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# The People's Pirate: Samuel Bellamy's Role as a Social Bandit in the Golden Age of Piracy

In his book *Bandits*, historian Eric Hobsbawm discusses the notion of social banditry. In many cases, Hobsbawm explains, bandits and thieves who arise out of poverty are not motivated by greed or by any desire to provoke violence, but are, instead, "peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, [and as] avengers" (Hobsbawm 2000: 20). Social bandits, as Hobsbawm defines them, are thus rebels against an unjust upper class, fighting to right perceived wrongs committed by those in power. By examining both historical record and archaeological evidence, this paper will aim to demonstrate that one of the most notorious pirate fleets of the Golden Age, namely that of Captain Samuel Bellamy and his crew, was indeed comprised of social bandits. Though they were branded as criminals by the law, Bellamy and his crew nevertheless acted primarily as rebels against the perceived tyranny of 18$^{th}$ century elites, and formed a better, more egalitarian community of their own aboard their Atlantic fleet.

One of the first accounts of Samuel Bellamy's life and exploits comes, as is the case with many of the earliest biographies of Golden Age pirates, from Charles Johnson's *A General History of the Pyrates*. Though his chapter on Bellamy is but a few pages long, and many of the details concerning Bellamy's youth and origins, as Johnson himself notes, cannot be determined with any certainty, Johnson nevertheless illustrates that the motives behind Bellamy's acts of piracy were indeed influenced by some notion of social banditry (Schonhorn 1999: 585). When

Johnson describes, for instance, the interaction between Bellamy and Captain Beer, the commander of a small sloop that Bellamy's crew captured off the coast of Rhode Island, he demonstrates Bellamy's own aspirations to become a champion of the lower classes—to serve as a social bandit on behalf of the poor. Concerning the upper classes of 18th century European society, Bellamy reportedly told Captain Beer, "They vilify us, the Scoundrels do, when there is only this Difference, they rob the Poor under the Cover of Law, forsooth, and we plunder the Rich under the Protection of our own Courage" (Schonhorn 1999: 587). Even if Johnson's account reflects only a dramatized echo of the actual exchange, it seems clear that Bellamy, at least to some degree, thought of himself and his crew as social bandits. In Johnson's account, Bellamy paints himself not as a violent criminal, but as a sort of Robin Hood figure, robbing only from the rich who have abused the poorer, working classes for so long (Puchala 2005: 6). Piracy, Bellamy thus argues, is a justified response to the unfair social structures of the times—a justified response, indeed, to the brutal treatments of sailors at the hands of merchant captains, who, throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, provided their workers with naught but "cramped quarters, poor victuals, brutal discipline, low wages, devastating diseases, and premature death" (Rediker 2004: 9).

But, as Hobsbawm writes in *Bandits*, a truly successful social bandit must also live an egalitarian, non-violent life: "the Robin Hood 'image' insists on morally positive actions such as robbing from the rich and not killing too much…it insists on the standard attributes of the morally approved citizen" (Hobsbawm 2000: 54). It is not enough, in other words, for Bellamy to preach justice while committing excessive murder, for it would destroy his image as a hero, and therefore act counter to his cause. Fortunately, as Johnson describes in his chapter on Bellamy, the pirate captain was never unnecessarily violent. For although Captain Beer refused

Bellamy's offer to join his ranks as a pirate, neither Bellamy nor his crew inflicted any sort of violence on the man. Instead, Bellamy simply mocked Beer for his devotion to society's elites, and, after plundering his ship, "set Captain Beer ashore" (Schonhorn 1999: 589). Thus even this earliest account of Samuel Bellamy's exploits depicts the pirate captain as a prime example of successful social banditry. Not only does Bellamy aim to target the elite on behalf of the oppressed, underprivileged working classes, but he also does this in a non-violent manner.

Furthermore, not only did Bellamy himself exemplify the egalitarian lifestyle that is so concordant with social banditry, but his crew did as well, for historical accounts illustrate Bellamy's men as a diverse community. Not only did Bellamy's crew include Hendrick Quintor, a black man of Dutch and African descent, but it also included such sailors as John Julian, a Miskito Indian, as well as John King, the youngest pirate (at only 11 years old) said to have sailed in the Golden Age (Clifford 2007: 80-81). Bellamy's acceptance of these men aboard his fleet provides further evidence of an egalitarian lifestyle among his crew—a crew, moreover, that provided safe haven for even non-white sailors. Moreover, the presence of Hendrick Quintor and John Julian, in particular, builds further on the idea that Bellamy and his crew were social bandits. Not only was their presence as equals aboard the fleet highly rebellious against European societal norms, but, through Quintor and Julian's own acts of piracy against white Europeans, the two men demonstrated a sense of resistance and retaliation against the unjust laws of the time, and fought as avengers for their people.

Moreover, much of what historical record neglects to include is revealed through excavation and archaeology. For in 1982, treasure hunter Barry Clifford discovered the first artifact off the coast of Cape Cod from what would prove to be Sam Bellamy's flagship, the *Whydah Gally* (Clifford 2007: 8). Not only did Clifford's findings mark the first time a pirate

ship had been discovered with total certainty as to its ownership and function as a pirate vessel, but its wide collection of artifacts, brought up from the sea floor, lend to the image of Bellamy and his crew as social bandits and rebels against the elites of their time.

Bellamy's very use of the *Whydah Gally* as his flagship reflects his own desire to target the larger Atlantic economy of European powers. The *Whydah*, after all, was originally an English slave-trading vessel, and was only halfway through its maiden journey when Bellamy captured it in 1717 (Webster 2008). Filled with gold and silver—profits from the auctioning off of slaves—the *Whydah*'s capture not only proved to be an immense success for Bellamy and his men in terms of profits, but it also provided Bellamy's crew the chance to directly inflict harm upon the larger economy of the Atlantic world, and it thus serves as an adequate microcosm for the economic effects of all social banditry at the height of the Golden Age of Piracy. By plundering ships like the *Whydah*—ships carrying goods and profits directly involved in the larger European economy—Bellamy and his men were able to take revenge on the rich merchants and elites who had exploited the poor members of Europe's colonial peripheries. Though the individual capture of the *Whydah* would not have made an immense dent in the Atlantic economy by any means, the larger efforts of social bandits like Sam Bellamy and his crew ultimately created disaster for European powers. The slave trade, for instance, was largely forced to a halt because of the efforts of pirates in the 1720s (Reilly 2016). Thus the very presence of the *Whydah* itself as a pirate vessel gives some small insight into Bellamy's role as a social bandit in the Atlantic world.

The actual artifacts (other than the ship itself) extracted from the shipwreck also paint a picture of a rebellious, egalitarian clan of outlaws. Clifford's private excavation of the wreck brought to light an abundance of metal buttons and belt buckles, as well as cufflinks, gold rings,

and other pieces of jewelry—all extravagant dress wear that would have contrasted sharply with the austere Puritan clothing of the 18th century (Clifford 2007: 80, 93-94). Even in their clothing, Bellamy and his crew thus attempted to rebel against European culture, embracing their alienation from the society that they had deemed unjust. But this rebelliousness ran deeper still. The excavation also produced, for instance, a large number of metal wax seals bearing the image of a wounded heart (Arnold 1986, Ewen 2016: 231). Like the crew's extravagant clothing, this image of the wounded heart also serves to illustrate the men as rebellious against European (particularly Puritan) culture, for the heart was a prominent symbol in Puritan iconography, and was associated with the triumph of the soul and good conscience (Ewen 2016: 230). The image of the wounded heart, then, was a direct contradiction to this Puritan idea. By depicting a bleeding, skewered heart on their seals, Bellamy and his crew demonstrated a mocking sense of contempt for the Puritan culture particularly prominent in the northeast British colonies. These pirates, indeed, embraced their own image (thrust upon them by Puritan leaders such as Cotton Mather) as nefarious criminals, exhibiting, even in their seals, both an acceptance of death, as well as a small form of retaliation against contemporary European society (Ewen 2016: 231).

The very presence of the wax seals amidst the wreckage further lends itself to the idea that Bellamy's crew, like true social bandits, lived an egalitarian life aboard the *Whydah Gally*. For not only did many pirates in the Golden Age abide by a certain democratic code, but they were also often required to sign the very articles of agreement, thereby affirming their separation from European and colonial society, and embracing their new lives as outlaws (Kuhn 2010: 85-87). Moreover, should the pirates have been illiterate and therefore unable to sign their own name, they were asked to leave their mark upon the articles, commonly in the form of a wax seal (Arnold 1986). Thus the presence of the seals aboard Bellamy's flagship lends itself to the idea

that he and his crew abided by some sort of articles of agreement—some sort of egalitarian, democratic code that was harmonious with their goal of acting as social bandits. Historical record, too, affirms this theory: in his court testimony, a member of Bellamy's own crew remarked that pirates were not allowed to take part in voting processes aboard Bellamy's fleet until they had signed the articles, and committed themselves to Bellamy's cause (Rediker 2004: 79). Thus historical and archaeological records both lend themselves to the egalitarian nature of Bellamy's fleet.

It is perhaps a testament to the success of pirates like Sam Bellamy and his crew that the eradication of piracy became a priority for European powers in the 1720s; for, as the merchant captain William Snelgrave pointed out in his 1734 article *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade*, the slave trade could not flourish to its full potential so long as pirates existed (Rediker 2004: 144). So long as men like Sam Bellamy retaliated against wealthy ship captains, so long as ships like the *Whydah Gally* were plundered before their journeys home were completed, the slave trade would indeed remain stalwart. But by the time Snelgrave published his paper, European authorities had already set themselves to dismantling Caribbean piracy; and indeed, by 1726, the Golden Age of Piracy had ended, and the pirates themselves had largely been wiped off the Atlantic map (Rediker 2004: 145). Despite Bellamy's pursuits of social banditry against merchant captains and European elites, the slave trade flourished after his death in 1717, even doubling its profitability (in terms of slaves transported) by the 1730s compared to its numbers throughout the late 1710s and 1720s (Reilly 2016).

But that is not to say that Bellamy failed in his efforts at social banditry. Although the Atlantic economy ultimately prospered to the benefit of merchant captains and European elites, Bellamy's successes, like those of Robin Hood and other folk heroes, survive in modern culture

and stories. Many aspects of Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, for instance, reflect the tales surrounding Bellamy himself. Not only do the pirates of the movies live by a code, attempting to form an egalitarian life aboard their vessels, but they, too, consistently squabble with merchant captains and political elites. Johnny Depp and Geoffrey Rush, like their pirate predecessor, also choose to eschew the 18th century wig so common among sea captains in favor of long, braided black hair. While it would be foolish to say that Johnny Depp's portrayal of Captain Jack Sparrow is an accurate reflection of Samuel Bellamy, the films themselves nevertheless acknowledge and revitalize many of the ideas that Bellamy himself, through his acts of social banditry, sought to bring to light. And although Bellamy and his crew were not able to enjoy their riches in the end, the *Whydah*'s discovery at the bottom of the sea has nevertheless proven to be profitable to understanding the role of social banditry in piracy's Golden Age.

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