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Marcus Rediker

WRITING to the Board of Trade in 1724, Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia lamented his lack of “some safe opportunity to get home” to London. He insisted that he would travel only in a well-armed man-of-war.

Your Lordships will easily conceive my Meaning when you reflect on the Vigorous part I’ve acted to suppress Pirates: and if those barbarous Wretches can be moved to cut off the Nose & Ears of a Master for but correcting his own Sailors, what inhuman treatment must I expect, should I fall within their power, who have been markt as the principle object of their vengeance, for cutting off their arch Pirate Thatch [Teach, also known as Blackbeard], with all his grand Designs, & making so many of their Fraternity to swing in the open air of Virginia.¹

Spotswood knew these pirates well. He had authorized the expedition that returned to Virginia boasting Blackbeard’s head as a trophy. He had done his share to see that many pirates swung on Virginia gallows. He knew that pirates had a fondness for revenge, that they often punished ship captains for “correcting” their crews, and that a kind of “fraternity” prevailed among them. He had good reason to fear them.

The Anglo-American pirates active between 1716 and 1726 occupied a grand position in the long history of a robbery at sea. Their numbers, near five thousand, were extraordinary, and their plunderings were exceptional in both volume and value. Spotswood and other officials and merchants produced a plentiful body of written testimony on pirates and their ways, but historians, though long fascinated by sea-rovers, have not used this

Mr. Rediker is a graduate student in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania. He wishes to thank Alan V. Briceland, Richard S. Dunn, Roma Heaney, Dan Schiller, Steven Zdatny, and, especially, Nancy Hewitt and Michael Zuckerman for their critical discussion and encouragement of this essay. He expresses special gratitude to Kent Willis for drawing the chart.

¹ Alexander Spotswood to the Board of Trade, June 16, 1724, C.O. 5/1319, Public Record Office.

material to full advantage.² This essay explores the social and cultural dimensions of piracy, focusing on pirates' experience, the organization of their ships, and their social relations and consciousness, with observations on the social and economic context of the crime and its culture. Piracy represented crime on a massive scale—crime as a way of life voluntarily chosen, for the most part, by large numbers of men and directly challenging the ways of the society from which the pirates excepted themselves. The main intent of this essay is to see how piracy looked from the inside and to examine the kinds of social order that pirates forged beyond the reach of traditional authority. Beneath the Jolly Roger, "the banner of King Death," a new social world took shape once pirates had, as one of them put it, "the choice in themselves."³

² Studies of piracy include general surveys, descriptive chronicles of exploits, and specific, often monographic examinations of certain features of pirate life. Daniel Defoe was the first historian of these pirates. Under the name Charles Johnson, he published an invaluable collection of mostly accurate information, *A General History of the Pyrates*, ed. Manuel Schonhorn (Columbia, S.C., 1972 [orig. publ. in 2 vols., London, 1724, 1728]), hereafter cited as *History of Pyrates*. George Roberts (believed to have been Defoe), *The Four Years Voyages . . .* (London, 1726), contains believable accounts of pirates. The best recent study is Hugh F. Rankin, *The Golden Age of Piracy* (New York, 1969). More ambitious are Philip Gosse, *The History of Piracy* (New York, 1932); Neville Williams, *Captains Outrageous: Seven Centuries of Piracy* (London, 1961); and P. K. Kemp and Christopher Lloyd, *Brethren of the Coast: Buccaneers of the South Seas* (New York, 1960). Patrick Pringle's *Jolly Roger* (New York, 1953), a piece of popular history, has some fine insights. Charles Grey, *Pirates of the Eastern Seas, 1618-1723: A Lurid Page of History*, ed. George MacMunn (Port Washington, N.Y., 1971 [orig. publ. London, 1933]); George Francis Dow and John Henry Edmonds, *The Pirates of the New England Coast, 1630-1730* (Salem, Mass., 1923); and John Biddulph, *The Pirates of Malabar; and, An Englishwoman . . . in India . . .* (London, 1907) are somewhat descriptive but present important data. Stanley Richards, *Black Bart* (Llandybie, Wales, 1966), is a biography of Bartholomew Roberts. See also Shirley Carter Hughson, *The Carolina Pirates and Colonial Commerce, 1670-1740*, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, XII (Baltimore, 1894); B. R. Burg, "Legitimacy and Authority: A Case Study of Pirate Commanders in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *American Neptune*, XXXVII (1977), 40-49; James G. Lydon, *Pirates, Privateers, and Profits* (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 1970); and Richard B. Morris, "The Ghost of Captain Kidd," *New York History*, XIX (1938), 280-297. The literature on piracy is vast. For the newcomer, these works provide a solid beginning.

³ S. Charles Hill, "Episodes of Piracy in Eastern Waters," *Indian Antiquary*, XLIX (1920), 37; Arthur L. Hayward, ed., *Lives of the Most Remarkable Criminals . . .* (London, 1735), 37. Following E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York, 1975), and Douglas Hay et al., *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1975), this study uses the social history of crime as access to lower-class life in the early eighteenth century. I define a pirate as one who willingly participates in robbery on the sea, not discriminating among nationalities in his choice of victims. Part of the empirical base of this study was accumulated in piecemeal fashion from documents of all

Contemporary estimates of the pirate population during the period under consideration placed the number between one and two thousand at any one time. This range seems generally accurate. From records that describe the activities of pirate ships and from reports or projections of crew sizes, it appears that eighteen to twenty-four hundred Anglo-American pirates were active between 1716 and 1718, fifteen hundred to two thousand between 1719 and 1722, and one thousand to fifteen hundred declining to fewer than two hundred between 1723 and 1726. In the only estimate we have from the other side of the law, a band of pirates in 1716 claimed that there were "30 Company of them," or roughly twenty-four hundred men, around the world. In all, some forty-five to fifty-five hundred men went, as they called it, "upon the account."⁴

These sea-robbers followed lucrative trade and, like their predecessors, sought bases for their depredations in the Caribbean Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Bahama Islands, no longer defended or governed by the crown, began in 1716 to attract pirates by the hundreds. By 1718 a torrent of complaints moved George I to commission Woodes Rogers to lead an expedition to bring the islands under control. Rogers's efforts largely succeeded, and pirates scattered to the unpeopled inlets of the Carolinas and to Africa. They had frequented African shores as early as 1691; by 1718, Madagascar served as both an entrepôt for booty and as a spot for temporary settlement. At the mouth of the Sierra Leone River on Africa's western coast pirates stopped off for "whoring and drinking" and to unload goods. Theaters of operation among pirates shifted, however, according to the policing designs of the Royal Navy. Pirates favored the Caribbean

varieties: individual pirates were recorded by name and dates of activity. Information on age, labor, class, and family background, and miscellaneous detail were noted. This file (519 men, 2 women) can be replicated only by consulting all the sources that follow in the notes. Since I have found mention of only 2 female pirates, and since the maritime world was predominantly male, the latter gender is used in references.

⁴ James Logan, 1717, estimated 1,500, in Hughson, *Carolina Pirates*, 59; Gov. of Bermuda, 1717, "at least 1,000," in Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 181, and in H.C.A. 1/54, f. 113, P.R.O.; Woodes Rogers, 1718, "near a thousand," in *History of Pyrates*, 615; Daniel Defoe, 1720, 1,500, *ibid.*, 132; Gov. of S.C., 1718, "near 2,000," in W. Noel Sainsbury *et al.*, eds., *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and the West Indies* (London, 1860-), XXXI, 10, hereafter cited as *Cal. St. Papers*; [Anonymous], 1721, 1,500, in Abel Boyer, ed., *The Political State of Great Britain . . .* (London, 1711-1740), XXI, 659. Quotation from Representation from Several Merchants Trading to Virginia to Board of Trade, Apr. 15, 1717, C.O. 5/1318, P.R.O. Estimates of the sizes of crews are available for 37 pirate ships: the mean is 79.5. I have found references to 79 crews through mentions of ship or captain. Totals were obtained by arranging ships according to periods of activity and multiplying by the mean crew size. If this mean holds, the total population would have been 6,281. Yet this figure counts some pirates more than once. For example, many who sailed with both Howell Davis and Bartholomew Roberts are counted twice. The range 4,500-5,500 expresses the uncertainty of the calculations. It seems that, in all, some 5,000 men were involved.

because of its shallow waters and numerous unsettled cays, but generally, as one pirate noted, these rovers were "dispers't into several parts of the World." Sea-robbers sought and usually found bases near major trade routes, as distant as possible from the powers of the state.⁵

Almost all pirates had labored as merchant seamen, Royal Navy sailors, or privateersmen.⁶ The vast majority came from captured merchantmen as volunteers, for reasons suggested by Dr. Samuel Johnson's observation that "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."⁷ Merchant seamen got a hard, close look at death: disease and accidents were commonplace in their occupation, rations were often meager, and discipline was brutal. Each ship was "a little kingdom" whose captain held a near-absolute power which he often abused. Peacetime wages for sailors were consistently low between 1643 and 1797; fraud and irregularities in the distribution of pay were general. A prime purpose of eighteenth-century maritime laws was "to assure a ready supply of cheap, docile labor."⁸ Merchant seamen also had to contend with impressment as practiced by the Royal Navy.

⁵ Deposition of John Vickers, 1716, C.O. 5/1317, P.R.O.; Spotswood to Council of Trade and Plantations, May 31, 1717, C.O. 5/1364; *History of Pyrates*, 31-34; Leo Francis Stock, ed., *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments respecting North America*, III (Washington, D.C., 1930), 399; deposition of Adam Baldrige, in John Franklin Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy in the Colonial Period: Illustrative Documents* (New York, 1923), 180-187; R. A. Brock, ed., *The Official Letters of Alexander Spotswood . . .* (Virginia Historical Society, Collections, N.S., II [Richmond, 1882]), 168, 351, hereafter cited as Brock, ed., *Letters of Spotswood*; William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade* (London, 1734), 197; Abbé Rochon, "A Voyage to Madagascar and the East Indies," in John Pinkerton, ed., *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels . . .*, XVI (London, 1814), 767-771; William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea . . .* (London, 1744), 12, 42. On Defoe's credibility see Schonhorn's introduction to *History of Pyrates*, xxvii-xl; Gosse, *History of Piracy*, 182; and Rankin, *Golden Age*, 161.

⁶ Biographical data indicate that 155 of the 157 for whom labor background is known came from one of these employments; 144 had been in the merchant service. Probably fewer than 5% of pirates originated as mutineers. See *History of Pyrates*, 116, 196, 215-216; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 203; deposition of Richard Symes, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXII, 319; and *ibid.*, XXXIII, 365 on volunteers.

⁷ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson . . .* (London, 1791), 86.

⁸ Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXV (1968), 379, 375-376, 406; Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York, 1946), 246-247, 257, 262-268; *History of Pyrates*, 244, 359; A. G. Course, *The Merchant Navy: A Social History* (London, 1963), 61; Samuel Cox to Council of Trade, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXII, 393; Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping*

Some pirates had served in the navy where conditions aboard ship were no less harsh. Food supplies often ran short, wages were low, mortality was high, discipline severe, and desertion consequently chronic. As one officer reported, the navy had trouble fighting pirates because the king's ships were "so much disabled by sickness, death, and desertion of their seamen."⁹ In 1722 the crown sent the *Weymouth* and the *Swallow* in search of a pirate convoy. Royal surgeon John Atkins, noting that merchant seamen were frequently pressed, underlined precisely what these sailors had to fear when he recorded that the "*Weymouth*, who brought out of England a Compliment [*sic*] of 240 Men," had "at the end of the Voyage 280 dead upon her Books."¹⁰ Epidemics, consumption, and scurvy raged on royal ships, and the men were "caught in a machine from which there was no escape, bar desertion, incapacitation, or death."¹¹

Pirates who had served on privateering vessels knew well that this employment was far less onerous than on merchant or naval ships: food was usually more plentiful, the pay considerably higher, and the work shifts generally shorter.¹² Even so, owing to rigid discipline and to other grievances, mutinies were not uncommon. On Woodes Rogers's spectacularly successful privateering expedition of 1708-1711, Peter Clark was thrown

Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (London, 1962), 144, 154-155; Nathaniel Uring, *The Voyages and Travels of Captain Nathaniel Uring*, ed. Alfred Dewar (London, 1726), xxviii, 176-178; Arthur Pierce Middleton, *Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of Chesapeake Bay in the Colonial Era* (Newport News, Va., 1953), 8, 13, 15, 18, 271, 281; Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200-1860: A Social Survey* (Rutherford, N.J., 1970), 249, 264; John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies . . .* (London, 1735), 261; G. T. Crook, ed., *The Complete Newgate Calendar . . .*, III (London, 1926), 57-58; S. Charles Hill, "Notes on Piracy in Eastern Waters," *Indian Antiq.*, LVI (1927), 130; Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 126.

⁹ Gov. Lowther to Council of Trade, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXIX, 350; Morris, *Government*, 247; Lemisch, "Jack Tar," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXV (1968), 379; Davis, *English Shipping*, 133-137; R. D. Merriman, ed., *Queen Anne's Navy: Documents Concerning the Administration of the Navy of Queen Anne, 1702-1714* (London, 1961), 170-172, 174, 221-222, 250; Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 44-46, 124-149; Peter Kemp, *The British Sailor: A Social History of the Lower Deck* (London, 1970), chaps. 4, 5; Arthur N. Gilbert, "Buggery and the British Navy, 1700-1861," *Journal of Social History*, X (1976-1977), 72-98.

¹⁰ Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 139, 187; *The Historical Register, Containing an Impartial Relation of All Transactions . . .*, VII (London, 1722), 344.

¹¹ Merriman, *Queen Anne's Navy*, 171. Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 44, estimates that 1/2 of all men pressed between 1600 and 1800 died at sea.

¹² Course, *Merchant Navy*, 84; Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 57; Edward Cooke, *A Voyage to the South Sea, and Round the World . . .*, I (London, 1712), v-vi, 14-16; Woodes Rogers, *A Cruising Voyage Round the World*, ed. G. E. Manwaring (New York, 1928 [orig. publ. London, 1712]), xiv, xxv; George Shelvocke, *A Voyage Round the World . . .* (London, 1726), 34-36, 38, 46, 157, 214, 217; William Betchag, *A Voyage Round the World . . .* (London, 1728), 4.

into irons for wishing himself "aboard a Pirate" and saying that "he should be glad that an Enemy, who could over-power us, was a-long-side of us."¹³

Whether from the merchant service, the navy, or the privateering enterprise, pirates necessarily came from seafaring employments. Piracy emphatically was not an option open to landlubbers since sea-robbers "entertain'd so contemptible a Notion of Landmen."¹⁴ Men who became pirates were grimly familiar with the rigors of life at sea and with a single-sex community of work.

Ages are known for 117 pirates active between 1716 and 1726. The range was seventeen to fifty years, the mean 27.4, and the median 27; the twenty-to-twenty-four and the twenty-five-to-twenty-nine age categories had the highest concentrations, with 39 and 37 men respectively. Significantly, 59.3 percent were aged twenty-five or older. Given the high mortality rates within the occupations from which pirates came, these ages were advanced.¹⁵ Though evidence is sketchy, most pirates seem not to have been bound to land and home by familial ties or obligations. Wives and children are rarely mentioned in the records of trials of pirates, and pirate vessels, to forestall desertion, often would "take no Married Man."¹⁶ Almost without exception, pirates came from the lowest social classes. They were, as a royal official condescendingly observed, "desperate Rogues" who could have little hope in life ashore.¹⁷ These traits served as bases of unity when men of the sea decided, in search of something better, to become pirates.

These characteristics had a vital bearing on the ways pirates organized their daily activities. Contemporaries who claimed that pirates had "no regular command among them" mistook a different social order—different from the ordering of merchant, naval, and privateering vessels—for disorder.¹⁸ This social order, articulated in the organization of the pirate ship, was conceived and deliberately constructed by the pirates them-

¹³ Rogers, *Cruising Voyage*, 205. See also Shelvocke, *Voyage*, 43, 221-225.

¹⁴ *History of Pyrates*, 228.

¹⁵ See above, n. 3. Ages were taken at time of first known piracy.

¹⁶ Only 23 in the sample of 521 are known to have been married. In pirate confessions, regrets were often expressed to parents, seldom to wives or children. See Cotton Mather, *Useful Remarks: An Essay upon Remarkables in the Way of Wicked Men: A Sermon on the Tragical End, unto which the Way of Twenty-Six Pirates Brought Them; At New Port on Rhode-Island, July 19, 1723 . . .* (New London, Conn., 1723), 38-42; and *Trials of Eight Persons Indited for Piracy . . .* (Boston, 1718), 24, 25. Quotation from John Barnard, *Ashton's Memorial: An History of the Strange Adventures, and Signal Deliverances of Mr. Philip Ashton . . .* (Boston, 1725), 3.

¹⁷ Peter Haywood to Council of Trade, Dec. 3, 1716, C.O. 137/12, P.R.O.; Lemisch, "Jack Tar," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXV (1968), 377; Davis, *English Shipping*, 114. Biographical data show that 71 of 75 class backgrounds were of low status.

¹⁸ Betagh, *Voyage*, 148.

selves. Its hallmark was a rough, improvised, but effective egalitarianism that placed authority in the collective hands of the crew.

A striking uniformity of rules and customs prevailed aboard pirate ships, each of which functioned under the terms of written articles, a compact drawn up at the beginning of a voyage or upon election of a new captain, and agreed to by the crew. By these articles crews allocated authority, distributed plunder, and enforced discipline.¹⁹ These arrangements made the captain the creature of his crew. Demanding someone both bold of temper and skilled in navigation, the men elected their captain. They gave him few privileges: he “or any other Officer is allowed no more [food] than another man, nay, the Captain cannot keep his Cabbin to himself.”²⁰ A merchant captain held captive by pirates noted with displeasure that crew members slept on the ship wherever they pleased, “the Captain himself not being allowed a Bed.”²¹ The crew granted the captain unquestioned authority “in fighting, chasing, or being chased,” but “in all other Matters whatsoever” he was “governed by a Majority.”²² As the majority elected, so it could depose. Captains were snatched from their positions for cowardice, cruelty, or refusing “to take and plunder English Vessels.”²³ One captain incurred the class-conscious wrath of his crew for being too “Gentleman-like.”²⁴ Occasionally, a despotic captain was summarily executed. As pirate Francis Kennedy explained, most sea-robbers, “having suffered formerly from the ill-treatment of their officers, provided carefully against any such evil” once they arranged their own command.²⁵

To prevent the misuse of authority, countervailing powers were designated for the quartermaster, who was elected to protect “the Interest of

¹⁹ *History of Pyrates*, 167, 211-213, 298, 307-308, 321; Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 37; H.C.A. 1/55, f. 23, P.R.O.; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 220; Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 337; Rankin, *Golden Age*, 31. The vast differences between pirate and privateer articles can be seen by comparing the above to Rogers, *Cruising Voyage*, xiv, xxv, 22-23; Shelvocke, *Voyage*, 34-36, 159, 218, 223; Cooke, *Voyage*, iv-vi; and Betagh, *Voyage*, 205-206.

²⁰ Clement Downing, *A Compendious History of the Indian Wars . . .* (London, 1924 [orig. publ. London, 1737]), 99; *History of Pyrates*, 121, 139, 167-168, 195, 208, 214, 340, 352; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 199; *Trials of Eight Persons*, 24; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 152; Roberts, *Four Years Voyages*, 39.

²¹ Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 217; *History of Pyrates*, 213-214.

²² *History of Pyrates*, 139; Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 37; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 153; Burg, “Legitimacy and Authority,” *Am. Neptune*, XXXVII (1977), 40-49.

²³ Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 294; *History of Pyrates*, 139, 67; Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 217; *Trials of Eight Persons*, 23; Morris, “Ghost of Kidd,” *N.Y. Hist.*, XIX (1938), 282.

²⁴ Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 199; Burg, “Legitimacy and Authority,” *Am. Neptune*, XXXVII (1977), 44-48.

²⁵ Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 37; *History of Pyrates*, 42, 296, 337.

the Crew."²⁶ His tasks were to adjudicate minor disputes, distribute food and money, and in some instances to lead attacks on prize vessels. He served as a "civil Magistrate" and dispensed necessities "with an Equality to them all."²⁷ The quartermaster often became the captain of a captured ship when the captor was overcrowded or divided by discord. This containment of authority within a dual executive was a distinctive feature of social organization among pirates.²⁸

The decisions that had the greatest bearing on the welfare of the crew were generally reserved to the council, a body usually including every man on the ship. The council determined such matters as where the best prizes could be taken and how disruptive dissension was to be resolved. Some crews continually used the council, "carrying every thing by a majority of votes"; others set up the council as a court. The decisions made by this body constituted the highest authority on a pirate ship: even the boldest captain dared not challenge a council's mandate.²⁹

The distribution of plunder was regulated explicitly by the ship's articles, which allocated booty according to skills and duties. Captain and quartermaster received between one and one-half and two shares; gunners, boatswains, mates, carpenters, and doctors, one and one-quarter or one and one-half; all others got one share each.³⁰ This pay system represented a radical departure from practices in the merchant service, Royal Navy, or privateering. It leveled an elaborate hierarchy of pay ranks and decisively reduced the disparity between the top and bottom of the scale. Indeed, this must have been one of the most egalitarian plans for the disposition of resources to be found anywhere in the early eighteenth century. The scheme indicates that pirates did not consider themselves wage laborers but rather risk-sharing partners. If, as a noted historian of piracy,

²⁶ *History of Pyrates*, 423; Lloyd Haynes Williams, *Pirates of Colonial Virginia* (Richmond, 1937), 19.

²⁷ Roberts, *Four Years Voyages*, 37, 80; *The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet and Other Pirates . . .* (London, 1719), 37; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 199-200, 238-239; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 153; *History of Pyrates*, 213-225; *Trials of Eight Persons*, 24, 25; *Tryals of Thirty-Six Persons for Piracy . . .* (Boston, 1723), 9; *Boston News-Letter*, July 15-22, 1717. Quotations from *History of Pyrates*, 213; Downing, *Indian Wars*, 99.

²⁸ Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 151; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 272; *History of Pyrates*, 138-139, 312. Davis, *English Shipping*, 113, discusses the quite different role of the quartermaster in the merchant service.

²⁹ *History of Pyrates*, 88-89, 117, 145, 167, 222-225, 292, 595; *Trials of Eight Persons*, 24; Downing, *Indian Wars*, 44, 103; H.C.A. 24/132, P.R.O.; Hill, "Episodes of Piracy," *Indian Antiq.*, XLIX (1920), 41-42, 59; Roberts, *Four Years Voyages*, 55, 86; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 153. Quotation from Betagh, *Voyage*, 148.

³⁰ *History of Pyrates*, 211-212, 307-308, 342-343; Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 146-147; Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 37; *Tryals of Bonnet*, 22; Morris, "Ghost of Kidd," *N.Y. Hist.*, XIX (1938), 283.

Philip Gosse, has suggested, "the pick of all seamen were pirates,"³¹ the equitable distribution of plunder and the conception of the partnership may be understood as the work of men who valued and respected the skills of their comrades. But not all booty was dispensed this way. A portion went into a "common fund" to provide for the men who sustained injury of lasting effect.³² The loss of eyesight or any appendage merited compensation. By this welfare system pirates attempted to guard against debilities caused by accidents, to protect skills, and to promote loyalty within the group.

The articles also regulated discipline aboard ship, though "discipline" is perhaps a misnomer for a rule system that left large ranges of behavior uncontrolled. Less arbitrary than that of the merchant service and less codified than that of the navy, discipline among pirates always depended on a collective sense of transgression. Many misdeeds were accorded "what Punishment the Captain and Majority of the Company shall think fit," and it is noteworthy that pirates did not often resort to the whip. Their discipline, if no less severe in certain cases, was generally tolerant of behavior that provoked punishment in other maritime occupations. Three major methods of discipline were employed, all conditioned by the fact that pirate ships were crowded: an average crew numbered near eighty on a 250-ton vessel. The articles of Bartholomew Roberts's ship revealed one tactic for maintaining order: "No striking one another on board, but every Man's Quarrels to be ended on Shore at Sword and Pistol." Antagonists were to fight a duel with pistols, but if both their first shots missed, then with swords, and the first to draw blood was declared the victor. By taking such conflicts off the ship (and symbolically off the sea), this practice promoted harmony in the crowded quarters below decks.³³ The ideal of harmony was also reflected when, in an often-used disciplinary action, pirates made a crew member the "Governor of an Island." Men who were incorrigibly disruptive or who transgressed important rules were marooned. For defrauding his mates by taking more than a proper share of plunder,

³¹ See above, n. 20; Gosse, *History of Piracy*, 103; Biddulph, *Pirates of Malabar*, x, 155; and [John Fillmore], "A Narrative of the Singular Sufferings of John Fillmore and Others on Board the Noted Pirate Vessel Commanded by Captain Phillips," Buffalo Historical Society, *Publications*, X (1907), 32.

³² *History of Pyrates*, 212, 308, 343; Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 147; pirate Jeremiah Huggins, quoted in Morris, "Ghost of Kidd," *N.Y. Hist.*, XIX (1938), 292; Hill, "Episodes of Piracy," *Indian Antiq.*, XLIX (1920), 57.

³³ *History of Pyrates*, 307, 212, 157-158, 339; see above, n. 4. James F. Shepherd and Gary M. Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade, and the Economic Development of Colonial North America* (Cambridge, 1972), 201-203, show that for the ports of Jamaica (1729-1731), Barbados (1696-1698), and Charleston (1735-1739) respectively, merchant seamen in vessels over 150 tons handled 8.6, 10.7, and 12.0 tons per man. Pirates, by more general calculations, handled only 3.1 tons per man; the difference reveals how much more crowded their ships were.

for deserting or malingering during battle, for keeping secrets from the crew, or for stealing, a pirate risked being deposited "where he was sure to encounter Hardships."³⁴ The ultimate method of maintaining order was execution. This penalty was exacted for bringing on board "a Boy or a Woman" or for meddling with a "prudent Woman" on a prize ship, but was most commonly invoked to punish a captain who abused his authority.³⁵

Some crews attempted to circumvent disciplinary problems by taking "no Body against their Wills."³⁶ By the same logic, they would keep no unwilling person. The confession of pirate Edward Davis in 1718 indicates that oaths of honor were used to cement the loyalty of new members: "at first the old Pirates were a little shy of the new ones, . . . yet in a short time the *New Men* being sworn to be faithful, and not to cheat the Company to the Value of a *Piece of Eight*, they all consulted and acted together with great unanimity, and no distinction was made between *Old* and *New*."³⁷ Yet for all their efforts to blunt the cutting edge of authority and to maintain harmony and cohesion, conflict could not always be contained. Occasionally, upon election of a new captain, men who favored other leadership drew up new articles and sailed away from their former mates.³⁸ The social organization constructed by pirates, although flexible, was unable to accommodate severe, sustained conflict. The egalitarian and collective exercise of authority by pirates had both negative and positive effects. Although it produced a chronic instability, it also guaranteed continuity: the very process by which new crews were established helped to ensure a social uniformity and, as we shall see, a consciousness of kind among pirates.³⁹

One important mechanism in this continuity can be seen by charting the connections among pirate crews. The accompanying diagram, arranged according to vessel captaincy, demonstrates that by splintering, by sailing in

³⁴ *Tryals of Bonnet*, 30; *History of Pyrates*, 211, 212, 342; Biddulph, *Pirates of Malabar*, 163-164; Rankin, *Golden Age*, 37.

³⁵ *History of Pyrates*, 212, 343; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 256; *American Weekly Mercury* (Philadelphia), May 30-June 6, 1723. This discussion of discipline takes into account not only the articles themselves but also observations on actual punishments from other sources.

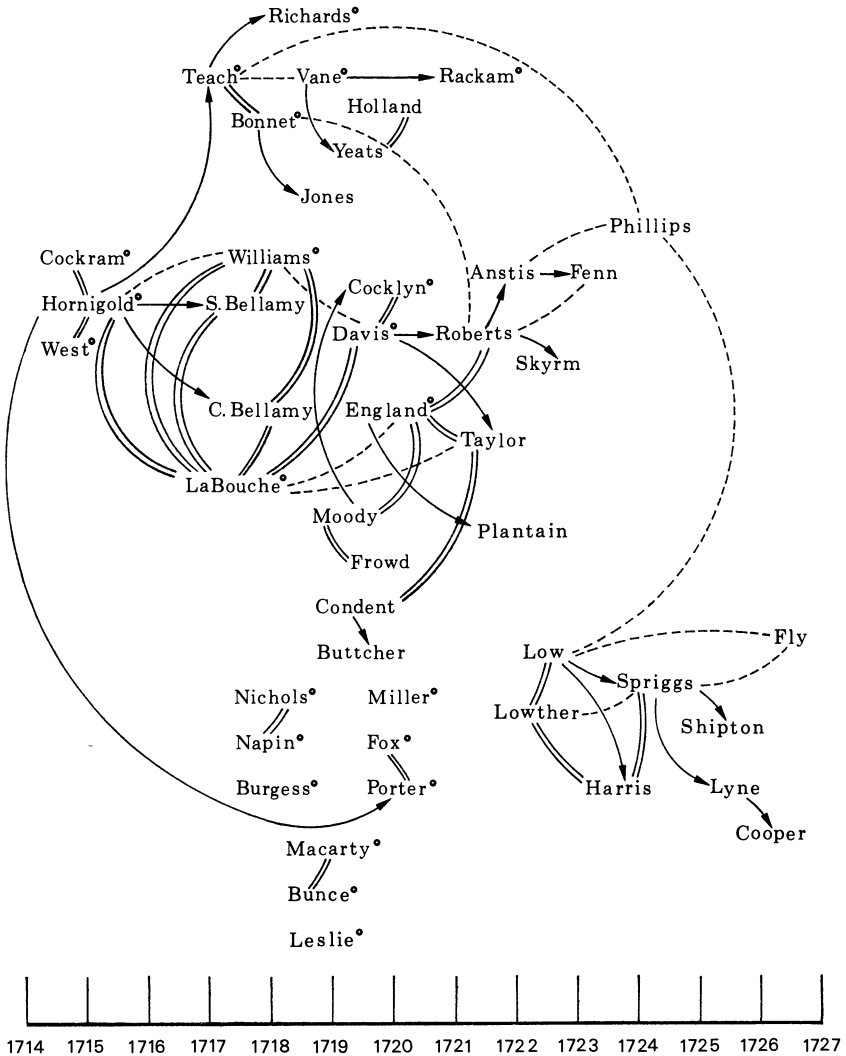
³⁶ Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 304; *Trials of Eight Persons*, 19, 21; Brock, ed., *Letters of Spotswood*, 249; *History of Pyrates*, 260. Some men, usually those with skills, were occasionally pressed: see *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXIII, 365.

³⁷ *Trials of Eight Persons*, 21; deposition of Samuel Cooper, 1718, C.O. 37/10, f. 35, P.R.O.; *History of Pyrates*, 116, 196, 216, 228; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 148; Gov. of Bermuda quoted in Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 181; deposition of Richard Symes, 1721, C.O. 152/14, f. 33, P.R.O.; *Am. Wkly Mercury*, Mar. 17, 1720; *New-England Courant* (Boston), June 25-July 2, 1722.

³⁸ Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 278; *History of Pyrates*, 225, 313; Lt. Gov. Bennett to Mr. Popple, Mar. 31, 1720, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXII, 19.

³⁹ Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 37; *History of Pyrates*, 226, 342.

CONNECTIONS AMONG ANGLO-AMERICAN PIRATE CREWS, 1714 TO 1726



- direct descent: crew division because of dispute, overcrowding, or election of a new captain
- sailed in consort
- other connection: common crew members, contact without sailing together
- used the Bahama Islands as rendezvous

consorts, or by other associations, roughly thirty-six hundred pirates—more than 70 percent of all those active between 1716 and 1726—fit into two main lines of genealogical descent. Captain Benjamin Hornigold and the pirate rendezvous in the Bahamas stood at the origin of an intricate lineage that ended with the hanging of John Phillips's crew in June 1724. The second line, spawned in the chance meeting of the lately mutinous crews of George Lowther and Edward Low in 1722, culminated in the executions of William Fly and his men in July 1726. It was primarily within and through this network that the social organization of the pirate ship took on its significance, transmitting and preserving customs and meanings, and helping to structure and perpetuate the pirates' social world.⁴⁰

Pirates constructed that world in defiant contradistinction to the ways of the world they left behind, in particular to its salient figures of power, the merchant captain and the royal official, and to the system of authority those figures represented and enforced. When eight pirates were tried in Boston in 1718, merchant captain Thomas Checkley told of the capture of his ship by pirates who "pretended," he said, "to be Robbin Hoods Men."⁴¹ Eric Hobsbawm has defined social banditry as a "universal and virtually unchanging phenomenon," an "endemic peasant protest against oppression and poverty: a cry for vengeance on the rich and the oppressors." Its goal is "a traditional world in which men are justly dealt with, not a new and perfect world"; Hobsbawm calls its advocates "revolutionary traditionalists."⁴² Pirates, of course, were not peasants, but they fit Hobs-

⁴⁰ The total of 3,600 is reached by multiplying the number of ship captains shown in the figure by the average crew size of 79.5. *History of Pyrates*, 41-42, 72, 121, 137, 138, 174, 210, 225, 277, 281, 296, 312, 352, 355, 671; *N.-Eng. Courant*, June 11-18, 1722; *Am. Wkly Mercury*, July 6-13, 1721, Jan. 5-12 and Sept. 16-23, 1725; Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 181, 190, 244; Biddulph, *Pirates of Malabar*, 135, 187; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 196-197, 199, 272, 280; Hughson, *Carolina Pirates*, 70; *Boston News-Letter*, Aug. 12-19, 1717, Oct. 13-20 and Nov. 10-17, 1718, Feb. 4-11, 1725, June 30-July 7, 1726; Downing, *Indian Wars*, 51, 101; Morris, "Ghost of Kidd," *N.Y. Hist.*, XIX (1938), 282, 283, 296; *Tryals of Bonnet*, iii, 44-45; Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 117, 135, 201, 283, 287; *Trials of Eight Persons*, 23; Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 304, 341; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXV, 198-199; Hill, "Notes on Piracy," *Indian Antiq.*, LVI (1927), 148, 150; Capt. Matthew Musson to Council of Trade, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXIX, 338; *ibid.*, XXXI, 21, 118; *ibid.*, XXXIII, 274; John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania . . .*, II (Philadelphia, 1844), 227; *Boston Gazette*, Apr. 27-May 4, 1724; C.O. 152/12, P.R.O.; C.O. 5/1319, P.R.O.; Additional Manuscripts 40806, 40812, 40813, Manuscripts Division, British Library.

⁴¹ Testimony of Thomas Checkley, 1717, in Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 304; *Trials of Eight Persons*, 11.

⁴² E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, 1959), 5, 17, 18, 27, 28; see also his *Bandits* (New York, 1969), 24-29.

bawm's formulation in every other respect. Of special importance was their "cry for vengeance."

Spotswood told no more than the simple truth when he expressed his fear of pirate vengeance, for the very names of pirate ships made the same threat. Edward Teach, whom Spotswood's men cut off, called his vessel *Queen Anne's Revenge*; other notorious craft were Stede Bonnet's *Revenge* and John Cole's *New York Revenge's Revenge*.⁴³ The foremost target of vengeance was the merchant captain. Frequently, "in a far distant latitude," as one seaman put it, "unlimited power, bad views, ill nature and ill principles all concur[red]" in a ship's commander. This was a man "past all restraint," who often made life miserable for his crew.⁴⁴ Spotswood also noted how pirates avenged the captain's "correcting" of his sailors. In 1722, merchant captains Isham Randolph, Constantine Cane, and William Halladay petitioned Spotswood "in behalf of themselves and other Masters of Ships" for "some certain method . . . for punishing mutinous & disobedient Seamen." They explained that captains faced great danger "in case of meeting with Pyrates, where we are sure to suffer all the tortures w[hi]ch such an abandoned crew can invent, upon the least intimation of our Striking any of our men."⁴⁵

Upon seizing a merchantman, pirates often administered the "Distribution of Justice," "enquiring into the Manner of the Commander's Behaviour to their Men, and those, against whom Complaint was made" were "whipp'd and pickled."⁴⁶ In 1724, merchant captain Richard Hawkins described another form of retribution, a torture known as the "Sweat": "Between decks they stick Candles round the Mizen-Mast, and about twenty-five men surround it with Points of Swords, Penknives, Compasses, Forks &c in each of their hands: *Culprit* enters the Circle; the Violin plays a merry Jig; and he must run for about ten Minutes, while each man runs his

⁴³ *The Tryals of Sixteen Persons for Piracy . . .* (Boston, 1726), 5; *Tryals of Bonnet*, iii, iv; Crook, *Newgate Calendar*, 61; Hughson, *Carolina Pirates*, 121; Rankin, *Golden Age*, 28; *History of Pyrates*, 116, 342; Downing, *Indian Wars*, 98. An analysis of the names of 44 pirate ships reveals the following patterns: 8 (18.2%) made reference to revenge; 7 (15.9%) were named *Ranger* or *Rover*, suggesting mobility and perhaps, as discussed below, a watchfulness over the treatment of sailors by their captains; 5 (11.4%) referred to royalty. It is noteworthy that only two names referred to wealth. Other names indicated that places (*Lancaster*), unidentifiable people (*Mary Anne*), and animals (*Black Robin*) constituted less significant themes. Two names, *Batchelor's Delight* and *Batchelor's Adventure*, tend to support the probability (p. 208, n. 16 above) the most pirates were unmarried. See *History of Pyrates*, 220, 313; William P. Palmer, ed., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers . . .*, I (Richmond, 1875), 194; and *Cal. St. Papers*, XXX, 263.

⁴⁴ Betagh, *Voyage*, 41.

⁴⁵ Petition of Randolph, Cane, and Halladay, 1722, in Palmer, ed., *Virginia State Papers*, 202.

⁴⁶ *History of Pyrates*, 338, 582; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 212, 225; Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 301; Uring, *Voyage*, ed. Dewar, xxviii. To pickle is to place in a salty solution; in this case, to put salt on the wounds.

Instrument into his Posteriors."⁴⁷ Many captured captains were "barbarously used," and some were summarily executed. Pirate Philip Lyne carried this vengeance to its bloodiest extremity, confessing when apprehended in 1726 that "during the time of his Piracy" he "had killed 37 Masters of Vessels."⁴⁸

Still, the punishment of captains was not indiscriminate, for a captain who had been "an honest Fellow that never abused any Sailors" was often rewarded by pirates.⁴⁹ The best description of pirates' notions of justice comes from merchant captain William Snelgrave's account of his capture in 1719. On April 1, Snelgrave's ship was seized by Thomas Cocklyn's crew of rovers at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River. Cocklyn was soon joined by men captained by Oliver LaBouche and Howell Davis, and Snelgrave spent the next thirty days among two hundred forty pirates.⁵⁰

The capture was effected when twelve pirates in a small boat came alongside Snelgrave's ship, which was manned by forty-five sailors. Snelgrave ordered his crew to arms; though they refused, the pirate quartermaster, infuriated by the command, drew a pistol. He then, Snelgrave testified, "with the but-end endeavoured to beat out my Brains," until "some of my People . . . cried out aloud 'For God sake don't kill our Captain, for we never were with a better Man.'" The quartermaster, Snelgrave noted, "told me, 'my Life was safe provided none of my People complained against me.' I replied, 'I was sure none of them could.'"⁵¹

Snelgrave was taken to Cocklyn, who told him, "I am sorry you have met with bad usage after Quarter given, but 'tis the Fortune of War sometimes. . . . [I]f you tell the truth, and your Men make no Complaints against you, you shall be kindly used." Howell Davis, commander of the

⁴⁷ Hawkins in Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 149-150; *History of Pyrates*, 352-353; Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 278; Betagh, *Voyage*, 26. This torture may have exploited that meaning of the verb "to sweat" which was to drive hard, to overwork. The construction of a literally vicious circle here seems hardly coincidental. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "sweat"; *Tryals of Sixteen Persons*, 14. Knowledge of this ritualized violence was evidently widespread. In 1722, Bristol merchants informed Parliament that pirates "study how to torture": see Stock, ed., *Proceedings and Debates of Parliaments*, 453. Torture was also applied to captains who refused to reveal the whereabouts of their loot. It seems that Spanish captains received especially harsh treatment.

⁴⁸ Crook, *Newgate Calendar*, 59; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXXII, 272; *Boston Gaz.*, Oct. 24-31, 1720; Rankin, *Golden Age*, 35, 135, 148; [Cotton Mather], *The Vial Poured Out upon the Sea: A Remarkable Relation of Certain Pirates . . .* (Boston, 1726), 21; Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, 227. Quotation from *Boston Gaz.*, Mar. 21-28, 1726. It should be stressed that Lyne's bloodletting was exceptional.

⁴⁹ *Boston News-Letter*, Nov. 14-21, 1720.

⁵⁰ Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 196, 199. This is a marvellous source written by an intelligent and perceptive man of long experience at sea. The book mainly concerns the slave trade, was addressed to the merchants of London, and apparently was not intended as popular reading.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 202-208.

largest of the pirate ships, reprimanded Cocklyn's men for their roughness and, by Snelgrave's account, expressed himself "ashamed to hear how I had been used by them. That they should remember their reasons for going a pirating were to revenge themselves on base Merchants and cruel commanders of Ships. . . . [N]o one of my People, even those that had entered with them gave me the least ill-character. . . . [I]t was plain they loved me."⁵²

Snelgrave's character proved so respectable that the pirates proposed to give him a captured ship with full cargo and to sell the goods for him. Then they would capture a Portuguese slaver, sell the slaves, and give the proceeds to Snelgrave so that he could "return with a large sum of Money to London, and bid the Merchants defiance."⁵³ The proposal was "unanimously approved" by the pirates, but fearing a charge of complicity, Snelgrave hesitated to accept it. Davis then interceded, saying that he favored "allowing every Body to go to the Devil in their own way" and that he knew that Snelgrave feared for "his Reputation." The refusal was graciously accepted, Snelgrave claiming that "the Tide being turned, they were as kind to me, as they had been at first severe."⁵⁴

Snelgrave related another revealing episode. While he remained in pirate hands, a decrepit schooner belonging to the Royal African Company sailed into the Sierra Leone and was taken by his captors. Simon Jones, a member of Cocklyn's crew, urged his mates to burn the ship since he had been poorly treated while in the company's employ. The pirates were about to do so when another of them, James Stubbs, protested that such

⁵² *Ibid.*, 212, 225. Piracy was perceived by many as an activity akin to war. See also *History of Pyrates*, 168, 319. Francis R. Stark, *The Abolition of Privateering and the Declaration of Paris* (New York, 1897), 14, 13, 22, claims that war in the 17th and early 18th centuries was understood in terms of "individual enmity" more than national struggle. Victors had "absolute right over (1) hostile persons and (2) hostile property." This might partially explain pirates' violence and destructiveness. Rankin, *Golden Age*, 146, correctly observes that "as more pirates were captured and hanged, the greater cruelty was practiced by those who were still alive."

⁵³ Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 241. For other examples of giving cargo to ship captains and treating them "civilly" see deposition of Robert Dunn, 1720, C.O. 152/13, f. 26, P.R.O.; deposition of Richard Symes, 1721, C.O. 152/14, f. 33; Biddulph, *Pirates of Malabar*, 139; Brock, ed., *Letters of Spotswood*, 339-343; *Boston Gaz.*, Aug. 21, 1721; Hill, "Episodes of Piracy," *Indian Antiq.*, XLIX (1920), 57; Morris, "Ghost of Kidd," *N.Y. Hist.*, XIX (1938), 283; Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, IV (Washington, D.C., 1935), 96; *Tryals of Bonnet*, 13; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVII, 616; deposition of Henry Bostock, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXX, 150-151; *Boston News-Letter*, Nov. 14-21, 1720; and Spotswood to Craggs, May 20, 1720: ". . . it is a common practice with those Rovers upon the pillageing of a Ship to make presents of other Commodity's to such Masters as they take a fancy to in Lieu of that they have plundered them of." C.O. 5/1319, P.R.O.

⁵⁴ Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 241, 242, 243.

action would only "serve the Company's interests" since the ship was worth but little. He also pointed out that "the poor People that now belong to her, and have been on so long a voyage, will lose their Wages, which I am sure is Three times the Value of the Vessel." The pirates concurred and returned the ship to its crew, who "came safe home to England in it." Captain Snelgrave also returned to England soon after this incident, but eleven of his seamen remained behind as pirates.⁵⁵

Snelgrave seems to have been an exceptionally decent captain. Pirates like Howell Davis claimed that abusive treatment by masters of merchantmen contributed mightily to their willingness to become sea-robbers. John Archer, whose career as a pirate dated from 1718 when he sailed with Edward Teach, uttered a final protest before his execution in 1724: "I could wish that Masters of Vessels would not use their Men with so much Severity, as many of them do, which exposes us to great Temptations."⁵⁶ William Fly, facing the gallows for murder and piracy in 1726, angrily said, "I can't charge myself,—I shan't own myself Guilty of any Murder,—Our Captain and his Mate used us Barbarously. We poor Men can't have Justice done us. There is nothing said to our Commanders, let them never so much abuse us, and use us like Dogs."⁵⁷ To pirates revenge was justice; punishment was meted out to barbarous captains, as befitted the captains' crimes.

Sea-robbers who fell into the hands of the state received the full force of penalties for crimes against property. The official view of piracy as crime was outlined in 1718 by Vice-Admiralty Judge Nicholas Trott in his charge to the jury in the trial of Stede Bonnet and thirty-three members of his crew at Charleston, South Carolina. Declaring that "the Sea was given by God for the use of Men, and is subject to Dominion and Property, as well as the Land," Trott observed of the accused that "the Law of Nations never granted to them a Power to change the Right of Property." Pirates on trial were denied benefit of clergy, were "called *Hostis Humani Generis*, with whom neither Faith nor Oath" were to be kept, and were regarded as "*Brutes, and Beasts of Prey*." Turning from the jury to the accused, Trott circumspectly surmised that "no further Good or Benefit can be expected from you but by the Example of your Deaths."⁵⁸

The insistence on obtaining this final benefit locked royal officials and pirates into a system of reciprocal terrorism. As royal authorities offered bounties for captured pirates, so too did pirates "offer any price" for cer-

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 275, 276, 284.

⁵⁶ *History of Pyrates*, 351; Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 341.

⁵⁷ [Mather], *Vial Poured Out*, 21, 48; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXXII, 272; Benjamin Colman, *It is a Fearful Thing to Fall into the Hands of the Living God* . . . (Boston, 1726), 39.

⁵⁸ *Tryals of Bonnet*, 2, 4, 3, 34. See also Hughson, *Carolina Pirates*, 5; *History of Pyrates*, 264, 377-379; Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 297; and Brock, ed., *Letters of Spotswood*, 339.

tain officials.⁵⁹ In Virginia in 1720 one of six pirates facing the gallows "called for a Bottle of Wine, and taking a Glass of it, he Drank Damnation to the Governour and Confusion to the Colony, which the rest pledged." Not to be outdone, Governor Spotswood thought it "necessary for the greater Terrour to hang up four of them in Chains."⁶⁰ Pirates demonstrated disdain for state authority when George I extended general pardons for piracy in 1717 and 1718. Some accepted the grace but refused to reform; others "seem'd to slight it," and the most defiant "used the King's Proclamation with great contempt, and tore it into pieces."⁶¹ One pirate crew downed its punch proclaiming, "Curse the King and all the Higher Powers."⁶² The social relations of piracy were marked by vigorous, often violent, antipathy toward traditional authority.

At the Charleston trial over which Trott presided, Richard Allen, attorney general of South Carolina, told the jury that "pirates prey upon all Mankind, their own Species and Fellow-Creatures without Distinction of Nations or Religions."⁶³ Allen was mistaken in one significant point: pirates did not prey on one another. Rather, they consistently expressed in numerous and subtle ways a highly developed consciousness of kind. Here we turn from the external social relations of piracy to the internal, in order to examine this consciousness of kind—in a sense, a strategy for survival—and the collectivistic ethos it expressed.

Pirates showed recurrent willingness to join forces at sea and in port. In April 1719, when Howell Davis and crew sailed into the Sierra Leone River, the pirates captained by Thomas Cocklyn were wary until they saw on the approaching ship "her Black Flag," then "immediately they were easy in their minds, and a little time after" the crews "saluted one another with their Cannon." Others crews exchanged similar greetings and, like Davis and Cocklyn who combined their powers, frequently invoked an unwritten code of hospitality to forge spontaneous alliances.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XIV, 295; XXI, 662; XXIV, 194; *History of Pyrates*, 79; *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXII, 168; Hill, "Episodes of Piracy," *Indian Antiq.*, XLIX (1920), 39; *Am. Wkly Mercury*, July 13-20, 1721.

⁶⁰ *Am. Wkly Mercury*, Mar. 17, 1720; Brock, ed., *Letters of Spotswood*, 338. For other cases of hanging in chains see *ibid.*, 342; Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 344; *Tryals of Sixteen Persons*, 19; *History of Pyrates*, 151; *Boston Gaz.*, Aug. 27-Sept. 3, 1722; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXIV, 201; and Gov. Hart to Council of Trade, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXIII, 275. For a brilliant analysis of this type of terror see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), chap. 2.

⁶¹ Deposition of Henry Bostock, 1717, C.O. 152/12, P.R.O.; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 253; *History of Pyrates*, 217; Spotswood to Board of Trade, May 31, 1717, C.O. 5/1318, P.R.O.; Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 315.

⁶² Deposition of Edward North, 1718, C.O. 37/10, P.R.O.

⁶³ *Tryals of Bonnet*, 8.

⁶⁴ Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 199; *History of Pyrates*, 138, 174; Morris, "Ghost of Kidd," *N.Y. Hist.*, XIX (1938), 282.

This communitarian urge was perhaps most evident in the pirate strongholds of Madagascar and Sierra Leone. Sea-robbers occasionally chose more sedentary lifeways on various thinly populated islands, and they contributed a notorious number of men to the community of logwood cutters at the Bay of Campeachy in the Gulf of Mexico. In 1718 a royal official complained of a "nest of pirates" in the Bahamas "who already esteem themselves a community, and to have one common interest."⁶⁵

To perpetuate such community it was necessary to minimize conflict not only on each ship but also among separate bands of pirates. Indeed, one of the strongest indicators of consciousness of kind lies in the manifest absence of discord between different pirate crews. To some extent this was even a transnational matter: French and Anglo-American pirates usually cooperated peaceably, only occasionally exchanging cannon fire. Anglo-American crews consistently refused to attack one another.⁶⁶

In no way was the pirate sense of fraternity, which Spotswood and others noted, more forcefully expressed than in the threats and acts of revenge taken by pirates. Theirs was truly a case of hanging together or being hanged separately. In April 1717, the pirate ship *Whidah* was wrecked near Boston. Most of its crew perished; the survivors were jailed. In July, Thomas Fox, a Boston ship captain, was taken by pirates who "Questioned him whether anything was done to the Pyrates in Boston Goall," promising "that if the Prisoners Suffered they would Kill every Body they took belonging to New England."⁶⁷ Shortly after this incident, Teach's sea-rovers captured a merchant vessel and, "because she belonged to Boston, [Teach] alledging the People of Boston had hanged some of the Pirates, so burnt her." Teach declared that all Boston ships deserved a similar fate.⁶⁸ Charles Vane, reputedly a most fearsome pirate, "would give no quarter to the Bermudians" and punished them and "cut away their masts upon account of one Thomas Brown who was (some time) detain'd in these Islands upon suspicion of piracy." Brown apparently had plans to sail as Vane's consort until foiled by his capture.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ James Craggs to Council of Trade, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXI, 10; Board of Trade to J. Methuen, Sept. 3, 1716, C.O. 23/12, P.R.O.; *History of Pyrates*, 315, 582; Downing, *Indian Wars*, 98, 104-105; Uring, *Voyages*, ed. Dewar, 241; Shelvocke, *Voyage*, 242; H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia*, III (Richmond, 1928), 612; Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 341; deposition of R. Lazenby in Hill, "Episodes of Piracy," *Indian Antiq.*, XLIX (1920), 60; [Anonymous], "Voyage to Guinea, Antego, Bay of Campeachy, Cuba, Barbadoes, &c, 1714-1723," Add. MS, 39946, British Library.

⁶⁶ *Boston News-Letter*, Aug. 15-22, 1720; *Am. Wkly Mercury*, Sept. 6-13, 1722.

⁶⁷ Trial of Thomas Davis, 1717, in Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 308; *Boston News-Letter*, Nov. 4-11, 1717.

⁶⁸ *Tryals of Bonnet*, 45.

⁶⁹ Lt. Gov. Benjamin Bennet to Council of Trade, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXX, 263; *Tryals of Bonnet*, 29, 50; *History of Pyrates*, 195.

In September 1720, pirates captained by Bartholomew Roberts "openly and in the daytime burnt and destroyed . . . vessels in the Road of Basseterre [St. Kitts] and had the audaciousness to insult H. M. Fort," avenging the execution of "their comrades at Nevis." Roberts then sent word to the governor that "they would Come and Burn the Town [Sandy Point] about his Ears for hanging the Pyrates there."⁷⁰ In 1721, Spotswood relayed information to the Council of Trade and Plantations that Roberts "said he expected to be joined by another ship and would then visit Virginia, and avenge the pirates who have been executed here."⁷¹ The credibility of the threat was confirmed by the unanimous resolution of the Virginia Executive Council that "the Country be put into an immediate posture of Defense." Lookouts and beacons were quickly provided, and communications with neighboring colonies effected. "Near 60 Cannon," Spotswood later reported, were "mounted on sundry Substantial Batteries."⁷²

In 1723 pirate captain Francis Spriggs vowed to find a Captain Moore "and put him to death for being the cause of the death of [pirate] Lowther," and, shortly after, similarly pledged to go "in quest of Captain Solgard," who had overpowered a pirate ship commanded by Charles Harris.⁷³ In January 1724, Lieutenant Governor Charles Hope of Bermuda wrote to the Board of Trade that he found it difficult to procure trial evidence against pirates because residents "feared that this very execution wou'd make our vessels fare the worse for it, when they happen'd to fall into pirate hands."⁷⁴

Pirates also affirmed their unity symbolically. Some evidence indicates that sea-robbers may have had a sense of belonging to a separate, in some manner exclusive, speech community. Philip Ashton, who spent sixteen months among pirates in 1722, noted that "according to the Pirates usual Custom, and *in their proper Dialect*, asked me, If I would sign their Articles."⁷⁵ Many sources suggest that cursing, swearing, and blaspheming

⁷⁰ Gov. Walter Hamilton to Council of Trade, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXII, 165; *Am. Wkly Mercury*, Oct. 27, 1720; *Boston Gaz.*, Oct. 24-31, 1720.

⁷¹ Spotswood to Council of Trade, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXII, 328.

⁷² Council Meeting of May 3, 1721, in McIlwaine, *Council of Colonial Virginia*, 542; abstract of Spotswood to Board of Trade, June 11, 1722, C.O. 5/1370, P.R.O.; Spotswood to Board of Trade, May 31, 1721, C.O. 5/1319.

⁷³ Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 281-282; *History of Pyrates*, 355; *Am. Wkly Mercury*, May 21-28, 1724.

⁷⁴ Hope to Council of Trade, Jan. 14, 1724, C.O. 37/11, f. 37, P.R.O. See also Treasury Warrant to Capt. Knott, Aug. 10, 1722, T52/32, P.R.O. Capt. Luke Knott, after turning over eight pirates to authorities, prayed relief for "his being obliged to quit the Merchant Service, the Pirates threatning to Torture him to death if ever he should fall into their hands." Robert Walpole awarded Knott £230 for the loss of his career.

⁷⁵ Barnard, *Ashton's Memorial*, 2, 4; emphasis added. Perhaps this was what M.A.K. Halliday has called an anti-language. This is "the acting out of a distinct social structure [in speech]; and this social structure is, in turn, the bearer of an

may have been defining traits of this style of speech. For example, near the Sierra Leone River a British official named Plunkett pretended to cooperate with, but then attacked, the pirates with Bartholomew Roberts. Plunkett was captured, and Roberts

upon the first sight of Plunkett swore at him like any Devil, for his Irish Impudence in daring to resist him. Old Plunkett, finding he had got into bad Company, fell a swearing and cursing as fast or faster than Roberts; which made the rest of the Pirates laugh heartily, desiring Roberts to sit down and hold his Peace, for he had no Share in the Pallaver with Plunkett at all. So that by meer Dint of Cursing and Damning, Old Plunkett . . . sav'd his life.⁷⁶

Admittedly we can see only outlines here, but it appears that the symbolic connectedness, the consciousness of kind, extended into the domain of language.

Certainly the best known symbol of piracy is the flag, the Jolly Roger. Less known and appreciated is the fact that the flag was very widely used: no fewer, and probably a great many more, than two thousand five hundred men sailed under it.⁷⁷ So general an adoption indicates an advanced state of group identification. The Jolly Roger was described as a "black

alternative social reality." An anti-language exists in "the context of resocialization." See his "Anti-Languages," *American Anthropologist*, LXXVIII (1976), 572, 575.

⁷⁶ Smith, *New Voyage*, 42-43. See also Morris, "Ghost of Kidd," *N.Y. Hist.*, XIX (1938), 286.

⁷⁷ Anthropologist Raymond Firth argues that flags function as instruments of both power and sentiment, creating solidarity and symbolizing unity. See his *Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1973), 328, 339; Hill, "Notes on Piracy," *Indian Antiq.*, LVI (1927), 147. For particular pirate crews known to have sailed under the Jolly Roger, see *Boston Gaz.*, Nov. 29-Dec. 6, 1725 (Lyne); *Boston News-Letter*, Sept. 10-17, 1716 (Jennings? Leslie?); *ibid.*, Aug. 12-19, 1717 (Napin, Nichols); *ibid.*, Mar. 2-9, 1719 (Thompson); *ibid.*, May 28-June 4, 1724 (Phillips); *ibid.*, June 5-8, 1721 (Rackham?); Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 317 (Roberts); *Tryals of Sixteen Persons*, 5 (Fly); Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 199 (Cocklyn, LaBouche, Davis); *Trials of Eight Persons*, 24 (Bellamy); Hughson, *Carolina Pirates*, 113 (Moody); *Tryals of Bonnet*, 44-45 (Bonnet, Teach, Richards); Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 208 (Harris), 213 (Low); Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 152 (Spriggs); Biddulph, *Pirates of Malabar*, 135 (Taylor); Donnan, ed., *Documents of the Slave Trade*, 96 (England); and *History of Pyrates*, 240-241 (Skyrm), 67-68 (Martel), 144 (Vane), 371 (captain unknown), 628 (Macarty, Bunce), 299 (Worley). Royal officials affirmed and attempted to reroute the power of this symbolism by raising the Jolly Roger on the gallows when hanging pirates. See *History of Pyrates*, 658; *N.-Eng. Courant*, July 22, 1723; and *Boston News-Letter*, May 28-June 4, 1724. The symbols were commonly used in the gravestone art of this period and did not originate with piracy. The argument here is that new meanings, derived from maritime experience, were attached to them.

Ensign, in the Middle of which is a large white Skeleton with a Dart in one hand striking a bleeding Heart, and in the other an Hour Glass."⁷⁸ Although there was considerable variation in particulars among these flags, there was also a general uniformity of chosen images. The flag background was black, adorned with white representational figures. The most common symbol was the human skull, or "death's head," sometimes isolated but more frequently the most prominent feature of an entire skeleton. Other recurring items were a weapon—cutlass, sword, or dart—and an hour glass.⁷⁹

The flag was intended to terrify the pirates' prey, but its triad of interlocking symbols—death, violence, limited time—simultaneously pointed to meaningful parts of the seaman's experience, and eloquently bespoke the pirates' own consciousness of themselves as preyed upon in turn. Pirates seized the symbol of mortality from ship captains who used the skull "as a marginal sign in their logs to indicate the record of a death."⁸⁰ Seamen who became pirates escaped from one closed system only to find themselves encased in another. But as pirates—and only as pirates—these men were able to fight back beneath the somber colors of "King Death" against those captains, merchants, and officials who waved banners of authority.⁸¹ Moreover, pirates self-righteously perceived their situation and the excesses of these powerful figures through a collectivistic ethos that had been forged in the struggles for survival.

The self-righteousness of pirates was strongly linked to the "traditional world in which men are justly dealt with," as described by Hobsbawm.⁸² It found expression in their social rules, their egalitarian social organization, and their notions of revenge and justice. By walking "to the Gallows without a Tear," by calling themselves "Honest Men" and "Gentlemen," and by speaking self-servingly but proudly of their "Conscience" and "Honor," pirates flaunted their certitude.⁸³ When, in 1720, ruling groups concluded that "nothing but force will subdue them," many pirates responded by intensifying their commitment.⁸⁴ It was observed of Edward Low's crew in 1724 that they "swear, with the most direful Imprecations, that if ever they should find themselves overpower'd they would immediately

⁷⁸ Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 152. Pirates also occasionally used red or "bloody" flags.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Hill, "Episodes of Piracy," *Indian Antiq.*, XLIX (1920), 37.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*; Snelgrave, *Account of the Slave-Trade*, 236.

⁸² See above, n. 42.

⁸³ *History of Pyrates*, 286, 43, 244, 159, 285, 628, 656, 660; Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 39; Rankin, *Golden Age*, 155; [Mather], *Vial Poured Out*, 47; Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 341; Lt. Gen. Mathew to Gov. Hamilton, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXII, 167; Bartholomew Roberts, the pirate, to Lt. Gen. Mathew, *ibid.*, 169.

⁸⁴ Gov. Hamilton to Council of Trade, *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXII, 165.

blow their ship up rather than suffer themselves to be hang'd like Dogs." These sea-robbers would not "do Jolly Roger the Disgrace to be struck."⁸⁵

This consciousness of kind among pirates manifested itself in an elaborate social code. Through rule, custom, and symbol the code prescribed specific behavioral standards intended to preserve the social world that pirates built for themselves. As the examples of revenge reveal, royal officials recognized the threat of the pirates' alternative order. Some authorities feared that pirates might "set up a sort of Commonwealth"⁸⁶—a correct designation—in uninhabited regions, since "no Power in those Parts of the World could have been able to dispute it with them."⁸⁷ But the consciousness of kind never took national shape, and piracy was soon suppressed. We now turn to the general social and economic context of the crime and its culture.

Contemporary observers seem to have attributed the rise of piracy to the demobilizing of the Royal Navy at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession. A group of Virginia merchants, for instance, wrote to the Admiralty in 1713, setting forth "the apprehensions they have of Pyrates molesting their trade in the time of Peace."⁸⁸ The navy plunged from 49,860 men at the end of the war to 13,475 just two years later, and only by 1740 did it increase to as many as 30,000 again.⁸⁹ At the same time, the expiration of privateering licenses—bills of marque—added to the number of seamen loose and looking for work in the port cities of the empire. Such underemployment contributed significantly to the rise of piracy,⁹⁰ but it is not a sufficient explanation since, as already noted, the vast majority of those who became pirates were working in the merchant service at

⁸⁵ Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 153. For similar vows and actual attempts see *Tryals of Bonnet*, 18; *History of Pyrates*, 143, 241, 245, 298, 317; *Cal. St. Papers*, XXXII, 168; Dow and Edmonds, *Pirates of New England*, 239, 292; Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, 227; Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 296-297; Atkins, *Voyage*, 12; Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 315; Arthur L. Cooke, "British Newspaper Accounts of Blackbeard's Death," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXI (1953), 305-306; *Am. Wkly Mercury*, June 16-23, 1720; *Tryals of Thirty-Six*, 9; and Spotswood to Board of Trade, Dec. 22, 1718, C.O. 5/1318, P.R.O.

⁸⁶ Cotton Mather, *Instructions to the Living, From the Condition of the Dead: A Brief Relation of Remarkables in the Shipwreck of above One Hundred Pirates . . .* (Boston, 1717), 4; meeting of Apr. 1, 1717, in H. C. Maxwell Lyte, ed., *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations . . .*, III (London, 1924), 359.

⁸⁷ *History of Pyrates*, 7.

⁸⁸ Virginia Merchants to Admiralty, 1713, C.O. 389/42, P.R.O.

⁸⁹ Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 287, Table 3.

⁹⁰ Jameson, ed., *Privateering and Piracy*, 291; Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 95; Lydon, *Pirates, Privateers, and Profits*, 17-20; Rankin, *Golden Age*, 23; Nellis M. Crouse, *The French Struggle for the West Indies* (New York, 1943), 310.

the moment of their joining. The surplus of labor at the end of the war had jarring social effects. It produced an immediate contraction of wages; merchant seamen who made 45-50s. per month in 1708 made only half that amount in 1713. It provoked greater competition for seafaring jobs, favorable to the hiring of older, more experienced seamen. And it would, over time, affect the social conditions and relations of life at sea, cutting back material benefits and hardening discipline.⁹¹ War years, despite their dangers, provided seafarers with tangible benefits. The Anglo-American seamen of 1713 had performed wartime labor for twenty of the previous twenty-five years, and for eleven years consecutively. But conditions did not worsen immediately after the war. As Ralph Davis explains, "the years 1713-1715 saw—as did immediate post-war years throughout the eighteenth century—the shifting of heaped-up surpluses of colonial goods, the movement of great quantities of English goods to colonial and other markets, and a general filling in of stocks of imported goods which had been allowed to run down."⁹² This small-scale boom gave employment to some of the seamen who had been dropped from naval rolls. But by late 1715, a slump in trade began, to last into the 1730s. All of these difficulties were exacerbated by the century-long trend in which "life on board [a merchant] ship was carried on amid a discipline which grew harsher with the passage of time."⁹³ Many seamen knew that things had once been different and, for many, decisively better.

By 1726, the menace of piracy had been effectively suppressed by governmental action. Circumstantial factors do not account for its demise. The number of men in the Royal Navy did increase from 6,298 in 1725 to 16,872 in 1726, and again to 20,697 in 1727. This increase probably had some bearing on the declining numbers of sea-robbers. Yet some 20,000 sailors had been in the navy in 1719 and 1720, years when pirates were numerous.⁹⁴ In addition, seafaring wages only twice rose above 24-25s. per month between 1713 and the mid-1730s: there were temporary increases to 30s. in 1718 and 1727.⁹⁵ Conditions of life at sea probably did not change appreciably until war broke out in 1739.

The pardons offered to pirates in 1717 and 1718 largely failed to rid the sea of robbers. Since the graces specified that only crimes committed at certain times and in particular regions would be forgiven, many pirates saw enormous latitude for official trickery and refused to surrender. Moreover, accepting and abiding by the rules of the pardon would have meant for most men a return to the dismal conditions they had escaped. Their tactic failing, royal officials intensified the naval campaign against piracy—

⁹¹ Davis, *English Shipping*, 136-137.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁹⁴ Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 287, Table 3; Davis, *English Shipping*, 27, 31.

⁹⁵ Davis, *English Shipping*, 136-137.

with great and gruesome effect. Corpses dangled in chains in British ports around the world "as a Spectacle for the Warning of others."⁹⁶ No fewer than four hundred, and probably five to six hundred, Anglo-American pirates were executed between 1716 and 1726.⁹⁷ The campaign to cleanse the seas was supported by clergymen, royal officials, and publicists who sought through sermons, proclamations, pamphlets and the newspaper press to create an image of the pirate that would legitimate his extermination. Piracy had always depended in some measure on the rumors and tales of its successes, especially among seamen and dealers in stolen cargo. In 1722 and 1723, after a spate of hangings and verbal chastisements, the pirate population began to decline. By 1726, only a handful of the fraternity remained.

Finally, pirates themselves unwittingly took a hand in their own destruction. From the outset, theirs had been a fragile social group. They produced nothing and were economically parasitic on the mercantile system. And they were widely dispersed, virtually without geographic boundaries. Try as they might, they were unable to create reliable mechanisms through which they could either replenish their ranks or mobilize their collective strength. These deficiencies of social organization made them, in the long run, easy prey.

We see in the end that the pirate was, perhaps above all else, an unremarkable man caught in harsh, often deadly circumstances. Wealth he surely desired, but a strong social logic informed both his motivation and his behavior. Emerging from lower-class backgrounds and maritime employments, and loosed from familial bonds, pirates developed common symbols and standards of conduct. They forged spontaneous alliances, refused to fight each other, swore to avenge injury to their own kind, and even retired to pirate communities. They erected their own ideal of justice, insisted upon an egalitarian, if unstable, form of social organization, and defined themselves against other social groups and types. So, too, did they perceive many of their activities as ethical and justified, not unlike the eighteenth-century crowds described by Edward Thompson.⁹⁸ But pi-

⁹⁶ Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 266-267; Violet Barbour, "Privateers and Pirates of the West Indies," *American Historical Review*, XVI (1910-1911), 566; Boyer, ed., *Political State*, XXVIII, 152; Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 37; [Anonymous], "A Scheme for Stationing Men of War in the West Indies for better Securing the Trade there from Pirates," 1723, C.O. 323/8, P.R.O.; *Boston News-Letter*, July 7-14, 1726. Gary M. Walton, "Sources of Productivity Change in American Colonial Shipping, 1675-1775," *Economic History Review*, 2d Ser., XX (1967), 77, notes that the economic uncertainty occasioned by piracy declined after 1725.

⁹⁷ If the population range discussed above is accurate, about 1 pirate in 13 died on the gallows.

⁹⁸ E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, No. 50 (1971), 76-136.

rates, experienced as cooperative seafaring laborers and no longer disciplined by law, were both familiar with the workings of an international market economy and little affected by the uncertainties of economic change. Perhaps their dual relationship to the mode of production as free wage laborers and members of a criminal subculture gave pirates the perspective and resources to fight back against brutal and unjust authority, and to construct a new social order where King Death would not reign supreme. This was probably a contradictory pursuit: for many, piracy, as strategy of survival, was ill-fated.

Piracy, in the end, offers us an extraordinary opportunity. Here we can see how a sizeable group of Anglo-Americans—poor men in canvas jackets and tarred breeches—constructed a social world where they had “the choice in themselves.”⁹⁹ Theirs was truly a culture of masterless men: Pirates were as far removed from traditional authority as any men could be in the early eighteenth century. Beyond the church, beyond the family, beyond disciplinary labor, and using the sea to distance themselves from the powers of the state, they carried out a strange experiment. The social constellation of piracy, in particular the complex consciousness and egalitarian impulses that developed once the shackles were off, might provide valuable clarification of more general social and cultural patterns among the laboring poor. Here we can see aspirations and achievements that under normal circumstances would have been heavily muted, if not rendered imperceptible, by the power relationships of everyday life.

⁹⁹ Hayward, ed., *Remarkable Criminals*, 37. See also Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London, 1972).