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Counter Power and Colonial Rule in the Eighteenth-Century Cape of Good Hope: Belongings and Protest of the Labouring Poor.

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ABSTRACT

Framed by an anarchist-syndicalist reading of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000), this study examines the dynamic nature of colonial and class rule in the eighteenth-century Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa, and the forms of belonging and traditions of political protest developed by the labouring poor. This study draws on archival material from national and international repositories, focusing on government records, criminal court trials, and travellers' accounts. Colonial rule, the under-class, and resistance in the Cape are located in a global context, with special attention being paid to changes associated with the 'Age of Revolution and War' and rise of the modern world. Breaking with the tendency to treat different sections of the motley (many-hued) labouring poor in the Cape as discreet, often racially defined, and nationally bounded population groups, segmented also by legal status, this study provides a comprehensive study of labour in the Cape that includes an examination of slaves, servants, sailors, and soldiers recruited, or imported from, Asia, Europe, and other parts of Africa.

I contest the established approaches to under-class resistance. In place of a socially fragmented labouring poor, solely engaged in 'informal', individualized, and uncoordinated resistance, this study reveals the spatially stretched and inclusive connections created by the labouring poor across gender, nation, race and status, which underpinned modes of protest that were confrontational, and often collective, in nature, including desertion, insurrection, mutiny, strikes, and arson. In spite of the harsh regime of class and colonial control developed under VOC rule, the labouring poor forged notable class solidarities.

The Cape Colony was influenced by two interrelated political processes unleashed by the Age of Revolution and War, including the global spread of radical political ideas, and the modernisation and strengthening of the European imperial states. The labouring poor in the Cape was also infected by and contributed to a radical consciousness of freedom and rights, leading to the 1797 naval mutinies, the (1799-1803) Servant Rebellion, and the 1808 Revolt. New political strategies and identities emerged, and under-class struggles contributed both to the decline of the VOC, and to the adoption of reforms and a new ethos of governance that altered relations between masters, the labouring poor, and the state.

This study is critical of 'new cultural history', which entrenches an economistic understanding of class, and detaches the study of identities from larger social structures and processes. To deepen our understanding of class, this study draws on left critiques of Marxism, especially anarchist ideas, which highlight the links between class and state-making, citizenship, and the law. This helps contest the often false distinctions drawn between the 'economic' and 'cultural' elements of class and inequality.