A Motley Crew in the American Revolution
Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker

IN OCTOBER 1765 a mob of sailors wearing blackface and masks, armed with clubs and cutlasses, visited the home of a wealthy Charleston merchant named Henry Laurens. Eighty strong and warm with drink and anger, they had come to protest the Stamp Act, recently passed by Parliament to raise tax revenues in the American colonies. Responding to the rumor that Laurens had stored in his home the stamped paper everyone would be forced to buy in order to conduct the business of daily life, they chanted, “Liberty, Liberty, & Stamp'd Paper,” and demanded that he turn it over so that they could destroy it in an act of defiance. Laurens was rattled, as he later explained: they “not only menaced very loudly but now & then handled me pretty uncouthly.” Finally convinced that Laurens did not have the paper, the men dispersed across the waterfront, shedding their disguises and straggling into the smoky taverns and bare boardinghouses, onto the damp wharves and creaky ships.

Their protest had consequences. Parliament, taken aback by colonial resistance, would soon repeal the Stamp Act. And in Charleston, one thing would lead to another, as another mob would meet in January 1766 to cry again for liberty. This time the protesters were African slaves, whose action caused greater fear and “vast trouble throughout the province.” Armed patrols stalked the city's streets for almost two weeks, but the tumult continued. Since Charleston's harbor was crowded with ships, the seafarers were soon “in motion and commotion again,” styling themselves, said a cynical Laurens, the “Protectors of Liberty.” South Carolina Governor William Bull would later look back over the events of late 1765 and early 1766 and blame Charleston's turmoil on “disorderly negroes, and more disorderly sailors.”

Laurens and Bull identified a revolutionary subject often described by contemporaries as a “motley crew,” which has rarely been discussed in histories of the American Revolution. It is a subject whose history we have traced from the hydrarchy of the 1710s and 1720s to the slave revolts and urban insurrections of the 1730s and 1740s. The defeat of these movements allowed slavery and maritime trade to expand, as gangs of slaves extended plantation acreage and gangs of sailors manned ever growing fleets of naval and merchant vessels. Britain confirmed its primacy as the world's greatest capitalist power by defeating France in the Seven Years' War in 1763, protecting and enlarging its lucrative colonial empire and opening vast new territories in North America and the Caribbean for the hewing of wood and the drawing of water. And yet at the very moment of imperial triumph, slaves and sailors began a new cycle of rebellion.

Operations on sea and land, from mutiny to insurrection, made the motley crew the driving force of a revolutionary crisis in the 1760s and 1770s. Such actions helped to destabilize imperial civil society and pushed America toward the world's first modern colonial war for liberation. By energizing and leading the movement from below, the motley crew shaped the social, organizational, and intellectual histories of the era and demonstrated that the American Revolution was neither an elite nor a national event, since its genesis, process, outcome, and influence all depended on the circulation of proletarian experience around the Atlantic. That circulation would continue into the 1780s, as the veterans of the revolutionary movement in America carried their knowledge and experience to the eastern Atlantic,

initiating pan-Africanism, advancing abolitionism, and assisting in the revival of dormant traditions of revolutionary thought and action in England and, more broadly, in Europe. The motley crew would help to break apart the first British empire and to inaugurate the Atlantic's age of revolution.

For our purposes, two distinct meanings of “motley crew” must be defined. The first of these refers to an organized gang of workers, a squad of people performing either similar tasks or different ones contributing to a single goal. The gangs of the tobacco and sugar plantations were essential to the accumulation of wealth in early America. Equally essential were the crews assembled from the ship's company, or ship's people, for a particular, temporary purpose, such as sailing a ship, undertaking an amphibious assault, or collecting wood and water. These crews knew how to pull together, or to act in unison, not least because they labored beneath the whip. The first meaning, then, is technical and specific to the plantation and maritime labor processes. The economies of the eighteenth-century Atlantic depended on this unit of human cooperation.

The second meaning describes a sociopolitical formation of the eighteenth-century port or town. The “motley crew” in this sense was closely related to the urban mob and the revolutionary crowd, which, as we shall see, were usually armed agglomerations of various crews and gangs that possessed their own motility and were often independent of leadership from above. They provided the driving force from the Stamp Act crisis to the “Wilkes and Liberty” riots to the series of risings of the American Revolution. The revolts of the eighteenth-century Atlantic depended on this broader social form of cooperation.

When we say the crew was motley, we mean that it was multiethnic. This was, as we have noted, characteristic of the recruitment of ships' crews during and after the expansion of the maritime state under Cromwell. Such diversity was an expression of defeat—consider the deliberate mixing of languages and ethnicities in the packing of slave ships—but that defeat was transformed into strength by agency, as when a pan-African, and then an African American, identity was formed from the various ethnicities and cultures. Original “ethnic” designations, such as the “free-born Englishman,” could thus become generalized, as shown by…the African sailor Olaudah Equiano. …

Over time, the second (political) meaning emerged from the first (technical) one, broadening the cooperation, extending the range of activity, and transferring command from overseers or petty officers to the group itself. This transition was manifested in the actions of the motley crew in the streets of the port cities: as sailors moved from ship to shore, they joined waterfront communities of dockers, porters, and laborers, freedom-seeking slaves, footloose youth from the country, and fugitives of various kinds. At the peak of revolutionary possibility, the motley crew appeared as a synchronicity, or an actual coordination among, the “risings of the people” of the port cities, the resistance or African American slaves, and Indian struggles on the frontier. Tom Paine feared precisely this combination, but it never actually materialized. On the contrary, as we shall see, the reversal of revolutionary dynamics…shifted the milieu of the motley crew, as refugees, boat people, evacuees, and prisoners gave human form to defeat.

SAILORS

Sailors were prime movers in the cycle of rebellion, especially in North America, where they helped to secure numerous victories for the movement against Great Britain between 1765 and 1776. They led a series of riots against impressment beginning in the 1740s, moving Thomas Paine (in Common
Sense) and Thomas Jefferson (in the Declaration of Independence) to list that practice as a major grievance. Their militancy in port grew out of their daily work experience at sea, which combined coordinated cooperation with daring initiative. Sailors engaged on board ship in collective struggles over food, pay, work, and discipline, and they brought to the ports a militant attitude toward arbitrary and excessive authority, an empathy for the troubles of others, and a willingness to cooperate for the sake of self-defense. As Henry Laurens discovered, they were not afraid to use direct action to accomplish their goals. Sailors thus entered the 1760s armed with the traditions of hydrarchy. They would learn new tactics in the age of revolution, but so, too, would they contribute the vast amount they already knew.

Part of what sailors knew was how to resist impressment. This tradition had originated in thirteenth-century England and continued through the Putney Debates and the English Revolution, into the late seventeenth century with the expansion of the Royal Navy, and then on into the eighteenth with its ever-greater wartime mobilizations. When, after a quarter century's peace, England declared war against Spain in 1739, sailors battled and often defeated press-gangs in every English port. Fists and clubs flew in American ports as well, on Antigua, St. Kitts, Barbados, and Jamaica and in New York and New England. Seamen rioted in Boston in 1741, beating a sheriff and a magistrate who had assisted the press-gang... The following year, three hundred seamen armed with clubs, cutlasses, and axes attacked the commanding officer of the Astrea, and destroyed a naval barge. They rose twice more in 1745,...but [lost] two of their own to the flashing cutlasses of the press-gang. Admiral Peter Warren warned in 1745 that the sailors of New England were emboldened by a revolutionary heritage: they had, he wrote, “the highest notions of the rights and liberties of Englishmen, and indeed are almost Levellers.”

During the 1740s, sailors began to burn the boats in which the press-gangs came ashore to snatch bodies, cutting their contact with the men-of-war and making “recruitment” harder, if not impossible. Commander Charles Knowles wrote in 1743 that naval vessels pressing in the Caribbean “have had Their Boats haul'd up in the Streets and going to be Burned, & their Captains insulted by 50 Arm'd Men at a tim...
and “hanged upon a sign post.” Governor Shirley beat a hasty retreat to Castle William, where he remained until the riot ran its course. Meanwhile, armed sailors and laborers considered burning a twenty-gun ship being built for His Majesty in a local shipyard, then picked up what they thought was a naval barge, carried it through town, and set it afame on Boston Common. Commodore Knowles explained their grievance: “The Act [of 1746] against pressing in the Sugar Islands, filled the Minds of the Common People ashore as well as Sailors in all the Northern Colonies (but more especially in New England) with not only a hatred for the King's Service but [also] a Spirit of Rebellion each Claiming a Right to the same Indulgence as the Sugar Colonies and declaring they will maintain themselves in it.”

As sailors defended liberty in the name of right, they captured the attention of a young man named Samuel Adams, Jr. Employing what his enemies called “serpentine cunning,” and understanding “Human Nature, in low life” very well, Adams watched the motley crew defend itself and then translated its “Spirit of Rebellion” into political discourse. He used the Knowles Riot to formulate a new “ideology of resistance, in which the natural rights of man were used for the first time in the province to justify mob activity.” Adams saw that the mob “embodied the fundamental rights of man against which government itself could be judged,” and he justified the taking of violent, direct action against oppression. The motley crew's resistance to slavery thereby produced a breakthrough in revolutionary thought.

Adams thus moved from the “rights of Englishmen” to the broader, more universal idiom of natural rights and the rights of man in 1747, and one likely reason for this shift may be found in the composition of the crowd that instructed him. Adams faced a dilemma: how could he watch a crowd of Africans, Scotsmen, Dutchmen, Irishmen, and Englishmen battle the press-gang and then describe them as being engaged simply in a struggle for the "rights of Englishmen"? How could he square the apparently traditional Lockean ideas set forth in his Harvard master's thesis of 1743 with the activities of the "Foreign Seamen, Servants, Negroes and other Persons of mean and vile Condition" who led the riot 1747? The diversity of the rebellious subject forced his thought toward a broader justification. Adams would have understood that the riot was, literally, a case of the people's fighting for its liberty, for throughout the eighteenth century the crew of a ship was known as “the people,” who once ashore were on their “liberty.”

The mass actions of 1747 moved Adams to found a weekly publication called the Independent Advertiser, which expressed a remarkable even prophetic variety of radical ideas during its brief but vibrant life of less than two years. The paper reported on mutiny and resistance to the press-gang. It supported the natural right to self-defense and vigorously defended the ideas and practices of equality, calling, for example, for popular vigilance over the accumulation of wealth and an “Agrarian Law or something like it” (a Diggerlike redistribution of land) to support the poor workers of New England. It announced that “the reason of a People's Slavery, is…Ignorance of their own Power.” Perhaps the single most important idea to be found in the Independent Advertiser appeared in January 1748: “All Men are by Nature On a Level; born with an equal Share of Freedom, and endow'd with Capacities nearly alike.” These words reached back exactly a century, to the English Revolution and the Levellers' Agreement of the People, and simultaneously looked forward to the opening words of the Declaration of Independence of 1776.

Another connection between 1747 and 1776 may be detected in Jonathan Mayhew's sermon “A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers,” delivered and
published in Boston in early 1750. The eminent clergyman preached his sermon at a time when the riot and its consequences were still on the minds of townspeople, especially the traders and seafarers who made up his own West Church. By 1748 Mayhew's teachings were considered heretical enough to get one listener, a young Paul Revere, a whipping from his father for his waywardness. By early 1749 Mayhew was tending toward what some saw as sedition, asserting that it was not a sin to transgress an iniquitous law such as the one that legalized impressment. Mayhew defended regicide in his sermon of January 30, the anniversary of the execution of Charles I, which was to him no day of mourning but rather a day for remembering that Britons will not be slaves. Like Adams before him, he argued passionately for both civil disobedience and a right to resistance that utilized force; indeed, passive nonresistance, Mayhew claimed, was slavery. Mayhew's influential defense of the right to revolution could not have been made without the action of the riot and its examination by Sam Adams and the readers of the Independent Advertiser.

The ideas and practices of 1747 were refined and expanded during the 1760s and 1770s, when Jack Tar took part in almost every port-city riot, especially after the end of the Seven Years' War (1763), when the demobilization of the navy threw thousands out of work. For those who remained at sea, the material conditions (food, wages, discipline) of naval life deteriorated, causing many to desert. The Admiralty responded with terror: in 1764 deserters John Evans, Nicholas Morris, and John Tuffin received seven hundred lashes on the back; Bryant Diggers and William Morris were hanged. Admiral Alexander Colvill admitted that these were the “most severe punishments I ever knew to have been inflicted” for desertion. Such deadly discipline at sea imparted a desperate intensity to shoreside resistance once the press-gang resumed its work.

Sailors now revived their attack on the king's naval property. When a press-gang from H.M.S. St. John tried in June 1764 to capture a deserter on a Newport wharf, a mob of sailors and dockworkers counterattacked, recaptured the man, roughed up the lieutenant who led the press-gang, and “threatened to haul [the king's] schooner on shore, and burn her.” The crowd later went by boat to Goat Island, where it fired cannon at the St. John. A month later, a New York mob attacked a press-gang of the Chaleur and “drewed its boat before the City Hall and there burnt her.” The pressed men were let go, the naval captain was forced to offer a public apology, and all efforts made in court to convict members of the mob of wrongdoing failed. Soon after, another mob of maritime workers in Casco Bay, Maine, seized a press boat, “dragged her into the middle of Town” and threatened to burn her unless a group of pressed men were freed. In Newport in 1765 a mob made up of sailors, youths, and African Americans took over the press tender of H.M.S. Maidstone, carried it to a central location in town, and set it ablaze. As popular antagonism toward the customs service grew in the late 1760s, sailors began to attack its vessels as well. Thomas Hutchinson wrote that in Boston in 1768, “a boat, belonging to the custom-house, was dragged in triumph through the streets of the town, and burnt on the Common.” Seamen either threatened to or actually did torch other vessels belonging to the king in Wilmington, North Carolina and in Nevis 1765, in Newport again in 1769 and 1772, and twice in New York in 1775. Sailors thus warned local leaders not to sign press warrants, as they twisted the longest and strongest arm of state power.

In the late 1760s, sailors linked movements in England and America by engaging in revolts that combined workers’ riots over wages and hours with protests related to electoral politics (“Wilkes and Liberty,” in which the London mob supported John Wilkes, the journalist and ruling-class renegade, in
his battles with the king and Parliament). The sailors of London, the world's largest port played leading roles in both movements and in 1768 struck (i.e., took down) the sails of their vessels, crippling the commerce of the empire's leading city and adding the strike to the armory of resistance. Seamen's strikes would subsequently take place on both sides of the Atlantic with increasing frequency…. In leading the general strike of 1768 sailors drew upon traditions of hydrarchy to advance a proletarian idea of liberty. One writer, looking back on the uprising, explained, “Their ideas of liberty are the entering into [of] illegal combinations.” Such combinations were “a many headed monster which every one should oppose, because every one’s property is endangered by it; nay, the riches, strength, and glory of this kingdom must ever be insecure whilst this evil remains unchecked.”

Sailors also continued the struggle against impressment, battling press-gangs in the streets of London in 1770 (during the war against Spain) and 1776 (during the war against the American colonies, hardly a popular cause among sailors). “Nauticus” observed the clashes between seamen and the navy in London in the early 1770s and wrote ‘The Rights of the Sailors Vindicated’, in which he compared the sailor's life to slavery and defended the right to self-defense. He echoed the Putney Debates more than a century earlier when he imagined a sailor asking a magistrate, “I, who am as free-born as yourself, should devote my life and liberty for so trifling a consideration, purely that such wretches as you may enjoy your possessions in safety?” Like Sam Adams, Nauticas went beyond the rights of Englishmen, pitting the rights of private property against common rights and the “natural rights of an innocent subject.” John Wilkes also began to argue for the right to resist impressment in 1772.

The motley crew also helped to create an abolitionist movement in London in the mid-1760s by setting in motion the eccentric but zealous Granville Sharp, who became one of slavery's most implacable foes. The key moment was a meeting in 1765 in a queue at a London medical clinic between the obscure, flinty clerk and musician Sharp and a teenager named Jonathan Strong, formerly a slave in Barbados, who had been pummeled by his master into a crippled, swollen, nearly blind indigent. Sharp and his brother, a surgeon, nursed Strong back to health, but two years later his former master imprisoned and then sold him. To prevent further such inhumanity, the African sailor Olaudah Equiano pushed Sharp to study the law and the writ of habeas corpus, the most powerful legacy of the “free-born Englishman,” because it prohibited imprisonment or confinement without due process of law and trial by jury, and thus might be employed against impressment and slavery alike. Sharp believed that the law should be no respecter of persons and concluded in 1769 that the “common law and custom of England…is always favourable to liberty and freedom of man.” Especially moved by the struggles of black sailors on the waterfront, he used habeas to defend several who struggled to resist reenslavement, often by the press-gang. Sharp won a lasting victory in his legal defense of James Somerset in 1772, when the court limited the ability of slaveowners to possess and exploit their human property in England. Habeas corpus, however, was suspended in 1777, though not without opposition. The Robin Hood Club of London debated the question, “Would not suspending the Habeas Corpus Act be a proper measure at this juncture?” The negative carried the debate by a great majority….

Sailors and the dockside proletariat attacked slavery from another angle in 1775, when they went on strike in Liverpool, as three thousand men, women, and children assemble to protest a reduction in wages. When the authorities fired upon the crowd killing several, the strike exploded into open insurrection. Sailors “hoisted the red flag,” dragged ships' guns to the center of the city, and bombarded
the Mercantile Exchange, leaving “scarce a whole pane of glass in the neighborhood.” They also trashed the property of several rich slave-trading merchants. One witness to the strife in Liverpool wrote, “I could not help thinking we had Boston here, and I hear this is only the beginning of our sorrows.”

There was a literal truth to the observation that Boston, the “Metropolis of Sedition,” was casting its long shadow on English ports on the eve of the American Revolution. An anonymous eyewitness noted that multiethnic American sailors “were among the most active in the late tumults” of London in 1768. They were “wretches of a mongrel descent,” the” immediate sons of Jamaica, or African Blacks by Asiatic Mulatoes”… An escaped indentured servant named James Aitken, better known as Jack the Painter, took part in the Boston Tea Party, then returned to England to wage revolutionary arson in 1775 against the king's ships and shipyards, for which crime he was captured and hanged. The mobility of sailors and other maritime veterans ensured that both the experience and the ideas of opposition carried fast. If the artisans and gentlemen of the American Sons of Liberty saw their rebellion as but “one episode in a worldwide struggle between liberty and despotism,” sailors, who had a much broader experience of both despotism and the world, saw their own struggle as part of a long Atlantic contest between slavery and freedom.…

MOBS

The trajectories of rebellion among sailors and slaves intersected in seaport mobs, those crowd gathering thousands of men and women that created the crisis in the North American colonies. Like the New York conspirators of 1741, sailors and slaves fraternized in grogshops, dancing cellars, and “disorderly houses.” in Philadelphia's Hell Town and elsewhere, despite efforts by authorities to criminalize and prevent such meetings. They had been gathering together in Boston's northside and southside mobs since the 1740s. Indeed, perhaps the single most common description of the mob in revolutionary America was as a “Rabble of boys, sailors, and negroes.” Moreover, on almost every occasion when a crowd went beyond the planned objectives of the moderate leaders of the patriot movement, sailors and often slaves led the way. Motley mobs were central to protests against the Stamp Act (1765), the Quartering Acts (1765, 1774), the Townshend Revenue Act (1767), the increased power of the British customs service (1764-74), the Tea Act (1773), and the Intolerable Acts (1774). As multiethnic mobs helped to revive old ideas and to generate new ones, they were denounced as a many-headed hydra.

Multiracial mobs helped to win numerous victories for the revolutionary movement against… impressment. The heterogeneous rioters of Boston… inspired new ideas in 1747. In 1765, “Sailors, boys, and Negroes to the number of above Five Hundred” rioted against impressment in Newport, Rhode Island, and in 1767 a mob of “Whites & Blacks all arm'd” attacked Captain Jeremiah Morgan in a press riot in Norfolk. A mob of sailors, “sturdy boys & negroes” rose in the Liberty Riot in Boston in 1768. Jesse Lemisch has noted that after 1763, “armed mobs of whites and Negroes repeatedly manhandled captains, officers, and crews, threatened their lives, and held them hostage for the men they pressed.” Authorities…of New York knew that royal fortifications had to be “sufficient to secure against the Negroes or a mob.”
Why did African Americans fight the press-gang? Some probably considered impressment a death sentence and sought to avoid the pestilence and punishment that ravaged the men of the Royal Navy. Others joined anti-impressment mobs to preserve bonds of family or some degree of freedom that they had won for themselves. And many may have been drawn to the fight by the language and principles of the struggle against impressment, for on every dock, in every port, everywhere around the Atlantic, sailors denounced the practice of slavery plain and simple. Michael Corbett and several of his brother tars fought against being forced on board a man-o-war in the port of Boston in 1769, claiming that “they preferred death to such a life as they deemed slavery.” The Baptist minister John Allen reiterated what countless sailors had expressed in action and what Sam Adams had written years before: The people “have a right, by the law of God, of nature, and nations… to resist any military or marine force.” Allen then compared one form of enslavement to another. The press-gang, he insisted, “ought ever to be held in the most hateful contempt, the same as you would a banditti of slavemakers on the coast of Africa.” Salt was the seasoning of the antislavery movement.

The motley crew led a broad array of people into resistance against the Stamp Act, which taxed the colonists by requiring stamps for the sale and use of various commodities. Since the act affected all classes of people, all were involved in the protests, though sailors were singled out by many observers for their oppositional leadership and spirit. The refusal to use stamped paper (and to pay the tax) slowed commerce, which means that idle sailors, turned ashore without wages, became a volatile force in every port. Royal officials everywhere would have agreed with the customs agent in New York who saw the power of the “Mob…daily increasing and gathering Strength, from the arrival of seaman, and none going out, and who are the people that are most dangerous on these occasions, as their whole dependence for subsistence is upon trade.” Peter Oliver noted that after the Stamp Act riots, “The Hydra was roused. Every factious Mouth vomited out curses against Great Britain, & the Press rung its changes against Slavery.”

Boston’s mob took angry action against the property of stamp distributor Andrew Oliver on August 14, 1765, then twelve days later turned as even fiercer wrath against the house and refined belongings of Thomas Hutchinson, who cried out at the crowd, “You are so many Masannellos!” Others who detested the mob later singled out its leader Ebeneezer MacIntosh, as the incarnation of the shoeless fisherman [Masaniello] of Naples. Sailors soon carried the news and experiences of the tumults in Boston to Newport, where [two] loyalists suffered the same fate as Hutchinson… In Newport, where the mercantile economy depended upon the labor of sailors and dockworkers… A band of sailors known as the Sons of Neptune…led three thousand rioters in an attack on New York’s Fort George, the fortress of Royal authority. They followed the example of the insurrection of 1741 when they tried to burn it to the ground. In Wilmington, North Carolina, a “furious Mobb of Sailors &c.” forced the stamp distributor to resign. Sailors also led mass actions against the Stamp Act in Antigua, St, Kitts, and Nevis… Mob action continued in resistance to the Townshend Revenue Act and the renewed power of the British customs service in the late 1760s and early 1770s. Seamen drew on maritime custom to add a weapon to the arsenal of justice, using tar and feathers to intimidate British officials. The clunk of the brush in the tar bucket echoed behind Thomas Gage’s observation in 1769 that “the Officers of the Crown grow more timid, and more fearfull of doing their Duty every Day.”
The burning of the customs schooner *Gaspee* in Newport in 1772 proved to be another decisive moment for the revolutionary movement. “Lawless seamen” had often taken direct action against customs men, in Newport and elsewhere. After the *Gaspee* ran aground, sixty to seventy men swarmed out of three longboats to board the ship…to set the vessel afire. The troublemakers were subsequently charged with “high treason, viz.: levying war against the King,” which sailors’ burning of the king’s vessels had long signified. Merchants, farmers, and artisans may have been involved in the *Gaspee* affair, but sailors were clearly the leaders, as concluded…the king’s commission to investigate this new incident. The act of burning the vessel had been “committed by a number of bold, daring, rash enterprising sailors”…

Seaman also led Golden Hill and Nassau Street riots in New York City and the King Street Riot in Boston better remembered as the Boston Massacre. In both ports, sailors and other maritime workers resented the British soldiers who labored for lower-than-customary wages along the waterfront; in New York they also objected to the soldiers’ attacks on their fifty-eight-foot liberty pole (a ship’s mast). Rioting and street fighting ensued. Thomas Hutchinson and John Adams believed that the events in New York and Boston were related, perhaps through common participants. Adams, who defended the British soldiers at trial, called the mob that assembled on King Street on “the Fatal Fifth of March” nothing but a “motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and molattoes, Irish teagues, and out landish Jack Tarrs.” Their leader was Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave of African American and Native American descent whose home was the small free black community of Providence in the Bahama Islands. Seamen also took part in the direct actions of the several Tea Parties, after which Thomas Lamb exclaimed in New York, “We are in a perfect Jubilee!”

By the summer of 1775, seamen and slaves had helped to generate an enthusiasm described by Peter Timothy: “In regard to War & Peace, I can only tell you that the Plebeians are still for War—but the noblesse [are] perfectly pacific.” Ten years of insurrectionary direct action had brought the colonies to the brink of revolution. As early as during the Stamp Act protests of 1765, General Thomas Gage had recognized the menace of the mob: “This Insurrection is composed of great numbers of Sailors headed by Captains of Privateers,” as well as many people from the surrounding area, the whole amounting to “some thousands.” Late in 1776, Lord Barrington of the British Army claimed that colonial governments in North America had been “overturned by insurrections last summer, because there was not a sufficient force to defend them.” Sailors, laborers, slaves, and other poor workingmen provided much of the spark, volatility, momentum, and sustained militancy for the attack on British policy after 1765. During the Revolutionary War, they took part in mob actions that harassed Tories and diminished their political effectiveness.

“I found myself surrounded by a motley crew of wretches, with tethered garments and pallid visages,” wrote Thomas Dring as he began his imprisonment in 1782 aboard the notorious hulk *Jersey*, a British man-of-war serving as a prison ship in the East River of New York. Many thousands, especially sailors were charged with being “pirates” and “traitors” and herded into British prisons and prison ships after 1776. Philip Freneau, who spent two months in the *Scorpion* hulk, “doom’d to famine, shackles and despair,” composed “The British Prison Ship,” one of the era’s greatest poems, in 1780:

*Hunger and thirst to work our woe combine,*
*And mouldy bread, and flesh of rotten swine,*
*The mangled carcase, and the batter’d brain,*
Amid the hunger, thirst, rot, gore, terror, and violence, and the deaths, of seven or eight thousand of their fellow inmates during the war, the prisoners organized themselves according to egalitarian, collectivist, revolutionary principles. What had once functioned as “articles” among seamen and pirates now became “a Code of By-Laws…for their own regulation and government.” Equal before the rats, the smallpox, and the guard's cutlass, they practiced democracy, working to distribute food and clothing fairly, to provide medical care, to bury their dead. On one ship a common sailor spoke between decks on Sundays to honor those who died “in vindication of the rights of Man.” A captain who looked back with surprise on the self-organization of the prisoners remarked that the seamen were “of that class… who are not easily controlled, and usually not the most ardent supporters of good order.” But the sailors drew on the tradition of hierarchy as they implemented the order of the day: they governed themselves.

The motley crew thus provided an image of revolution from below that proved terrifying to Tories and moderate patriots alike. In his famous but falsified engraving of the Boston Massacre, Paul Revere tried to render the “motley rabble” respectable by leaving black faces out of the crowd and putting in entirely too many gentlemen. The South Carolina Council of Safety complained bitterly of the attacks of sailors—both “white and black armed men”—in December 1775. Elite colonists reached readily for images of monstrosity, calling the mob a “Hydra,” a “many-headed monster,” a “reptile,” and a “many-headed power.” Many-headedness implied democracy run wild, as Joseph Chalmers explained: A government that is too democratic “becomes a many-headed monster, a tyranny of many.” Against the revolutionary soldiers and sailors who fought beneath the banner of the serpent and the motto “Don't Tread on Me,” John Adams proposed Hercules as the symbol for the new nation.

Multiracial mobs under the leadership of maritime workers thus helped simultaneously to create the imperial crisis of the 1770s and to propose a revolutionary solution to it. The militancy of multiracial workers in Boston, Newport, New York, and Charleston led to the formation of the Sons of Liberty, the earliest intercolonial organization to coordinate anti-imperial resistance. Richard B. Morris wrote that New York's sailors “were organized as the Sons of Neptune, apparently antedating the Sons of Liberty, for whom they may well have provided the pattern of organization.” The commotion around the Gaspee incident of 1772 set in motion a new round of organization, for in the aftermath of this bold action, another revolutionary institution, the committee of correspondence, was established throughout the colonies. To loyalist Daniel Leonard, such committees were the “foulest, subtlest, and most venomous serpent ever issued from the egg of sedition.” But if the motley crew shaped the organizational history of the American Revolution, it had, as we have seen, all even greater impact upon its intellectual history, influencing the ideas of Samuel Adams, James Otis, Jr., Anthony Benezet, Thomas Paine, and John Allen. Action from below taken in Boston, in Saint Mary's Parish, Jamaica, and in London perpetuated old ideas and generated new ones that would circulate around the Atlantic for decades to come.

One of the main ideas kept alive by multiracial seaport crowds was the antinomian notion that moral conscience stood above the civil law of the state and therefore legitimimized resistance to oppression, whether against a corrupt minister of empire, a tyrannical slaveowner, or a violent ship's captain. David S.
Lovejoy has convincingly shown that a levelling spirit and an antinomian disdain of laws and government lay within the rising “political enthusiasm” of the revolutionary era. The higher-law doctrine historically associated with antinomianism would appear in secular form in the Declaration of Independence, denounced in its own day as an instance of “civil antinomianism.”

In its struggle against impressment in the 1760s and 1770s, the motley crew drew on ideas dating from the English Revolution, when Thomas Rainborough and the revolutionary movement of the 1640s had denounced slavery. In the second Agreement of the Free People of England (May 1649), the Levellers had explained the antinomian basis of their opposition to impressment: “We the free People of England” declared to the world that Parliament had no power to press any man into war, for each person must have the right to satisfy his own conscience as to the justice of such war. The Levellers thus made man and his conscience (not the citizen) the subject of the declaration, and life (not the nation) its object. Peter Warren was correct when he claimed that the sailors of New England were “almost Levellers”; as such, they expressed their opposition to impressment and to slavery more broadly, influenced Jefferson, Paine, and a whole generation of thinkers, and showed that revolutionary confrontation between upper and lower classes in the 1640s—and not the compromises of 1688 within the ruling orders—was the true precedent to the events of 1776….

The patriots struck against several meanings of slavery: taxation without representation, denial of free trade, limitations on the press, ecclesiastical intolerance, and the expense and intrusions of a standing army. Sailors and slaves, meanwhile, opposed other meanings: impressment, terror, working to death, kidnapping, and forcible confinement. Both groups objected to arbitrary arrest and judgment without peers or juries. These tolling bells revived distant, deeper memories from the English Revolution. Hence the importance of habeas corpus, or freedom from imprisonment without due process of law, the deepest tone in freedom's peal and fundamental to sailor, slave, and citizen. In the cycle of the American Revolution, Tacky struck the tocsin of freedom's uprising, and the Philadelphia Convention sounded the knell of its death, though the murmuring undertones would continue, in diminuendo, and in San Domingue.

COUNTERREVOLUTION

If the motley crew's audacious actions gave motion to the multiclass movement toward independence, they also generated commotion within it,—fear, ambivalence, and opposition. In New York, for example, the Sons of Liberty came into being as a reaction against the “threatened anarchy” of autonomous risings against the press and the Stamp Act in 1764 and 1765. Everywhere the Sons [of Liberty] began to advertise themselves as the guarantors of good order, as the necessary counterpoint to the upheaval within which they themselves had been born. By 1766 the propertied opponents of British policy had declared themselves for “ordered resistance.” In the aftermath of the Boston Massacre in 1770, John Adams defended the redcoats and made an explicitly racist appeal in court, claiming that the looks of the Afro-Indian sailor Crispus Attucks “would be enough to terrify any person.” But in 1773 he wrote a letter about liberty, addressed it to Thomas Hutchinson, and signed it, “Crispus Attucks.” Adams dreaded the motley crew, but he knew that it had made the revolutionary movement.
Similar contradictions haunted Thomas Jefferson, who acknowledged the motley crew but feared its challenge to his own vision of America's future. Jefferson included in the Declaration of Independence the complaint that King George III had “constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.” He (and Congress) included sailors in the revolutionary coalition but tendentiously simplified their history and role within the movement, leaving out the war of classes and emphasizing only the war of nations. The passage also lacks the graceful wording and lofty tone of the rest of the Declaration: it seems awkward, confused, especially in its indecision about how to classify the sailor (citizen, friend, brother?). Jefferson employed the “most tremendous words,” as Carl Becker said of the draft prose concerning African slavery, but “the passage somehow leaves us cold.” There is in it a “sense of labored effort, of deliberate striving for an effect that does not come.” As it happened, Jefferson added the words about impressment as an afterthought, squeezing them into his rough draft of the Declaration. He knew that the labor market was a serious problem in that mercantile age and that commerce would depend on sailors, whether America remained within the British Empire or not.

Thomas Paine knew it, too… The only question remaining was how to obtain independence: should it be done from above, by the legal voice of Congress, or should it be done from below, by the mob? Here Paine shared the attitudes of others of his station: he feared the motley mob (though he would think differently in the 1790s). The multitude, he explained, was reasonable in 1776, but “virtue” was not perpetual. Safeguards were necessary lest “some Massanello may hereafter arise, who laying hold of popular disquietudes, may collect together the desperate and the discontented, and by assuming to themselves the powers of government, may sweep away the liberties of the continent like a deluge.” His greatest fear lay in a concurrence of the struggles of urban workers, African slaves, and Native Americans.

The motley crew had helped to make the revolution, but the vanguard struck back in the 1770s and 1780s, against mobs, slaves, and sailors, in what must be considered an American Thermidor. The effort to reform the mob by removing its more militant elements began in 1766 and continued, not always successfully, through the revolution and beyond. Patriot landowners, merchants, and artisans increasingly condemned revolutionary crowds, seeking to move politics from “out of doors” into legislative chambers, in which the propertyless would have no vote and no voice. Paine, for his part, would turn against the crowd after Philadelphia’s Fort Wilson Riot of 1779. When Samuel Adams helped to draw up Massachusetts’s Riot Act of 1786, designed to be used to disperse and control the insurgents of Shays' Rebellion, he ceased to believe that the mob “embodied the fundamental rights of man against which government itself could be judged,” and detached himself from the creative democratic force that years before had given him the best idea of his life.

The moderate patriots had, since the beginning of the movement, in 1765, sought to limit the struggle for liberty by keeping slaves out of the revolutionary coalition. The place of slaves in the movement remained ambiguous until 1774, when Lord Dunmore, governor of Virginia, attacked the patriot tobacco planters by offering freedom to servants and slaves willing to join His Majesty’s army to

---

2 Because of the overthrow of the revolutionary radical Maximilian Robespierre and his followers in the French Revolution during the month “Thermidor” the word has come to mean a retreat from more radical goals and strategies during a revolution.
The plantation master extending the slave trade, providing for the return of fugitive slaves, and giving national political power to the institution of slavery.

The sailor would be encouraged to serve in the Continental Navy, but he was not, according to James Madison, a good citizen for a republic. What little virtue he must have had was deadened by his life as a dumb drudge at sea: “Though traversing and circumnavigating the globe, he sees nothing but the same vague objects of nature, the same monotonous occurrences in ports and docks; and at home in his vessel, what new ideas can shoot from the unvaried use of the ropes and the rudder, or from the society of comrades as ignorant as himself.” Madison's own ignorance, arrogance, or denial caused him to invert the truth, but he was right about something else: the greater the number of sailors in a republic as he suggested, the less secure its government. Madison was joined in these attitudes by many, including [those] who in 1787 wrote a poem entitled “The Anarchiad,” in response to Shays’ Rebellion and in memory of the cycle of revolt in the 1760s and 1770s. The poets expressed their hatred for mobs and their ideas. They sneered at “democratic dreams,” “the rights of man,” reduction of all “to just one level.” One of their darkest nightmares was what they called a “young DEMOCRACY from hell.” They had not forgotten the role of sailors in the revolution: in their imagined state of anarchy, the “mighty Jacktar guides the helm.” He had been “Nurs'd on the waves, in blust'ring tempests bred./ His heart of marble, and his brain of lead.” Having sailed “in the whirlwind” as a part of his work, this hard-hearted, thick-headed man naturally “enjoys the storm” of revolution. The poets alluded to the revolutionary acts of sailors when they referred to “seas of boiling tar.”

During the 1780s, such thinking came to prevail among those who made up the emerging political nation—merchants, professionals, shopkeepers, artisans, slaveowners, and yeoman farmers. Sailors and slaves, once necessary parts of the revolutionary coalition, were thus read out of the settlement at revolution's end. Of the five workingmen killed in the Boston Massacre in 1770, John Adams had written, “The blood of the martyrs, right or wrong, proved to be the seed of the congregation.” Yet had Crispus Attucks—slave, sailor, and mob leader—survived the fire of British muskets, he would not have been allowed to join the congregation, or new nation, he had helped to create. The exclusion of people like Attucks epitomized the sudden, reactionary retreat from the universalistic revolutionary language that had been forged in the heat of the 1760s and 1770s and permanently emblazoned in the Declaration of Independence. The reaction was canonized in the U.S. Constitution, which gave the new federal government the power to suppress domestic insurrections. James Madison worried in 1787 about a “levelling spirit” and an “agrarian law.” The Constitution also strengthened the institution of slavery by extending the slave trade, providing for the return of fugitive slaves, and giving national political power to the plantation master class. Meanwhile, an intensive debate about the nature and capacity of “the negro”
raged between 1787 and 1790. Many Baptists and Methodists backed away from antislavery positions and sought instead a “gospel made safe for the plantation.” The new American ruling class redefined “race” and “citizenship” to divide and marginalize the motley crew, legislating in the 1780s and early 1790s a unified law of slavery based on white supremacy. The actions of the motley crew, and the reactions against it, help to illuminate the clashing, ambiguous nature of the American Revolution—its militant origins, radical momentum, and conservative political conclusion.