The Many-Headed Hydra
Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic

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CHAPTER FIVE

Hydrarchy: Sailors, Pirates, and the Maritime State

When I was free once more,
I was like Adam when he was first created.
I had nothing at all, and therefore resolved
to join the privateers or buccaneers. . . .
—A. O. Exquemelin, The Buccaneers of America (1678)

All the ships crews are drawn out,
and the slaves that have deserted
to us from the plantations
are all brave determin'd fellows. . . .
—John Gay, Polly: An Opera (1729)

Richard Braithwaite, who supported Parliament in the English Revolution and lost a son to Algerian pirates, described the seventeenth-century mariner:

He was never acquainted with much civility; the sea hath taught him other rhetoric. . . . He cannot speak low, the sea talks so loud. His advice is seldom taken in naval affairs; though his hand is strong, his headpeace is stupid. . . . Stars cannot be more faithful in their society than these Hans-kins in their fraternity. They will have it valiantly when they are ranked together, and relate their adventures with wonderful terror. Necessary instruments are they, and agents of main importance in that Hydrarchy wherein they live; for the walls of the State could not subsist without them; but least useful they are to themselves, and most needful for others supportance.1

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The upper-class Braithwaite condescended to his subject, calling him loud, stupid, even savage, but he knew him well. He knew that sailors were essential to English expansion, commerce, and the mercantilist state. He knew, moreover, that they had ways of their own—their own language, storytelling, and solidarity.

In this chapter we will employ Braithwaite’s term *hydrarchy* to designate two related developments of the late seventeenth century: the organization of the maritime state from above, and the self-organization of sailors from below. As the strong hands of Brathwaite’s sailors made the Atlantic a zone for the accumulation of capital, they began to join with others in faithfulness, or solidarity, producing a maritime radical tradition that also made it a zone of freedom. The ship thus became both an engine of capitalism in the wake of the bourgeois revolution in England and a setting of resistance, a place to which and in which the ideas and practices of revolutionaries defeated and repressed by Cromwell and

_Sailors telling tales belowdecks, c. 1810. Charles Napier Robinson, A Pictorial History of the Sea Services, or Graphic Studies of the Sailor’s Life and Character Afloat and Ashore (1911). Brown Military Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University._
then by King Charles escaped, re-formed, circulated, and persisted. The period between the 1670s and the 1730s marked a new phase in the history of Atlantic capitalism, one in which the breakthrough discussed in the previous chapter was consolidated and institutionalized amid new and geographically expanded class struggles. During the pause when revolutionary ideas and action seemed to be missing from or muted in landed society, hydrarchy arose at sea to pose the era’s most serious challenge to the development of capitalism.

**Imperial Hydrarchy, or the Maritime State**

The seizure of land and labor in England, Ireland, Africa, and the Americas laid the military, commercial, and financial foundations for capitalism and imperialism, which could be organized and maintained only through Braithwaite’s hydrarchy, the maritime state. A decisive moment in this development was the terrifying discovery by Cromwell and Parliament in 1649 that they had only fifty naval vessels with which to defend their republic against the monarchs of Europe, who did not look happily upon the severed head of Charles I. The new rulers of England urgently (and permanently) mobilized the shipyards at Chatham, Portsmouth, Woolwich, and Deptford to build the necessary ships. They passed “Laws and Ordinances Martial” authorizing impressment and warranting the death penalty for resistance, as a means to provide the necessary labor. By 1651 the New Model Navy had defeated the royalists at sea and begun to menace, even intimidate, the still-hostile other governments of Europe. England’s new men took immediate steps to extend their commercial and military power by sea, enacting two linked pieces of legislation: one for the merchant shipping industry, the Navigation Act of 1651, and another for the Royal Navy, the Articles of War of 1652. These two acts, both reaffirmed by the Restoration government after 1660, would dramatically expand the powers of the maritime state.²

With these acts Cromwell and Parliament signaled their intention to challenge the Dutch for maritime supremacy and to assert their own sovereignty in the Atlantic. The writers of the first act intended to displace the Dutch as primary carriers of the transatlantic trades by reserving imports for English vessels. In 1660, a new Navigation Act detailed the At-
lantic commodities to be shipped by English merchants, sailors, and ships. An additional act, of 1673, established a staff to police colonial trade, enforce the acts, and make sure that the king was getting his proper share of the booty. Parliament emphasized foreign trade as the way to advance English shipping and economic power. In 1629 English merchants shipped only 115,000 tons of cargo; by 1686 that figure had tripled, to 340,000 tons, with a corresponding increase in the number of sailors who handled such immense amounts of cargo. The lucrative Atlantic trades in tobacco, sugar, slaves, and manufactures led English merchant shipping to expand at a rate of 2 to 3 percent a year from roughly 1660 to 1690.3

The success of the Navigation Acts depended on accompanying changes in the Royal Navy. The Articles of War of 1652 imposed the death penalty in twenty-five out of thirty-nine clauses and proved an effective means for governing English ships during the war against the Dutch. After the Press Act of 1659 (which renewed the martial law of 1649), the articles were reenacted in 1661 as the Naval Discipline Act, which established the power of courts martial and specified the death penalty for desertion. Meanwhile, Samuel Pepys set about reorganizing the English navy in other respects, professionalizing the officer corps and building more, ever bigger, and ever more powerful ships. During the second Dutch war, some three thousand sailors deserted the English navy to fight for the enemy, which moved English authorities to stage highly visible executions of deserters and to make “flogging round the fleet” a frequent form of discipline. The Articles of War were renewed yet again in 1674, during a third war against the Dutch. The transformation of the Royal Navy during these years can be summarized in terms that parallel almost perfectly the development of the merchant shipping industry: the navy had 50 ships and 9,500 sailors in 1633, and 173 ships and 42,000 sailors in 1688.4

If Cromwell inaugurated the maritime state and Charles II realized its promise, finally displacing the Dutch as the hegemonic Atlantic power, it was because of advisers such as Sir William Petty (1623–1687), the father of political economy or, as it was called in his day, political arithmetic. Petty, who wrote the Political Anatomy of Ireland for Charles II, had begun his working life as a cabin boy at sea. He was part of England's
conquering army in Ireland, serving as physician general in 1652 and cartographer of confiscated lands in the Down survey of 1654 (he took fifty thousand acres for himself in County Kerry, where he organized hewers of wood, fishermen, quarrymen, lead miners, and iron workers.) Such experiences gave him a clear understanding of the primary importance of land, labor, and transatlantic connections. Labor, he believed, was the “father . . . of wealth, as lands are the mother.” Labor had to be mobile—and labor policy transatlantic—because lands were far-flung. He advocated shipping felons to plantations overseas: “Why should not insolvent thieves be rather punished with slavery than death? so as being slaves they may be forced to as much labour, and as cheap fare, as nature will endure, and thereby become as two men added to the commonwealth, and not as one taken away from it.”

He noted the increasing importance of the slave trade to imperial planning: “The accession of Negroes to the American plantations (being all Men of great labour and little expence) is not inconsiderable.” He included reproduction in his calculus, projecting that the fertility of women in New England would compensate for losses in Ireland. Based on the assumption that “you value the people who have been destroyed in Ireland as Slaves and Negroes are usually rated, viz., at about £15 one with another; Men being sold for £25 and Children £5 each,” he estimated the financial losses of the war in Ireland (1641–51) at £10,355,000. Petty’s main point, however, was that ships and sailors were the real basis of English wealth and power. “Husbandmen, Seamen, Soldiers, Artizans, and merchants, are the very Pillars of any Common-Wealth,” he wrote, but the seaman was perhaps most important of all, as “every Seaman of industry and ingenuity, is not only a Navigator, but a Merchant, and also a Soldier.” He concluded, “The Labour of Seamen, and Freight of Ships, is always of the nature of an Exported Commodity, the overplus whereof above what is Imported, brings home money, etc.”

Sailors thus produced surplus value above the costs of production, including their own subsistence; the political arithmetician called this process “superlucration.” Petty thus originated the labor theory of value by refusing to think of workers in moral terms; he preferred the quantifiable approach of number, weight, and measure. His method of thinking was essential to the genesis and the long-term planning of the maritime state.
Such planning emerged during the quarter century surrounding the three Anglo-Dutch wars (roughly 1651–75), when the shipping industry and the navy took on their modern forms, but it reached a new stage after the accession of William III in 1688 and the declaration of war against France the following year. Just as the theater of merchant shipping had in recent years shifted from the Mediterranean, the Baltic, and the North Sea to the Atlantic—to Africa, the Caribbean, and North America—so the theater of war followed, moving from the northern seas, where the Anglo-Dutch wars had been fought, to the Atlantic, where a broader and more forthright battle for overseas trade and territories would be waged. English rulers fought to protect their plantation economies, and not only against France and Spain. At the request of sugar planters and merchants who now wanted to trade and smuggle goods to New Spain, Sir Robert Holmes commissioned a squadron of ships in 1688 to dispatch the buccaneers who had once been based in Jamaica. The freebooters who had filled Jamaican coffers with Spanish gold were now an obstacle to a more orderly accumulation of capital, which would soon be planned from London and carried out on an Atlantic scale. “It is a sign of the growing importance of the distant colonies and oceanic trades in the estimation of all Europe,” wrote J. H. Parry, “that the age of the buccaneers should be followed by the age of the admirals.”

The consolidation of the maritime state took place in the 1690s, by which time the Royal Navy had become England’s greatest employer of labor, its greatest consumer of material, and its greatest industrial enterprise. English rulers had discovered the navy as an instrument of national policy during the 1650s, in the defense of the republic, and had expanded its function as protector of shipping and overseas markets. A pamphleteer of 1689 echoed the Articles of War and the Naval Discipline Act of 1661 in writing that the navy was “the bulwark of our British dominions, the sole fence of our Country.” Here were Brathwaite’s “walls of the State,” an enclosure built around a new field of property whose value and appreciation were expressed in a congeries of changes in the 1690s: the concentration of maritime capital in joint stock companies, which grew from eleven in 1688 to more than a hundred by 1695; the formation of the Bank of England in 1694; the growth of the marine insurance industry; the beginnings of the deregulation of the Royal African Company (1698)
and the emergence of the free traders who would in the next century make England the world’s greatest transporter of slaves; the increasing use of commercial newspapers; the booming importance of manufacture and the related export and reexport trades. The Act of Trade of 1696 brought all colonial affairs under the purview of the Board of Trade and generalized the admiralty court system throughout the empire. The Act of Trade consolidated the gains of the new Atlantic capitalism, but it also pointed to a threat that had not been eliminated by Holmes and the navy of 1688. One of the biggest and most worrying issues facing Parliament and the Board of Trade remained pirates: accordingly, Parliament passed an “Act for the More Effectual Suppression of Piracy” in 1698, hoping to convince colonial administrators and citizens of the necessity of the death penalty for a crime that had long been tolerated and sometimes even encouraged.10

**The Ship**

By the last half of the seventeenth century, capitalists had organized the exploitation of human labor in four basic ways. The first of these was the big commercial estate for the practice of capitalist agriculture, whose American equivalent was the plantation, in many senses the most important mercantilist achievement. Second was petty production such as the yeoman farmer or prosperous artisan enjoyed. Third was the putting-out system, which had, in Europe, begun to evolve into the system of manufactures. In Africa and the Americas, European merchants put out firearms, which were used by their clients to capture people (to sell as slaves), to kill animals (for their furs), and to destroy a wealth of common ecologies. The fourth means of organizing the exploitation of labor was the mode of production that united all of the others in the sphere of circulation—namely, the ship.

Each way organized human labor differently. The large-scale estate and plantation were among the first sites in modern history of mass cooperation. Petty production remained the context for resourcefulness and independent individualism. Manufacture and the putting-out system created the fragmented, detail laborer whose “idleness” would become the bane of the eighteenth-century political economist. The ship, whose
milieu of action made it both universal and sui generis, provided a setting in which large numbers of workers cooperated on complex and synchronized tasks, under slavish, hierarchical discipline in which human will was subordinated to mechanical equipment, all for a money wage. The work, cooperation, and discipline of the ship made it a prototype of the factory. Indeed, the very term *factory* evolved etymologically from *factor*, “a trading representative,” and specifically one associated with West Africa, where factories were originally located. One trading syndicate off the Gold Coast in the 1730s would anchor a ship permanently to serve as a base for stocks, intelligence gathering, and cargoes; it was called a floating factory. By 1700 the ship had become the engine of commerce, the machine of empire. According to Edward Ward, who wrote in defense of the maritime state, it was “the Sovereign of the Aquatic Globe, giving despotic laws to all the meaner Fry, that live upon that Shining Empire.” For Barnaby Slush, a defender of the skilled sailor, it was, however, “too big and unmanageable a machine to be run by novices.” Sailors and the ship thus linked the modes of production and expanded the international capitalist economy.

Despite the nationalism of the Navigation Acts and the Naval Discipline Act, and despite the bold declarations that English ships must be sailed by English seamen, it was nonetheless true that many of the ships were actually Dutch (having been seized in the wars) and that many of the seamen were not English. The expansion of the merchant shipping industry and the Royal Navy during the third quarter of the seventeenth century posed an enduring dilemma for the maritime state: how to mobilize, organize, maintain, and reproduce the sailoring proletariat in a situation of labor scarcity and limited state resources. Rulers discovered time and again that they had too few sailors to operate their various maritime enterprises, and too little money with which to pay wages.

One result of this situation was a fitful but protracted war among rulers, planners, merchants, captains, naval officers, sailors, and other, urban workers over the value and purposes of maritime labor. Since conditions aboard ship were harsh and wages often two or three years in arrears, sailors mutinied, deserted, rioted, and altogether resisted naval service. Over and against these chronic struggles for freedom and money, the state used violence and terror to man its ships and to man them
cheaply, preying often on the poorest, most ethnically diverse populations. The press-gang, which swaggered to brutal prominence during the 1660s, swung bigger sticks in the 1690s as the demand for maritime labor continued to swell. For sailors, the press-gang represented slavery and death: three out of four pressed men died within two years, with only one in five of the dead expiring in battle. Those lucky enough to survive could not expect to be paid, as it was not uncommon, writes John Ehrman, the preeminent scholar of the navy of the 1690s, for a seaman to be owed a decade’s wages. The figure of the starving, often lame sailor in the seaport town became a permanent feature of European civilization, even as the motley crew became a permanent feature of modern navies.

The dynamic of manning was different in merchant shipping, but the outcome was similar. As the conditions of seafaring life ebbed and flowed, as hard discipline, deadly disease, and chronic desertion thinned the ranks of the ship, the captain would take on sailors wherever he could find them. The ship became, if not the breeding ground of rebels, at least a meeting place where various traditions were jammed together in a forcing house of internationalism. Even though the Navigation Act of 1651 stipulated that three fourths of the crew importing English goods were to be English or Irish under penalty of loss of ship, tackle, and lading, English ships continued to be worked by African, Briton, quashee, Irish, and American (not to mention Dutch, Portuguese, and lascar) sailors. Ruskin was therefore correct in saying, “The nails that fasten together the planks of the boat’s bow are the rivets of the fellowship of the world.”

Ned Coxere, who went to sea in 1648 and “served several masters in the wars between King and Parliament at sea,” wrote, “Next I served the Spaniards against the French, then the Hollanders against the English; then I was taken by the English out of Dunkirker; and then I served the English against the Hollanders; and last I was taken by the Turks, where I was forced to serve then against English, French, Dutch, and Spaniards, and all Christendom.” Alexander Exquemelin remarked on the mingling of cultures among the buccaneers in the late seventeenth century. William Petty also understood the international reality of the lower deck: “Whereas the Employment of other Men is confined to their own Country, that of Seamen is free to the whole world.” During the 1690s, English sailors served under all colors, for, according to John Ehrman, “the inter-
change of seamen between the different maritime countries was too widespread and deep-rooted a custom” to eliminate.\textsuperscript{15}

The ship was thus not only the means of communication between continents, but also the first place where working people from those different continents communicated. All the contradictions of social antagonism were concentrated in its timbers. Imperialism was the main one: the sun of European imperialism always cast an African shadow. Christopher Columbus had not only a black cabin boy but an African pilot, Pedro Niño. As soon as the \textit{Mayflower} discharged the pilgrims, it sailed for the West Indies with a cargo of people from Africa.\textsuperscript{16} Forced by the magnitude of its own enterprise to bring huge and heterogeneous masses of men and women together aboard ship to face a deathly voyage to a cruel destination, European imperialism also created the conditions for the circulation of experience within the huge masses of labor that it had set in motion.

The circulation of experience depended in part on the fashioning of new languages. In 1689, the same year that the two factions of the English ruling class under the constitutional tutelage of John Locke learned to speak a common language, Richard Simson wrote of his experiences in the South Seas, “The means used by those who trade to Guinea, to keep the Negroes quiet, is to choose them from several parts of ye Country, of different Languages; so that they find they cannot act joyntly, when they are not in a Capacity of Consulting with one another, and this they cannot doe, in soe farr as they understand not one another.” In \textit{The London Spy} (1697), Ned Ward described in sporting vocabulary the Wapping “salt water vagabonds” who were never at ease except at sea, and always wandering at home. To communicate, they had to develop a language of their own, which was, Ward asserted later, in \textit{The Wooden World Dissected} (1708), “all Heathen Greek to a Cobbler.” A student of seventeenth-century ships’ logs has shown in sixty densely worded pages how very different was maritime phonetics from that of the landsman. Mariners spoke a “dialect and manner peculiar to themselves,” said a writer in the \textit{Critical Review} (1757).\textsuperscript{17}

What W. E. B. DuBois described as the “most magnificent drama of the last thousand years of human history”—the Atlantic slave trade—was not enacted with its strophes and prosody ready-made. A combination
of, first, nautical English; second, the “sabir” of the Mediterranean; third, the hermeticlike cant talk of the “underworld”; and fourth, West African grammatical construction, produced the pidgin English that became in the tumultuous years of the slave trade the essential language of the Atlantic. According to one modern philologist, “No other form of speech in the history of the English language has been so deplored, debated, and defended.” The word crew, for example, originally meant any augmentation of a band of armed men, but by the end of the seventeenth century it had come to signify a supervised squad of workmen bent to a particular purpose, as the cooper’s, gunner’s, or sailmaker’s crew, or even the ship’s entire company—that is, all of the men of the vessel. B. Traven placed the emphasis on the collectivity, the crew, in contrast to William Dampier, Daniel Defoe, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for whom the sailor was an individualist. Traven asserted that “living together and working together each sailor picks up the words of his companions, until, after two months or so, all men aboard have acquired a working knowledge of about three hundred words common to all the crew and
understood by all.” He concluded, “A sailor is never lost where language is concerned”: no matter what coast he was thrown on, he found a way to ask, “When do we eat?”

Linguists describe pidgin as a “go-between” language, the product of a “multiple-language situation,” characterized by radical simplification. It was a dialect whose expressive power arose less from its lexical range than from the musical qualities of stress and pitch. Some African contributions to maritime and thence standard English include *caboodle*, “kick the bucket,” and “Davy Jones’s locker.” Where people had to understand each other, pidgin English was the lingua franca of the sea and the frontier. By the mid-eighteenth century, pidgin-speaking communities existed in Philadelphia, New York, and Halifax, as well as in Kingston, Bridgetown, Calabar, and London, all of them sharing unifying syntactic structures. Pidgin became an instrument, like the drum or the fiddle, of communication among the oppressed: scorned and not easily understood by polite society, it nonetheless ran as a strong, resilient, creative, and inspirational current among seaport proletarians almost everywhere. Krio, itself a lingua franca of the West African coast, was spoken in many places, as were Cameroons pidgin, Jamaican creole, Gullah, and Sranan (Suriname). The multilinguality and Atlantic experience common to many Africans were demonstrated by a black man in the Comoros Islands of the Indian Ocean in 1694, who greeted pirate captain Henry Avery, the “maritime Robin Hood,” in English. The man, as it happened, had lived in Bethnal Green, London.

**The Sailors’ Hydrarchy**

As thousands of sailors were organized for collective cooperative work in the merchant shipping industry, in the Royal Navy, and in wartime privateering, the motley crew began, through its work and new languages, to cooperate on its own behalf, which meant that within imperial hydrarchy grew a different hydrarchy, one that was both proletarian and oppositional. The process was slow, uneven, and hard to trace, not least because the alternative order of the common sailor was decapitated almost every time it reared its head, whether in mutiny, in strike, or in piracy. It took a long time for mariners to get, as one man put it, “the choice in them-
selves”—that is, the autonomous power to organize the ship and its miniature society as they wanted. The sailor’s hydrarchy went through several stages, appearing most clearly—and, to the authorities, most threateningly—when sailors organized themselves as pirates in the early eighteenth century.21

Piracy itself passed through a number of historical stages before common working sailors could make it a vessel of their own. Atlantic piracy had long served the needs of the maritime state and the merchant community in England. But there was a long-term tendency for the control of piracy to devolve from the top of society to the bottom, from the highest functionaries of the state (in the late sixteenth century), to big merchants (in the early to middle seventeenth century), to smaller, usually colonial merchants (in the late seventeenth century), and finally to the common men of the deep (in the early eighteenth century). When this devolution reached bottom, when seamen—as pirates—organized a social world apart from the dictates of mercantile and imperial authority and used it to attack merchants’ property (as they had begun to do in the 1690s), then those who controlled the maritime state resorted to massive violence, both military (the navy) and penal (the gallows), to eradicate piracy. A campaign of terror would be employed to destroy hydrarchy, which was thus forced belowdecks and into an existence that would prove both fugitive and durable.22

The mass resistance of sailors began in the 1620s, when they mutinied and rioted over pay and conditions; it reached a new stage when they led the urban mobs of London that inaugurated the revolutionary crisis of 1640–41. In 1648 sailors aboard six vessels of the fleet mutinied in the name of the king; some would later mutiny against the king’s commanders, such as Prince Rupert. The immediate remaking of the fleet along republican lines brought religious radicals into the navy, though never as many as served in the army. The Cromwellian regime bought the support of many sailors by promising prize money and by creating, in 1652, a new occupational category, the “able seaman,” who made twenty-four shillings a month rather than the usual nineteen. Yet problems remained for the sailor, including the “turnover” (which sent a man from one vessel to another before he was paid), arrears and inflated tickets rather than money payment, and impressment, the response to which was a series of
riots and mutinies in 1653 and 1654. The “Humble Petition of the Seamen, belonging to the Ships of the Commonwealth of England,” dated November 4, 1654, complained of disease, poor provisions, bloodshed, wage arrears, and most of all the “thraldom and bondage” of impressment, which were “inconsistent with the Principles of Freedom and Liberty.”

The sailors’ struggles registered in the published radical discourse of the 1640s and 1650s, especially in pamphlets written by the Levellers. Richard Overton denounced impressment in 1646, decrying the need “to surprize a man on the sudden, force him from his Calling . . . from his dear Parents, Wife and Children . . . to fight for a Cause he understands not, and In Company of such as he hath no comfort to be withall; and if he live, to returne to a lost trade, or beggary.” In the first *Agreement of the People*, the Levellers stated plainly, “The matter of impresting and constraining any of us to serve in the warres, is against our freedome.” In *A New Engagement, or, Manifesto* of August 1648 they expressly denied Parliament the power to conscript men for fighting on land or sea. There was “nothing more opposite to freedom,” they explained in a petition to Parliament of September 1648. They opposed impressment again in the second *Agreement of the People*, issued ten days before the king was beheaded. The following month Parliament approved impressment, and the Levellers again denounced it, in *New Chains Discovered* (1649). Finally, on May Day, 1649, even though the tide had turned against them, the Levellers wrote in the third *Agreement of the People*, “We doe not impower them to impresse or constraint any person to serve in war by Sea or Land every man’s Conscience being to be satisfied in the justness of that cause wherein he hazards his life, or may destroy an others.” This would be a fundamental idea in the lower deck’s oppositional tradition, even after the experience of defeat and the diaspora of thousands, sailors included, to the Americas.

The struggles waged by sailors of the revolutionary era for subsistence, wages, and rights and against impressment and violent discipline first took autonomous shape among the buccaneers in America. Even as buccaneering benefited the upper classes of England, France, and the Netherlands in their New World campaigns against their common enemy, Spain, common seamen were building a tradition of their own, at that
time called the Jamaica Discipline or the Law of the Privateers. The tradition, which the authorities considered to be the antithesis of discipline and law, boasted a distinctive conception of justice and a class hostility toward shipmasters, owners, and gentlemen adventurers. It also featured democratic controls on authority and provision for the injured. In fashioning their hydraarchy, the buccaneers drew upon the peasant utopia called the Land of Cockaygne, where work had been abolished, property redistributed, social distinctions leveled, health restored, and food made abundant. They also drew on international maritime custom, by which ancient and medieval seafarers had divided their money and goods into shares, consulted collectively and democratically on matters of moment, and elected consuls to adjudicate differences between captain and crew.

The early shapers of the tradition were those whom one English official in the Caribbean called the “outcasts of all nations”—the convicts, prostitutes, debtors, vagabonds, escaped slaves and indentured servants, religious radicals, and political prisoners, all of whom had migrated or been exiled to the new settlements “beyond the line.” Another royal administrator explained that the buccaneers were former servants and “all men of unfortunate and desperate condition.” Many French buccaneers, such as Alexander Exquemelin, had been indentured servants and before that textile workers and day laborers. Most of the buccaneers were English or French, but Dutch, Irish, Scottish, Scandinavian, Native American, and African men also joined up, often after they had in one way or another escaped the brutalities of the Caribbean’s nascent plantation system.

These workers drifted to uninhabited islands, where they formed maroon communities. Their autonomous settlements were multiracial in nature and organized around hunting and gathering—usually the hunting of wild cattle and pigs and the gathering of the king of Spain’s gold. These communities combined the experiences of peasant rebels, demobilized soldiers, dispossessed smallholders, unemployed workers, and others from several nations and cultures, including the Carib, Cuna, and Mosquito Indians. One of the most potent memories and experiences underlying buccaneer culture, writes Christopher Hill, was the English Revolution: “A surprising number of English radicals emigrated to the
West Indies either just before or just after 1660,” including Ranters, Quakers, Familists, Anabaptists, radical soldiers, and others who “carried with them the ideas which had originated in revolutionary England.” A number of buccaneers, we know, hunted and gathered dressed in the “faded red coats of the New Model Army.” One of these was a “stout grey-headed” and “merry hearted old Man,” aged eighty-four, “who had served under Oliver in the time of the Irish Rebellion; after which he was at Jamaica, and had followed Privateering ever since.” In the New World, such veterans insisted upon the democratic election of their officers, just as they had done in the revolutionary army on the other side of the Atlantic. Another source of buccaneering culture, according to J. S. Bromley, was the wave of peasant revolts that shook France in the 1630s. Many French freebooters came, as engagés, “from areas affected by peasant risings against the royal fisc and the proliferation of crown agents.” Protesters “had shown a capacity for self-organization, the constitution of ‘communes,’ election of deputies and promulgation of Ordonnances,” all in the name of the “Commun peuple.”28 Such experiences, once carried to the Americas, informed the life ways of the buccaneering “Brethren of the Coast.”

The early experiences were passed on to later generations of sailors and pirates by the hearty souls who survived the odds against longevity in seafaring work. When one privateering captain took on board four seasoned buccaneers in 1689, he designated them “to be a mess by themselves, but the advantage of their conversation and intelligence obliged him afterward to disperse them amongst the Shipps Company.” Some of the old-timers had served on Jamaican privateers during the War of Spanish Succession, then taken part in the new piracies after the Treaty of Utrecht. The Jamaica Discipline and the exploits that it made possible also lived on in folktales, songs, ballads, and popular memory, not to mention the widely published (and frequently translated) accounts of Alexander Exquemelin, Père Labat, and others who knew life among the buccaneers firsthand.29

Therefore when sailors encountered the deadly conditions of life at sea in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, they had an alternative social order within living memory. Some sailors mutinied and seized control of their own vessels, stitching the skull and crossbones
onto a black flag and declaring war against the world. The overwhelming majority of those who became pirates, however, volunteered to join the outlaw ships when their vessels were captured. Their reasons are not difficult to fathom. Dr. Samuel Johnson put the matter succinctly when he said, “No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in jail with the chance of being drowned. . . . A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company.” Many sailors, of course, had made the comparison themselves, waking up punch-drunk or just plain drunk in the jails of the port cities or in the holds of outward-bound merchant ships. Johnson’s point, though, was that the lot of the merchant seamen was a difficult one. Sailors suffered cramped, claustrophobic quarters and “food” that was often as rotten as it was meager. They routinely experienced devastating disease, disabling accidents, shipwreck, and premature death. They faced discipline from their officers that was brutal and often murderous. And they got but small return for their death-defying labors, for peacetime wages were low and fraud in payment was frequent. Seamen could expect little relief from the law, for its main purpose was “to assure a ready supply of cheap, docile labor.”

Merchant seamen also had to contend with the impressment unleashed by the expansion of the Royal Navy. In the navy, shipboard conditions were as harsh as, and in certain respects even worse than, the mercantile equivalents. Wages, especially during wartime, were lower than in the merchant service, while the quantity and quality of food aboard ship were consistently undermined by corrupt pursers and officers. Organizing cooperation and maintaining order among the often huge numbers of maritime workers on naval vessels required violent discipline, replete with carefully staged, spectacular executions, more severe than those on merchant ships. Another consequence of the number of sailors crowded onto ill-ventilated naval ships was the omnipresence of disease, often of epidemic proportions. In an irony that the pirates themselves would have savored, one official claimed that the navy could not effectively suppress piracy because its ships were “so much disabled by sickness, death, and desertion of their seamen.” The knowledgeable anonymous author of a pamphlet entitled *Piracy Destroy’d* (1700) made it clear that impressment, harsh discipline, poor provisions and health,
long confinement aboard ship, and wage arrears had caused thousands of sailors to turn pirate. It was “the too great severity Commanders have used as to their backs and their bellies” that “had occasioned the Seamen to mutiny and run away with the Ships.” The naval ship in this era, concludes one scholar, was “a machine from which there was no escape, bar desertion, incapacitation, or death.”

Life was a little better on a privateering vessel: the food was more palatable, the pay was higher, the work shifts were shorter, and the power of the crew in decision-making was greater. But privateers were not always happy ships. Some captains ran their vessels like naval craft, imposing rigid discipline and other unpopular measures that generated grievances, protests, or even outright mutinies. Woodes Rogers, the gentleman captain of a hugely successful privateering voyage between 1708 and 1711 and later the scourge of the pirates of the West Indies as royal governor of the Bahama Islands, clapped into irons a man named Peter Clark, who had
wished himself “aboard a Pirate” and said that “he should be glad that an Enemy, who could over-power us, was a-long-side of us.” What would men such as Peter Clark do once they got off a merchant, naval, or privateering vessel and “aboard a Pirate”? How would they secure their own subsistence? How would they organize their own labor, their access to money, to power? Had they internalized the dominant ideas of the age about how to run a ship, or could these poor, uneducated men imagine better?

The Maritime World Turned Upside Down

The early-eighteenth-century pirate ship was a “world turned upside down,” made so by the articles of agreement that established the rules and customs of the pirates’ social order, hydrarchy from below. Pirates distributed justice, elected officers, divided loot equally, and established a different discipline. They limited the authority of the captain, resisted many of the practices of the capitalist merchant shipping industry, and maintained a multicultural, multiracial, multinational social order. They sought to prove that ships did not have to be run in the brutal and oppressive ways of the merchant service and the Royal Navy. The dramatist John Gay demonstrated his understanding of all this when, in Polly, he had Macheath disguise himself as the black pirate named Morano and sing a song to the tune of “The World’s Turned Upside Down.”

The pirate ship was democratic in an undemocratic age. The pirates allowed their captain unquestioned authority in chase and battle, but otherwise insisted that he be “governed by a Majority.” As one observer noted, “They permit him to be Captain, on Condition, that they may be Captain over him.” They gave him none of the extra food, the private mess, or the special accommodations routinely claimed by merchant and naval captains. Moreover, as the majority gave, so did it take away, deposing captains for cowardice, for cruelty, for refusing “to take and plunder English Vessels,” or even for being “too Gentleman-like.” Captains who dared to exceed their authority were sometimes executed. Most pirates, “having suffered formerly from the ill-treatment of their officers, provided carefully against any such evil” once they were free to organize the ship after their own hearts. Further limitations on the captain’s power
were embodied in the person of the quartermaster, who was elected to represent and protect the interests of the crew, and in the institution of the council, the gathering that involved every man on the ship and always constituted its highest authority.34

The pirate ship was egalitarian in a hierarchical age, as pirates divided their plunder equally, levelling the elaborate structure of pay ranks common to all other maritime employments. Captain and quartermaster received one and one half to two shares of plunder; minor officers and craftsmen were given one and one quarter or one and one half; all others got one share each. Such egalitarianism flowed from material facts. To merchant captains it was galling that “there is so little Government and Subordination among [pirates], that they are, on Occasion, all Captains, all Leaders.” By expropriating a merchant ship (after a mutiny or a capture), pirates seized the means of maritime production and declared it to be the common property of those who did its work. Rather than working for wages using the tools and larger machine (the ship) owned by a merchant capitalist, pirates abolished the wage and commanded the ship as their own property, sharing equally in the risks of common adventure.35

Pirates were class-conscious and justice-seeking, taking revenge against merchant captains who tyrannized the common seaman and against royal officials who upheld their prerogative to do so. Indeed, the “Distribution of Justice” was a specific practice among pirates. After capturing a prize vessel, pirates would “distribute justice” by inquiring about how the ship’s commander treated his crew. They then “whipp’d and pickled” those “against whom Complaint was made.” Bartholomew Roberts’s crew considered the matter so important that they formally designated one of their men—George Willson, who was no doubt a fierce and lusty man—the “Dispencer of Justice.” Pirates roughed up and occasionally executed captured captains; a few bragged of their avenging justice upon the gallows. Pirate captain Howell Davis claimed that “their reasons for going a pirating were to revenge themselves on base Merchants and cruel commanders of Ships.” Still, pirates did not punish captains indiscriminately. They often rewarded the “honest Fellow that never abused any Sailors” and even offered to let one decent captain “return with a large sum of Money to London, and bid the Merchants defiance.” Pirates thus stood against the brutal injustices of the merchant
shipping industry, with one crew’s even claiming to be “Robbin Hoods Men.”

Pirates insisted upon their right to subsistence, the food and drink so often denied aboard the merchant or naval ship—the very shortage that led many sailors to go “upon the account” in the first place. One mutinous sailor aboard the George Galley in 1724 responded to his captain’s orders to furl the mizen-top by saying, “in a surly Tone, and with a kind of Disdain, So as we Eat so shall we work.” Other mutineers simply maintained that “it was not their business to starve,” and that if a captain was making it so, hanging could be little worse. Many observers of pirate life noted the carnivalesque quality of its occasions—the eating, drinking, fiddling, dancing, and merriment—and some considered such “infinite Disorders” inimical to good discipline at sea. Men who had suffered short or rotten provisions in other maritime employments now ate and drank “in a wanton and riotous Way,” which was indeed their custom. They conducted so much business “over a Large Bowl of Punch” that sobriety sometimes brought “a Man under a Suspicion of being in a Plot against the Commonwealth”—that is, the community of the ship. The very first item in Bartholomew Roberts’s articles guaranteed every man “a Vote in Affairs of Moment” and equal title to fresh provisions and strong liquor. For some who joined, drink “had been a greater motive... than Gold,” and most would have agreed with the motto “No Adventures to be made without Belly-Timber.” The pirates of the Atlantic thus struggled to assure their health and security, their own self-preservation. The image of the freebooter as a man with a patched eye, a peg leg, and a hook for a hand suggests an essential truth: sailoring was a dangerous line of work. Pirates therefore put a portion of all booty into a common fund reserved for those who sustained injuries of lasting effect, whether the loss of eyesight or of any appendage. They tried to provide for the needy.

The pirate ship was motley—multinational, multicultural, and multiracial. Governor Nicholas Lawes of Jamaica echoed the thoughts of royal officials everywhere when he called pirates a “banditti of all nations.” Another Caribbean official agreed: they were “compounded of all nations.” Black Sam Bellamy’s crew of 1717 was “a mix’t multitude of all Country’s,” including British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Native
American, and African American, along with two dozen Africans liberated from a slave ship. The main mutineers aboard the George Galley in 1724 were an Englishman, a Welshman, an Irishman, two Scots, two Swedes, and a Dane, all of whom became pirates. Benjamin Evans’s crew consisted of men of English, French, Irish, Spanish, and African descent. Pirate James Barrow illustrated the reality of this internationalism as he sat after supper “prophanely singing . . . Spanish and French Songs out of a Dutch prayer book.” The government often told pirates that “they [had] no country,” and the pirates themselves agreed: when they hailed other vessels at sea, they emphasized their own rejection of nationality by announcing that they came “From the Seas.” A colonial official reported to the Council of Trade and Plantations in 1697 that pirates “acknowledged no countrymen, that they had sold their country and were sure to be hanged if taken, and that they would take no quarter, but do all the mischief they could.” But as a mutineer muttered in 1699, “it signified nothing what part of the World a man liv’d in, so he Liv’d well.”

Hundreds of people of African descent found places within the social order of the pirate ship. Even though a substantial minority of pirates had worked in the slave trade and had therefore been part of the machinery of enslavement and transportation, and even though pirate ships occasionally captured (and sold) cargo that included slaves, Africans and African Americans both free and enslaved were numerous and active on board pirate vessels. A few of these maritime men of color ended up “dancing to the four winds,” like the mulatto who sailed with Black Bart Roberts and was hanged for it in Virginia in 1720. Another “resolute Fellow, a Negro” named Caesar, stood ready to blow up Blackbeard’s ship rather than submit to the Royal Navy in 1718; he, too, was hanged. Black crewmen also made up part of the pirate vanguard, the most trusted and fearless men who were designated to board prospective prizes. The boarding party of the Morning Star, for example, had “a Negro Cook doubly arm’d,” while more than half of Edward Condent’s boarding party on the Dragon was black. A “free negro” cook divided provisions equally so that the crew aboard Francis Spriggs’s ship might live “very merrily” in 1724. “Negroes and Molattoes” were present on almost every pirate ship, and only rarely did the many merchants and captains who commented on their presence call them slaves. Black pirates sailed with Captains Bel-
lany, Taylor, Williams, Harris, Winter, Shipton, Lyne, Skym, Roberts, Spriggs, Bonnet, Bellamy, Phillips, Baptist, Cooper, and others. In 1718, sixty out of Blackbeard’s crew of one hundred were black, while Captain William Lewis boasted “40 able Negro Sailors” among his crew of eighty. In 1719, Oliver La Bouche’s ship was “half French, half Negroes.”41 Black pirates were so common as to move one newspaper to report that an all-mulatto band of sea robbers was marauding the Caribbean, eating the hearts of captured white men.42 In London, meanwhile, the most successful theatrical event of the period was prevented from depicting the reality of black pirates, as the Lord Chamberlain refused to license Polly, John Gay’s sequel to The Beggar’s Opera, which had ended with Macheath about to be hanged for highway robbery. In Polly he was transported to the West Indies, where he escaped the plantation, turned pirate, and, disguising himself as Morano, “a negro villain,” became the principal leader of a gang of freebooters. Polly Peachum dressed herself as a man and sought her hero and his fellow pirates by asking, “Perhaps I may hear of him among the slaves of the next plantation.”43

Some black pirates were freemen, like the experienced “free Negro” seaman from Deptford who in 1721 led “a Mutiny that we had too many Officers, and that the work was too hard, and what not.” Others were escaped slaves. In 1716 the slaves of Antigua had become “very impudent and insulting,” causing their masters to fear an insurrection. Historian Hugh Rankin writes that a substantial number of the unruly “went off to join those pirates who did not seem too concerned about color differences.”44 Just before the events in Antigua, Virginia’s rulers had worried about the connection between the “Ravage of Pyrates” and “an Insurrection of the Negroes.” The sailors of color captured with the rest of Black Bart’s crew in 1722 grew mutinous over the poor conditions and “thin Commons” they suffered at the hands of the Royal Navy, especially since many of them had lived long in the “pyratical Way.” That way meant, to them as to others, more food and greater freedom.45

Such material and cultural contacts were not uncommon. A gang of pirates settled in West Africa in the early 1720s, joining and intermixing with the Kru, themselves known for their skill in things maritime (and, when enslaved, for their leadership of revolts in the New World). And of course pirates had for many years mixed with the native population of Madagascar, helping to produce a “dark Mulatto Race there.” Cultural
exchanges among European and African sailors and pirates were extensive, resulting, for example, in the well-known similarities of form between African songs and sea shanties. In 1743 some seamen were court-martialed for singing a “negro song” in defiance of discipline. Mutineers also engaged in the same rites performed by slaves before a revolt. In 1731 a band of mutineers drank rum and gunpowder, while on another occasion a sailor signaled his rebellious intentions by “Drinking Water out of a Musket barrel.” Piracy clearly did not operate according to the black codes enacted and enforced in Atlantic slave societies. Some slaves and free blacks found aboard the pirate ship freedom, something that, outside of the maroon communities, was in short supply in the pirates’ main theater of operations, the Caribbean and the American South. Indeed, pirate ships themselves might be considered multiracial maroon communities, in which rebels used the high seas as others used the mountains and the jungles.46

That piracy was not only for men was proved by Anne Bonny and Mary Read, who showed, sword and pistol in hand, that the many freedoms of the pirates’ life might be enjoyed by women. Women were few aboard ships of any kind in the eighteenth century, but they were numerous enough to inspire ballads about cross-dressing female warriors that became popular among the workers of the Atlantic. Bonny and Read, whose exploits were announced on the cover page of A General History of the Pyrates and no doubt in many another yarn of their own day and after, cursed and swore like sailors, carried their weapons like those well trained in the ways of war, and boarded prize vessels as only the most daring and respected members of pirate crews were permitted to do. Operating beyond the reach of the traditional powers of family, state, and capital, and sharing in the rough solidarity of life among maritime outlaws, they added another dimension altogether to the subversive appeal of piracy by seizing the liberties usually reserved for men, at a time when the sphere of social action for women was narrowing.47

The War against Hydrarchy

The freedoms of hydrarchy were self-consciously established and defended by pirates, not least because they knew that they would aid in recruitment and therefore in the reproduction of their oppositional cul-
tured. What they perhaps did not fully understand was that these same freedoms, once recognized by the ruling class, would fuel a campaign of terror to eliminate the alternative way of life, whether at sea or, more dangerously, ashore. Some among the powerful worried that pirates might “set up a sort of Commonwealth” in areas where no power would be able “to dispute it with them.” Colonial and metropolitan merchants and officials feared incipient separatism in Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Bermuda, North Carolina, the Bay of Campeche, and Honduras. Colonel Benjamin Bennet wrote of pirates to the Council of Trade and Plantations in 1718: “I fear they will soon multiply for so many are willing to joyn with them when taken.” And multiply they did: after the War of Spanish Succession, as working conditions in the merchant shipping industry rapidly deteriorated, seamen turned to the black flag by the thousands. Edward England’s crew took nine vessels off the coast of Africa in the spring of 1719, and found fifty-five out of the 143 tars ready to sign their articles. John Jessup swore that a jovial life among the pirates was better than working at the big slave-trading fort of Cape Coast Castle. Such desertion was common between 1716 and 1722, when, as one pirate told a merchant captain, “people were generally glad of an opportunity of entring with [the pirates].” The prospect of plunder and ready money, the food and the drink, the camaraderie, the equality and justice, and the promise of care for the injured—all of these must have been appealing. The attractions were perhaps best summarized by Bartholomew Roberts, who remarked that in the merchant service “there is thin Commons, low Wages, and hard Labour; in this, Plenty and Satiety, Pleasure and ease, Liberty and Power; and who would not ballance Creditor on this Side, when all the Hazard that is run for it, at worst, is only a sower Look or two at choaking. No, a merry Life and a short one, shall be my motto.” When John Dryden rewrote The Tempest in 1667, he had one of his sailors announce, “A short life and a merry, I say.” Two generations later, the aphorism had taken on a subversive tone that now called forth the executioner.

Hydarchy was attacked because of the danger it posed to the increasingly valuable slave trade with Africa. A series of sailors’ mutinies shook the slave trade between 1716 and 1726, a logical outcome of the chronic complaints about food, discipline, and the general conditions of work-
ing life aboard the slave ships that left England for West Africa during those years. Sailors alleged in court that Captain Theodore Boucher of the slave ship *Wanstead* “did not allow victualls & liquor enough to support them & used them very barbarously and inhumanly in their diett.” Other sailors accused their captains of tyrannical discipline. Those who dared to object to shipboard conditions might find themselves “as Slaves linked and coupled by chains together & . . . fedd with Yams & Water the Usuall dyett for Slaves.”

Some mutinous sailors, however, averted a fate of chains by seizing their vessels, raising the black flag, and establishing hydrarchy. After George Lowther and his comrades mutinied aboard the slave ship *Gambia Castle* in 1720, they renamed the vessel the *Delivery* and sailed away in triumph, not unlike the mutineers in Prince Rupert’s convoy near the Gambia in 1652. Lowther and his men may have been emboldened by the knowledge that the coast of West Africa had already become a favorite haunt of pirates, especially since the British government in 1718 had recaptured the Bahama Islands and reestablished royal authority in the place that had for years been the freebooters’ main base of operations in the Caribbean. Hundreds of pirates had headed for the coast of Africa, attacking poorly defended ships and claiming their cargo. The greatest and most successful assaults on merchants’ property had been carried out by a pirate convoy under the leadership of Bartholomew Roberts, which ranged up and down the African coast “sinking, burning, and destroying such Goods and Vessels as then happen’d in [its] Way.” Roberts’s interest lay in capturing not ships full of slaves but rather ships on their way to trade for slaves—“good Sailing Shipps well furnisht with Ammunition, Provisions, & Stores of all Kinds, fitt for long Voyages.” He and his fellows also plundered the slave-trading forts, as a group of merchants explained: pirates “sometimes land at the chief Factories and carry off what they think fit.” Many a slave ship in the early eighteenth century was captured and converted to pirate duties, including the recently recovered *Whydah*, captained by Black Sam Bellamy.

As pirates with Bartholomew Roberts and other captains sailed from Senegambia to the Gold Coast and back again, disturbing the region most vital to British merchants in the 1720s, they “struck a Pannick into the Traders,” in the words of naval surgeon John Atkins, who spent sev-
eral months on the coast. One writer estimated in 1720 that pirates had already done a hundred thousand pounds’ worth of damage on the coast of Africa. An anonymous writer to the Board of Trade asserted in 1724 that pirates had taken “near 100 sail of Ships in the space of two years” in the African slave trade. Other estimates ran even higher. Merchants in Bristol, Liverpool, and London began to protest their losses, screaming to Parliament about the disorder plaguing the lucrative slave trade and demanding naval protection for their property. Their cries fell on sympathetic ears. When a group of merchants petitioned Parliament for relief in early 1722, the House of Commons ordered the immediate drafting of a bill for the suppression of piracy, which was, with Robert Walpole’s assistance, quickly passed. Soon a naval squadron under the leadership of Captain Challoner Ogle was fitted out to sail to the African coast, where it arrived later in 1722, engaged the ships of Bartholomew Roberts, and defeated them. More than a hundred pirates were killed in battle, while others escaped into the jungle; scores were captured and ordered to stand trial. They were taken to Cape Coast Castle, the centerpiece of the British slave trade, where slaves awaiting ships were chained, confined, and “marked with a burning iron upon the right breast, D. Y. Duke of York.” Within Cape Coast Castle’s brick walls, fourteen feet thick and guarded by seventy-four mounted cannons, a gang of pirates were executed, and their chained corpses distributed and hanged along the coast in order to maximize the terror: nine at Cape Coast, four on the Windward coast, two each at Acera, Calabar, and Whydah, and one at Winnebah. Thirty-one others were hanged at sea, aboard the Weymouth. Another forty were sentenced to slavery, forced to work for the Royal African Company on ships or in gold mines; all of them apparently died within a matter of months. After his triumphant return to London, Challoner Ogle became, in May 1723, the first naval captain to be knighted for his actions against pirates. He was honored by King George I, whom Roberts and his fellow pirates had ridiculed as the “turnip man.”

The defeat of Roberts and the subsequent destruction of piracy off the coast of Africa represented another turning point in the history of capitalism, largely because piracy and the slave trade had long been linked, in the experiences of war, commerce, and imperial expansion. The conflict between pirates and slave traders on the coast of West Africa dated back
to the end of the War of Spanish Succession in 1713, when thousands of sailors had been demobilized from the Royal Navy, causing wages to plummet, food to deteriorate, and the lash to fly among workers in the merchant shipping industry, which in turn moved sailors to cast their lot with the Jolly Roger. The end of the war brought a prize for British merchants: the Assiento, which gave these traders the legal right to ship 4,800 slaves a year (and the illegal right to ship many more) to Spanish America through the South Sea Company. This incentive, coupled with the final deregulation of the African slave trade in 1712, when the chartered Royal African Company had lost its battle against the free traders who had already begun to supply most of the slaves to American plantations, increased dramatically the importance of the slave trade in the eyes of British merchants.  

Pirates now had to be exterminated in order for the new trade to flourish, a point that was made by the slave-trading merchant captain William Snelgrave, who published *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea*.
and the Slave Trade, dedicated to “the Merchants of London, trading to the Coast of Guinea.” He divided the book into three sections, providing for his readers a “History of the late Conquest of the Kingdom of Whidaw by the King of Dahome”; an account of the business practices and statistics of the slave trade; and “A Relation of the Author’s being taken by Pirates” and the dangers posed thereby. But by the time Snelgrave published his book, in 1734, the pirate was dead, defeated by the terror of hanging and enhanced naval patrols, though occasionally the corpse would twitch with a mutiny here or an act of piracy there. In the immediate aftermath of the suppression of piracy, Britain established its dominance on the western coast of Africa. As James A. Rawley has written, “In the decade of the 1730s England had become the supreme slaving nation in the Atlantic world, a standing she occupied until 1807.” There was a sharp jump of almost 27 percent in slave-trade exports over the previous pirate-infested decade. If the plantation capital of the Caribbean, allied with the merchant capital of the metropolis, killed the first generation of pirates—the buccaneers of the 1670s—and if the capital of the East India Company killed the pirates of the 1690s, when the company’s ships were hothouses of mutiny and rebellion, it was African slave-trading capital that killed the pirates of the early eighteenth century. Hydrarchy from below was a deadly enemy to hydrarchy from above, as pirates had ruptured the middle passage. By 1726 the maritime state had removed a major obstacle to the accumulation of capital in its ever-growing Atlantic system.

It was not many years earlier that English and other, mostly Protestant European rulers had turned pirates loose on the riches of other realms. Now they and their former national enemies discovered common interests in an orderly Atlantic system of capitalism, in which trade would flow without attack and capital accumulate without disruption—unless, of course, the attacks and disruptions were the results of war declared by the rulers themselves. By the 1720s, thousands of pirates had deeply damaged world shipping. They had also self-consciously built an autonomous, democratic, egalitarian social order of their own, a subversive alternative to the prevailing ways of the merchant, naval, and privateering ship and a counterculture to the civilization of Atlantic capitalism with its expropriation and exploitation, terror and slavery. Whigs and Tories
alike responded by repeating the repressions of the 1690s and erecting gallows for pirates and the waterfront folk who dealt with them. Merchants petitioned Parliament, whose members obliged them with deadly new legislation; meanwhile, Prime Minister Robert Walpole took an active, personal interest in putting an end to piracy, as did scores of other officials, newspaper correspondents, and clergymen. They denounced pirates as sea monsters, vicious beasts, and a many-headed hydra—all creatures that, pace Bacon, lived beyond the bounds of human society. Their violent rhetoric demanded and legitimated the use of the gallows. The pirates and their living alternative were clearly marked for extinction. Hundreds were hanged, and their bodies left to dangle in the port cities of the world as a reminder that the maritime state would not tolerate a challenge from below.\(^61\)

The sailors’ hydrarchy was defeated in the 1720s, the hydra beheaded. But it would not die. The volatile, serpentine tradition of maritime radicalism would appear again and again in the decades to come, slithering quietly belowdecks, across the docks, and onto the shore, biding its time, then rearing its heads unexpectedly in mutinies, strikes, riots, urban insurrections, slave revolts, and revolutions. John Place, for example, would help in October 1748 to organize a mutiny aboard the H.M.S. Chesterfield, off the coast of West Africa, not far from Cape Coast Castle. He had been there before. He had sailed as a pirate with Black Bart Roberts, suffered capture by Captain Challoner Ogle in 1722, and somehow escaped the mass executions. When the time came, a quarter of a century later, for know-how about mutiny and an alternative social order, Place was the man of the moment. The authorities hanged him this time, but they could not kill the subversive tradition that lived in tales, in action, in sullenly silent memory, on the lower decks of the Chesterfield and countless other vessels. The Martinican poet Aimé Césaire captured this survival of resistance when he wrote, “It is this stubborn serpent’s crawling out of the shipwreck.”\(^62\)
Chapter Five


33. Rediker, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, chap. 6.


37. An Account of . . . the Late John Gow, 3; C. Johnson History, 244, 224. Bartholomew Roberts’s crew was taken in 1722 because many of the men were drunk when the time came for an engagement. See C. Johnson, History, 243, and John Atkins, A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, & the West Indies . . . (1735; reprint, London: Frank Cass, 1970), 192.


39. Walter Hamilton to Council of Trade and Plantations, 6 January 1718, Colonial Office Papers (CO) 152/12, fo. 211, Public Record Office, London; Boston Gazette, 6–13 July 1725; James Vernon to Council of Trade and Plantations, 21 December 1697, Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series 16 (1697–98), 70; Tryals of Thirty-Six Persons


51. *Parker v. Boucher* (1719), HCA 24/132; *Wise v. Beekman* (1716), HCA 24/131. For
other instances of conflicts that ended up in court, see Coleman v. Seamen (1718) and Desbrough v. Christian (1720), HCA 24/132; Povey v. Bigelow (1722), HCA 24/134; Wistridge v. Chapman (1722), HCA 24/135. All, Public Record Office, London.

52. Information of Alexander Thompson (1723), HCA 1/55, fo. 23; see also Petition of John Massey and George Lowther (1721), CO 28/17, fo. 199.


56. Atkins, Voyage, 98; Rawley, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, 155; Boston Gazette, 27 August–3 September 1722; New England Courant, 3–10 September 1722.


58. Rawley, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, 162.

59. Ibid., 164, 165; Curtin, Atlantic Slave Trade, 150.


Chapter Six

1. Daniel Horsmanden, A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for Burning