

Review of *Pirate Enlightenment*, by David Graeber

Kevin Carson

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David Graeber. *Pirate Enlightenment, Or the Real Libertalia* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2023).

“This is a book about pirate kingdoms, real and imagined,” Graeber begins what is likely to be the last book that appears under his name. “It’s also about a time and place where it is very difficult to tell the difference between the two.”

The pirate kingdom of Libertalia first appeared in *A General History of the Pyrates*, a 1724 work by “Captain Johnson” (a pseudonym for Daniel Defoe, Graeber speculates). Libertalia, on the Malagasy coast, was “an egalitarian republic, in which slavery had been abolished and all things were shared in common and administered democratically, created by a retired French pirate captain named Misson under the philosophical influence of a defrocked Italian priest.” The consensus is that “Johnson” simply fabricated the whole thing.

Nevertheless, as Graeber relates, there were other pirate settlements on the Malagasy coast, which were in fact

the place for radical social experiments. Pirates did experiment with new forms of governance and property arrangements; what’s more, so did members of the surrounding Malagasy communities into which they married, many of whom had lived in their settlements, sailed in their ships, formed blood brotherhood pacts, and spent many hours in political conversation with them.

Such pirate utopias, both true and fabled, resonated powerfully in the popular culture of the Atlantic world. Pirate utopias, both as a real-world phenomenon and cultural theme, are especially significant when juxtaposed to the authoritarianism prevailing in the legally approved maritime culture of naval and merchant ships. “Modern factory discipline,” Graeber writes, “was born on ships and plantations.” So pirate utopias were compelling symbols not only to seamen of the 18th century, but to the later proletarians in the mills of Manchester and Birmingham.

Given the mixture of legend and fact in the body of pirate utopia lore, and the difficulty of drawing a line between them, Graeber considers it important to start out by listing what we do know as fact.

We know that a very large number of seventeenth-century pirates, from the Caribbean and elsewhere, settled along the northeast coast of Madagascar, where their Malagasy descendants (“the Zana-Malata”) remain a self-identified group to this day. We know that their arrival set off a series of social upheavals that ultimately led to the formation, in the early eighteenth century, of a political entity called the Betsimisaraka Confederation. We also know that those who live in the territory once controlled by this confederation — a coastal strip almost seven hundred kilometers long — still refer to themselves as Betsimisaraka and are considered one of Madagascar’s most stubbornly egalitarian peoples. We know the man who is considered to be the founder of this confederation was named Ratsimilaho, that Ratsimilaho was said at the time to be the son of an English pirate from a settlement called Amboanavola..., and that Amboanavola is described in contemporary English accounts as a kind of utopian experiment, an attempt to apply the democratic principles of organization typical of pirate ships to a settled community on land. Finally, we know that Ratsimilaho was declared King of the Betsimisaraka in that very city.

Beyond this, little is known with certainty, or even likelihood. Regarding Ratsimilaho’s “kingship,” Graeber speculates that it was largely make-believe, deliberately fed to foreign observers in something of the same spirit with which Samoan girls pulled Margaret Mead’s leg. There is no archaeological evidence of the kind of physical structures or settlement patterns we would identify with a territorial state, let alone a kingdom. The popular assemblies appear to have, if anything, increased in importance, and the previous warrior aristocracies to have disappeared altogether.

Graeber stresses the contribution to the experiment by the native Malagasy population:

Under the cover of the pirates, and the formal leadership of a half-caste pirate king, clan leaders and ambitious young warriors carried out what I think would best be considered their own proto-enlightenment political experiment, a creative synthesis of pirate governance and some of the more egalitarian elements in traditional Malagasy political culture. What is generally written off as a failed attempt to create a kingdom can just as easily be seen as a successful Malagasy-led experiment in pirate Enlightenment.

These “self-conscious experiments in radical democracy,” Graeber argues, were “some of the first stirrings of Enlightenment political thought, exploring ideas and principles that were ultimately to be developed by political philosophers and put in practice by revolutionary regimes a century later.”

The effect legends of pirate utopia had on mainstream political philosophy is a major theme of the book. It is a theme Graeber previously developed elsewhere: the debt Western political philosophies like liberalism and democracy, supposedly products of the rarified air prevailing only at a handful of the highest peaks of civilization, owe to ordinary people throughout history — and particularly to marginalized groups like rogue sailors and the peoples of the colonial world. In *The Democracy Project*, he pointed out that democracy — far from being an idea so advanced it waited to be discovered in 5th century BCE Athens or Philadelphia in the 1780s — has been the common practice of ordinary people throughout history when deciding things among themselves. And in *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber argued for the influence of Native American thought on the political theory of the Enlightenment. *Pirate Utopias* also fits into a body of literature, in which the work of James C. Scott occupies a central place, on stateless people deliberately living in areas outside and beyond the reach of states and their governing authorities.

The middle part of the book is devoted, first, to an account of the origin of pirate settlements in Madagascar, and then to an ethnology of pirate and Malagasy society (for which Graeber relies heavily on contemporary literature like “Captain Johnson’s” account). Although some pirate ships were “privateers gone rogue,” the majority were the result of mutiny. Crews that revolted against the brutal ship discipline of the 17th and 18th centuries had little choice other than resorting to piracy, since death sentences awaited them anywhere within extradition range of their home country. As English pirates in the Atlantic rounded the Cape and began exploring the Indian Ocean, they were drawn to Madagascar by the fact that it was unclaimed by either the British Royal African Company or the British East India Company. And the northeast coast was outside the control of the major kingdoms of the island. Hence, after 1691 it became

a notorious pirate base, with fortress, refitting center, and emporium, replete with a small town whose population might fluctuate... between a few score and over a thousand active and retired freebooters, runaways, and escapees of one sort or another, along with their various Malagasy wives, allies, merchants, and hangers-on.

The town eventually grew to several thousand, and the rest of the coast became “speckled with little pirate settlements.”

The pirate society on Madagascar was a place where pirates could dispose of some of their booty — difficult or impossible to launder in the West — in return for subsistence or luxury goods. Merchant ships from places like New York arrived to serve the pirate market, “laden not just with ale, wine, spirits, gunpowder, and weapons, but with such essentials as woolens, mirrors, crockery, hammers, books, and sewing needles.”

European countries had considerably worse luck than the pirates in establishing official settlements on Madagascar, not only because of their racism but their actual participation in the slave trade. For pirates, in contrast, slave ships constituted a major source of new ships and crewmates.

Women in traditional Malagasy culture were subordinate to men, serving as “tokens” or “gifts” by which one man would cement his social relationship with another. In marrying pirate settlers, in contrast, women were the active parties in seeking out husbands. Their goal was to acquire the means for engaging in trade, and to borrow the status of their foreign husbands, in order to achieve in their own right a social status superior to their typical condition in Malagasy society. Hence the pirates, in establishing their relations with the native population, wound up being primarily drawn into the women’s culture rather than the warrior culture of the men, and it was disproportionately female society that entered into the fusion of the Malagasy and pirate cultures.

In the third and last part, Graeber deals with the formation of the Betsimisaraka Confederation, which persisted for some time on a larger scale than the pirate settlements. The Confederation itself, as opposed to the settlements, was the work of the Malagasy themselves, and appears to have been an attempt — “a kind of masculine riposte to the self-assertion of the women who allied themselves with the pirates” — to reshape male warrior clan society along the lines of pirate democracy.

The Enlightenment, Graeber concludes, was a product of the European world-system as a totality. Although Enlightenment thought “might have come to full flowering in cities like Paris, Edinburgh, Königsberg, and Philadelphia,” it was in its origin an emergent product of the imperial core’s encounter and interplay with the peoples of the colonial periphery: “the creation of conversations, arguments, and social experiments that criss-crossed the world.”

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