

**“The Age of the Freebooter”: The Impact of Democracy on Social Values in Pirate Societies.**

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HIST 532 Pirates of the Atlantic World

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*O'er the glad waters of the dark blue sea,  
 Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free,  
 Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam,  
 Survey our empire and behold our home!  
 These are our realms, no limits to their sway—  
 Our flag the sceptre all who meet obey.*

*The Corsair*, 1814  
 Lord Byron

Byron's verse, *the Corsair*, evokes imagery of the life of the pirate as one of freedom, boundless and beholden to none. Its main character, Conrad, shares similar traits of most flawed Byronic heroes. Conrad, while criminal, embodies other high ideals: justice, honor, fairness, and liberty. Byron wrote in the age of Romanticism, of sweeping and grand imagery that emphasized the individual. Often exaggerated in its scenery and symbolism, Romantic poetry like *the Corsair* often beg the question: stripped away of the hyperbole of Romanticism, did it truly reflect the reality of life under the Black Flag. The analysis of the highly romanticized picture of pirates and their lives have, therefor, been the subject of significant historic study. This analysis will be rooted in the historiographical examination of the concept of "pirate democracy" and "social activism" in pirate societies during the "Golden Age of Piracy" and will focus primarily on the analysis of historians Marcus Rediker, Arne Bialuschewski and economist Peter Leeson.

To answer the initial question of whether or not the de-romanticized image of pirate societies were democratic and progressive is a complicated one, as historian Mark Hanna points

out, “it depends on when and where.”<sup>1</sup> If one must provide a response based on the three hundred and fifty year span of piracy from the late 1400s to the eighteenth century, one must undoubtedly answer no. The changing geopolitical dynamics and evolving economic forces during this period caused the nature and definition of piracy to shift repeatedly over this span of time, and as Hanna’s statement suggests, pirates and “pirate societies” were very different from one point in time to another, making this sort of analysis inherently short and futile.<sup>2</sup> This inherent problem of study has led to a wide range of dispute among historians regarding the topic of “pirate democracy” and “social banditry”.

The current paradigm on the subject of piracy seems to have been pioneered by Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh. One criticism of their work is that they focus their conclusions and take most of their sources from a very narrow sliver of pirate history, namely the early eighteenth century, and much of it from the years following the War of Spanish Succession that was concluded by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Rather than a criticism, I see this as a valid lens from which to view this subject. As mentioned previously, any attempt to characterize the largess of the pirates, their history and “societies” is problematic and invite overgeneralization. Additionally, the use of the term pirate itself is problematic prior to this period as, as Kris Lane frequently notes that piracy was “often in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>3</sup> The distinctions of pirate, privateer, corsair, and buccaneer were vague and nebulous, and the accusation of piracy came from being on the wrong side of a cutlass. State-sponsorship of maritime predation, active or passive, frequently generated this ambiguity making the difficulty of examining the ship or

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Hanna, “A Lot of What Is Known about Pirates is Not True, and a Lot of What is True Is Not Known,” *Humanities* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2017),

<sup>2</sup> Mark Hanna, “Well Behaved Pirates Seldom Make History: A Reevaluation of the Golden Age of English Piracy,” *Governing the Sea in the Early Modern Era Essays in Honor of Robert C. Ritchie*, University of California, San Diego, March 21, 2015: 129.

<sup>3</sup> Kris Lane, *Pillaging the Empire: Global Piracy on the High Seas, 1500-1750*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 163.

squadron dynamics additionally difficult. The period Rediker explores then, is probably the purest form of piracy to examine, where the multinational “war on piracy” eliminated the bulk of confusion of national endorsement and affiliation. Additionally, this “Age of the Freebooters” seems to be one of the most romanticized periods of piracy in the popular conception of the word. From Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* to Jerry Bruckheimer’s *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the image of the swashbuckling, free and independent pirate crew as an autonomous society has captured the public imagination, therefore worthy of examination into its authenticity.

The topic of “pirate democracy” and the question as to what extent these “societies” were progressive regarding complex political, economic and social constructs has generated different conclusions regarding the nature of these societies. They address issues of governance, liberty, social hierarchies, conceptualization of property, race and gender, all within the context of a criminal operation in the early to mid-eighteenth century and are each deserving of summary.

### **Marcus Rediker**

As a professor of history at Georgetown and the University of Pittsburgh, Marcus Rediker’s work regarding piracy and maritime history is frequently cited by other historians in their study on the subject of maritime predation. Many, like Hanna, believe Rediker (later joined by Peter Linebaugh in their work *The Many-Headed Hydra*) has generated the current paradigm for the study of piracy in the Atlantic world. Rediker’s work on the subject is expansive and draws from, in addition to more traditional primary sources, maritime records from vice and high admiralty courts, trade records, labor records, and literature as well as personal histories. His work pieces the picture of the pirate world in a “bottom up” approach through the lens of social, labor and class history. The history that he weaves is not simply confined to that of piracy, but of the English maritime world at large from the commoner’s perspective, including sailors and

merchant seamen, slaves, women and workers that made their living from ships and the sea. Rediker's treatment of piracy in the Atlantic world is set in the context of the development of an English "hydrarchy", the maritime state that required the seas and sailors for expansion, trade and the development of mercantilist goals.<sup>4</sup> This hydrarchy was created from two forces, the first was an oppressive, top-down development of the structures and systems, both legal and economic, required to maintain a presence on the sea to promote and expand national expansionist and capitalist goals. The second was a hydrarchy that existed *within* the "Imperial hydrarchy" that organized from the bottom up in response to the conditions of which the common sailor experienced within these structures.<sup>5</sup> This second hydrarchy was one of resistance and rebellion and rooted in class divisions. This occurred across the maritime world, not just on the decks of ships, but on docks and warehouses, and came in the form of, not only mutiny at sea, but labor strikes on land. This is the context that sets Rediker's analysis of piracy in the Atlantic world. He describes piracy's history in the Atlantic in stages, "from the top of society to the bottom." It began as an institution organized from for the nation, then big merchants, then small merchants, then the "common men of the deep."<sup>6</sup> It is this last phase, the age of the freebooters of the eighteenth century, where Rediker's analysis of true "pirate societies" is characterized. This "sailor's hydrarchy" is freed of the constraints of the "imperial hydrarchy" and presented the opportunity to create a new social order at sea. Here, Rediker describes a "pirate democracy" based on merit, resistance to arbitrary authority, justice, egalitarian and cooperative values of the lower classes. Because of this, they were able to create

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 144.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-46, 156-157.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

a more socially progressive and inclusive culture to “fight back against brutal an unjust authority and to construct a new social order.”<sup>7</sup> This new order included those that were oppressed in the strict hierarchies and social expectations of Europe: the poor lower classes, laborers, blacks, and women. While Rediker recognizes the parasitic and criminal nature of these pirate societies, he saw that these constituencies were able to justify their actions in the context of the unjust order of the maritime hydrarchy.

### **Arne Bialuschewski**

Bialuschewski, a professor of history at Trent University, addresses the history of piracy through a social and economic historical lens. Much of his research and writing is about blacks and slaves in the colonial Atlantic world. Logically, then, his purpose of his analysis of piracy is to challenge the current paradigm of the progressive, color-blind “social bandit” as an overgeneralized myth and romanticized notion of the pirate society. In the end, he has a far less sympathetic view of the buccaneers of the Atlantic.

In order to evaluate the question, Bialuschewski focused on black and slave history in the Atlantic maritime world. One key element of his thesis is that the presence of blacks, free and slave, were ubiquitous in this sea-faring world and were, therefore, “neither exceptional nor multiracial pioneers.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the presence of blacks on pirate crews was not revolutionary, socially or politically, but commonplace in the maritime world. To get a better picture of potential multiracial views of pirates, Bialuschewski examines the treatment of slaves to fix a more accurate conclusion on these claims of racial progressivism. In this analysis, he

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Arne Bialuschewski, “Pirates, Black Sailors and Seafaring Slaves in the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1716-1726,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 45, no. 2 (2011): 144.

finds these claims about pirate crews deficient and cites numerous types of examples to illustrate this point. Abundant cases exist of pirate crews failing to liberate slave on captured slave ships and in the case of Stede Bonnet, as discovered at his trial, even delivered these captured slaves to their owners in South Carolina.<sup>9</sup> Bialuschewski, cites a multitude of other mistreatments of slaves, including the conscripting of their labor to do menial tasks aboard their ships, to fill out their crews, and physical brutalities that were inflicted upon them. Included in this description was the treatment of slave women, particularly the brutalities of rape that would be corroborated by Mark Hanna's account of the *Bachelor's Delight* that "was so named after its crew stole fifty women from the coast of West Africa."<sup>10</sup> To Bialuschewski, these behaviors and actions are hardly those progressive societies of enlightened individuals.

In his overall analysis of piracy, he posits that the structure of "pirate societies" and freebooter behaviors were simply the practical result of a criminal economic endeavor, not a protest of the social order in the world that these pirates emerged from. These were people who were motivated by profit and greed, not high-minded ideals born out of their station in a rigid European colonial hierarchy. To Bialuschewski, these men (and a few women) were opportunistic and, "driven by plain mercenary motives," that took advantage of the political upheavals of Europe and the isolation of the sea.<sup>11</sup>

### **Peter Leeson**

It is not surprising, then, that economist Peter Leeson examined the history of pirate societies through an economic lens. Leeson, a professor of Economics at George Mason

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>10</sup> Hanna, "Well Behaved Pirates Seldom Make History: A Revaluation of the Golden Age of English Piracy," 146.

<sup>11</sup> Arne Bialuschewski, "Between Newfoundland and the Malacca Strait: A Survey of the Golden Age of Piracy, 1695-1725," *The Mariner's Mirror* 90, no. 2 (2004): 180.

University, wrote his *Invisible Hook* to reveal that, contrary to some assertions, piracy in the Atlantic was not just a reaction to burgeoning capitalism in Europe, but was itself founded on those same capitalistic principles. As one might guess, as the title of his book suggests, that pirates acted in accordance with basic capitalistic principles and laws as outlined by Adam Smith and his “invisible hand”. The basic points he makes is that pirates were rational actors in a market system, and much of their cooperative behavior, while much was democratic and socially progressive, was done out of personal interest for success and survival.

One example is the democratic structure of the pirate ship, one that acted as a small society. In chapter two, *Vote for Blackbeard*, he asserts that the democratic functions of this ship were based on the conception of common property that existed among the crew. Most frequently, freebooters were sailing on stolen vessels, and as a result, belonged to no crewmember. As such, the structures for governing and providing for a stable and predictable functioning of the ship in, not only in the selection of targets and the actions of “war”, but in the day to day routines as well, were necessary for a successful venture (and survival as they were actively hunted), as criminal as it might be. At its most basic, this manifested in the practice of “the vote” where nearly all decisions of import were put to the assembly of the Council, all of the ship’s crew. This, like most capitalists, placed far more emphasis on the *individual* and their self-interest than other mariners would experience. This in itself was a revolutionary philosophy for people in the maritime world. The democratic practices on board the ship were, by Leeson’s account, an extension of this value of the individual that resulted in egalitarian practices of division of labor, separation of powers of governance, behavior expectations, and the ship agreements that all crew members signed *before* embarking on any voyage.

Leeson's arguments are not solely rooted in the discipline of economics. He does address concepts of political science in his analysis of pirate governance and democracy. One example is his analysis of the election of pirate Captains. He considered Madison's "Power Paradox". As tempting as it may have been for pirates, considering the frequently brutal autocrats most had served under as legitimate merchant seamen, the urge to "rule by the committee" was not an option as pirates understood, "how shattr'd and weak a Condition their Government must be without a head."<sup>12</sup> The question was how to avoid the trappings of power for this "Captain"? The answer came nearly a half a century before America's framers did in the form of separation of powers and the democratization of the vote as Capt. Charles Johnson noted observed that, "the Rank of Captain being obtained only by the Suffrage of the Majority."<sup>13</sup>

### **Analysis of Arguments**

All three of the positions share some common factors that can help characterize the pirate's democracy and society during the "Age of the Freebooters" of the eighteenth century. None of the authors question the democratic structure and institutions of the eighteenth century freebooters and their shipboard society. Another factor that all three recognize is the significance of economic factors in the creation, maintenance, and survival of these pirate societies. But they tend to disagree about the way these economic factors were responsible for piracy, pirate societies, and the level of social progressivism this democracy generated. Additionally, each of the arguments made by the authors have shortcomings or leave questions unanswered: perhaps Rediker is too sweeping, Leeson too narrow and Bialuschewski too

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Leeson, *The Invisible Hook: The Hidden Economics of Pirates*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

confined and oppositional. Regardless, each of them, upon the greater analysis, shed new light on the fascinating lives and world of piracy.

The most compelling case is made by Rediker. First, his work is the most comprehensive, even in its sheer volume. Additionally, his approach addresses multiple facets and lenses regarding the examination of the source material and his interpretation. He constructs a picture in history that is rooted in an enormous number of diverse sources, both primary and secondary. He mixes personal narratives with legal documents, court records, demographic data, literature and art, and maritime records. While there is room for fair criticism about overreaching in his histories, they are the most complete.

While Leeson offers an alternate analysis into the world of piracy, he does acknowledge (or at least leave room for) that there are certainly historical realities that fit Rediker's thesis. Concordantly, Rediker may grant Leeson the same wide berth. But most of the criticisms regarding Rediker's work come from Bialuschewski. I'll examine Rediker and Leeson in the context of my analysis of Bialuschewski which I found the weakest.

One criticism of Bialuschewski's conclusions are that they fail to acknowledge considerable evidence that does not fit his thesis. As mentioned previously, his primary criticism of Rediker's thesis is based on race, specifically the treatment of free blacks and slaves in the maritime world by pirate crews, so that will be the focus my analysis. A key argument that he uses was that pirates used force to regularly conscript captured blacks into service, presumably to do the menial tasks that would free up the white members of his crew. A key piece of evidence he uses to illustrate this argument was in the story of the final capture of the crew of Bartholomew Roberts' pirates. In it, seventy-four of the one hundred and sixty five men who were accused of piracy were black and were acquitted because they claimed they were "forced to

go with the marauders.”<sup>14</sup> In what might be characterized as “undue certainty,” Bialuschewski assumes that this example is a clear-cut case of slave mistreatment. Nothing could be less certain. The pirate’s claim of conscription into service was one of the most common defenses against the hangman’s noose, and counterintuitively, it was an easier defense for blacks and Native Americans to mount than it was for their white counterparts. Natives and blacks were often *assumed* to have been pressed into service.<sup>15</sup> Pirates had whole systems, including “ads of force” and staged “shows of impressment,” to help them navigate the newly created and ever more stringent anti-piracy laws by proving they were forced into service of the pirates. Additionally, Leeson argues that it was counterproductive to have conscripted members aboard pirate ships in such large numbers. At the trial of Roberts’ men, nearly half the crew was black. This, according to Leeson, was not a rare occurrence, and conscription would have posed a significant threat to the functioning of the pirates’ operation and at worst, a revolt. Prior to his death and the capture of his crew mentioned above, Bartholomew Roberts warned of conscription saying conscripts, “might hazard, and, in Time, destroy his Government.”<sup>16</sup> Just as a point of contrast, Roberts would allow black crewmembers, but wouldn’t tolerate the Irish.

Another argument that Bialuschewski makes is that slaves, once captured, frequently fled or refused to join pirate crews. He suggests that this phenomenon is indicative of the harsh treatment they would receive at the hands of the freebooters and would prefer a life of slavery on the plantation or, at very least, with privileged status as a skilled maritime slave. Bialuschewski seems to make an error of logic here, and not the only one. The risks to those who willingly

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<sup>14</sup> Bialuschewski, “Between Newfoundland and the Malacca Strait: A Survey of the Golden Age of Piracy, 1695-1725,” 178.

<sup>15</sup> Hanna, “Well Behaved Pirates Seldom Make History: A Reevaluation of the Golden Age of English Piracy,” 155.

<sup>16</sup> Leeson, *The Invisible Hook*, 136.

became pirates were grave, literally so. At this phase in piracy, laws were increasingly harsh to pirates and their confederates and efforts to pursue and capture them increased. The punishment upon conviction was swift, sure, and final: to “swing to the four winds” at the end of a gibbet. In conjunction with the demographic data on the number of pirates at this time, it’s rational to believe that most that were faced with this decision to join the pirates declined, white and black alike.

Another example of this logic was in the final battle with Edward Teach in 1718. In the wake of his death, only nine members of his crew survived and, according to Bialuschewski, they were mostly black and the fact that they survived or did not receive serious injury indicates that they were likely slaves. This is also a leap of logic. According to estimates of Blackbeard’s crew in 1717, sixty percent of his one-hundred man crew was black and in another from 1718, thirty-six percent were.<sup>17</sup> If either of those were the case, or near to it, it would indicate that a large portion of the dead, in fact, were black pirates in his crew. Rediker also cites example after example of reports, documents and stories of black men serving as active members of pirate crews. He not only confirms Leeson’s claims about the notorious pirates Roberts and Teach, but adds to the manifest the likes of Edward Condent, Francis Sprigg, William Lewis and “Black Sam” Bellamy as captains of crews with a substantial black contingent of shareholding pirates.<sup>18</sup>

In his defense, both Leeson and Rediker both recognize that there were depredations against blacks and slaves, including selling slaves that had been captured during their raiding. Leeson even goes as far to say that most pirates probably did not have racially progressive views beyond their contemporaries in the maritime world, but goes on to say that white pirates

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>18</sup> Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra*, 165-167.

“probably shared the same racist *beliefs* as their legitimate contemporaries does not mean pirates must have always *behaved* as prejudicially as their legitimate contemporaries did.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, the behaviors that are most commonly describe in the historical record regarding racial cooperation on pirate crews wouldn’t find congruence in the United States until one hundred years later.

In a sense, Bialuschewski seems to draw conclusions through the lens of modern values, a sense of cultural relativism, that comes dangerously close to making the mistake of finding that *a revolution incomplete is no revolution at all*. Bialuschewski and other critics of Rediker’s work raise some valid points regarding his analysis. Rediker may, to some extent, overstate the scope of the phenomena he describes with regard to the “social banditry” and proto-revolutionary spirit of pirate societies. But it appears that many of those same critics treat pirate societies as one “nationality” rather than hundreds of different and highly diverse micro-societies, all with varying degrees of progressivism. While his crew “liberated” the cargo of a one Captain Beer of Boston, Samuel “Black Sam” Bellamy’s let loose an angry condemnation of Beer, “Damn ye altogether! damn them for a pack of crafty rascals, and you, who serve them, for a parcel of hen-hearted numbskulls. They vilify us, the scoundrels do, when there is only this difference, they rob the poor under the cover of law, forsooth, and we plunder the rich under protection of our own courage; had you not better make one of us, than sneak after the asses of those villains for employment?”<sup>20</sup> Bellamy’s blast is certainly a condemnation of the nascent capitalist systems and the development of a mercantilist hierarchy emerging in Europe. Did all pirates feel this way? Unlikely, but it also means that some probably did. The same might be said about feminism on board the pirate society. The story of militant, armed female rebels like Mary Read

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<sup>19</sup> Leeson, *The Invisible Hook*, 159.

<sup>20</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005.), 116.

and Ann Bonney, are probably outliers, yet there were others like them and their story and its popularity in the poems and literature in their own time seem to indicate a growing sense of gender equality, one that was more likely to be fostered on a ship than at the hearth. Rediker claims that the disappearance of this gender egalitarianism was likely squelched, not at sea, but by the new “cult of domesticity” that began as the market and industrial revolutions began in the early nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps it’s true that Rediker is perpetuating, to some extent, that very same romanticized version of the pirate that has existed since the nineteenth century, immortalized by Byron, Stevenson and Defoe. Perhaps, Bialuschewski is correct when he mentions that some of these values were emerging on land as well. The reality was, though, that pirates had the freedom to explore these values on the high seas, on the decks of their shipboard nations, that they created themselves through democratic processes that valued the individual in a sort of sea borne liberalism. The freedom the seas provided set them apart from their land borne counterparts. That very same freedom and individualism and that surely inspired Byron’s *Corsair*.

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<sup>21</sup> Marcus Rediker, “When Women Pirates Sailed the Seas, *Wilson Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (Autumn, 1993): 102-110.

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