

**Comparison of Social Society, Institutions, and Behavior Among Pirates:
Kris Lane and Marcus Rediker**

Nick Whalen
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After the War of Spanish Succession and the Treaty of Utrecht, the last great period of Atlantic piracy occurred until about 1730. Historian Kris Lane in the second edition of his work Pillaging the Empire: Global Piracy on the High Seas, 1500-1750 and historian Marcus Rediker in his article *“Under the Banner of King Death”: The Social World of Anglo-American Pirates, 1716-1726* offer sometimes competing, and sometimes complimentary, views on the social structures, institutions, and behaviors of pirates onboard ships during the early 18th century. A comparison of the two historians’ works reveals the points on which they agree and disagree. While Rediker presents a social society based on the idea of egalitarianism and mutual success, Lane seems to construct the social society as remaining more hierarchical, as had been common during the pirate cycles dating back to the early 16th century.

During the last great pirate-cycle of the in the Atlantic, performed by a group of pirates known as Anglo-American Freebooters, the trading states of the mercantile empires of Europe had undergone a significant change with regard to their treatment of piracy. It was during the careers of Henry Avery and William Kidd, the latter of whom was executed just twelve years before the Treaty of Utrecht, that Europe shifted “from collusion to intolerance of pirates and their wild escapades”.¹ This critical shift had a major impact on pirates, certainly increasing the risk assumed by anyone engaged in piracy. Both Avery and Kidd attempted to present their activities as legitimate in order to protect themselves. Avery attempted to pacify the English East India Company, suggesting that he would not attack any of their assets. However, his attacks on Mughal ships led the Mughals to accuse the English of colluding with him, representing a threat to trade.² Avery’s acquittal did not sit well with the East India Company,

¹ Kris Lane, *Pillaging the Empire: Global Piracy on the High Seas, 1500-1750, 2nd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 183.

² Lane, *Pillaging*, 186-187.

forcing Kidd to present his voyages as even more legitimate through the disguise of a pirate hunter.³ Seeking to be spared from trial for his piracy, Kidd sought favor with a former sponsor-turned-governor of Massachusetts, but was rejected and finally hanged for his piracy.⁴ Even though Kidd's voyage began as a privateering mission against pirates in the backdrop of King William's War, Historian Lauren Benton explains that it "ended in peacetime when political winds had shifted . . . [and] anxiety over maintaining trade" were fueling anti-piracy measures.⁵ Kidd was commissioned to "capture pirates and French merchant ships", but not to disrupt Indian Ocean trade or to commit murder.⁶ The English shift to a position against piracy was Kidd's undoing as the "political climate that had turned against both piracy and the irregular practices of privateers as forces to disrupt trade" led to the inevitability of his execution.⁷ Kidd tried to appear legitimate, and tried somewhat to operate within the confines of legality on the seas.⁸ This changing political climate would lead to the freebooting period following the War of Spanish Succession.

This shift to a strong anti-piracy stance in Europe, and particularly in England, had profound effects on the pirates of the freebooting era following the War of Spanish Succession and the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. After the War of Spanish Succession, many sailors found themselves out of work. The Freebooters almost all had experience as "merchant seamen, Royal Navy sailors, or privateersmen".⁹ Their former jobs had been extremely difficult, receiving

³ Ibid, 186-187

⁴ Ibid, 189-190.

⁵ Lauren Benton. "Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Oct. 2005). 707.

⁶ Ibid, 708.

⁷ Ibid, 708.

⁸ Ibid, 709.

⁹ Marcus Rediker, "'Under the Banner of King Death': The Social World of Anglo-American Pirates, 1716 to 1726," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Apr. 1981), 206.

harsh discipline, little rations, frequent disease, and tyrannical leadership from onboard captains.¹⁰ These bleak conditions in former jobs were replaced on pirate vessels by a “rough, improvised, but effective egalitarianism that placed authority in the collective hands of the crew”, an egalitarianism that even sometimes led to the execution of captains who were too rough.¹¹ Nevertheless, the threat of execution for piracy, like William Kidd had met in 1701, was a constant threat for the Freebooters. This threat, along with a rejection of the social structures, hierarchies, and institutions on land led freebooters to develop a society that was very much their own onboard the ships that terrorized the Caribbean and North American trading lanes and ports until the end of the freebooting era.

Historians Lane and Rediker characterize this social development differently in some instances and similarly in others in their respective works on the subject. In order to demonstrate their, Lane generally provides anecdotal evidence in the form of narrative history. Rediker’s work is more analytical, focusing on conclusions drawn by examining primary sources and biographies. This difference in presentation allows for placing Rediker’s conclusions about the social world of the pirates against Lane’s stories, an interesting juxtaposition of historiographical styles.

One of the first points of contradiction between the two historians emerges when considering the effectiveness and behavior of pirate captains on their ships. Lane tells the story of the voyages of John Clipperton and George Shelvocke in 1719 to the South Sea as evidence of poor leaders and leadership. The two were poor captains as Clipperton was evidently “an incorrigible alcoholic and neither he nor Shlevocke was considered an able leader”.¹² This poor

¹⁰ Ibid, 206-207.

¹¹ Ibid, 209.

¹² Lane, *Pillaging*, 194-195.

leadership resulted in little profit for the crew. Over the course of the voyages, large numbers of crew members deserted or fell ill with scurvy due to malnutrition. Finally, a “unnamed personal animosity between the two captains” led the mission to split up altogether.¹³ Lane continues by describing Captain Edward Teach, otherwise known as Blackbeard, as a “notoriously cruel and unusual pirate captain” who was only able to control the actions of his crew by continuously maintaining in them a level of intoxication.¹⁴ Furthermore, Lane explains that “Blackbeard was also said to be fond of terrorizing his own men”.¹⁵ While Lane admits that “pirate command structures were, in the tradition of the buccaneers, far more democratic” than other 18th century institutions, he does not present the captains of his narrative in this way.¹⁶

Rediker characterizes the leadership structures on the pirate ships of the day to be quite different than as they appear based on Lane’s narrative. One of Rediker’s initial points about piracy during the freebooting period concerns the number of individuals involved in piracy during the relatively short time between 1716-1726. Estimates offered by Rediker suggest that “between one and two thousand” pirates were operating at a given moment, and that “some forty-five to fifty-five hundred men” participated in total.¹⁷ The lucrative nature of the career drew scores of poor, jobless, and generally young, unmarried men into piracy regardless of their captains’ behaviors.¹⁸ However, the captains in Rediker’s account were generally much more favorable to their crews than in Lane’s account. The codification, or at least social

¹³ Ibid, 195.

¹⁴ Ibid, 199.

¹⁵ Ibid, 199.

¹⁶ Ibid, 197.

¹⁷ Rediker, *Social World*, 205.

¹⁸ Rediker, *Social World*, 208.

acceptance, of a set of rules was a very important part of daily functioning on the pirate vessels of the freebooters. In fact, on most freebooting ships, Rediker explains that the captain does not appear to have held all that much power at all. The crews created “a striking uniformity of rules and customs [that] prevailed aboard pirate ships, each of which functioned under the terms of written articles, a compact draw up at the beginning of a voyage” that would guide behavior.¹⁹ In fact, many of the ships knew what sort of captain they needed, so had the practice of “demanding someone both bold of temper and skilled in navigation, the men elected their captain”.²⁰ Beyond electing the captain, the crew had a great deal of power in determining whether the captain was fulfilling the role that he had been elected to serve. Captains could be removed from their positions for a variety of reasons, including for “cowardice, cruelty, or refusing ‘to take and plunder English vessels’”, or for acting like one a member of the classes they so rejected. Captains could even be executed by their crews.²¹ Rediker’s position regarding the ineptitude and/or cruelty of captains towards their crews is in fairly stark contrast to Lane’s stories about Clipperton, Shelvocke, and Teach. In one case, the captains were either terrible at their jobs and ruthless towards their crews and in the other, the captains were very much only able to maintain their positions through strong performance and respect.

Another place of disagreement between the two historians was regarding the motivations of the individuals who participated in piracy during the era of the Freebooters in the Atlantic. Lane actually directly criticizes Rediker’s position about factors that motivated the Freebooters. Lane describes Rediker’s argument that Freebooters were social bandits as “rather

¹⁹ Ibid, 209.

²⁰ Ibid, 209.

²¹ Ibid, 209.

strained” because of the “undeniable presence of sadistic tendencies, not to mention the undisguised avarice among more than a few”.²² Pointing to one such instances of sadism, Lane explains that one of the known female pirates, Mary Read, of the freebooting era turned against her crewmates as she “was so upset at the spinelessness of the crew that she shot and killed one of her companions” after the crew did not face an attack from an English patrol.²³ Another instance of sadism Lane cites occurred when Teach took his crew and “locked them in the ship’s hold with him, forcing them to endure a fire and brimstone smoke-out”.²⁴ While instances of greed and deceit regarding the unequal distribution of booty among crewmembers are numerous during earlier sections of Lane’s work, he fails to give any clear examples of avarice during the section concerning the Freebooters.

The theory that Rediker presents, and Lane somewhat rejects, that Freebooters were indeed social bandits rather than simply sadistic and greedy terrorists is in Rediker’s work. Greed, or at least the unregulated distribution of plunder, was not apparently very common for the Freebooters according to Rediker. For most, “the distribution of plunder was regulated explicitly by the ship’s articles, which allocated booty according to skills and duties”.²⁵ This system of distribution was a “radical departure from the practices in the merchant service, Royal Navy, or privateering”, and represented “one of the most egalitarian plans for the distribution of resources to be found anywhere in the early eighteenth century”.²⁶ Indeed, taking more than the amount entitled to any one crew member could result in being marooned

²² Lane, *Pillaging*, 197

²³ Ibid, 198.

²⁴ Ibid, 199.

²⁵ Rediker, *Social World*, 210.

²⁶ Ibid, 210.

for greed.²⁷ Furthermore, the sadism of crewmembers towards each other seems to have been much less prominent than one would believe based on the two instances presented by Lane concerning Mary Read and Edward Teach. One facet of social structure on the pirate ships where this departure becomes clear is in Rediker's discussion concerning discipline. Discipline was levied against crew members depending on "a collective sense of transgression".²⁸ Since rules were codified and democratically drafted and applied, punishments for transgressions probably were not seen as sadistic by the crew members. Among the punishments Rediker highlights include bring brought to land to settle a physical dispute between pirates with a duel, being marooned for taking more than one's share of booty or being too disruptive or cowardly, and executions were usually reserved for sexual crimes or a despotic captain.²⁹ While the punishments were harsh, Rediker does not seem to view them as sadistic. Additionally, crew members were not forced to remain on a ship. Individuals unwilling to perform their duties were able to leave the ship, or were not forced to come about in the first place.³⁰

One point of agreement between Lane and Rediker focuses on the role of women in pirate society. Lane explains that the stories of Ann Bonny and Mary Read are among only a total of four or five women known to have participated in piracy, revealing a culture that was almost exclusively dominated by men.³¹ The women were "forced to dress as men most of the time", because "women on board ship were considered bad luck by some superstitious sailors, but more concrete was the possibility of sexual conflict". Rediker agrees with Lane on this point, as he explains "men who became pirates were grimly familiar with the rigors of life at sea

²⁷ Ibid, 211.

²⁸ Ibid, 211.

²⁹ Ibid, 211-212

³⁰ Ibid, 212.

³¹ Lane, *Pillaging*, 197.

and with a single-sex community of work”.³² Additionally, as briefly noted above, men could face execution for “bringing on board ‘a Boy or a Woman’ or for meddling with a ‘Prudent Woman’ on a prize ship”.³³ The reason for this strong resistance to the presence of women was, as Lane explained, to avoid sexual conflicts among the crew members. These would have presented serious problems, as the “social organization constructed by pirates, although flexible, was unable to accommodate severe, sustained conflict”.³⁴

Another point of agreement between the two historians is best encapsulated by Lane’s statement of “pirate society was unlike any found on land in the period”.³⁵ Rediker echoes Lane’s statement by stating that “pirates constructed [a] world in defiant contradistinction to the ways of the world they left behind”.³⁶ Lane demonstrates this his anecdote regarding Captain Bartholomew Roberts’s (aka Black Bart) flag depicting “himself standing on two human skulls,” symbolic of his desire for vengeance against Barbadians and Martinicans.³⁷ This flag, according to Lane, actually reveals “the symbolism . . . follows Marcus Rediker’s suggestion that many pirates in this period were deeply antagonistic toward familiar authorities”.³⁸ Rediker takes this symbolism even further, suggesting that the flag actually represented the society that pirates had constructed away from the land. Pirates often worked together and “showed a recurrent willingness to join forces at sea and in port”, pirates generally refused plunder each other, French and Anglo-American pirates cooperated, and pirates developed a “sense of

³² Rediker, *Social World*, 208.

³³ *Ibid*, 212.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 212.

³⁵ Lane, *Pillaging*, 197.

³⁶ Rediker, *Social World*, 214.

³⁷ Lane, *Pillaging*, 201.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 201.

fraternity” at sea and in pirates’ havens.³⁹ The flag flown by Roberts, and the incarnations of it known as the Jolly Roger, “was very widely used: no fewer, and probably a great many more, than two thousand five hundred men sailed under it”.⁴⁰ This flag was a symbol of group identification for Freebooters. The group that the flag represented was a community of men who had developed a strong social system in direct rejection of the systems on land that had left them with few prospects for wealth and success.

Historians Kris Lane and Marcus Rediker each offer their scholarship concerning their views on the social structures, institutions, and behaviors of pirates known as Freebooters onboard ships during the early 18th century. Lane generally presents his positions in the form of narrative history and anecdotes, sharing the stories of the pirates of the Atlantic in order to bring their culture to life. Rediker offers an analytical article that dissects primary sources and data in order to draw conclusions about the society that developed at sea during the period. Lane and Rediker seem to disagree on certain aspects of the pirate society of the Freebooters. In Lane’s narrative, captains like Clipperton, Shelvocke, and Teach were respectively drunk, ineffective, or cruel and unusual. While these three individuals may well reasonably be characterized as such by Lane, Rediker instead sees the Freebooter captains as a product of a democratic system that existed on the ships. Captains needed to be skilled navigators, effective leaders, and well-respected by the crew; failure to satisfy the crew could lead a captain to be deposed or even executed. Another point of disagreement between the two historians was about what motivated the pirates. Lane characterized the pirates as sadistic, greedy, and deceitful. Rediker highlighted the codification of rules, clear punishments for transgressions

³⁹ Rediker, 219-220.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 222.

against those rules, and the crew-wide agreements about the distribution of booty that were made before sailing. While these contradictions between the two historians are significant, Lane and Rediker find points of agreement as well. Both Lane and Rediker agree that pirate society was one nearly completely dominated by men, with less than 10 exceptions known to exist. Women represented a source of sexual conflict for pirates, conflict that could not be well sustained while aboard a ship at sea. Lane and Rediker also agree that the society that developed at sea among the pirates was much different than any society that existed on land during the same time period. Social structures and group-identification for pirates were unique when compared to the societies from which they had come. The opportunities for success on the high seas led thousands of young men to join this society. The historiography of both Lane and Rediker is also in agreement on this.

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