

The Genesis of Rebellion

The Age of Sail has long fascinated readers, writers and the general public. Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, Jack London et al. treated ships at sea as microcosms; petri dishes in which larger themes of authority, conflict and order emerge.

In this fascinating book, Pfaff and Hechter explore mutiny as a manifestation of collective action and contentious politics. The authors use narrative evidence and statistical analysis to trace the processes by which governance failed, social order decayed and seamen mobilized.

Their findings highlight the complexities of governance, showing that it was not mere deprivation, but how seamen interpreted that deprivation, which stoked the grievances that motivated rebellion.

Using the Age of Sail as a lens to examine topics still relevant today – what motivates people to rebel against deprivation and poor governance – *The Genesis of Rebellion: Governance, Grievance and Mutiny in the Age of Sail* helps us understand the emergence of populism and rejection of the establishment.

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The Genesis of Rebellion

Governance, Grievance and Mutiny in
the Age of Sail

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IN MEMORIAM

Edward Pfaff
and
Eliana Hechter

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Preface

The Age of Sail has long fascinated readers. Writers like Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, Jack London and Herman Wouk treated ships at sea as microcosms, literary petri dishes in which they explored grand themes of authority, conflict and order. Popular novelists such as Patrick O'Brien and C. S. Forester have lovingly and perceptively rendered the naval world at the time of Nelson. Accounts of mutiny comprise a particular genre in maritime literature, stretching from *Mutiny on the Bounty* to *Billy Budd* and *The Caine Mutiny*. A host of successful feature films have followed in the wake of the books. The challenge before us lies in combining the excitement of maritime history with the methods that enable us to make broader claims about the mechanisms that explain rebellion.

In researching and writing this book, we have brought perspectives from the social sciences to bear on history. And we have sought to enrich the social scientific perspective by engaging in the kind of detailed and contextual analysis that the use of historical evidence allows. Drawing upon a host of primary and secondary sources, we trace the processes by which governance failed, social order decayed and seamen mobilized with systematic, multivariate analysis of ships that had mutinies and those that did not. These sources allow us to understand how seamen interpreted governance and why failures of governance instilled a sense of grievance in them. Our analyses reveal that the failure of governance is the single largest factor that explains the incidence of mutiny. Our findings show how seamen attained solidarity and why

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discipline and punishment played an ambiguous role in securing social order.

Unlike earlier inquiries into mutiny, the present one is motivated by a twin concern for the causes of rebellion and its antithesis, social order. Mutiny in the Age of Sail implicates both of these phenomena. Despite the harsh conditions that seamen faced aboard Royal Navy vessels, mutiny was a rare event. We argue that the infrequency of mutiny – like that of large-scale rebellions more generally – owes, in part, to people's tendency to tolerate accustomed levels of subordination and deprivation under normal conditions, and, in part, to the capacity of authorities to attain social order by governing fairly and effectively. If we want to understand the relationship between governance, social order and rebellion then and now, we need to rethink the genesis of rebellion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book was born in 1996 in Oxford. As a fellow of New College living in college, I routinely dined at High Table. Like many things at Oxford, High Table has its own ritual. Shortly before the meal, participants gather in the Senior Common Room, and then walk into Hall to be seated in a random order. Once seated, the norm at the very long table is to converse with the people both on one's right and left. That evening there was a strange face to my right, and I struck up a conversation with him. It turned out that this individual was a postgraduate student in Naval History pursuing his DPhil. He was grouching about the long and tedious day he had just spent at the Public Records Office (PRO, now the National Archives). I was curious about the nature of the naval records to be found there. The student mentioned that the PRO had records of every sailor who had ever been on every ship since the founding of the Royal Navy in the seventeenth century.

Whereas there is a good deal of information about organizations in the historical record, ordinarily there is very little that identifies every individual in a given organization, especially over the *longue durée*. I immediately realized that this kind of evidence could be marshaled to create an innovative study of collective action – and of mutiny, in particular.

The idea lay dormant for quite a while. When I rejoined the Sociology Department at the University of Washington in 1999, I broached it to several of my colleagues there as a possible opportunity for collaboration. Steve Pfaff, who entered the department as an

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assistant professor that same year, became intrigued, and the two of us began thinking about applying for the funding that would be necessary to support the research. Years passed as we developed a proposal. In 2008 we succeeded in getting a seed grant from the University of Washington's Royalty Research Fund. A more substantial grant from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation followed in 2009. Also in that year, I attended a conference organized by Sun-Ki Chai at the University of Hawaii-Manoa where I met Terence Lyons, then a program officer for the Air Force Office of Scientific Research (AFOSR). After mentioning the project, Lyons encouraged me to submit a larger grant to the AFOSR. This Steve and I did, and the agency came through with the bulk of the funds that enabled us to collect the data. Needless to say, we are deeply indebted to these institutions for the support that enabled us to tackle the substantial challenges that assembling our data from historical sources entailed.

Steve conducted exploratory research in the summer of 2008 as a visiting scholar at the Centre for Maritime Historical Studies at the University of Exeter. He benefited from conversations with outstanding historians at Exeter, in particular with Nicholas Rodger and Jeremy Black, world-renowned experts on the naval and military history of Georgian Britain. Professor Rodger graciously took on the ongoing role of informal advisor to our project. He also helped us to recruit Moira Bracknell, recently awarded a PhD in Maritime History, who we hired as a researcher on our project. We are thankful for her expert advice on sources and her mastery of the Admiralty records. She proved indefatigable, tracking down and photographing the archival records of hundreds of Royal Navy ships.

In the summer of 2009, we took another trip to the UK to work with primary documents. The data we collected enabled us to analyze the 1797 mass mutinies at Spithead and the Nore. This enriched our understanding of the dynamics of insurgency and informed the explanation of mutiny that we developed in this book. In order to carry out our work we had to take long westward rides on the Underground from central London to the National Archives at Kew, as well as long eastward rides on the Docklands Light Railway to the Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. All the shuttling paid off handsomely. Working closely with the documents and using them to

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assemble systematic data gave us richer appreciation of the questions we were interested in tackling.

While in the UK that summer, we also visited the University of Oxford, where Eliana Hechter, a Rhodes scholar, was conducting research at St. John's College for her DPhil in Statistics. When we explained to Eliana the daunting sampling issues that we confronted in attempting a systematic study of a rare event (mutiny), she suggested an elegant solution. Rather than build a representative sample of Royal Navy ships in which we would inevitably have too few observations on the dependent variable and confront enormous expense in gathering so large and comprehensive a dataset, she suggested that we adopt the case-control method that is widely employed in epidemiology to study rare diseases. Subsequent consulting by the Health Sciences Library and the Center for Statistics in the Social Sciences at the University of Washington proved just how right Eliana was, and taught us how to use the method properly. Eliana's intervention opened up the pathway that led to a systematic analysis of mutinies, something that had never before been accomplished by researchers.

Our book has been substantially enriched by collaborations with Katie E. Corcoran and Patrick Underwood that resulted in earlier versions of some chapters that first appeared in the *American Sociological Review* (Chapter 4) and *Social Science History* (Chapters 5 and 6). We are grateful for their contributions and for the comments and suggestions that we received from the editors and reviewers of those journals. Portions of those papers appear by the kind permission of SAGE Publishing and Cambridge University Press.

Working to transform thousands of pages of handwritten documents into a machine-readable dataset required us to build a team of talented and hard-working coders. University of Washington students Lindsey Beach, Jayleen Bowman, Elizabeth Cady, Dale Coleman, Lauren Ho, Christopher Prather, Sarah Reinecke, Heather Reyes, Jocelyn Saylor, Kristin Smith, Samuel Stabler, Thomas Stanton, Timothy Thomas, Meral Tunador and Rachel Tweet proved to be patient and careful researchers without whom we could not have completed the book. Yuan Hsiao provided assistance with data visualizations.

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Parts of this book benefited from presentations at a number of venues including the annual conference of the American Sociological Association; the Sociology Department at the University of Washington; the Quality of Governance Institute at Gothenburg University; the Center for Advanced Study in Madrid; the Juan March Foundation in Madrid; the Centre for Maritime Historical Studies at the University of Exeter; the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University; the Sociology Department at Umeå University; Nuffield College, Oxford; and the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics and Culture.

The story of this book opened at Oxford with me and it closed there with Steve. Nuffield College provided an academic visitorship that allowed him to spend the spring and summer of 2018 in a very congenial setting for the final effort to put our research together and complete a draft of the manuscript. Thanks are owed to the many friends and colleagues at the University of Oxford who have encouraged our work over the years and to the Department of Sociology and the Clarence and Elissa M. Schrag Faculty Fellowship for supporting Steve's sabbatical leave that enabled us to finish the book.

Michael Hechter