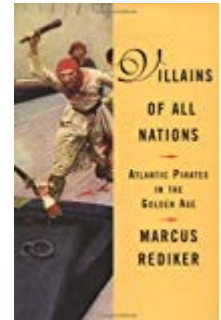


Marcus Rediker. *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. 240 pp. \$24.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8070-5024-8.



Reviewed by Kevin P. McDonald

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Accounts of pirates and piracy, ranging from the fantastical to the historical and everywhere in between, have been recorded since antiquity, when trading vessels were first constructed to move people and goods via waterways. Pirates plundered periodically throughout the ancient Aegean, but it was Roman jurisprudence that first characterized the watery brigands as *hostes humani generis*, enemies of all mankind, in a bid to protect a claim of imperial sovereignty upon the seas that linked their cross-continental empire. This legal designation, notably absent in the Hellenic era, was re-invoked two millennia later by the courts of the early modern mercantile empires for similar imperial objectives. As these latter-day maritime empires expanded beyond their familiar home waters, their desire to control the seas and the jurisdictional claims of sovereignty followed in the wakes of their carracks, caravels, fly-boats, and frigates. Regulating and enforcing this tenuous authority was a herculean task, however, and pirates from all regions demonstrated over time that they were indeed not enemies of all humankind; instead, they nearly always found friendly ports of call in which to trade their looted

cargoes, spend their equitably divided shares, and debauch themselves in drunken orgies. This socioeconomic aspect of piracy was *de rigueur* until the peak of the golden age of piracy, roughly 1716 to 1726, the decade explored under the revealing historical lens of Marcus Rediker.

In this fine collection of essays, Professor Rediker has provided a welcome addition to the growing subfield of pirate studies and created a worthy companion volume to his landmark maritime labor history, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*.^[1] In the admirable tradition of the late E. P. Thompson, Rediker fashions his social and cultural histories from below, with special thematic emphasis placed upon work, class, and power. The author posits mariners as proto-industrial laborers, the ship as a factory at sea, and pirates as libertarian heroes and anarchic rebels who fought against the brutality and hierarchy of the navy, but most especially against authoritarian merchant captains and the injustices of the wage labor regime. Readers familiar with Rediker's scholarship will find similar content in *Villains of All Nations*, as many of the same protagon-

nists, arguments, sources, and illustrations materialize in these pages. Memorable themes of hierarchy and Libertia are recounted, as the class antagonisms of *terra firma* are turned upside down in the wooden world of the pirate ship, and a dialectic of violence and terror develops between these pirates and the ruling classes of the emerging nation-states, especially Great Britain.

The eight chapters are arranged thematically and can be read in any order, though the first essay serves as an introduction and sets the tone of the volume, beginning with the execution of the Anglo-American pirate, William Fly, upon the Boston gallows. Chapter 2 explains the circumstances that gave rise to the peak period of pirate activity, particularly from the perspective of the sailors who "went on the account." The next chapter describes the social origins and demographics of pirate crews--overwhelmingly poor working seamen--who either mutinied and seized a merchant vessel, or more commonly, volunteered to join when a pirate boarded their vessel. Chapter 4 details the democratic and egalitarian culture of the pirate ship, including the election of captains and quartermasters, the drawing up and signing of articles, the equitable division of plunder, and an early modern version of health and life insurance, all of which can be traced to the seventeenth-century practices of Caribbean freebooters. The fifth essay elucidates upon the "distribution of justice" meted out by pirate crews upon their victims and the social contempt they held "for the merchant captain, the royal official, and the system of authority those figures represented and enforced" (p. 85). Chapter 6, revised from a previously published essay, engages the infamous women pirates, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, and is derived mostly from Captain Charles Johnson's contemporary account. Chapter 7 describes the rhetorical, military, and legal campaign initiated by the ruling classes to "extirpate [pirates] out of the world," and the final essay explores the symbolic origins of the Jolly Roger and "the interrelated themes of death, apocalypse, hell, and self-de-

struction--fundamental matters of life and death and what they might have meant to these poor, motley, seafaring people in the early eighteenth century" (p. 153). An epigrammatic conclusion ends the volume, leaving the reader somewhat dangling, like one of the many condemned pirates described in such fascinating detail throughout the preceding pages.

The essays are strongly supported by the author's skillful use of metropolitan and colonial newspaper articles, travel accounts, religious sermons, official correspondence, state papers, admiralty records, and other court documents. Rediker also leans heavily on the contemporary *General History of the Pyrates* (1724) by Captain Charles Johnson, though some scholars, as well as library catalogues, have continued to maintain Daniel Defoe as its true author. The most imaginative use of sources occurs in chapter 6, where the author juxtaposes an early eighteenth-century allegorical painting of piracy with Eugène Delacroix's 1830 masterpiece, *Liberty Leading the People*, claiming that its inspiration lies in the illustration on the frontispiece of the Dutch translation of Johnson's *General History*. In addition, the author has compiled a database of 778 pirates--the best available to date--that he draws upon for statistical purposes, especially in chapters 2 and 3.

While endlessly engaging, there are some questionable aspects. The heroic stature granted these violent villains is somewhat disconcerting, as many pirates consistently engaged in the brutal torture of victims for sadistic purposes and the pursuit of personal wealth as much as for any alleged political agenda. Furthermore, while pirates undoubtedly came from all nations, the ones described herein are decidedly anglocentric, as are the majority of sources. In addition, the author's reasonable contention that piracy made a major impact on the Atlantic trade is based mainly on anecdotal evidence and would greatly benefit from more detailed quantitative data compiled from a wider range of sources, especially Spanish,

Dutch, French, and Portuguese archival materials. Finally, Rediker's insistence that pirates "ruptured the Middle Passage" elides the more fundamentally complicit role played by pirates--from the Elizabethan era onward--in building up the slave trade (p. 145).

Careful periodization is the key to explaining these generational aspects of a long and complex history, and in the decade following the War of the Spanish Succession, when thousands of seamen and legally commissioned privateers suddenly found themselves unemployed, Rediker's anti-authoritarian characterization of pirates is certainly well founded. The limited temporal scope, illuminating in its focus, at the same time obfuscates the more complex and often contradictory roles played by pirates and privateers--often one and the same--at the behest of merchants and colonial administrators throughout most of the early modern era. Indeed, the overall process of early European colonizing efforts, beginning with the induction by the Portuguese of the extortionate cartaze system in the Indian Ocean region, might properly be framed as state-sponsored piracy. In the Atlantic world, the conspicuous exploits of Drake, Raleigh, Cavendish, and Hawkins, as well as the abandoned privateer staging post at Roanoke, are only the most obvious evidence of this, while less notable but equally revealing markers include the French settlement attempt at Fort Caroline in La Florida, the Scots effort in Darien, and the Puritan scheme of settling Old Providence Island near the Spanish Main. Throughout the seventeenth century, moreover, French, English, and Dutch buccaneers operated, with tacit support, if not official sponsorship, throughout the Caribbean basin, attacking Spanish ships and towns while selling their plunder in bustling pirate havens like Port Royal, Jamaica. As the lucrative sugar trade began to take hold, merchants and administrators became less tolerant toward the freebooters, and the buccaneers shifted their bases accordingly, forum-shopping for friendly ports along the North Atlantic seaboard

and finding refuge in places like Charleston, New York, and Newport, while expanding their hunting grounds and networks to the South Sea and the rich trading world of the Indian Ocean region.

Indeed, over the *longue durée*, cyclical patterns of piracy can be identified, as David J. Starkey has noted, with a marked increase in piratical activities following periods of European warfare, for example, from 1603 to 1616, 1714 to 1726, and 1815 to 1825.[2] These short-wave cycles, as transient phases, might otherwise undermine any wider historical significance of Rediker's anti-statist villains if not for the deep and lasting impact these particular pirates have maintained in the popular culture. The recent Disney blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean*, with a sequel planned for release next summer, has demonstrated a continuing popular fascination with pirates, and this is translating into more and more serious scholarly attention. As historians of Marcus Rediker's caliber and imagination continue to unveil the fascinating societies, vibrant cultures, and remarkable lives of pirates, the history of this generation of pirates must now be integrated into a longer history, in which we will see significant changes over time. In so doing, the history of the Atlantic, indeed, of the globe, can only come more sharply into focus, and the seas, along with the islands, ports, and littorals that adjoin them, will continue to be recognized in their proper context as spaces of cultural, political, economic, and social interaction.

Notes

[1]. Rediker's initial foray into the field of piratology was his seminal article, "'Under the Banner of King Death': The Social World of Anglo-American Pirates, 1716 to 1726," *William and Mary Quarterly*, ser. 3, 38 (1981): pp. 203-227. See also, Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-*

Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic (Boston: Beacon Press; London: Verso, 2000).

[2]. David Starkey, "Pirates and Markets," in *Bandits at Sea: A Pirates Reader*, ed. C. R. Pennell (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

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