# *Introduction: Like a Ship on Fire*

> The sea smells bad.
> This is not because of the mud, however.
> The sea smells of sailors, it smells of democracy.
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> —JACQUES RANCIÈRE,
> *On the Shores of Politics* (2007)

THE BATTLE OF CAMPERDOWN ON OCTOBER 11, 1797 was one of the hardest fought victories the British Royal Navy won during the French Revolutionary Wars. In most major engagements, the British outkilled their enemies by a vast margin—from the First of June 1794 to the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, on average by a proportion of about six to one—but against the Dutch at Camperdown the losses were more evenly balanced. Unlike French and Spanish gun crews, who were trained to aim for the masts and rigging in order to immobilize the enemy's ships, the Dutch adopted the British tactic of pounding the hull with broadsides until there no longer were enough men left standing to return fire. At Camperdown, it took about three hours of close-range combat before the slower-firing Dutch were forced to surrender. Most of their sixteen ships were damaged beyond repair, their hulls shot through, masts and rigging destroyed. Some were on fire, and three ships would eventually sink. Of the 7,157 Dutch seamen who had sailed into battle, 620 now lay weltering in each other's gore; another 520 were already dead. They had sold their lives dearly. The British, who had entered the fight with 8,221 men, suffered 228 men dead and 812 wounded, many of them invalids for life.[1]

When news of the carnage reached Amsterdam, Dutch naval authorities breathed a sigh of relief. Their men had fought with bravery and dedication against a much superior enemy, and that was not something anyone had been able to count on. Morale below deck had been rotten for months, and before the battle many officers had worried that disaffected crews might refuse orders and turn their guns on the quarterdeck instead. It would not have been the first time. Just over a year before, a Dutch squadron at anchor in Saldanha Bay had been forced to surrender to the British after a council of war came to the conclusion that the crews, if ordered to fight, were as likely "to shoot and kill their own officers as fire on the enemy." When the decision to surrender was announced, violent riots erupted on several of the ships. Officers and their supporters among the crews were beaten up, and some murdered. Afterwards, the majority of Dutch sailors switched sides and joined the Royal Navy, and some even ended up on the British ships that fought the Dutch at Camperdown the following year.[2]

A few months after the Saldanha Bay surrender, a British spy reported that the French government had become so concerned about their Dutch allies "that they have shipped on board of every Dutch ship of the line such a number of French troops as they think sufficient to maintain discipline and enforce Patriotism." Not surprisingly, the decision to use French troops to enforce Dutch patriotism only added to the breakdown of discipline. Right before the battle, a group of French soldiers on the *Hector* were discovered as they plotted to assassinate the ship's commander, while two days later a sailor was executed on the flagship *Vrijheid* for murdering a soldier. He was sorry, he said before dying, for there were two more he would have liked to kill. On the *Kortenaar,* meanwhile, counter-revolutionary agitators were discovered with orange ribbons in their possessions, signifying their continued loyalty to the overthrown Stadtholder William V, who from his exile in Britain had called upon Dutch troops to aid the British war effort by rising up against the revolutionary Batavian regime.[3]

As they prepared for the battle in the early fall of 1797, British Admiralty officials had no idea of just how much disorder there was in the Dutch fleet. But it probably would not have made much difference had they known, for their own crews were just as unreliable. Of the sixteen ships that eventually sailed into battle at Camperdown, ten had participated in the fleet mutinies that rocked the Royal Navy's home command earlier that year. From Cork in the west all the way to Great Yarmouth in the east, over 40,000 men on more than a hundred ships had raised the blood-red flag of mutiny and for two months refused to do the work of war. It became the largest, best organized, most sustained working-class offensive in eighteenth-century Britain. At the Nore anchorage, where the rebellion peaked in late May, the mutineers proclaimed a "floating republic," established a complex hierarchical committee system staffed by instantly recallable delegates to serve as their legislative branch, elected a president as their executive, and used a jury-based court system as their judiciary. When the government refused to negotiate, some of the insurgents suggested taking the ships to sea and handing them over to the nearest enemy, but in the end the mutiny collapsed before any of the ships could sail. In the chaos that ensued, several dozen mutineers fled to France and the Batavian Republic, and some even appear to have made their way onboard the Dutch ships that fought the British at Camperdown a few months later.[4]

With the memory of the great mutiny still fresh in their minds, British admiralty and high government officials were just as relieved as their Dutch counterparts when news of Camperdown arrived in London. The battle's unusual ferocity and high death toll seemed to suggest that Jack Tar had finally come to his senses and was looking for redemption, and that in its pursuit he was willing to kill and die like never before. The government seized the opportunity to stage a series of bombastic victory celebrations. Parliament voted funds for a monument at St. Paul's, Admiral Duncan was ennobled Viscount Camperdown, all first lieutenants in his fleet were promoted to the rank of master and commander, and a variety of little-known medieval titles were resurrected to further honor the display of martial valor. The most persistent theme that emerged from the celebrations was that victory in the battle had owed entirely to the fact that every single sailor onboard the king's ships, from the commander in chief down to the lowest cabin boy, had fulfilled without fail the duties expected of his particular station. To underscore the point, the grand Naval Thanksgiving procession that snaked its way through London towards St. Paul's Cathedral on December 19, 1797 included as its central component the reenactment of the properly constituted hierarchies that governed patriotic service at sea: following behind the rugged warrior-hero Duncan came individual ship delegations from his fleet, each consisting of one lieutenant trailed by one master's mate, two midshipmen, three marines, and five common seamen. The message was clear: order had been restored, and with everyone once again content and fixed in their proper place, the Royal Navy ruled the waves.[5]

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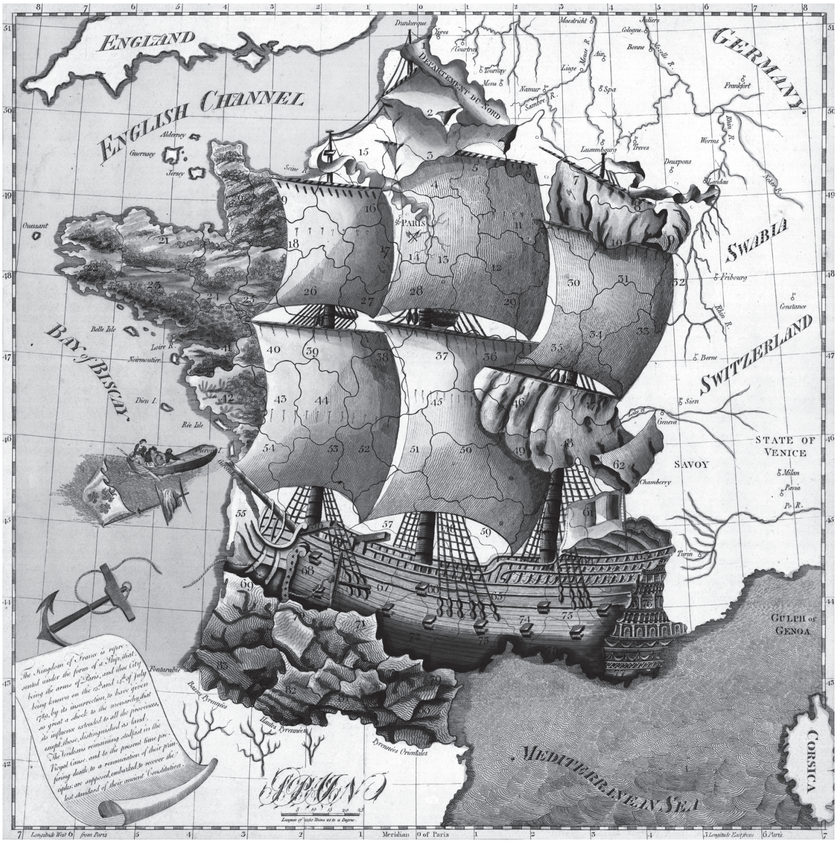
In renouncing the egalitarian principles that had flourished during the floating republic at the Nore, the government-backed celebrations that followed the British victory at Camperdown drew on an ancient trope that associated the sea and those who made a living upon its waves and along its shores with the potential for political unrest and social collapse. Plato, for example, used the metaphor of a mutinous ship to denounce democratic forms of rule, painting a dystopian image of a bickering, drunken crew, unwilling to recognize their own limitations and too jealous to admit that others might be more skilled in the intricate art of navigation. And so, Plato concluded, "they sail the way you'd expect people like that to sail." Centuries later, when political philosophers in ancient Rome elaborated on the same theme, hatred of democracy was often tempered with a stronger emphasis on the fragility of the "ship of state," and the need for all members of society to pull together and do their duty in order to ensure its safe passage through a world in which it was constantly beset by hostile forces. However, as with Plato's more openly antidemocratic use of the trope, the evocation of a state of emergency as the permanent condition of political society similarly served to naturalize the need for strong governments, hierarchical forms of rule, and unquestioned submission to authority.[6]

The trope reemerged following Europe's early modern turn towards the sea, and it was especially prominent in periods of political crisis. In 1798, for example, Finland-Swedish poet and one-time revolutionary enthusiast Frans Michael Franzén used it in a mournful denunciation of the Enlightenment's culminating decade. "A terrifying beauty," he began,

> This century already has passed us by,
> Like a ship on fire,
> Casting its luster and horror,
> On the night-dark river's shore.
> In vain did humanity hope to see,
> It carefully carrying Peace
> To meet with Truth and Liberty;
> Nothing but ruins mark its course.

Franzén was not the first to reflect on the consequences of the French Revolution with the metaphor of a ship in distress, drifting towards catastrophe. A few years earlier, in 1792, as France proclaimed itself a republic and began the world anew, German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder consoled himself with the idea that the national characters of Germany and France were as vastly different as the solid earth and the fluid sea, and that therefore "we can observe the French Revolution as if it were a shipwreck on


ENGLAND
ENGLISH CHANNEL
GERMANY
SWABIA
SWITZERLAND
STATE OF VENICE
SAVOY
GULPH of GENOA
CORSICA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
BAY of BISCAY
SPAIN
DEPARTEMENT DU NORD
PARIS
Alderney
Guernsey
Jersey
Oussant
Belle Isle
Noirmoutier
Dieu I.
Rée Isle
Dunkerque
Maestricht
Juliers
Cologne
Bonne
Namur
Liege
Spa
Luxembourg
Treves
Frankfort
Worms
Deuxpons
Landau
Fribourg
Constance
Berne
Sion
Geneva
Chamberry
Turin
Milan
Pavia
Po R.
Fontarabie
Basses Pyrennées
Hautes Pyrennées
Pyrennées Orientales
Longitude West 6 from Paris
Meridian 0 of Paris
5 Longitude East from 6 Paris

The Kingdom of France is repre-
sented under the form of a Ship, that
being the arms of Paris, and that City
being known on the 13th and 14th of July
1789, by its insurrection, to have given
so great a shock to the monarchy, that
its influence extended to all the provinces,
except those, distinguished as land.
The Vendeans remaining stedfast in the
Royal Cause, and to the present time pre-
fering death to a renunciation of their prin-
ciples: are supposed, embarked, to recover the
lost standard of their ancient Constitution.

FIGURE 1. British propaganda print depicting the revolutionary French "ship of state" as an abandoned warship, London, 1796. Courtesy of the Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

the open, foreign sea, witnessed from the safety of the shore." A similar vision of French revolutionary collapse appeared in a 1796 British propaganda print, which depicted the French republic as a warship adrift, its quarterdeck empty and abandoned, anchor cable torn, sails fluttering wildly in the winds, the *fleur-de-lis* thrown overboard, and flying from its foretop a red flag of rebellion, running like a thick stream of blood from Paris out into the sea.[7]

For many of those who throughout the centuries used the "ship of state" trope to theorize the nature of political power, shipboard society was not just a conveniently intuitive metaphor with which to attack democratic forms of rule. It also often reflected the authors' own unhappy experiences with the mutinous inhabitants of the waterfront. Based on the experience of his own family's struggles with the rebellious sailors gathered in the port of Piraeus, Plato argued that proximity to the sea naturally fostered social and political unrest, and he therefore pronounced that a well-governed city must be located as far inland as possible, away from the sea and the undesirable elements it threw up on the shore. His student Aristotle also saw the dangers of political instability that cosmopolitan seafarers and merchants brought to a city, but these were outweighed, he thought, by the commercial and military advantages of sea-power. He therefore recommended that the city's dependence on maritime resource extraction and commerce, as well as on the workers whose labor made it possible, instead be managed and supervised with care.[8]

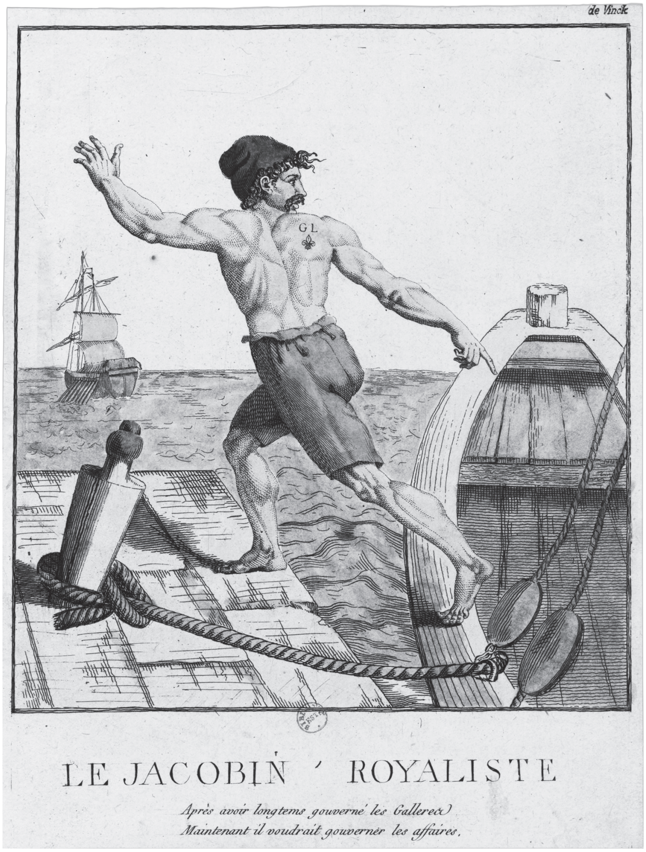
Two millennia later, Aristotle's early modern followers recognized his concerns as their own. Political thinkers, especially in England and the Netherlands, often celebrated their nation's liberty, strength, and prosperity as the natural consequence of sea-power. And yet, they never quite managed to overcome the fear of disorder that was associated with those who lived along the coasts and made their living afloat. Their fears were not without cause. As revolution began to ricochet back and forth across the Atlantic in the middle of the eighteenth century, the same maritime workers whose labor had transformed the once-peripheral northwestern European coast into the core of the capitalist world-economy were often at the forefront of the revolutionary movements that now threatened to unravel European imperial power overseas.[9]

In 1746, Boston seafarers resisted an attempt to coerce them into the Royal Navy and thus triggered the first urban insurrection on the road to the American Revolution, a road that eventually was paved with dozens of riots in port cities up and down the North American seaboard, throughout the Caribbean, and even in the imperial capital itself. In 1768, Thames river workers ceased work and symbolically struck the sails of their vessels, gifting the global labor movement with the evocative word "strike" for its most important form of struggle. In the late winter of 1770, Crispus Attucks, a seafarer of both Native American and African descent, was gunned down by a detachment of British troops in Boston, and thus became the first martyr of the American Revolution. Five years later, slave ship sailors in Liverpool rebelled against their wage-suppressing employers, dragged cannons off their ships, and, with the red flag flying high, bombarded the city's mercantile exchange. When mobs tore apart London during nearly a week of rioting in the summer of 1780, workers connected to the river and the seven seas beyond came flooding out of their neighborhoods, attacked the houses of rich, and demolished London's central prison-house, freeing all those locked up inside.[10]

In the 1790s, when tens of thousands were coerced to serve in the French Revolutionary Wars at sea, the radicalism of seafaring workers escalated to previously unprecedented heights. Governed by a form of martial law that afforded naval seamen none of the protections against state violence enjoyed by their compatriots on shore, warships had always been spaces of intensely concentrated social conflict. Before the 1790s, however, the balance of power was heavily in the officer corps' favor, and naval seamen therefore rarely mutinied in pursuit of better conditions. They chose to simply run away instead. All that changed when revolution gripped France at the end of the 1780s. Virtually overnight, port cities along both the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts became leading centers of radicalization, sending out disruptive impulses to the colonies overseas and amplifying them as they came bouncing back towards the imperial core. Across the French Atlantic empire, warship crews turned on their aristocratic officers, endlessly questioned the legitimacy of their rule, and with increasing confidence and consequence disregarded orders whenever they feared them to be out of step with the revolutionary movement on land.

When the revolutionary turmoil took more violent and chaotic turns, and the foundations of political authority on both sides of the Atlantic began to crumble, French warship crews often had no choice but to assert their own collective will as the only reliable source of political legitimacy at sea. After four years of revolution, coinciding with the Jacobins' rise to power in metropolitan France and the destruction of slavery in the colonies overseas, control over the shipping lanes and naval stations that held together the French Atlantic empire had effectively devolved into the hands of common seamen. To outsiders, that devolution of power often appeared as just a never-ending series of mindless mutinies and provocations, easy fodder for counter-revolutionary propagandists who mocked as ludicrous the idea that ordinary seamen ought to be granted any degree of political authority at all. And yet, the chaos obscured what in reality was a serious attempt to articulate a claim to popular sovereignty onboard ship that had profound implications for the structure of French imperial power overseas.

The project to make the French navy a truly republican fighting force did not long survive the outbreak of war and the onset of the Terror in 1793. Soon, however, major conflicts erupted onboard the ships of the Dutch navy. Following the combined French invasion and domestic


de Vinck
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LE JACOBIN ROYALISTE
Après avoir longtems gouverné les Galleres
Maintenant il voudrait gouverner les affaires.

FIGURE 2. French political cartoon that draws on the anti-democratic "ship of state" trope to disparage the radical Jacobin republic, Paris, n.d. Caption: "Le Jacobin royaliste: après avoir longtems gouverné les galleres maintenant il voudrait gouverner les affaires." Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

revolution that overthrew the Orangist regime and created the Batavian Republic in 1795, seamen in the Dutch fleet almost immediately launched a series of violent, treasonous mutinies. Unlike the French navy, where the majority of sailors were native-born conscripts who fought for their place within the reconstituted imperial nation, the Dutch navy had long relied on foreign-born volunteers with purely contractual ties to the nation they served. When initial promises of post-revolutionary reforms were not met, many seamen in the Dutch navy considered themselves no longer bound by the terms of service to which they had agreed and soon took extreme measures to escape.

When large-scale mutinies erupted in the British navy not long afterwards, both the French emphasis on popular sovereignty and the Dutch insistence on consent reappeared, but in a context of increasingly confrontational struggles over shipboard working conditions. Ever since the Royal Navy had embarked on a course of aggressive expansion in the 1740s, bringing wide-ranging reforms to maximize the exploitation of all available resources, relations between officers and crews onboard ship had gone into steep decline. Most importantly, where previously officers and men had been allowed to serve together for the duration of a war, they now faced each other as strangers who temporarily served together in one ship before being transferred into another. Reduced to feeling like replaceable cogs in a vast imperial war machine, sailors began to experience a consciousness of class that prefigured its broader appearance during the industrial revolution on land.

The great, fleetwide strikes in the spring of 1797 turned that consciousness of class into a material force. But contradicting the well-worn attempt to discredit revolutionary movements on shore with evocative images of anarchy at sea, when British fleet mutineers seized control of over a hundred vessels, they developed a sophisticated constitutional order that brought together the egalitarian culture of North Atlantic maritime communities with contemporary forms of revolutionary republicanism, and then refracted both through their experience of class conflict onboard ship. This experiment in self-government only lasted for a few weeks, but for those who participated in the mutinies, it was a transformative experience. For a brief moment, they had turned the Royal Navy into a floating republic, replaced their despotic officers with democratic assemblies below deck, and the unrelenting terror of the lash with debate and popular consent.

After two months, the insurrection collapsed, and a wave of punitive terror took the lower deck in its grip. Dozens of men were executed and publicly tortured, and hundreds more were thrown into prison and sent to penal colonies overseas. But the continued demand for manpower at sea and the continued globalization of naval warfare ensured that the experience and lessons of the fleet mutinies spread around the world, together with the bitter memory of their repression. Strike-like mutinies suddenly disappeared from the arsenal of the lower deck, and a wave of violent, retaliatory mutinies surged through the ships of the Royal Navy instead. Following the influx of large numbers of hardline Irish republican seamen, who planned to steal several of the Royal Navy's warships in coordination with the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland, the lower deck's murderous rage against the officer corps was briefly given a renewed political focus, but that more radical form of lower deck republicanism also soon collapsed. Another round of even more extreme punitive violence finally crushed the lower deck's insurrectionary spirit for good.

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From the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 to the brief pause in the global wars it spawned in 1802, the French, Dutch, and British navies experienced over 150 single-ship mutinies, as well as half a dozen fleet mutinies that lasted from a few days to several months and involved between 3,000 and 40,000 men each time. While conflicts in each navy followed their own trajectory, in the latter half of the 1790s overlapping waves of revolt flowed together into a single revolutionary surge, genuinely Atlantic in both origin and scope. By the time the mutinous surge broke in the early 1800s, between one-third and one-half of the approximately 200,000 men mobilized across all three fleets had participated in at least one mutiny, many of them in several, and some even on ships in different navies. This book tells their forgotten story.

The history of mutiny in the revolutionary era is of course not completely unknown, but the sheer scale of unrest, its sophistication, and political significance has previously been obscured by attempts to write about it primarily from the perspective of individual navies. This was not always the case. When Herman Melville turned to the British fleet mutinies of 1797 in *Billy Budd,* he wrote that "reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances in the fleet had been ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames." Melville's vision of a revolutionary wildfire spreading across the sea was not entirely fanciful. The mutineers of 1797 inherited a rich tradition of lower deck struggle that fed on experiences not just in the British navy, but in all those in which the cosmopolitan, ocean-wandering crews who came together in the spring of 1797 had previously served. While it is often difficult to trace direct lines of influence, it is clear that the mutineers of the 1790s shared in a radical and cosmopolitan political culture that reached across navies, a culture that was influenced by traditions neither wholly of the land nor of the sea, but instead combined elements of both. Crowded out by the belligerent, terrestrial nationalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that radical maritime culture seems to have disappeared nearly without a trace. And yet, the longterm legacies of maritime radicalism include some the most powerful symbols in the canon of revolutionary struggle: as the floating republic collapsed into defeat, the red flag that had flown continuously from the masts of the mutinous fleet went on to become the most important symbol of class struggle, economic justice, and republican liberty worldwide.[11]