

## The Twilight of Atlantic Piracy

It is clear that Atlantic piracy experienced a drastic change from the relatively carte-blanche buccaneering in the mid to late seventeenth century, replete with pirate havens, royal indifference (if not outright support), and expanding opportunities for plunder, to the low-tolerance, inhospitable climate for pirates of the Atlantic World during the suppression of the early eighteenth century. What is less clear are the reasons why this change occurred. Just as royal officials were issuing multiple letters of marque at the outbreak of each new conflict, they proved equally willing to use their improved naval capabilities to eradicate those who refused to relinquish command. Individual privateers began to come into conflict with other powerful "legitimate" merchant operations which, as we have seen, often blurred the lines of trade and piracy themselves. Powerful officials walked a fine line by investing in privateering missions while trying simultaneously to distance themselves from piracy, and local governors tried to balance the economic benefits pirates brought to their ports with the shifting desires of the Crown. While remaining lucrative economically, piracy became an increasing political liability.

1. Within this context, how do we define the twilight of Atlantic piracy?
2. In what ways were the voyages of Avery and Kidd indicative of the changes on the horizon?
3. Was the latter an adventurer who went rogue or a political pawn who was sacrificed to appease those groups ushering in an era of change?
4. Were the famous freebooters who followed them lawless and violent criminals unwilling to obey the rule of law in a now established colonial society, or were they "social bandits" who rose up in the face of authoritarianism and disparity caused by capitalistic and mercantilistic colonial regimes?
5. What caused these late pirates to fly under their own flags and attack ships regardless of affiliation?
6. Why did the very countries who fostered piracy in the Atlantic in the first place finally turn on the privateering and piracy they had created?
7. Finally, was the nature of freebooting a necessary reaction to increasing royal hostilities or did suppression become necessary due to the changing nature of piracy?

The twilight of Atlantic piracy might best be described as the remnant of an opportunistic system that had, like a child's jacket, slowly been grown out of politically and economically by many of the powers that employed, and been the victims of, piracy. Even at the end of its run, the early eighteenth century, it still had its utility during war, notably King William's War and the War of Spanish Succession, but each time the aftermath created a resurgence of piracy with little political backing, with notable liabilities for employing it as a tool of state in a time of peace and trying to establish merchant empires. In the end, the nations that fostered piracy turned on it and committed to put down the "rabid dog" that it could no longer control.

Kidd and Avery's stories illustrate a time of nebulous legality and, as would be indicated by Benton's essay, ambiguous legality in mercantilist policies that were becoming established with

more clearly defined colonial societies. The question was, what to do with this holdover “institution” where legitimate targets, that were once easy to spot, were becoming less and less clear and carried more entangled connections to friend and foe alike. Both Lane and Benton clearly describe the story of Kidd and the political railroading that he received as a way to appease parliamentary, Mughal, and East Indian connections alike (Lane, 190). His fate was written before the first bang of the gavel. Not to say that Kidd didn’t break the rules, it’s clear he did (Benton, 708-709). But so had many others that escaped prosecution by navigating ambiguous waters of the privateer/ pirate. The reality for Kidd and Avery was, the politics and economics of the world had changed from during the previous 200 years to create a system that no longer had much place, aside for a few and private investors, but only served the state during the occasional war.

Rediker paints a clear portrait of these pirates in their final few decades. They were the last holdovers from the buccaneering golden age, and old habits die hard. While he may introduce some speculation on the subject, he illustrates the idea that over this last 50 years or so, a “pirate society” emerged as a subculture/counterculture that rejected much of what was seen as conventional authority and society in an age of absolutism to form their own social order (Rediker, 208-209). While research of others, like Arne Bialuschewski, may see this as an overgeneralization, Rediker does show that that were some elements of a democratic set of institutions, like the separation of powers between Captain, Quartermaster, and council that seem to indicate a level of democracy that was not typical in other “legitimate” maritime trades during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Rediker, 209-210). Lane seems to support that by saying that these later buccaneers were a vast, “departure from the baroque hierarchies,” that existed in Europe (Lane, 211). These pirates may have flown under their own flags, or, as Lane describes, from what appears a complete compliment of whichever nation they wanted to disguise themselves as, perhaps to inspire fear or potentially to indicate their multinational crew compliment or as a symbol that they were beholden to no nation. Their stockholders were their crews, and in an age when “enemy” ships were difficult to spot due to structural changes in global politics, this brand of pirates saw no national affiliation and pirates like Teach and Roberts frequently targeted their own countrymen (Lane, 199-201).