

# Atlantic pirates in the golden age history essay



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In *Villains of All Nations*, Marcus Rediker argues that piracy in the Atlantic rose in direct response to the fundamental issues of the period – roughly, 1710s to 1720s. Specifically, those issues are, as Rediker contends, concerns of class, questions of race, gender issues, and political rhetoric. In the chapters of *Villains*, the over-arching themes of work, class, and power are used to tie together the government and religious authorities of the Atlantic with the pirates who plundered against their legitimacy. In chapter one, he argues that pirates were bold political “terrorists” who challenged eighteenth-century social order by creating a more egalitarian seafaring lifestyle. Rediker contends that on both sides of the piracy issue – religious/political figures and pirates – was a world of terror. This terror, used by either side to, ironically, avoid fighting, was used to intimidate either side into submission. The author describes terror as a tool that either side used to defend their views of how the social order should be established and maintained. According to Rediker, pirates were “made up of all nations, and [attacked] the commerce of the world without respect for nation or property” (17). Chapter 2 presents the seafaring world of the eighteenth century through the unique eyes of the sailors. Next, the social demographics of pirate crews are described as mostly poor men who either mutinied and seized a merchant vessel or volunteered their sailing services when pirates boarded their vessel. The following three chapters (4-6) discuss piracy in terms of race, social, national, and economic backgrounds. In these chapters, Rediker argues that the true nature of pirate life a balance of contradictions: democratic, egalitarian, economically fair, and yet rebellious, anarchical and predatory. Chapter 6 presents the reader with images of the female pirate in which Rediker explores the political, economic, and symbolic

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dimensions of gender among pirates and the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. In chapters 7 and 8, Rediker argues that the “golden age” of piracy is an example of class warfare, which pitted the pirates against the emerging capitalism in the nation-states of the Atlantic. Within chapter 8, he discusses “the interrelated themes of death, apocalypse, hell, and self-destruction – fundamental matters of life and death and what they might have meant to these poor, motley, seafaring people in the early eighteenth century” (153). The conclusion essay neatly ties up his main contention that piracy rose as a response to the fundamental issues of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. However, it does leave the reader with the comparison of modern-day authorities to those of the eighteenth century and romanticizes the enigmatic pirates of that period.

Rediker provides his evidence through the use of newspaper articles, travel accounts, sermons, official correspondence, state papers, admiralty records, and other court documents. Also, he uses the painting *Liberty Leading the People* (Delacroix, 1830) as a way to have the reader visualize piracy within the thought process of the eighteenth century, as compared to the 1724 *General History of the Pyrates* by Captain Charles Johnson. Importantly and astoundingly, Rediker has compiled a list of 778 pirates that he uses for statistical analysis.

While Rediker engages the reader with his band of protagonists, there are some aspects of the book that remain questionable. He romanticizes the pirate and pirate culture: “These outlaws led audacious, rebellious lives, and we should remember them as long as there are powerful people and oppressive circumstances to be resisted” (176). Rediker paints the pirate as

a struggling, poor man (or woman) responding to issues of class, work conditions, race, gender, and political and religious rhetoric in the eighteenth century. Additionally, Rediker titles his book *Villains of All Nations*, yet the pirates he chooses to describe decidedly Anglo examples. Finally, he contends that piracy's impact on the Atlantic seafaring trade was a major hit to the budding trade economies of this area, but does include other Atlantic nations in his discussion. Including the Spanish, French, or Portuguese in his contention would serve to give more evidence for his contention. Despite these short-comings, Rediker does support his contention that piracy was result of the socio-economic issues of the eighteenth century. By using quantitative data and juxtaposing it against contemporary sources of the era, he is able to construct a well founded case that pirates, although terrorists of the period, were heroes to the population with their Robin Hood myth-like reputation. He says correctly, " we love pirates most of all because they were rebels" (176).

*Villains of All Nations* is a symbol of what popular culture has constructed out of this period of pirates, and a symbol that scholars have been able to see themes of rebellion and anarchy translated into ideas of democracy and egalitarianism that identify this period of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Though the book romanticizes the image of the pirate as a patriot of socio-economic equality, it does so through an analysis of quality evidence – sermons, newspapers, court documents. Pirates, as Rediker has painted them, are the early eighteenth-century versions of the American patriot. He adds, " pirates opposed the high and mighty of the day and by their actions became the villains of all nations" (176). That sentence could also

interchange pirates for colonists and nations for Britain in the discourse of the American Revolution. The history of piracy brings with it a place in the context of Atlantic history as a place of political, social, and economic interaction.

Throughout the readings and discussion in class of the eighteenth century, the fundamental issues Rediker speaks to - class, work, race, gender, and politics - are changing throughout this period and can only continue to do so with the impending American Revolution. In both the Chesapeake and New England colonial societies, these issues are brought up consistently. For example, in *Many Thousands Gone*, Ira Berlin contends that slavery makes black through a social construction that affects colonial America through slavery's construction of race. Similarly, pirates make villains and terrorists, according to Rediker. Finally, in Jon Butler's *Becoming America*, he argues that Americans were created through a model of simplification to elaboration to differentiation. In that model, politics play a role in the development of a differential American society. In Butler's model, he uses five categories of analysis: peoples, economy, politics, material things, and spirituality. In all these categories, there are rebels to the norm and in those rebel, are they not what Rediker defines a pirate as? Though Rediker clearly defines a pirate as a seafaring person, his definition can be applied to any person who attacks the cultural norms of the period. Hence, Rediker's *Villains of All Nations* belongs in the discourse of the colonial world as an example of early patriotism on one hand, and an example of terrorism on the other. Both examples work towards explaining a model of differentiation in becoming America, which is what the course was designed to attempt to answer.