

BOOK REVIEWS

## Making the Sailor's Empire of Exclusion

**William D. Riddell. *On the Waves of Empire: U.S. Imperialism and Merchant Sailors, 1872–1924*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023. xi + 217 pp. \$100 (cloth) ISBN 978-0-252-4516-5; \$26 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-08730-1.**

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William D. Riddell begins *On the Waves of Empire: U.S. Imperialism and Merchant Sailors, 1872–1924* with a story that, while perhaps familiar to maritime historians, is often neglected in broad surveys of American history despite illustrating the tension of labor in the age of empire. In May 1895, four American sailors walked off the brigantine *Arago* in Knappen, Washington. They were doing what sailors had done for centuries to protest the unsafe and brutal labor conditions common to sailing vessels. They were deserting. The captain of the *Arago*, knowing any interruption of the voyage bound for Valparaiso, Chile, by way of Astoria, Oregon, would threaten the trip's profitability, conspired with local and state officials to have the offending seamen returned to the ship. Even so, they refused to work. When the *Arago* arrived in San Francisco the sailors were arrested for desertion, setting off a legal dispute that eventually brought the case of the deserting seamen before the Supreme Court.

The yearslong appeals process was financed by the International Seamen's Union under the direction of the pugnacious sailor-turned-union-boss Andrew Furuseth. The sailors argued that under the recently passed Maguire Act, which outlawed imprisonment for deserting vessels engaged in domestic trade, the arrest of the *Arago* four was illegal and a violation of the Thirteenth Amendment. The prosecution countered with the claim that since the *Arago* was destined for an international port, the *Arago* was engaged in foreign trade and thus not subject to the provisions of the Maguire Act. The Supreme Court would decide against the deserting seamen, arguing that the Thirteenth Amendment did not apply to maritime labor. Writing for the majority, Justice Henry Billings Brown, who authored the majority opinion in the infamous case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* the previous year, claimed that sailors were an "exceptional" class of laborers. Although such exceptionality prevented their protection under the Thirteenth Amendment, they were still bound by "the ancient characterization of seamen as 'wards of the admiralty'" who "surrender[ed] ... his personal liberty during the life of the contract" (2).

The *Arago* case has been remembered as the “second Dred Scott decision” (3). But as Riddell argues, the *Arago* case shines light on both the vital distinction between the foreign and the domestic and the complex relationship between sailors and other laborers during an era in which the nation’s imperial expansion beyond North America complicated such relationships. As the *Arago* case showed, sailors were often considered an exceptional group, different from other kinds of laborers. The unique laboring conditions aboard ships and the distinct culture incubated in maritime communities made the case for such a distinction. Yet, as historians such as Jesse Lemisch, Marcus Rediker, and now William Riddell show, sailors were, despite their perceived differences, workers nonetheless, subjected to the same tensions of the age of empire.

Like other workers of the era, sailors at the turn of the twentieth century were disquieted by the nation’s imperial expansion and the acquisition of formal colonies. For workers, or more precisely labor leaders like Furuseth, the inclusion of non-white populations in the American domain was something to be resisted. White workers, including sailors, saw these populations as “millions of potential low-wage workers that would increase the labor supply and drive down wages” (9). Riddell argues that this fear did not inspire a wholesale rejection of imperialism on the part of organized labor but “affirmed their commitment to white settler colonialism,” which would allow for restrictions and limitations placed upon the movement of individuals in the imperial system to forestall wage competition with white workers (8). Consequently, “immigration restriction” became “organized labor’s primary repertoire of imperial power” (9).

While concerns about the threat non-white populations posed to white wage earners in the United States was common to labor organizations, white sailors were under particular pressure. As Riddell argues, for most workers in the United States “the threat from America’s new subjects was largely an abstract, potential threat,” but for sailors it was “very real ... [f]or sailors were the few white American workers ... who actually ventured out into what was being reconstituted as the U.S. ‘empire’” (11).

During the late nineteenth century, the ability of white sailors to make a living faltered. Even as legislation reformed the shipping industry by ending unfree labor practices that forced sailors into perpetual debt to shipping companies, prospects for white sailors remained dim. The advent of steam power deskilled the sailing profession, which convinced shipping companies that anyone could sail a merchant ship. As a result, firms recruited cheaper labor from East Asia. As maritime labor unions like the International Seamen’s Union fought for the rights of workers, it also fought against the inclusion of foreign workers in the labor market. “Whiteness,” Riddell shows, “became one of the central organizing principles of the ISU leadership” (14). For sailor’s unions the question was not whether the Constitution followed the flag, but whether exclusionary immigration policies would.

During the twentieth century, maritime labor leaders continued their fight against what the alleged threat posed by foreign sailors. In what is perhaps the most intriguing section of the book, Riddell interprets the La Follette Seamen’s Act of 1915 through the lens of imperial racial exclusion. On its face, the La Follette Act seemed a major victory for sailors by improving safety standards and labor conditions aboard American vessels. But as Riddell shows, certain provisions of the Seamen’s Act—namely, the requirement that a majority of crews speak English—were intended to push back against the employment of Chinese sailors. “Instead of overtly restricting Chinese workers,” Riddell argues, the law created “labor and safety standards” the ISU leadership “believed Chinese sailors could not meet. The La Follette Act’s standards of skill, training, and efficiency, therefore performed the same function as Chinese exclusion” (89). Andrew Furuseth’s advocacy

for the La Follette Act earned him the sobriquet “the emancipator of the seamen,” but it was clear his fight for sailors’ rights was limited. As Furuseth testified before Congress, the purpose of the 1915 act was to “keep the sea for the white race” (99).

Racial exclusion would ultimately fracture the maritime labor movement and sap its organizational power. Over the course of the next decade, the merchant marine of the United States and the ISU grew prodigiously as a result of the increased shipping demand during the First World War. Yet in the post war years, labor leaders such as Furuseth continued to operate as if the ISU remained an ethnically homogenous body organized along strict craft union principles. Eventually much of the rank and file would defect for the Industrial Workers of the World while leadership continued its embrace of anti-immigration policies. As Riddell concludes, “They ... chose exclusion and lost” (141).

In an innovative and insightful story of the creation and operation of American empire, Riddell’s work does much to turn attention away from the turn-of-the-century architects of American empire who dominate much of the historical literature. Instead, Riddell highlights the working people who made and attempted to unravel that empire. By doing so, he offers a sobering lesson for modern movements about the costs of choosing racial exclusion over labor solidarity.

## On Democracy and Trash

**Strach, Patricia, and Kathleen S. Sullivan. *The Politics of Trash: How Governments Used Corruption to Clean Cities, 1890–1929*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023. 246 pp. \$40.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-501-76698-5.**

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By examining the development of municipal garbage collection in the United States, Patricia Strach and Kathleen Sullivan have written a political history of city wide public policy. Focusing primarily on five cities, Saint Louis, New Orleans, Charleston, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco, their book studies the ways local governments addressed the issue of trash collection. The authors chose garbage collection because it is inherently tied to “politics of the everyday, intrinsic to the understanding of political development” (18). The book’s timeline begins in the late nineteenth century, when many cities across the country had grown to a point where traditional ways of disposing trash were no longer effective, and concludes in the late 1920s, when most garbage collection programs were effectively in place. A goal of Strach and Sullivan is to discuss how modern trash pick up began and continues as a municipal undertaking, rather than a duty of the state or federal government. Strach, Professor of Political Science at the University of Albany, New York,