The Invisible Hook
The Hidden Economics of Pirates

By Peter Leeson

With the global economy in shambles and the freewheeling sort of capitalism long celebrated by Wall Street in disgrace, thoughtful people are once again turning to government for answers. Well, most thoughtful people. Peter Leeson, a libertarian economist at George Mason University in Virginia, dissents in ways that should disarm the most determined born-again statist. He has used what was plainly a youthful obsession with 18th-century pirates as a device for analyzing the ways in which markets – indeed, whole subcultures within societies – can regulate themselves without formal government. Pirates, he acknowledges, rejected civil society, destroying property rights and killing those who got in their way. Yet they managed to organize in ways that were surprisingly rational, at least from their own perspective. Whether or not you buy his argument, I suspect you’ll find The Invisible Hook: The Hidden Economics of Pirates to be a fascinating look at a hidden world, as well as a challenge to our Hobbesian assumptions about how social order can be established and enforced. — Peter Passell

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Adam Smith, Meet Captain Hook.

In 1776, the Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith published a landmark treatise that launched the study of modern economics. In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, he described the most central idea to economics, which he called the “invisible hand” — the hidden force that guides economic cooperation. According to Smith, people are motivated by self-interest; they want to do what’s best for themselves. However, to do what’s best for themselves, people must often do what’s best for others.

The reason is straightforward. Most of us can only serve our own interests by cooperating with others. We can achieve very few of our own goals, from securing our next meal to acquiring our next pair of shoes, in isolation. Just think about how many skills you’d need to master and how much time you’d require if you had to produce your own milk or fashion your own coat, let alone manufacture your own car.

Because of this, Smith observed, in seeking to satisfy our own interests we’re led, “as if by an invisible hand” to serve others’ interests, too. The milk producer, for example, must offer the best milk at the lowest price possible to serve his self-interest, which in this case is making money. He thus serves his customers’ interests, too, which is acquiring cheap, high-quality milk. On the other side of this, the milk producers’ customers, in their capacity as producers of whatever they sell (shoes, coats, more typically, their own labor), must offer the lowest price and highest quality in order to compete with other producers. And so on. The result is a group of economic actors narrowly focused on promoting their own interests, but in the process assisting others.

Smith’s invisible hand is as true for criminals as it is for anyone else. Although criminals aim to gain from others’ losses, if they desire to move beyond one-man mug jobs they must also cooperate with others to satisfy their own interests. A one-man pirate “crew,” for example, wouldn’t have gotten far. To take the massive hauls they aimed at, pirates had to cooperate with other sea dogs. The mystery is how such a shifty “parcel of rogues” managed to pull this off. And the key to unlocking this mystery is the invisible hook — the piratical analogue to Smith’s invisible hand that describes how pirates’ efforts to advance their own interests led to cooperation among bandits. If the invisible hand examines the hidden order behind the metaphoric anarchy of the market, the invisible hook examines the hidden order behind the apparent anarchy of pirates.

Unlike traditional economic actors guided by the invisible hand, pirates weren’t in the business of producing and selling things. They therefore didn’t have customers to satisfy. Further, pirates’ efforts to advance their own interests didn’t tend to benefit the wider society, as traditional economic behavior does. Pirates could only thrive as parasites on the production of others.

Despite these differences, pirates, like everyone else, had to cooperate to make their ventures successful. And it was self-interest that led them to do so. This reality, common to both pirates and the members of “legitimate” society, is what ties the idea of the invisible hook to the invisible hand.

This way of thinking is grounded in a few common-sense assumptions. First, the fact that individuals focus on advancing their own interests doesn’t mean they never care about anyone other than themselves. It just means
that most of us, most of the time, put our own interests (and perhaps the interests of our families and friends) ahead of those of the larger society. Second, individuals are rational. This doesn’t mean they’re robots or infallibly consistent. It just means individuals try to achieve their goals in the best ways they know how. Third, individuals respond to incentives. Other things being equal, when the cost of an activity rises, people do it less. When the cost of an activity falls, they do it more. The reverse is true for the benefit of an activity. In short, people try to avoid costs and capture benefits.

Economists call this analysis of individual decision making the “rational choice” model. And the rational choice framework, I would argue, applies to behavior that is widely viewed as unusual or immoral. In particular, it applies to pirates.

Pirates satisfied each of the assumptions of the economic way of thinking described above. They were plainly self-interested and, contrary to popular depictions, also highly rational. They devised ingenious practices to circumvent costs that threatened to eat into their profits and to increase the revenue of their plundering expeditions.

Pirates, it should be noted, also responded to incentives. When the law made it riskier (and thus costlier) to be a pirate, they did less of it or devised ways to reduce the risk. By the same token, when pirates were offered larger rewards for doing their jobs better, they responded appropriately.

It’s not just that economics can be applied to pirates. I believe that the rational choice framework is the only way to truly understand flamboyant, bizarre and downright shocking pirate practices. Why, for example, did pirates fly flags with skulls and crossbones? Why did they brutally torture some captives? And why did they create “pirate codes”? The answers lie in the hidden economics of pirates, which only the rational-choice framework can reveal.

When we view pirates through this lens, their seemingly unusual behavior becomes quite understandable. Strange pirate behavior resulted from pirates rationally responding to the unusual economic context they operated in – which generated unusual costs and benefits – not from some inherent strangeness of pirates themselves. Indeed, a pirate ship more closely resembled a Fortune 500 company than the unstable society of savage schoolchildren depicted in William Golding’s Lord of the Flies. Peg legs and parrots aside, piracy was a business and needs to be examined in this light.

AVAST, YE SCURVY DOGS

Many discussions of pirates use the terms pirates, buccaneers, privateers and corsairs interchangeably. There’s a reason: all were types of sea bandits. But each variety was distinct. Pure pirates were total outlaws; they attacked merchant ships indiscriminately for their own gain. Eighteenth-century sea bandits were predominantly of this ilk.

Privateers, in contrast, were state-sanctioned robbers. Governments commissioned them to attack and seize enemy nations’ merchant ships during war. Similarly, governments sanctioned corsairs’ plunder. The difference is that corsairs targeted shipping on the basis of religion. The Barbary corsairs of the North African coast, for instance, attacked ships from Christendom. However, there were Christian corsairs as well, such as the Knights of Malta. This book’s discussion largely excludes privateers and corsairs since they weren’t outlaws.

Buccaneers, though, typically were. The original buccaneers were French hunters living on Hispaniola – the island of modern-day
Haiti and the Dominican Republic — in the early 17th century. Although they mostly survived by hunting game, they weren’t averse to the occasional act of piracy.

In 1630 the buccaneers migrated to Tortuga, a tiny, turtle-shaped island off the coast of Hispaniola, which soon attracted English and Dutch rabble as well. Spain officially held sovereignty over Hispaniola and Tortuga, and was hardly fond of the outlaw settlers. In an effort to drive them away, the Spanish government wiped out the wild animals the hunters thrived on. Instead of leaving, however, the buccaneers redirected their efforts to hunting a different sort of game: Spanish shipping.

In 1655, England wrested Jamaica from the Spaniards and encouraged the buccaneers to settle there as a defense against the island’s recapture. Buccaneers spent much of their time preying on Spanish ships laden with gold and other cargo sailing between the mother country and Spain’s possessions in the Americas. Many of these attacks were outright piracy, but many were not. Eager to break Spain’s monopoly on the New World under the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), England and France commissioned these sea rovers to harass Spain.

Thus, although buccaneers weren’t pure pirates, they anticipated and influenced pure pirates’ organization in the early 18th century. So it’s important to draw on their experiences at various points throughout my discussion.

The same is true of the Indian Ocean pirates who harassed shipping from about 1690 to 1700. These sea rovers represent a bridge between the more privateer-like buccaneers and the total-outlaw pirates active from 1716 to 1726. In the late 17th century, the Indian Ocean pirates, or “Red Sea Men” as their contemporaries sometimes called them, settled on Madagascar and its surrounding islands where they were well situated to prey on Moorish treasure fleets. For the most part, Indian Ocean pirates were pirates plain and simple. But some of them sailed under a veneer of legitimacy, which their successors abandoned completely.

While this book considers the pirate society and economy from about 1670 to 1730, it focuses on the final stage of the great age of piracy (1716-26) when men like Blackbeard, Bartholomew Roberts and Calico Jack Rackham prowled the sea.

Jamaican governor Sir Nicholas Lawes described these scoundrels as “banditti of all nations.” He was right: a sample of 700 pirates active in the Caribbean between 1715 and 1725 reveals that 35 percent were English, 25 percent were American, 20 percent were West Indian, 10 percent were Scottish, 8 percent were Welsh and 2 percent were Swedish, Dutch, French or Spanish. Yet others came from Portugal, Scandinavia, Greece and East India.

The pirate population is hard to measure precisely, but by all accounts was considerable. In 1720, Jeremiah Dummer, an agent for colonial interests, reported to the British Council of Trade and Plantations that some 3,000 pirates were active. And in 1721, Captain Charles Johnson, the pseudonym of a

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popular writer of the day, suggested that 1,500 pirates haunted the Indian Ocean alone. In any one year between 1716 and 1722, roughly 1,000 to 2,000 sea bandits prowled the waters of the Caribbean, Atlantic Ocean and Indian Ocean.

This may not seem like a large number. But when you put the pirate population in perspective, it is. The British Royal Navy employed an average of only 13,000 men between 1716 and 1726. In a good year, then, the pirate population was more than 15 percent that of the Navy’s.

Many pirates lived together on land bases, such as the one Woodes Rogers (the colonial governor of the Bahamas) went to destroy at New Providence in 1718. However, the most important unit of pirate society, and the strongest sense in which this society existed, was aboard ship. The average pirate crew had about 80 members. Several crews were closer to 120, though, and crews of 150 to 200 weren’t unheard of. In contrast, the average 200-ton merchant ship in the early 18th century carried only 13 to 17 men.

Furthermore, some pirate crews were too large to fit in one ship. In this case they formed pirate squadrons. Captain Bartholomew Roberts, for example, commanded a squadron of four ships that carried 508 men. In addition, pirate crews sometimes joined for concerted plundering expeditions.

The most impressive fleets of sea bandits belonged to the buccaneers. Captain Morgan commanded a fleet of 37 ships and 2,000 men – enough to attack communities on the Spanish Main (Spain’s territories bordering the Caribbean). The explorer-adventurer-buccaneer William Dampier records a pirating expedition that boasted 10 ships and 960 men.

Nearly all pirates had maritime backgrounds. Most had sailed on merchant ships, many were former privateers and some had previously served – though not always willingly – in the Royal Navy. Based on a sample of 169 early-18th-century pirates compiled by the historian Marcus Rediker, the average age of pirates was 28 years. The youngest in this sample was only 14 and the oldest 50 – ancient by 18th-century seafaring standards. Fifty-seven percent of those in Rediker’s sample were between 20 and 30.

These numbers suggest a youthful pirate society with a few older members and a few
barely more than children. In addition to being very young, pirate society was also very male; we know of only four women active among 18th-century pirates. Pirate society was therefore energetic and testosterone-saturated – probably similar to a college fraternity, only with more peg legs and fewer teeth, and pistol dueling instead of wrestling to resolve disputes.

**YO HO, YO HO, A LUCRATIVE LIFE FOR ME**

Pirate fiction portrays seamen as choosing piracy out of romantic, if misplaced, ideals about freedom, equality and fraternity. While greater liberty, power sharing and unity did prevail aboard pirate ships than their legitimate counterparts, these were means used to secure cooperation within the criminal organization rather than ends, as they’re often depicted in fiction.

This isn’t to say that noble notions never motivated pirates. In his book *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, Rediker considers pirates in the larger context of 18th-century life. He argues persuasively that, in part, pirates acted as rebels against the authoritarian, exploitative and rigidly hierarchical organization of pre-Industrial Revolution “state capitalism.”

But most sailors who became pirates did so for a more familiar reason: money. Sea raiding could be a lucrative business. When, during war, would-be pirates could work as legal bandits on privateers, they often did. During the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), for instance, English sailors happily cruised on private men-of-war. Britain’s Prize Act of 1708 sweetened the pot for these sailors by granting them and the owners of their ships the full value of their captures, with the government generously forgoing its share.

But when war wasn’t raging, privateering commissions dried up. What was a sea dog to do?

One possibility was to seek employment in Britain’s Royal Navy. But at conflicts’ end the Royal Navy shed crew; it wasn’t interested in hiring. The year before the War of the Spanish Succession concluded, the British Navy employed nearly 50,000 sailors. Two years later it employed just 13,500.

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Most sailors’ only other legitimate maritime option was the merchant marine. This was fine for those who had not acquired a taste for banditry, were willing to put up with atrocious working conditions and didn’t mind taking a pay cut. Between 1689 and 1740 the average able seaman’s wage varied from about $4,000 to $8,800 in today’s dollars – a lot of money in the 18th century. But the high end of this range was during war years when privateers and the Navy bid up wages. The low end was during the years of peace, when hordes of ex-privateer and Navy seamen flooded the labor market.

Piracy, moreover, had several advantages over working on a merchant ship. For one, it allowed ex-privateers to continue in the trade they knew best. The downside, of course, was
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that piracy (unlike privateer work) was illegal. But the prospect of sufficient gain could compensate for this inconvenience. And piracy could pay extremely well – even better than privateering.

Although there aren’t data to compute the average pirate’s wage, the available evidence does show that piracy sometimes offered sailors the opportunity to become incredibly wealthy. In 1695, for example, Henry Every’s pirate fleet captured a prize carrying more than £600,000 in precious metals and jewels. The resulting share-out earned each crew member £1,000, the equivalent of about 40 years’ income for a contemporary able merchant seaman. In 1721, Captain John Taylor’s and Oliver La Bouche’s pirate consort earned an astonishing £4,000 for each crew member from a single prize.

This anecdotal evidence should be interpreted with caution; more modest prizes were certainly more common. And many pirates nearly starved searching for the score that would make them rich. Still, unlike employment as a merchant sailor, which guaranteed a regular, if unspectacular, income, a single successful pirating expedition could make a sailor wealthy enough to retire.

The prospect for substantial booty wasn’t the only material concern driving some sailors’ choice for piracy over the merchant marine. Ships’ working environments played an important role in this decision, too. Merchant ships engaged in long-distance trade spent months at sea between ports. An important part of the overall compensation to consider when making employment decisions was therefore what life was like aboard these vessels. And unpleasant – even miserable – working conditions were the norm.

Merchant ship crews were organized in rigid hierarchies. On top was the captain, below him were his officers and far below these were ordinary seamen. This hierarchy gave captains autocratic authority that extended to all aspects of life aboard their ships including work assignments, victual provision, wage payment and, of course, crew discipline. The law permitted captains to dock sailors’ wages for damaging freight, or insolation, or shirking their duties. It also supported the captain’s right to administer “reasonable” corporal punishment.

One consequence was to create significant potential for abuse of authority. And merchant captains were tempted to make the most of it, preying on their seamen for personal benefit. Predatory captains cut sailors’ rations to keep costs down, or to leave more for them and their fellow officers to consume. They fraudulently docked sailors’ wages or paid in debased colonial currency, and voyaged to locations where their crews hadn’t contracted to sail.

To keep hungry and uncomfortable men in check, abusive captains used all manner of objects as weapons to punish insolent crew...
members. In some cases, captains actually killed sailors in the process. In 1724 (according to testimony from a man named Benjamin Bush to the High Court of the Admiralty), one merchant ship captain dealt two of his sailors “above a hundred blows with a cane upon & about their heads, necks & shoulders with great force and violence in a very cruel and barbarous manner.” A few days later the sailors died.

Since British Admiralty law considered interfering with punishment to be mutinous, captains alone decided what discipline was legitimate and when. They could therefore abuse targeted seamen at will. Not surprisingly, some of the abuse was sexual. Captain Samuel Norman ordered one of his ship’s boys “to fetch a Pail of Water ... to wash his legs, thighs, & privy parts.” The boy resisted, but Norman compelled him “& whilst he was washing the same, he then said Samuel let down the [boy’s] trousers ... & had the carnal use of him.”

There were legal checks on the authority of merchant captains. English law, for example, allowed merchant seamen to take captains to court for their abuses, and some were successful. However, the law wasn’t much protection. Part of the difficulty stemmed from the uncertainties of the sea. Once afloat, there were rarely impartial spectators to verify a sailor’s word against his captain’s. Did a captain dock a sailor’s pay because the sailor damaged freight, or was the captain simply stealing? In many cases it was difficult to say.

Further, the law itself regarding these matters could be unclear. Some sailors successfully sued their captains for merely stealing crew provisions. In other cases the law sanctioned far more abusive conduct. In one case, a captain beat his sailor with a one-and-half-inch-thick rope for cursing. The court found he “had lawful provocation to correct the Complainant and had not exceeded the bounds of humanity,” and thus dismissed the sailor’s claim.

Reputation could also constrain predation. Since merchant ships had to attract volunteers, captains’ autocratic inclinations were, in part, deterred by the practical realities of gathering crews.

But captains sometimes didn’t know the sailors they employed, which implies sailors sometimes didn’t know the captains who employed them. A fair percentage of sailors were the “fair-weather” sort, drifting between employment on land and at sea, as prospects permitted. Others went to sea between regular jobs and only had sporadic interaction with the maritime community. These features of the merchant sailor labor market made information sharing more difficult and rendered reputation a less effective constraint on abuse by captains. It’s not surprising, then, that “the too great severity their Commanders have used both to their back and bellies” was near the top of pirates’ list of reasons for entering their illicit trade.

The potential for captain abuse on pirate ships is the subject of two of the chapters following. Suffice it to say that pirates organized their ships in ways that largely overcame this threat. In doing so, pirates created an improved work atmosphere on their vessels. Combined with the potential for substantially higher monetary rewards, this created a more attractive compensation package than seamen could expect on merchant ships.

Of course, unlike in merchant shipping, in piracy you might well have a leg blown off by a cannon ball or meet an untimely state-sanctioned death at the end of a rope. But the lure of more money and better treatment was hard to resist. Indeed, it attracted thousands to piracy between 1716 and 1726. These seamen entered their trade out of material
concerns and, as I describe in later chapters, adopted their trademark practices to maximize the material rewards of life under the black flag.

**THE ECONOMICS OF PIRATE TORTURE**

One of the most popular pirate images is the brute and bearded captain, perhaps with a hook for a hand and a parrot on one shoulder, barking at a prisoner with sadistic pleasure, “Walk the plank!” In the movies, the captain, standing at the edge of his ship, is surrounded by a mob of pirates urging him on while the poor captive stands on a wooden beam jutting from the vessel’s side. Below him swirl the ominous waves, perhaps even the fins of circling sharks.

Movies and books depict such torture as a pirate pastime, a source of amusement. Though entertaining to contemporary audiences, this depiction is purely fictional. There are no recorded cases of 18th-century pirates,
hook-handed or otherwise, forcing captives to jump off wooden planks. More to the point, pirates weren’t sadists who tortured for fun. A few actually showed downright charity to their targets.

Still, it’s easy to think of pirates as blood-thirsty fiends – many contemporaries saw them as such. Charles Johnson, for example, argued that pirates, “are like mad Men, that cast Fire-Brands, Arrows, and Death, and say, are not we in Sport?”

There were some psychopathic pirates, to be sure. But most had the attitude of Captain Sam Bellamy who claimed that he was not inclined “to do any one a Mischief when it is not for my Advantage.”

**IT’S NOTHING PERSONAL: DISCOVERING HIDDEN BOOTY**

Violent conflict wasn’t the only hurdle pirates faced in maximizing profits from their expeditions. Equally problematic was finding the loot on captured vessels. Unsurprisingly, crew members aboard these vessels weren’t always forthcoming with the location of valuables. In other cases, a captured vessel’s passengers might destroy the booty rather than surrender it. One merchant captain whom Edward Low attacked, for example, “hung eleven thousand moydores of gold [Portuguese coins] in a bag out of the cabbin window, and as soon as he was taken by the said Lowe, cutt the rope and lett them drop into the sea.”

Captives’ passive resistance therefore posed a threat to pirates’ profit. And pirates developed the practice of abusing captives in response: By inflicting heinous tortures on those who were suspected of hiding or destroying valuables, pirates could deter behavior that would otherwise erode their revenue. Even more important than its ability to reveal stashed valuables on a prize, torture deterred crew members on future prizes from attempting to withhold valuable booty. Creating a reputation for pirate barbarity that scared most victims into surrendering everything they had.

Any firm owner who wants to remain in business can benefit from differentiating the product. Businesses go about this in various ways. One is simply to make high-quality products and then to rely on word of mouth to spread the information. Another is to invest in branding that institutionalizes reputation.
When you think of Mercedes-Benz, for example, you think of quality and exclusivity of future as well as current models. There are many ways businesses can invest in brand names, but perhaps the most common is through advertising.

In this respect the business of piracy was no different than the business of selling cars. To prevent captives from withholding booty in the ways described above, pirates required a reputation for cruelty. Adding madness to the piratical reputation didn't hurt either. Pirates didn’t pay for glossy ads in magazines. But they did make a point of publicizing their barbarity so their reputation would strengthen and spread. And happily (at least for the pirates), the popular press was happy to provide free advertising.

To develop the desired reputation, pirates sought to impose the highest cost possible on captives who resisted their demands. Relatively painless tortures, like the apocryphal walking of the plank, just didn’t make the grade.

Thus, in retaliation for the aforementioned merchant captain’s decision to throw a bag of Portuguese gold coins into the ocean to prevent Edward Low’s pirate crew from taking it, “Lowe cutt off the said Masters lipps and broyl’d them before his face, and afterwards murder’d the whole crew being thirty two persons.” Apparently it worked: Low’s pirates “took to the value of a Thousand Pistoles [Spanish gold coins] from Passengers and others.

This sort of response wasn’t unique to Low. Pirate captain Charles Vane “bound [one captive’s] hands and feet and ty’d (upon his back) down to the bowspritt with matches to his eyes burning and a pistol loaded with the muzzle into his mouth, thereby to oblige him to confess what money was on board.”

The French buccaneer Francois L’Ollonais added a special flair to his torture of several stubborn Spanish prisoners who refused to lead him to their hidden compatriots and money. L’Ollonais “being possessed of a devil’s fury, ripped open one of the prisoners with his cutlass, tore the living heart out of his body, gnawed at it, and then hurled it in the face of one of the others.”

But pirates couldn’t afford to torture prisoners indiscriminately. If captives expected to be brutalized whether they delivered up their valuables or not, captives wouldn’t find it costly to hide loot. For torture to serve as a deterrent, pirates needed to spare captives who acquiesced to their demands.

Philip Ashton, for instance, “learned from some” of his pirate captors “that it was one of their Articles Not to Draw Blood, or take away the Life of any Man, after they had given him Quarter.” This explains the seeming generosity of the quartermaster on Captain Roberts’s ship who observed one of his men abusing a captive. When he saw this “the Quarter-master came forward, and took the Pyrate off from beating him, asking him how he wou’d like it were he a Prisoner.”

Pirates also needed survivors who could relay the consequences of resisting their demands and spread tales of their wickedness to others. They thus often released some or all of the crew members to return home. Pirate captain John Phillips established a reputation as a “bloody, merciless ruffian” with the “diabolical disposition of an infernal fiend” this way. When Phillips captured John Fillmore, for instance, Fillmore was “dread to fall into [Phillips’s] hands;” he later recorded, “having heard of the cruelties committed by that execrable pirate.”

The torture-as-deterrent strategy faced a potential free-riding problem. A wimpy pirate crew without the stomach to inflict heinous tortures on captives who hid or de-
stroyed booty might still take advantage of the fearsome reputation earned by their more ruthless brethren. But pirates could overcome this free-rider problem by creating their own brands that stood out from the pack. Cases in point: the aforementioned John Phillips and Edward Teach [a.k.a Blackbeard].

The media of choice for reputation building in the 17th and 18th centuries were the newspapers – especially those published in London and New England. In addition to relating information about pirate movements, captures and facts about crew composition, newspapers also told the stories of both pirate victims and prisoners they released. As historian Joel Baer points out, in these published accounts “Something about [the pirates’] temper might be included to help persons that confront[ed] them in the future.”

Newspaper reporting on “piratical character” provided pirates further opportunity to build their reputations as insane, heartless heathens. According to one pirate captive’s information published in the American Weekly Mercury, “The Pyrates gave us an account of” several of their violent depredations, including their slaughter of crews, burning of ships, and a particularly loathsome act in which they “cut off one of the Masters Ears and slit his Nose.”

Pirates also deliberately propagated the myth that they were reckless in the face of danger. As the British Journal reported, the members of one pirate crew declared to their captives that “they have no Thoughts of ever being taken, but swear, with the most dire Imprecations, that if ever they should find themselves overpower’d, they would immediately blow their Ship up, rather than do Jolly Roger the Disgrace to be struck, or suffer themselves, to be hang’d like Dogs.”

Bartholomew Roberts famously boasted “A merry Life and a short one, shall be my Motto.” The operative word here was short.

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In part, declarations like Roberts’s were simple statements of fact. Few pirates managed to survive life as outlaws for more than a few years. But equally important, the pirate motto was a useful way to signal that they had what economists call a high “discount rate”; that is, the future meant relatively little to them. This was a useful tactic since, if potential victims or authorities viewed pirates as reckless with their own lives, they would be less willing to risk engaging them or raising their ire for fear of a suicidal response.

The melodramatics of Blackbeard’s last stand against Lieutenant Robert Maynard, reported in the Boston News-Letter, helped solidify pirates’ reputation as shortsighted demons. As the newspaper described it, before engaging Maynard, “Teach called for a Glass of Wine, and swore Damnation to himself if he either took or gave Quarters.”

Pirates’ desire to build brands may also
explain the seemingly senseless destruction of cargo. A victim of Bartholomew Roberts’ crew reported that Roberts’ men proceeded “with madness and rage to tare up the Hatches” and then “enter[ed] the Hould like a Parcel of Furies, where with Axes, Cutlashes, etc they cut, tore, and broke open Trunks, Boxes, Cases, and Bales…”

One pirate victim’s account, published in the *Boston News-Letter*, spoke specifically to pirates’ apparent godlessness and confirmed the popular perception that pirates were “in the Possession of the Devil” and “laughing at the very thunders of God. In ravaging the vessel, this victim reported, “they met with two or three Bibles, at the sight whereof some started and said, They had nothing to do with them; or with God, nor anything Above.”

The same reputational considerations likely motivated pirates’ pyromania. Captain Johnson provides a list of reasons why pirates frequently burned ships, which he notes was “sometimes to prevent giving Intelligence, sometimes because they did not leave men to navigate them, and at other Times out of Wantonness, or because they were displeased with the Master’s Behaviour.” But the “Wanton” destruction Johnson describes was more likely a deliberate effort to foster an image of insanity and fearsomeness.

A few pirates took name branding a step further. Edward Teach, the “notorious pyrate better known by the name of Blackbeard,” cut a terrifying image. His “Beard was black, which he suffered to grow of an extravagant Length; as to Breadth, it came up to his Eyes; he was accustomed to twist it with Ribbons, in small Tails.”

And appearance, it seems, was all he really needed to make the point. According to the Scottish historian Angus Konstam who has investigated Blackbeard’s life extensively, until Blackbeard’s final battle with Robert Maynard, the lieutenant of HMS Pearl, the world’s most fearsome pirate hadn’t killed a single man.

**MESS WITH A PIRATE, GET THE HOOK: DETERRING CAPTURE**

Pirates fostered a devilish brand name for another reason as well: to deter authorities from clamping down on their activities. They directed their barbarity at government officials (or citizens of the officials’ countries) who tried to capture sea bandits. In response to a pirate crackdown by the governors of Barbados and Martinique, Captain Roberts constructed a special flag to communicate his new policy: death for any Barbadian and Martinican whom he took prisoner. Roberts squelched any doubts about his threat’s credibility when he captured and “murther’d the French Governor of” Martinique, hanging the good governor from the yardarm of his own ship, “and hang’d the First Mate for some Minutes, because he said Governor executed one his best Men.”

Other pirates adopted a similar policy. The man-o’-war HMS Greyhound, once attacked Captain Edward Low and succeeded in capturing his pirate consort, Charles Harris. Low announced he would have his revenge by brutalizing the New England vessels he encountered. He was good to his word. The next two ships Low captured happened to be from Plymouth. As the *Boston News-Letter* reported the episode, Low slashed one of the captains open alive, “taking out his Heart;” “roasting” it, “and then made” the captain’s “Mate eat it.”

The New England-directed rage of several other sea bandits traced back to the Boston hanging of a handful of pirates who sailed with Sam Bellamy’s Whydah. Blackbeard, for example, informed Captain William Wyer, whose ship he’d recently taken, of the sad news that he’d have to “burn his Ship because she belonged to Boston.”
According to historian Marcus Rediker, in at least some cases these sorts of threats — backed by implementation — did work as deterrents to tough enforcement. As one Bermudan colonial official complained, the island’s residents “fear’d that this very execution [of two pirates] wou’d make our vessels fare the worse for it when they happen’d to fall into the pyrates’ hands” and so were reluctant to provide the testimony needed to condemn them. The all-too-credible threat of pirate retribution put pressure on government officials to think twice about zealously pursuing sea bandits.

**MIXING BUSINESS AND PLEASURE: PIRATE JUSTICE**

Pirates used torture for one other purpose: to bring “justice” to predatory captains. Unlike torture aimed at making pirating safer and more profitable, this motive had a more personal edge. Several pirates identified their mistreatment as merchant sailors as their reason for turning to piracy, and took it on themselves to return the favor. It didn’t hurt, of course, that this sort of torture also contributed to pirates’ reputation as madmen who shouldn’t be trifled with. What’s more, abusing merchant captains helped with recruiting and might even have inclined alienated merchant sailors to help their captors.

Recall that British law afforded some protection for merchant sailors against predatory captains. But enforcement left much to be desired. In theory, the British government could have placed government officials on merchant ships leaving British ports, or used the Navy to inspect merchant ships at sea. But this would have been prohibitively expensive and burdened the very commercial activity Britain hoped to encourage.

Pirates, ironically, were better suited to the task of enforcing rules than were governments. For them, the additional cost of administering justice to predatory merchant ship captains was very low since they were stopping merchant vessels to plunder them anyway. Inquiring of a captured crew how its master treated sailors, and then dispensing justice accordingly, required little additional time or effort. Any benefit pirates derived from avenging their own formerly abusive captains was likely plenty to compensate for this small cost.

After taking a ship, pirates would “examin the Men concerning their Master’s Usage of them, according to the Custom of other Pyrates.” If the crew informed their captors that its captain had “misbehaved,” the pirates punished him. Pirates did this with torture, including some of the methods described earlier. On taking a “whole Salt Fleet, consisting of about 20 Sail,” pirate Captain Christopher Condent, “whipp’d and pickled” the offending merchant captain — a torture that
involved lashing the abusive officers and pouring brine on their open wounds.

Particularly unlucky captains might happen into the hands of pirates who used to sail under them as merchant sailors. Woe to such a captain if he’d wronged his sailors. One of Edward England’s pirates, for instance, immediately recognized Captain Skinner, whom he’d previously sailed under as boatswain, when England’s crew captured Skinner’s ship. Apparently Skinner had misbehaved as his captain. The pirates tied Skinner “to the Windless, and there pelted him with Glass Bottles, which cut him in a sad Manner; after which they whipp’d him about the Deck, till they were weary.” England’s men finished Captain Skinner with a “shot ... thro’ the Head.”

Conversely, if a captured merchant crew spoke well of its captain, the pirates not only spared him punishment, but might even reward him. When Thomas Cocklyn’s pirate crew took William Snelgrave’s ship and “endeavoured to beat out my Brains” (as Snelgrave put it) for ordering his sailors to defend their vessel, “some of my People that were on the Quarter-Deck observing, cried out aloud, For God’s sake don’t kill our Captain, for we never were with a better Man.” Not only was Snelgrave’s life “safe provided none of my people Complained against me” the pirate quartermaster informed him, but by the end of Snelgrave’s captivity his captors were so impressed with him, that they offered to give him a ship loaded with valuable cargo.

Pirates might also make gifts to merchant ship captains if they believed they could forge friendships with men who could serve them in the future. Pirate captain William Lewis, for example, took a ship “belonging to Carolina, commanded by [a] Captain Smith… Lewis used him very civilly, and gave him as much or more in Value than he took from him, and let him go, saying, he would come to Carolina when he had made Money on the Coast, and would rely on his Friendship.”

To strengthen merchantmen’s incentives to yield to them, some pirates even gave freight to their victims, which harmed the cargo’s owners, but left the captain and sailors no worse for wear. As Alexander Spotswood observed, “It is a common practice among the Pirats to make presents to Masters of Ships and Seamen of such Commodities they have less use of, in lieu of what they take away.”

One merchant ship captain named Knott, for example, couldn’t have been too disappointed at his crew’s capture in 1720. His pirate attackers “took what they wanted out of the merchantman and gave him money and goods of a very considerable value for the same.”

It’s impossible to say how effective the threat of private, pirate-applied justice was in reducing abuse within the merchant marine. But a letter from three merchant shipmasters to Virginia’s governor in 1722 suggests it had some effect. “The far greater hazard, which we run in case of meeting with Pyrates,” they wrote, is “we are sure to suffer all the tortures wch such an abandoned Crew can invent, upon the least intimation of our striking any of our men.”

Of course, pirate justice wasn’t all upside. While it may have filled a void that the high costs of state-administered justice created, pirate justice suffered from the absence of any checks. While an official court would financially punish many captain abuses, pirates were partial to the death sentence and went out of their way to make executions cruel and unusual. Furthermore, the only participants in pirates’ private justice system were disgruntled sailors and pirates.

The bottom line: Pirate torture, while often heinous, was rarely arbitrary. Pirates primarily used grizzly tactics to serve their bottom line.