

Pirate anarchy

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Escaping from life in tyrannical monarchies, the seventeenth and eighteenth-century pirates took to plundering merchant ships in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, Caribbean Sea, and Gulf of Mexico. Between and within crews, pirates organized themselves in an egalitarian manner complete with highly democratic constitutions, checks and balances and a loose confederation of crews. At any given time, there were an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 pirates and an even larger number of buccaneers, who were essentially part-time pirates that spent a portion of their time engaging in state-sanctioned plundering. A study of pirate crews between 1716 and 1726 found that the average crew had 80 members, although crews of 150 to 200 members were not uncommon. An analysis of 23 pirate crews between 1682 and 1726 found that over a quarter of the average crew was of African descent.¹

Aside from the democratically elected captain and quartermaster, all pirates on a ship received an equal share of the loot. The captain and quartermaster received up to twice the normal share, but they were expected to store their wealth and make it available to the crew it times of need.² Pirates could recall and replace captains for a number of reasons including corruption, cowardice and poor judgement. Although the captain assumed full authority in times of chase and battle, when snap-decisions needed to be made, he had very little to no coercive power during all other times.³ Crews sometimes executed captains who exceeded their limited authority.⁴ The quartermaster, who distributed food and loot, adjudicated crew conflicts, and administered punishment. By separating the powers into two offices, pirate crews created a system of checks and balances that prevented the captain from assuming the kinds of autocratic power seen on the merchant ships.⁵

Written constitutions called “articles of agreement” set rules for the ship and specified the limits of the authority of the captain, the quartermaster and other officers. The crew had to reach full consensus to approve the articles. Articles from Captain Robert’s ship laid out guidelines for how to make decisions (by majority vote), how to settle disputes (by duel), and how to distribute

¹ Peter Leeson, “An-arrgh-chy: The Law and Economics of Pirate Organization,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 2007, vol. 115, no. 6, <http://www.peterleeson.com/An-arrgh-chy.pdf>.

² Gabriel Kuhn, *Life Under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on Golden Age Piracy* (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 32.

³ Leeson, *An-arrgh-chy*.

⁴ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 162.

⁵ Leeson, *An-arrgh-chy*.

loot (officers get one and-a-quarter to two shares, everyone else gets one share). The articles also stipulated rules against stealing from other members, striking one another at sea, and bringing women onto the ship. Punishments included banishment, slitting of the ears and nose, and death.⁶

Although a “substantial minority” of pirates traded slaves, free Africans and African Americans, including ex-slaves, were common on pirate ships. “Negroes and Molattoes” are recorded “on almost every pirate ship,” and only rarely as slaves, according to Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker.⁷

There were some women pirates, including Anne Bonny and Mary Read, who “cursed and swore like sailors, carried their weapons like those well trained in the ways of war, and boarded prize vessels as only the most daring and respected members of pirate crews were permitted to do.”⁸

Pirates created stateless, egalitarian base communities on land. One prominent base existed on New Providence in Nassau, Bahamas from 1716 to 1718. Gabriel Kuhn cites an estimate that the settlement had a population of 2,000 people including pirates and other residents. There were no laws or government. Pirates were said to have spent their days drinking, gambling, sleeping with sex workers, and lying on hammocks. Frank Sherry describes this temporary pirate utopia:

A shanty-town—a zany collection of stores, shacks, whorehouses, and saloons, cobbled together from driftwood and canvas with palm thatch for roofs—stretched in a half circle along the sandy shore of the harbor. The wreckage of captured prizes lay rotting on the beach, their ribs exposed like long-dead carcasses. Dozens of vessels—pirate sloops and captured merchants—crowded the harbor, their masts looked like a leafless forest from the shore. In this place, their own crazy metropolis, the pirates of the western world drank, argued among themselves, gambled away fortunes, paid in stolen coin for the bodies of the prostitutes who flocked to the town, and lived in an uproarious present until their coin was gone and they had to go to sea once more. It was said that the stench from Nassau—a combination of roasting meat, smoke, human offal, rum, unwashed bodies, and rotting garbage, all stewing together under the tropical sun—could be detected far out to sea, long before the island itself was visible. New Providence and its wild harbor town were in many ways a pirate heaven as well as a pirate haven. Free from all laws other than the laws of piracy, it made available all the rough joys that the outlaw brotherhood held dear.⁹

In Hakim Bey’s account quoted below, Libertatia features prominently, even though most historians agree Libertatia was fictional.¹⁰

After the fall of Tortuga, the Buccaneer ideal remained alive all through the “Golden Age” of Piracy (ca. 1660–1720), and resulted in land-settlements in Belize, for example, which was founded by Buccaneers. Then, as the scene shifted to Madagascar — an island still unclaimed by any imperial power and ruled only by a patchwork of

⁶ Leeson, “An-arrgh-chy”.

⁷ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 165.

⁸ Linebaugh and Reiker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 167.

⁹ Kuhn, *Life Under the Jolly Roger*, 141–142.

¹⁰ Leeson, “An-arrgh-chy”. Kuhn, *Life Under the Jolly Roger*, 144.

native kings (chiefs) eager for pirate allies — the Pirate Utopia reached its highest form.

Defoe's account of Captain Mission and the founding of Libertatia may be, as some historians claim, a literary hoax meant to propagandize for radical Whig theory — but it was embedded in *The General History of the Pyrates* (1724–28), most of which is still accepted as true and accurate. Moreover the story of Capt. Mission was not criticized when the book appeared and many old Madagascar hands still survived. They seem to have believed it, no doubt because they had experienced pirate enclaves very much like Libertatia. Once again, rescued slaves, natives, and even traditional enemies such as the Portuguese were all invited to join as equals. (Liberating slave ships was a major preoccupation.) Land was held in common, representatives elected for short terms, booty shared; doctrines of liberty were preached far more radical than even those of *Common Sense*.

Libertatia hoped to endure, and Mission died in its defense. But most of the pirate utopias were meant to be temporary; in fact the corsairs' true "republics" were their ships, which sailed under Articles. The shore enclaves usually had no law at all. The last classic example, Nassau in the Bahamas, a beachfront resort of shacks and tents devoted to wine, women (and probably boys too, to judge by Birge's *Sodomy and Piracy*), song (the pirates were inordinately fond of music and used to hire on bands for entire cruises), and wretched excess, vanished overnight when the British fleet appeared in the Bay. Blackbeard and "Calico Jack" Rackham and his crew of pirate women moved on to wilder shores and nastier fates, while others meekly accepted the Pardon and reformed. But the Buccaneer tradition lasted, both in Madagascar where the mixed-blood children of the pirates began to carve out kingdoms of their own, and in the Caribbean, where escaped slaves as well as mixed black/white/red groups were able to thrive in the mountains and backlands as "Maroons." The Maroon community in Jamaica still retained a degree of autonomy and many of the old folkways when Zora Neale Hurston visited there in the 1920's (see *Tell My Horse*). The Maroons of Suriname still practice African "paganism."¹¹

¹¹ Hakim Bey, *Temporary Autonomous Zones*, hermetic.com/bey/taz3.html

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