those working on a free-wage-labor basis and the culture they fashioned were probably the most important historically of all these types, although still the least studied or understood. Focusing upon the unique geographic mobility of these wages earners he identified it as both an effective way to limit the rate of exploitation imposed by local employers as well as a means of building "the only cross-regional culture of working people in early America." In discussion, respondents once again applauded the presentation's synthetic sweep and particularly welcomed the attention paid to wage labor in this early period. Doubts were registered over the extent to which these colonial proletarians were actually able to influence other contemporary producing strata or to fashion a wage-labor distinct and strong enough significantly to shape the culture and behavior of the larger class of wage workers which arose in later decades.

The discussion of both papers benefited greatly from the participation of scholars visiting from Britain, Canada, and Australia—first of all, Christopher Hill, as well as John Brewer, Rhys Isaac, Robert Malcolmson, and Nicholas Rogers. Considering the relevance of the subjects discussed, it is to be hoped that in future conferences of this type, papers can be circulated more widely and farther in advance and that students of other phases and periods of social/labor history can be involved.