

The Many Motivations of Jack Tar

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

The Many Motivations of Jack Tar

Andrew Parnaby

Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730–1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006)

Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004)

Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon 2004)

Daniel Vickers, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2005)

WITH THE PUBLICATION of “Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America” in 1968, Jesse Lemisch helped to transform the ways in which historians viewed the American Revolution. With ordinary seafarers, not founding fathers, at the centre of his analysis, Lemisch argued forcefully that the popular politics of the waterfront – in particular, seafarers’ opposition to the British navy’s repeated and “barbaric” use of the press to man its undermanned ships – braced the unfolding imperial crisis over taxation and representation with more radical language, behaviour, and objectives. Working from a PhD thesis completed at Yale University in 1963, Lemisch sought to rescue “jolly Jack Tar” – with his “bowed legs,” “baggy trousers,” and “foul mouth” – from the romanticism of popular culture and mystifications of conservative historiography, and reveal him for he what was: a thinking, craving, assertive historical actor in one of the 18th century’s most important political dramas. “Impressment meant the loss of freedom, both personal and economic, and, sometimes the loss of life itself. The seaman who defended himself against impressments felt that he was fighting to defend his ‘liberty,’ and he justified his resistance on the grounds of ‘right,’” Lemisch wrote. “It

is in the concern for liberty and right that the seaman rises from vindictiveness to a somewhat more complex awareness that certain values larger than himself exist and that he is the victim not only of cruelty and hardship, but also, in light of those values, of injustice."¹

With the appearance of *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* nearly twenty years later, Marcus Rediker – like Lemisch before him – pursued the hidden history of the Anglo-American seafarer in the early modern period.² While Lemisch felt the influence of British Marxist historiography only slightly, Rediker embraced the work of E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm thoroughly, and thus used the experiences of the “brotherhood of the deep” to explore the origins, logic, and implications of the transition to capitalism in the Atlantic world. For Rediker, then, the trans-Atlantic sailing ship prefigured the modern factory; seafarers were among the globe’s first wage workers; and the “wooden world,” with its endemic conflict between captains (the “devils”) and crews, gave form and texture to a plebian value system that flourished in port cities and beyond.³ Critically, in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, as in “Jack Tar in the Streets,” the self-activity of seafaring men propels the author’s analysis. Indeed, of particular importance to Rediker was not simply what happened to seafarers at the hands of merchants, captains, and lesser officers, but what maritime workers did for themselves – on deck, in the forecabin, and on shore – to be free from the brutal physical punishment and exploitative work conditions that characterized life at sea. Through work stoppages, desertions, strikes, mutinies, and piracies, Rediker argues, seafarers laid bare a “spirit of rebellion” – an impulse to action suffused by the values of collectivism, egalitarianism, and liberty. In doing so they changed not only their own lives, but the history of the Atlantic world more broadly.⁴ Amplified and extended in two subsequent publications – *The Many-Headed Hydra* (co-authored with Peter Linebaugh) and *Villains of All Nations* – Rediker’s influential vision of seafaring men as a trans-national, ocean-going proletariat-in-the-making has provoked considerable debate and reflection, much of it, as the books under review here suggest, centering on the utility of class as a category of analysis in the maritime context and the nature of seafarers’ political worldview.⁵

1. Jesse Lemisch, “Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (July 1968), 371–407. Lemisch’s dissertation was later published as *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of the Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York 1997). See also Lemisch, “The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up,” in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York 1968), 3–45.

2. Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge 1987).

3. Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 294.

4. Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 205.

5. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves,*

In *Liberty on the Waterfront*, Paul A. Gilje's meticulous analysis of the culture of American seafarers from the 1760s to the 1840s, Marcus Rediker is mentioned only once by name and only in passing. Yet it is clear, as this panoramic and deeply researched social history unfolds, that the author of *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* looms large, like St. Elmo's Fire around a masthead, and that Gilje is not especially entranced by the dazzling show.⁶ "Sailors were not a proletariat in the making, nor were they a peculiar kind of patriot," Gilje writes. "Jack Tar's penchant for pursuing his own interests and ideas evades the standard ideological boxes historians like to use." (6, 151) Eschewing the language and conceptual apparatus of historical materialism, Gilje argues that seafarers' culture was not characterized by a well-defined consciousness of class, but by a deeply set sense of personal liberty, which could be as divisive, selfish, and apolitical as it was unifying, collective, and politically engaged. Liberty is the book's unifying theme, and through a close reading of personal diaries and contemporary periodicals, as well as poetry, prose, and song, Gilje explores "its varied meanings for those who lived on the waterfront in the Age of Revolution." (xii) To this end, the first section of the book, which is organized thematically, provides a lively tour of seafarers' familiar habits and haunts – from "drinking, cursing, carousing, fighting, misbehaving, and spending to excess" in the waterfronts' many taverns, boarding houses, and brothels to working, resting, and resisting while aboard a sloop, schooner, brig, or barque. (24) Seafarers' conceptions of masculinity, both ashore and afloat, are touched upon here; so, too, are the domestic costs of going to sea.⁷ With a sharp eye for detail and a telling anecdote, Gilje presents this useful material well, ranging widely over decades (mid-18th century to mid-19th century), small and big ports (Marblehead to Baltimore to New York to Charleston), and facets of maritime life (from the whale fishery to the American navy). And along the way, he tacks closely to his core theme of liberty and the specific ways in which it shaped a man's life before the mast. "Liberty on the waterfront allowed the sailor to engage in a variety of long- and short-term heterosexual relationships," Gilje writes in chapter two. "Liberty at sea released the sailor, at least temporarily, from those relationships and compelled him to live in an all-male society where his imagination could run wild. He might long for absent loved

Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic (Boston 2000); Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston 2004).

6. For additional comment and criticism see "Roundtable: *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*," with contributions by Daniel Vickers, Lewis R. Fischer, Marilyn Porter, Sean Cadigan, Robert Lewis, Peter Narvaez, Peter Pope, and David J. Starkey in *International Journal of Maritime History*, 1, 1989, 311–357.

7. For more on gender and seafaring see Margaret Creighton and Lisa Norling, eds., *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920* (Baltimore and London 1996).

ones, or he might relish the freedom of the fraternity of the forecandle. Most likely, he did both.” (34)

Throughout this opening section of *Liberty on the Waterfront*, Gilje sets himself off from Rediker on numerous occasions, most obviously in his treatment of piracy.⁸ For Rediker, pirates were “revolutionary traditionalists”⁹ – primitive rebels who deployed terror and brutality to fight “the violent disciplinary regime of the deep-sea sailing ship” and the broader political and economic framework that sanctioned and upheld it. (17) This is the argument that holds *Villains of All Nations*, a collection of eight essays about pirates during the “golden age,” together. Here, as in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, piracy is situated firmly in the context of work, class, and power afloat, a natural, if extreme, byproduct of the endemic conflict between captains and crews during the transition to capitalism. Organized around egalitarian values, animated by a well-honed desire for justice and revenge, and committed to living “merrily all day,” pirates constructed a “new government of the ship,” a fragile utopian opposite of the tyrannical merchant vessel. (61, 73) Gilje’s pirates are cut from a different cloth. Whereas Rediker emphasizes the sharp character of class conflict on board a sailing vessel, Gilje stresses the ambiguity of power relations at sea, writing: “While in many instances the autocracy of the quarterdeck limited some aspects of sailors’ liberty aboard ship, the relationship between the quarterdeck and the forecandle was more often under constant negotiation.” (83) *Liberty on the Waterfront* thus presents pirates not as anarchic rebels, the Robin Hoods of the sea, but as criminals who “burned vessels with passengers and crew aboard, serially raped women, and tortured captives.” (90) Indeed, Gilje concludes, most sailors wanted little to do with the “brutality, illegality, and danger of piracy,” preferring, instead, to sympathize with the idealized, romanticized portrait of pirate life that circulated in story and song, rather than hoist the Jolly Roger themselves. (91)

Organized chronologically, parts two and three of Gilje’s analysis – “Revolution” and “Legacy” – explore seafarers’ conceptions of liberty from the American Revolution to the aftermath of the War of 1812. Like others before him, Gilje understands the pivotal role that seafaring men played, both politically and symbolically, in the tumultuous events of the 1760s and 1770s: from the boycotts against the Stamp Act in 1765 and 1766 to the Boston Massacre in 1770, the “sons of Neptune” helped move the “resistance movement toward greater social change and gave voice to a call for equality.” (106) The form and content of seafarers’ involvement, Gilje notes, was shaped decisively by their long history of collective action in port towns and cities, lengthy experience with British impressment, and commitment to republican principles, especially liberty. Yet, as the author asserts, that support for bigger ideals was not

8. Similar criticisms can be found in Benerson Little, *The Sea Rover’s Practice: Pirate Tactics and Techniques, 1630–1730* (Dulles, Virginia 2005).

9. Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 254–287.

always steadfast: seafarers were as likely to be motivated by their own self-interest – both personal and economic, “right there and then” – as they were by high-minded political objectives. (127) “People riot for specific reasons tied to grievances and larger social trends, but also because rioting can be fun,” Gilje observes. “[Seafarers were also] concerned with preserving the liberty to contract their own labor.” (104) The ambiguity of seafarers’ motivations – “These men cared little for abstractions” – was also evident in the context of patriotism. (127) In both the revolutionary war and the War of 1812, captured American sailors often chose to serve on British vessels in exchange for their early release from a royal prison. Here, again, Jack Tar’s individual choice is critical – more important, in this example, than national attachment. “Men fought in the war for many reasons – sometimes they were patriotic and sometimes they were mercenary. Often they were both,” the author concludes. “And, regardless of the larger issues at play, as in the street so also on the planks of a ship – sailors continued to pursue their own varied agendas.” (175)

As in his treatment of pirates, Gilje’s perspective on the role of seafaring men during the American Revolution is different than Rediker’s in important ways. Both historians agree that Jack Tar and his mates provided the “shock troops” – and those are Gilje’s words – for the resistance movement and that this involvement was shaped in large measure by their time spent ashore and afloat; however, they disagree profoundly on the precise nature of seafarers’ motivations and the broader implications of their revolutionary-era experiences. Gilje, as the above paragraph suggests, drains sailors’ participation in revolutionary crowds of much of its ideological content. More often than not, personal, not political, priorities were satisfied by such collective action. Not surprisingly, Gilje maintains in the third and final section of his book, that when seafaring men asserted their rights in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, they did so only after middle-class reformers and writers, such as Herman Melville and Richard Henry Dana, had brought the issues to the public’s attention. Only then, the author observes, did the “ideas of liberty from the Age of Revolution, [work] their way into the forecabin.” (245) Rediker’s angle of vision is entirely different. The seafaring men who appear in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, *Villains of All Nations*, and *The Many-Headed Hydra* cared tremendously for “abstractions”: they were part and parcel of an Atlantic subaltern experience and were conscious of the wider linkages to be found there. Alongside slaves, soldiers, peasants, pirates, and religious dissenters, seafarers were among the “outcast of the nations of the earth” – a “motley crew” whose members not only advanced and radicalized the American Revolution, but carried that conflict’s defining ideals forward into their proletarian experiences around the Atlantic world, spawning mutinies, insurrections, revolts, and movements for social change – such as abolition – wherever the winds and currents of the ocean took them.¹⁰ While Gilje’s mariners appear inward-

10. Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 211–47.

looking, contradictory, and somewhat powerless, Rediker's seafarers seem outward-facing, more resolute, and potentially powerful. "The globalizing powers have a long reach and endless patience," Rediker (and Linebaugh) assert. "Yet the planetary wanderers do not forget, and they are ever ready ... to resist slavery and restore the commons."¹¹

Well written, amply illustrated, and deeply researched, *Liberty on the Waterfront* is a provocative book. It presents an original, and certainly conservative, interpretation of seafaring men which stands in clear opposition to the bolder claims made by scholars working in the tradition of historical materialism. Gilje's attention to Jack Tar's desire for personal gain and gratification draws the reader's attention to the culture of seafarers' everyday life and away from the world of merchants, captains, and officers, something that good social history ought to do. Yet the author's use of liberty as the book's primary category of analysis, and his decision to write in opposition to Rediker on the strength of this particular category, brings with it one significant problem. Across eight well-crafted chapters, Gilje argues that seafarers' understanding of themselves and their place in society rarely displayed an overt or sustained consciousness of class: "varied" and "contradictory," Jack Tar was "pushed and pulled in many directions, and his values, consciousness, and understanding of liberty were peculiarly his own." (127) In this respect, he was no "proletariat" and thus, from the historian's perspective, defies "any grand characterization." (xiii, 32) This argument is problematic for it conflates class as an objective socio-economic presence with class as a subjective lived experience, then posits, oddly, that the absence of the latter, in the form of a well articulated sense of one's place in society, is evidence that the former does not matter much or does not exist at all. Jack Tar may have preferred "immediate liberty without regard for the long-term future or without regard to revolutionary principles" (129) – as Gilje suggests – but that doesn't mean he wasn't, still, a proletariat in the making, a "working man who got wet," only that his understanding of this shifting material position was mixed, ever-changing, and unpredictable.¹² With the question of class fenced off in this way, Gilje's historical gaze never penetrates fully the work process at sea, the political economy of specific port towns or cities, or the transition to capitalism – areas of investigation where the proletarian nature of Jack Tar's life may be more starkly drawn. Indeed, without a clearer sense of seafarers' collective experience and contribution as a class, Gilje's emphasis on their individual pursuit of their own sensual experiences comes dangerously close to reinforcing the older, stereotypical images of jolly Jack Tar, the rogue who cared only for ready money, women, and song – and little else.

Daniel Vickers's *Young Men and the Sea* is an eloquent, sophisticated analy-

11. Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 353.

12. Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting, eds., *Working Men Who Got Wet: Proceedings of the 4th Conference of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project* (St. John's 1980).

sis of “Yankee seafarers” from Salem, Massachusetts during the age of sail. Neither as conservative as Gilje nor as radical as Rediker, Vickers – with the extensive assistance of Vince Walsh – marshals an impressive array of primary sources to understand what drove young men to the sea. The book’s opening chapters, which ease the reader through the founding of the early Puritan Commonwealth and the settlement and expansion of Salem, make clear the deep, ongoing, and natural connections between pre-industrial colonial New England and the ocean. “This colony, whose history is usually presented in agrarian images, was in truth one of the most thoroughly maritime societies to be found during the seventeenth century anywhere around the North Atlantic rim,” the author observes. “Maritime labor was part of life.” (60) In other words, for the average Salemite, the sea was not strange or foreboding, but familiar and unexceptional: they lived by it and worked on it. Building on this set of observations, chapters three, four, and five – which together form the crux of Vickers’s argument – examine sailors’ lives at sea, the trajectory of their careers before (and after) the mast, and the character of shore-side life in Salem. Of particular importance, here, is Vickers’s revelation that seafaring men from this coastal town worked most of the time on small coastal vessels and often did so alongside their relatives and neighbours. This combination of small craft, short journeys, limited labour market, and personal intimacy produced a shipboard milieu in which hierarchies of rank and skill were muted and confrontation between masters and crews (seemingly) rare. “Customary understandings of work,” not class conflict, thus defined most voyages. (94) “Heavy discipline” – of the kind often described so graphically by Rediker – was rarely meted out. (241)

As in his previous monograph *Farmers and Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630–1850*, which revealed the “strict intergenerational dependency that suffused the New England countryside and the reins of clientage that ran throughout the fishery,” *Young Men and the Sea* is similarly focused on the question of “who worked for whom and under what terms.”¹³ But unlike that earlier, revisionist publication, which, as Vickers confides, “made a great deal of the border between land and sea and invested a lot of energy in explaining why people ever crossed it,” (ix) *Young Men and the Sea* draws land and sea so tightly together that the border between the two realms nearly dissolves, and with it the notion that going to sea was somehow a deviation from the agrarian economic norm. This perspective allows Vickers to track seafaring men’s work lives before, during, and after their time before the mast – an approach that neither Rediker nor Gilje utilizes – and thus argue convincingly that age, not the absence of opportunities due to landlessness or an obsession with personal liberty, explains male settlers’ desire to go to sea. Working on the water was a life stage, a customary right of passage, into

13. Daniel Vickers, *Farmers and Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630–1850* (Chapel Hill 1994), 326, viii.

adult life. "Nowhere in colonial New England could employers depend on life-long class dependency to generate the hands they needed, because too many men acquired elements of independence...when they moved into middle age," Vickers asserts. "A few colonists employed indentured servants and slaves; more used a species of debt peonage; men depended upon gender; but everyone used age. The power of the old over the young could be condescending, exploitative, and even brutal, but in periods and places where a significant proportion of householders could expect to grow into some degree of economic autonomy, it got things done." (129–30)

In stressing the importance of age in this context, Vickers does not repudiate the significance of class (as Gilje does), but offers a clearer appreciation of the timing, pacing, and nature of the transition to capitalism in the colonial North American context than Rediker provides.¹⁴ This sensitivity flows, in large measure, from his deep understanding of the linkages between work on land and work at sea in New England.¹⁵ Most seafaring men, Vickers suggests, did not hail from London, Bristol, or Boston, but came from places such as Salem, where bonds of custom, clientage, and family persisted, where a young man's time at sea was but one moment in a diverse occupational history, where coastal trips, as opposed to deep sea voyages, were the norm, and where land ownership and other pathways to self-sufficiency were still relatively open. The upshot, as Vickers makes clear in his final chapter which examines "mastery and the maritime law," was a seafaring experience that had more in common with pre-industrial work cultures ashore than most "novelists, poets, and historians" care to realize: put simply, it was "hardly a world apart" nor a precursor to the modern factory. (215) Rediker's emphasis is entirely elsewhere: it's global, not local, and privileges the ship – and "the realities of work and authority aboard" – not the shore. In this formulation, the transition to capitalism looks very different: more advanced, more polarized, more brutal. Writing in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, he argues that "maritime work represented a capital-labor relation quite distinct from landlord-tenant, master-servant, or master-apprenticeship relationships."¹⁶ While the particularities of the colonial economic context are pertinent, he continues in the book's conclusion, it would be "wrong" to "overemphasize" their historical importance for "both English and American seamen" were "witnessing the same basic social and economic processes."¹⁷ Vickers, clearly, disagrees, and through his localized study seeks to balance – or correct, depending on one's view – this sweeping vision of class formation.

14. So, too, does Eric Sager in his *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820–1914* (Montreal and Kingston 1989).

15. Vickers first addresses this point in his short, but highly instructive "Beyond Jack Tar," *William and Mary Quarterly* 1 (April 1993), 419–424.

16. Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 114.

17. Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 155.

If *Young Men and the Sea* is incisive on the connections between land and sea, and the maritime culture that evolved in this context, it is less persuasive on the question of race. Limited to two pages in the book's final chapter, Vickers's analysis, which takes its cue from Jeffrey Bolster's *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail*,¹⁸ makes clear that the "degree of abuse that fell on black sailors on New England vessels...was really quite remarkable" when compared to the treatment of white sailors. (240) That the forecabin was often a multi-cultural, multi-racial place, even when the vessel set sail from a small northern port, is an important observation – one that reinforces similar conclusions drawn by Gilje and Rediker. Critically, though, the impact of such racial encounters on the young men from Salem is left entirely unexplored. If seafaring facilitated a young man's entry into adulthood, it is possible, given the diversity of people involved, that it heightened (or reinforced) his appreciation that being "white" mattered – economically, politically, culturally, psychologically, and symbolically – and had meaningful consequences for his life, both afloat and ashore. Having become a man at sea, he likely became whiter too – an identity that perhaps lent his pursuit of a propertied independence once at home a sharper racial edge. Paradoxically, then, his relatively peaceful time at sea may have contributed to a deeply racialized ethic of accumulation on shore that, as the indigenous people on the New England frontier knew well, was often terribly violent.¹⁹

The importance of race – both blackness and whiteness – to seafaring life is the focus of *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes* by Emma Christopher. Noting that slave trade sailors are usually depicted as "un-dimensional tyrants" in both the popular culture and scholarly literature devoted to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Christopher explores the tangle of identities, loyalties, and motivations that shaped life aboard a slave trading vessel. (4) In the book's opening chapters, the author examines the origins and recruitment of slave ship sailors, the multi-racial character of slave crews, the brutal nature of the work process and disciplinary regime on board, and the dangers and temptations associated with trading along the African littoral. Blacks and whites filled out the ranks of the workers, Christopher observes, and they often formed strong occupational bonds that cut across racial differences – linkages that were necessary to operate a ship effectively, blunt the heavy abuse meted out by slave ship captains, and to control and brutalize captive Africans below deck. With this point in mind, Christopher – drawing on the work of David Roediger and Theodore W. Allen – makes much of the ways in which seafarers came to understand the importance of being white at

18. W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass. 1997).

19. Vickers gestures in this direction in "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 47 (January 1990), 3–29.

work.²⁰ For some, whiteness mattered tremendously. It compensated for the alienation and powerlessness they felt as working men in a material context so obviously stacked against them; it marked off further the distance between themselves and their human cargo; and it steeled the zeal with which they wielded the whip against African men, women, and children – just as their own captains had once used it against them. For others whiteness mattered less. The skill and dexterity of black crewmates, the savagery of white captains and brother tars, and the drama of slave trading shaped for them a set of values in which human empathy, not racial superiority, took root. The result was often solidarity between sailors – white and black, free and slave – and slaves themselves, and pitched battles for liberty and equality in seaports around the Atlantic rim. “Regularly kidnapped aboard their vessel, ruled with the whip and shackles, and at constant risk of enslavement in North Africa, the men who made transatlantic slavery were themselves the white men closest to bondage,” the author concludes. “They responded by being one of the most anti-authoritarian, militant, unruly professional groups, and could and did, on occasion, extend their activism to spread news of slave revolts and abolitionism and help runaway slaves.” (229) While Christopher’s analysis overlaps in substantial ways with the perspective advanced by Rediker (and Linebaugh), her deft handling of whiteness also suggests some of the ways that Vickers’s insightful *Young Men and the Sea* might benefit from this line of inquiry.

United by a shared desire to debunk the older, cruder stereotypes of seafaring men, Rediker, Gilje, Vickers, and Christopher have read widely, researched deeply, and produced arguments that are persuasive, provocative, and problematic in equal measure. In doing so, *Villains of All Nations*, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, *Young Men and the Sea*, and *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes* have presented very different interpretations of the many motivations of Jack Tar and, in the process, laid bare some of the important conceptual themes that have shaped the “new maritime history”: the transition to capitalism as embedded in seafaring life; the role of seafarers as agents of political change; and the relationship between life at sea and life on shore. Taken together, their work also illustrates the enduring influence of historical materialism as a conceptual apparatus. Rediker is the standard bearer here. Articulated over twenty years ago, his boldly drawn portrait of seafaring men as a working-class-in-formation remains powerful; Gilje, Vickers, and Christopher are all, in some ways, grappling with the extensive reach of Rediker’s perspective. Beginning in earnest with Lemisch’s pioneering analysis of the American Revolution from the bottom up, the new maritime history has rehabilitated the image of Jack Tar. Yet as this essay suggests, which conceptual category – race, class, liberty, or age – provides the best means to understand his life before the mast is the source of considerable and ongoing scholarly debate.

20. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London 1991); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (London 1997).