The Problem of Solidarity in Insurgent Collective Action: The Nore Mutiny of 1797

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Mutiny: a form of high-risk collective action

- One of the most serious and feared challenges to social order
- Naval mutiny exceptionally risky –
  - Difficult to seize control of the ship and to sail it
  - Difficult to conceal from the authorities
  - High degree of uncertainty
  - Potentially high costs - penalty for mutiny is death
    - Admiralty zealously pursued mutineers globally over course of decades
Seamen being hanged by the yardarm
The problem of collective action

- Key obstacles to collective action (CA)
  - To motivate individual contribution
  - To coordinate joint effort
- Large number of variables associated with CA
  - Experiments and simulations used to control for their effects
  - External validity questionable
- Empirical lacunae in CA research
  - Lack of individual-level data on collective actors
  - Case selection on the dependent variable
  - Lack of multiple observations in comparable social units
Advantages of this research site

- Royal Navy in the Age of Sail (1740-1820)
  - RN provides excellent individual-level data and faced continual threat of rebellion
- Study employs multiple methods
  - *Qualitative* and descriptive data – process tracing and case-based analysis
  - *Quantitative* data taken from coding of
    - Captain’s logs
    - Master’s logs
    - Muster books
    - Court martial records
Captain’s Log from Culloden (12/5/1794)
Master’s Log from Culloden
Muster Book of *Culloden*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Pay</th>
<th>Pay weekly</th>
<th>Pay monthly</th>
<th>Porridge</th>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Captain</td>
<td>£1</td>
<td>£4</td>
<td>£48</td>
<td>2 guineas</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Lieutenant</td>
<td>£0.50</td>
<td>£2.50</td>
<td>£30</td>
<td>1 guinea</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Midshipman</td>
<td>£0.25</td>
<td>£1.25</td>
<td>£15</td>
<td>0.5 guinea</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Midshipman</td>
<td>£0.25</td>
<td>£1.25</td>
<td>£15</td>
<td>0.5 guinea</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Midshipman</td>
<td>£0.25</td>
<td>£1.25</td>
<td>£15</td>
<td>0.5 guinea</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Court Martial of the Culloden Mutineers

[Document Image]
Historical context of the mass mutinies

- Mutinies at Spithead and the Nore occurred in the midst of the French Revolutionary Wars
  - Britain feared invasion by France, the Netherlands and Spain
- Fleets considered the ‘wooden walls’ protecting the country
  - Outbreak of the mass mutinies led to great anxiety in Britain
The Nore
The mass mutinies of 1797

- Spithead (first mutiny 16 April; second mutiny 6 May; mutiny ends 15 May)
  - The Channel Fleet
    - *Royal George, Royal Sovereign, London, Queen Charlotte, Glory, Duke, Mars, Marlborough, Ramillies, Robust, Impétueux, Defence, Terrible La Pompée, Minotaur, Defiance, Prince, Formidable, Ceasar, Juste, Hector, Games, Buxsell, Thames*

- The Nore (mutiny begins 12 May, ends 15 June)
  - The North Sea Fleet
    - *Sandwich, Monarch, Nymph, Virginie, Melpomene, Sta. Margarita, Hind, Euydice, San Fiorenzo, Grampus, Serapis, Lancaster, Proserpine, Pylades, Comet, Discovery, Montague, Director, Inflexible, Monmouth, Belliqueux, Standard, Lion, Nassau, Repulse, Iris, Champion, Tysiphone, Swan, Inspector, Vestal, Isis, Leopard, Agamemnon, Ranger, Clyde, Ardent*
Spithead mutiny: a success

- Spithead mutiny resolved when the Admiralty agreed to increase seamen’s wages and provided the King’s Pardon (amnesty) for all participants
- No courts-martial and most of the letters and other correspondence destroyed by the Admiralty
  - Thus insufficient evidence to explore the causes of the Spithead mutiny
Nore: the mutiny unravels

- Ships begin leaving the mutiny, and this paper tries to explain why some ships left early, whereas others remained loyal to the bitter end.
- In so doing, it provides an explanation of the seamen’s variable *solidarity* with the mutiny.
2 key questions

1. How did the mutineers initiate the mutiny, given its exceedingly high risks?

2. How did they convince the seamen to go along with their plan?
The key: oath-taking

- Example of surviving oaths

  *Saturn (1797)*: “To be true and faithful to one another and to follow the rules and regulations of the Grand Fleet and not to be separated from it, and not to suffer ourselves to be drafted [into other ships] for the duration of the war.”
The costs of illegal oath-taking

- Against the law to take such an oath
  - Penalty could be hanging
- Mutineers threatened that any oath-taker who reneged would be severely punished
  - They ‘roved the ropes’
- Pervasiveness of oath gave sailors the **assurance** that others would take part in the mutiny
- Enforcement of oath by mutinous seamen alone – hence much more problematic than on normal ships
- If the mutiny unraveled, the binding quality of the oath declined
  - Even so, some fear of retaliation for betrayal
A civil war on each ship

- Struggle between the two committed groups
  - Officers
  - Mutineers
- For the support of the majority of the crew
  - Shifting position of the bystanders influenced by forces and events on each ship and by defections occurring across the fleet
  - Solidarity with the mutiny largely depended on the disposition of the uncommitted majority
Key challenge for mutiny’s ringleaders

- To maintain control over ships of the fleet
  - Required monitoring the activities of the loyalists (and suspected loyalists) and
  - Credibly threatening to punish those who sought to sail ships into government hands
  - This capacity varied across ships and *solidarity was maintained longest on the ships in which the mutiny leadership exercised the greatest control over the crew*
Defection of ships in Nore mutiny

![Graph showing defection timeline]
Three explanations for the timing of Nore defections

- Revolutionary ideology → late defection
  - Ships with a high proportion of Irishmen and ‘Foreigners’ (more likely to have been exposed to revolutionary ideology)

- ‘Community’ among sailors → late defection
  - Ships with a high proportion of Landsmen (recently induced to serve)
  - Ships with a high proportion of sailors who had been shipmates on other vessels

- Control capacity of mutineers → late defection
  - Ships whose leaders did not allow the Admiralty or Officers to inform sailors of the Spithead settlement and Royal Pardon
Event-history analysis

- **Dependent variable**
  - Date of defection from the mutiny

- **Independent variables**
  - Community ties
    - Share of the ship’s company rated as landsmen
    - Share of a ship’s company that was Irish
    - Share of the ship’s crew that had previous service with at least one other seaman on the same ship prior to assignment to their vessel

- **Dependence and control**
  - Share of active mutineers that faced indictment for their avid participation as a percentage of a ship’s company
  - Date that details of the **Royal Pardon** were communicated to seamen (if ever)
Control variables

- Size of the ship’s company
- Proportion of impressed seamen
- Spread of defection (a diffusion variable)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model (1)</th>
<th>Model (2)</th>
<th>Model (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active mutineers</strong></td>
<td>-6.302†</td>
<td>-6.797†</td>
<td>-7.855*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.724)</td>
<td>(3.646)</td>
<td>(3.642)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Share Irish</strong></td>
<td>6.554†</td>
<td>6.913*</td>
<td>7.830*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.553)</td>
<td>(3.478)</td>
<td>(3.306)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pardon Read</strong></td>
<td>1.028*</td>
<td>1.033*</td>
<td>0.967*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.444)</td>
<td>(0.062)</td>
<td>(0.434)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>S1: Cumulative prior defection</strong></td>
<td>0.157***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.043)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>S2: Defection within the past 3 days</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.200**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.062)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>S3: Defection within the past day</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.353***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.095)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \chi^2 )</td>
<td>31.67</td>
<td>27.48</td>
<td>31.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of spells</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of ships</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. SEs in parentheses.
Two-tailed significance tests: † \( p < .10 \); * \( p < .05 \); ** \( p < .01 \); *** \( p < .001 \)
Principal determinants of defection timing

1. Proportion of active mutineers $\rightarrow$ *late* defection
2. Proportion of Irish $\rightarrow$ *early* defection
3. Recency of previous defection $\rightarrow$ *early* defection
Summary of findings

- *Little support* for the ideology explanation
  - Based on qualitative evidence

- *Some support* for community explanations
  - Share of Irishmen in a ship’s company *decreased* the duration of the mutiny
    - Consistent with literature on effect of ethnic heterogeneity on provision of public goods

- *Strongest support* for dependence and control mechanisms
  - Ships whose mutineers prevented the *Royal Pardon* from being read were last to defect
Accounting for the variable proportion of mutineers

- None of the following were significant determinants of early defection
  - *Socio-demographic* variables
  - *Conditions* under which the ship joined the mutiny
    - Whether the ship had been stationed at the Nore, was a frigate, or was a member of Duncan's Yarmouth Squadron
  - Rate of *punishment* experienced by ships’ companies
  - *Desertion* rate
  - Rate of *impressments*
  - *Conditions of service*
    - Time spent at sea, service outside of home waters, and shortages of rations
Why was the King’s pardon a key determinant?

- Anyone known to have taken the oath was at risk of punishment (perhaps hanging) by Admiralty.
- Information about the King’s pardon lowered the cost of prior oath-taking to zero.
- That information would have led to pervasive defection.
- Thus, it was in the interest of mutineers to conceal the existence of the pardon.
- They could only do so when they had high control over the seamen.
Moral of the story

- Norms (in this case, mutinous oaths) are only effective when they can be enforced
  - Cf. Christine Horne, *The Rewards of Punishment*