

*Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail.* By Marcus Rediker. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014. Pp. ix, 223. \$26.95, cloth.

There are many histories written from the perspective of the Captain, the General, the King, and the President. While doubtlessly providing important insights, Marcus Rediker has sought to provide a different perspective, one “from below.” In *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail*, he examines a variety of experiences, employments, and escapades encountered by the poorest, weakest, most abused, and illicit members of the maritime community. Given that Rediker has studied this historical period for many years, the book does not disappoint in providing a rich depiction of times past.

In each chapter, Rediker examines a different person or place in society. Chapter 1 describes how sailors frequently, and with much enthusiasm, told stories of the sea. Rediker argues, that this served to transmit important cultural attributes. Chapters 2 and 3 follow the lives of Edward Barlow and Henry Pitman, a bitter sailor and a bonded laborer, respectively, who felt oppressed by the toils of life. Both chapters have a narrow focus with the hope of drawing some general lesson about what it meant to be an outsider during this period. Chapter 4 describes the pirate’s life, including discussions of the Jolly Roger, pirate culture, and their relationship with merchants and military officers. Chapter 5 examines the multiethnic groups of sailors, slaves, and mobs active during the American Revolution. This was a tumultuous time, during which the lowest classes occasionally grouped together to fight back against oppressive structures. Chapters 6 and 7 examine the transatlantic slaving trade, the riveting drama of the *Amistad* slave ship mutiny, and its popular depiction in the day. Throughout, Rediker tells a vivid story.

Historians and lay readers will find this a scintillating read. However, economic historians may be less gripped by Rediker’s tales. The main reason for this is that *Outlaws* lacks a clear analytical framework. Instead, Rediker relies on Marxist notions, and he does not explore or explain them in any depth. The characters of his stories, he contends, are exploited, alienated, and possess a sense of class-consciousness. However, the book does not explain how these can be examined empirically, how the theoretical mechanisms work, or how they help explain variation in observed outcomes of interest. The book also does not consider the alternative explanation that economic factors provide greater explanatory power.

Consider, for example, Rediker's analysis of pirates. He sees pirates as something akin to crusaders for social justice. To him, the best way to explain pirate activity is as class warfare against merchant captains and royal officials (p. 72). Thus, when pirates tortured merchantman victims, it was a dispensation of justice (p. 74). Rediker explains that pirates lived under an "egalitarian and collective exercise of authority" because of a shared "consciousness of kind among pirates" (p. 71). Merchant ships, by contrast, were ruled in a hierarchy by a captain who had little concern for the crew. Does ship organization simply reflect pirates' "highly developed consciousness," (p. 78) or do economic factors explain different organizational forms? Past work that uses economics to study pirates argues that the efficient organizational structure varies across ship types because of residual claimancy and monitoring costs (P. Leeson. "An-arrgh-chy: The Law and Economics of Pirate Organization." *Journal of Political Economy* 115, no. 6 [2007]: 1049-1094). On merchant ships, the owner of the ship was not onboard. His agent, the ship captain, had legal authority to punish with great brutality to ensure that the wage laborers delivered an acceptable return to the owner. Pirate ship organization was markedly different. All pirate members jointly owned the ship for the simple reason that they did not buy it—they stole it. Given that all pirate members were residual claimants and were on the ship, monitoring each person's effort was easier. This alternative explanation seems to offer substantial empirical support and is consistent with more general explanations of organization.

Likewise, Rediker argues that the widespread use of the Jolly Roger flag indicated "an advanced state of group identification... [that] eloquently bespoke the pirates' own consciousness of themselves as preyed upon" (p. 81-82). Through their battles with merchants and the military, the pirates had derived a "collectivistic ethos" (p. 82). One problem with this explanation is that, as Rediker notes, "there was considerable variation in particulars among these flags" (p. 81). If the flag represented their collective ethos, then what explains the variety of designs? An alternative explanation comes from signaling theory (P. Leeson. *The Invisible Hook*. New York: Princeton University Press. 2009: 82-106.). It is costly to commandeer a ship, for both the pirates and the victims. The Jolly Roger signaled a deal: if the ship surrendered peacefully the crew would not be harmed; if they fought back, they would be killed. However, killing a recalcitrant crew once onboard was costly, so rational pirates might renege on their promise by not killing crews who did fight back. Yet, this would undermine the credibility of the "surrender or die" offer, leading to inefficiently high levels of fighting. Pirates solved this

problem by developing reputations for keeping their promise. For this reason, each pirate crew had to distinguish itself (and reputation) from others. Hence, each ship designed its own flag. Not only does this argument explain the variation in flag styles, but it doesn't require appealing to class consciousness. It explains more with less.

Rediker has written a fascinating book, rich with historical detail. Nevertheless, for readers seeking explanations more than description, it is missing something crucial: either a more substantial discussion of Rediker's analytical framework or engagement with the explanations offered using the rational-choice tools of economics.

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