"Drunk, crazy, and manipulated by their betters" – Sailors and Democracy

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My research on Jack Tar, the American colonial seaman, began in rebellion against the highly politicized historiography of the 50s and early 60s, which reflected Cold War values, stressing the classlessness of American society, the lack of conflict, and the irrationality of those who dissented. A conservative historiography saw crowd actions in early America as drunk/crqzy, or manipulated by their betters. I undertook research on seamen, who were disproportionately present in the Revolutionary crowds, which I rescued from the contempt of the dominant historiography, finding rational motives and grievances (such as impressment by the Royal Navy. I published various pieces on the American Revolution as seen from the bottom up.
Now, some 40+ years later, younger historians are continuing and refining this work. Thus at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Washington DC on April 9, I chaired a session on “From the Bottom Up: Sailors and Democracy.” Below is my introduction in text and in video excerpt, plus a video excerpt from the paper presented in the session by Nathan Perl-Rosenthal.