

Pirates and Hobos: Radical Politics on the Margins of Society

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“Though you are a sneaking puppy, and so are all those who will submit to be governed by laws which rich men have made for their own security; for the cowardly whelps have not the courage otherwise to defend what they get by knavery; but damn ye altogether: damn them for a pack of crafty rascals, and you, who serve them, for a parcel of hen-hearted numbskulls.”
Captain Samuel “Black Sam” Bellamy[1]

“Long-haired preachers come out every night, Try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right; But when asked how ‘bout something to eat they will answer with voices so sweet: You will eat, bye and bye, in that glorious land above the sky; Work and pray, live on hay, you’ll get pie in the sky when you die.”
Joe Hill[2]

Although the bigger part of human history has went under conditions of hierarchy, authority and heteronomy, germs of autonomy and politics “from below” were always present in every historic moment, each time with different dynamic, according to the specific socio-historic context. In the crackings of the system, where the dominant institutions of authority were on the retreat or have lost significant level of their social legitimization, appeared the possibility for the emergence of radical politics, allowing for the different experience and organization of everyday life and human relations. It is important to note that although such cracks provide fruitful ground for radical thinking and acting, by no means are they enough by themselves for such to emerge.

Today we can think of many such cases: the most famous amongst whom are the Zapatistas and the Kurdish liberation movement. **Both of these social groups have experienced explicit exclusion from the welfare functions of the state and subjected only to the exploitative and repressive ones.** Thus, a complete de-legitimization of the dominant system sediment among the local population, which together with the cooperative local traditions, allowed the liberation of radical imaginary.

Two significant cases of the past could be viewed in this line of thought: the **pirates** and the **hobos**. Both of these social groups found themselves excluded from the hegemonic order of their times, becoming superfluous and thus hunted and repressed. This condition of theirs however provided fertile ground for the emergence of radically different political culture, based on direct democracy and commoning.

Pirates

17th and 18th century was a period in which piracy was flourishing, leaving to the future generations rich legacy of literature and experiences. The pirates were, in their bigger part, people with no means to survive “legally”, runaway slaves, political fugitives, naval deserters etc. Various reasons provided fertile ground for the pirate lifestyle to develop among these “marginal” segments of society. An important role played the Caribbean islands, where the most significant pirate activity took place. This area was highly uncharted at that time, offering a power vacuum, with many unclaimed and uninhabited islands, making it extremely difficult for policing by any navy of that period. Thus it provided innumerable hiding places, caves, coves, unknown paths etc. to everyone that wanted to avoid monarchic control. Simultaneously the Caribbean islands were located on the trade route between South America on the one hand, and Spain and Portugal on the other, i.e. a route through which significant treasures were transferred.

Unlike the discipline of merchant and military vessels, pirates, although certainly no saints, were most often organized in an anti-authoritarian manner. Pirate crews were deciding the rules under which they would sail the seas in assemblies in which each member had to agree and sign them.[3]

Often these rules were highly egalitarian, viewing the achieved booty, as well as the provisions, as **commons**. Highly exemplary for this are the articles of Bartholomew Robert's crews, according to which every member had a vote in the common affairs, equal share of the fresh provisions and liquors at any time and could use them as he wished, unless the whole crew voted retrenchment because of scarcity[4]. Similar egalitarian characteristics were shared among other crews as well, like the one of John Gow.[5]

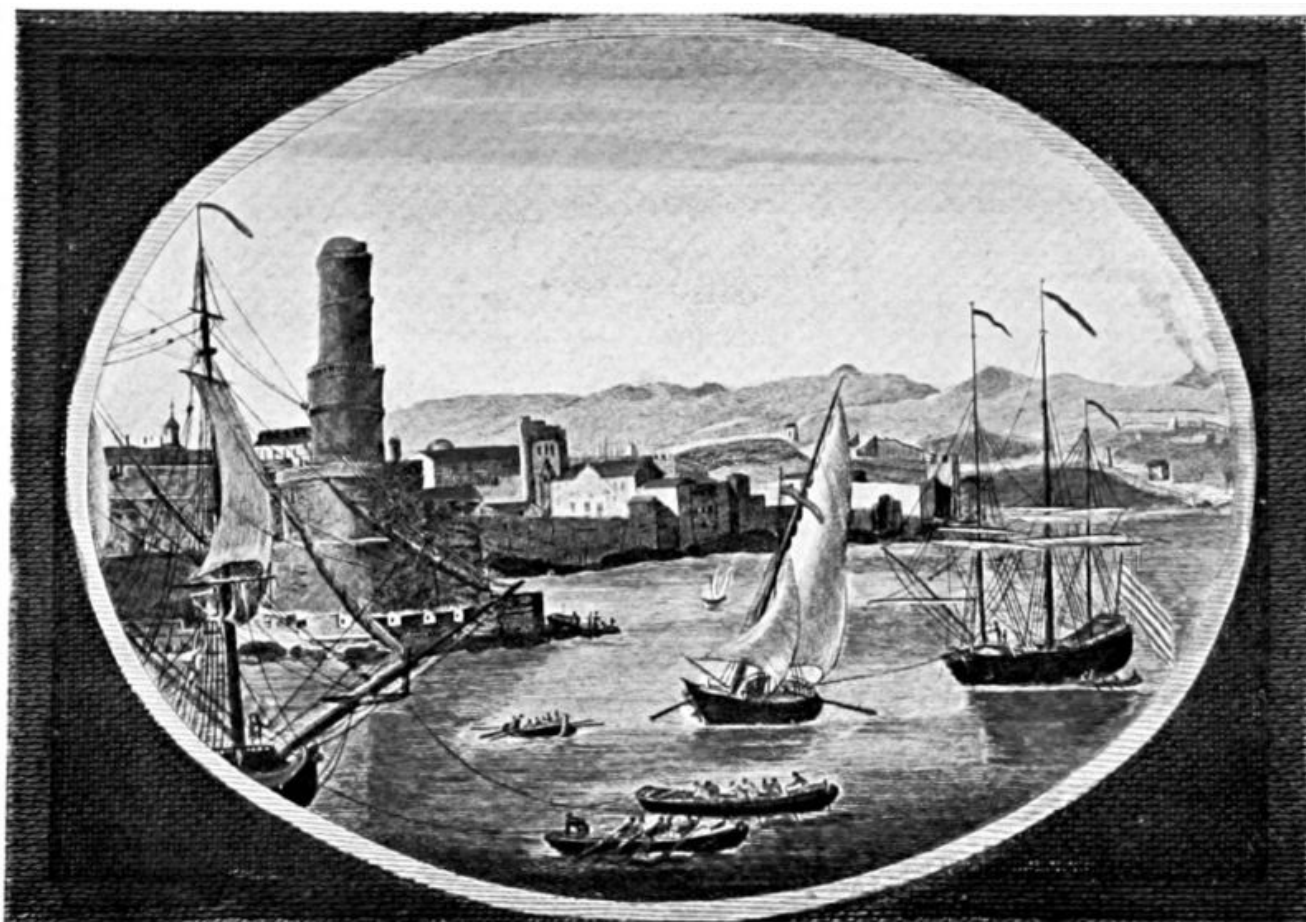


Illustration of the Pirate city "Port Royal"

These libertarian tendencies among the pirates didn't remain unnoticed by the monarchic authorities. The Dutch governor of

Mauritius, impressed by the democratic character of a pirate crew he met, noted that **“every man had as much say as the captain and each man carried his own weapons in his blanket.”**[6]

Their egalitarian character was strengthened even further by the forms of solidarity such crews practiced. Often pirates had rules, based on mutual aid that enacted that injured shipmates, unable to fight, would still receive their share. Articles by both the Bartholomew Robert’s crew[7] and that of George Lowther’s[8] offer testimony for that, even characterizing their stock and provisions as public.

Often, claims about the anti-authoritarian tendencies among pirates are being met with skepticism because of the fact that most tales and myths that bear witness about them speak about adventures of brave captains leading their mates. But this was not necessarily the case. Except of the ship rules on which all the crew had to agree, the captains were also often elected and could be revoked at any time if the shipmates decided that they abuse the authority, nested in this position.[9] The captain had to keep track of the condition of the ship and the course it was taking, as well as to command in the heat of battle. For everything else the whole ship’s crew had to assemble and decide.

The attitude pirates had towards slavery differed, but many didn’t participate in the slave trade. There were many ex-slaves on pirate ships, seeking freedom far away from the authorities. In fact among the pirate crews the proportion of blacks was much higher than the one among merchant or naval ones.[10]

Somewhat similar was the case of the women. In the period when piracy flourished it was difficult for a woman to legally enter a vessel. There are many tales of women dressing as men so that they could enter and travel with a ship. Many saw in piracy a way to rebel against the imposed gender roles,

although women still were minority amount pirates.[11] Some female pirates created quite a name for themselves like Mary Read and Anne Bonny.

Although each pirate crew was sailing the seas separately, there were many cases in which several of them have joined forces like in 1695, when the ships of Captain Avery, Faro, Want, Maze, Tew and Wake all met up for a combined raid on the annual Muslim pilgrim fleet to Mecca.[12] It is indicative for the connection pirates shared from the way the original buccaneers called themselves – “Brethren of the coast”.[13] Pirate crews were continually returning to various “free ports” where they were meeting with each other as well as with black market merchants with whom they traded. Pirates recognized each other and didn’t attack one another. **This interconnectedness between the various pirate cells and the evidences for the existence of a unique pirate language are both signs for the emergence of a distinct culture.**

One of the most famous pirate settlements was Libertatia. It was founded by Captain Mission and his crew in northern Madagascar in 18th century.[14] The founders of Libertatia renounced their nationalities and called themselves Liberi instead. They created their own language, consisted of colorful mixture of English, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Madagascan and other African languages. The land was held in common; while treasures acquired at sea were carried into common treasury and decisions were taken collectively by all settlers. There are disputes whether Libertatia was something more than just a myth, but the very fact that such a vision appeared indicates the radically democratic and egalitarian tendencies among the pirates.

The decline of piracy began in the beginning of 18th century, when new measures were introduced to counter the many pirate crews sailing the seas. Rewards were given to anyone that would fight the pirates. A new law, approved in 1700, allowed the execution of pirates wherever they could be found, while

before that they had to be transported back to London, where to be trialed.[15] And for the case of trials a new special court was introduced to deal exclusively with piracy, consisted mainly of naval officers.[16]

Hobos

The second half of 19th century, during the so called *Long Depression*, saw the rise of the so called hobos in the US – unemployed homeless people (sometimes voluntarily abandoning their homes in search for work). Unlike the colorful amalgam of the pirates, the hobos were predominantly white and male, although exceptions were not missing.[17] **What characterized their lifestyle was the way they viewed the widespread American railroad network. For the hobos this was a commons which they were using to travel, without paying a ticket, all across the country in search for work.**

Unlike other ‘migratory’ groups inside the US of that time (like Mexican, Chinese and Europeans), hobos used to travel individually. But like the pirates, they kept close ties with other fellow travelers through free camps they called “**jungles**”[18]. These encampments were located at close proximity across the railroad, near spots where trains had to stop for one reason or another (like changing crews, wagon composition etc.). The jungles were shelters, since they offered relative safety for hobos to clean themselves, eat, sleep, share information and socialize. Because of the hobo’s nomadic lifestyle, most often these camps were having temporal character, and the ones with continuous existence had their congregation changing often.

Like the pirate ships and free ports, a basic characteristic of the hobo jungles was their democratic and egalitarian character.[19] The inhabitants collectively forged the rules by which they themselves had to co-exist, while sharing food, utensils, blankets etc. All had to follow whether the rules were successfully enforced and had to participate in the

defense of the camp in case of an attack by police, mercenary thugs or far-right groups like the American Legionnaires[20].



A Hobo Jungle

Vital part of these democracies was the institution of the jungle committees whose main task was the prescription of punishments as well as taking care of the everyday troubles in the camp.[21] Their members and chairman were voted between the inhabitants of these camps. Often the punishments they prescribed were viewed as too severe by the community, with the latter to offer alternative solutions.

During their existence and interaction with each other, hobos developed their own slang and system of signs.[22] While individually travelling, most of them were leaving signs on walls for other fellow travelers as whether one place was safe to hang around, whether there was a fascist threat nearby (to which hobos often fell victim), available jobs etc. Thus hobos

corresponded with each other and outside their jungles.

Basic characteristic of the hobos was the way they viewed the railroads – as a commons. Hundreds of thousands of them crossed the country annually, with their “jungles” dotting the rail map. Their effort at *re-communalizing* train transport and land was most often unconscious, driven by sheer need. **However, many hobos were highly political, among whom the majority sympathized or was affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World.[23]**

The huge presence of hobos on national level didn't remain unnoticed for long. Their effort at re-commonization confronted them with one of the most developed industries of that time, spreading on 254,037 miles in 1916.[24] The hobo jungles on the other hand challenged the ongoing land concessions and enclosures. Thus a complexity of several factors led to the decline of hobos.

In the beginning of the 20th century a wave of brutal repressions began, with “shoot-on-sight” attitude being adopted by the railroad security. To confront their numerous “enemy” they joined forces with the police and the far-right, who viewed the hobo lifestyle as degenerate. Thus the number of “trespassers” shot rose dramatically – 2,553 were killed in 1919 and 2,166 in 1920.[25] This wave of repression spread to other political groups that challenged the established norms – among whom the IWW becoming object of physical elimination of valuable cadres by the authorities. The 1930s was the last decade during which the hobos had significant presence around the US, due to the Great Depression.[26]

Parallely with this, a new era of transportation was unfolding over the continent – this of automobiles, buses and trucks. This deeply privatized way of transport completely changed the conditions that were once favorable for the rise of the hobo culture. In a world where highways were to replace railroads as a main means for travel there was place for scarce

hitchhiking, but not for a mass commoning movement.

Also a stereotype emerged presenting the hobos as lazy and illiterate parasites on society who have been stripped of any decency, because they no longer were restrained by “home” and “family”.^[27] This narrative helped “normalize” the violence that the state waged against them. The image of the hobo as degenerate, as self-destructive as well as socially corrosive has been since then reproduced through movies, literature, music etc.

Reshaping everyday life

Although the pirates and hobos remained in history, spaces for radical politics could be found and today. And while Zapatistas and Kurds are developing their autonomies in distant from us lands, similar patterns could also be found in our own backyard. With the unfolding of the multidimensional crisis of the last decade there are many cracks in the system in which radical politics could potentially be cultivated.

This does not mean that we should engage in a search for one revolutionary subject that can lead us towards “brighter future”, but that we can find many such subjects all around us and that we can transform our everyday reality into laboratory for direct democracy and commoning.

It should once again be made clear that the exclusion from the welfare functions of the dominant system is not necessary precondition for the emergence of democratic and egalitarian projects. From the history we know of societies that in such cases have turned towards fascistic and authoritarian forms, while others, immersed into luxurious consumerism, have given birth to participatory and ecological tendencies. Thus what makes a really important precondition for such radical political projects to flourish is the liberation of the imaginary, something that was encouraged through the adventurous lifestyle of both pirates and hobos. What we

should strive at is making the experience of everyday life more interactive by involving each member of society into the shaping of our common future.

Notes:

[1] Captain Samuel "Black Sam" Bellamy quoted by Captain Charles Johnson in *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724)

[2] Joe Hill, famous hobo and IWW activist, in *The Preacher and the Slave* (1911)

[3]

<https://mentalfloss.com/article/23673/democracy-high-seas-how-pirates-rocked-vote>

[4] A specific Pirate Code of Conduct was agreed by Bartholomew Roberts' in the Shipboard Articles of 1721 <https://sites.google.com/site/thepiraterepublic/the-constitution-of-the-pirate-republic>

[5] <https://www.exclassics.com/newgate/ng182.htm>

[6] <https://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/pirate.html>

[7] <https://beej.us/bartart.html>

[8]

<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Captain-George-Lowthers-Pirate-Code-Articles>

[9] John Ward: *Barbary Pirate*, The History Press 2010, p.42

[10]

<https://thepirateempire.blogspot.gr/2016/01/black-pirates.html>

[11] https://www.pantherbay.com/bio_womenpirates.php

[12] E. T. Fox: *King of the Pirates: The Swashbuckling Life of Henry Every*, Tempus Publishing 2008

[13] Peter Kemp and Christopher Lloyd: *Brethren of the Coast: The British and French Buccaneers of the South Sea*, St. Martin's Press 1960

[14] Rediker, Marcus: *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*, Beacon Press 2004

[15] John Raithby: *Statutes of the Realm: volume 7: 1695-1701*, Great British Record Commission 1820, pp590-94

[16] Max Boot: *Pirates, Then and Now* in "Foreign Affairs"

vol. 88/4 2009, pp94–107

[17] See the movie *Riding the Rails* (1997), written and directed by Lexy Lovell and Michael Uys.

[18]

<https://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/White/hobo/thejungle.html>

[19] Todd Depastino: *Citizen Hobo*, University of Chicago Press 2005, pp81-85

[20] Benedict Giamo: *The Homeless of Ironweed*, University of Iowa Press 1996, p.82

[21] George Caffentzis: *In letters of Blood and Fire*, PM Press 2013, p.92

[22] <https://www.cyberhobo.com/signs/hobosigns.html>

[23] <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/143783.html>

[24] William Greenleaf: *American Economic Development Since 1860*, University of South Carolina Press 1968, p.79

[25] Nels Anderson: *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*, University of Chicago Press 1923, pp 161-62

[26] William A. Darity, Jr: *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2nd Edition*, Macmillan Reference 2008, p.494

[27] Charles Elmer Fox: *Tales of an American Hobo*, University of Iowa Press 1989, p.xvii