

Tuning in to the illegalist continuum

Bank Robbers on Land, Buccaneers at Sea, Pirate Radio

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Bank robbers

The Bonnot Gang were notorious anarchist bank robbers whose daring exploits in pre World War One France were legendary examples of illegalism. In contrast to the stalwart proletarian solidarity prized by the anarcho-syndicalists of that time, the illegalists saw no need to wait for the Great General Strike to reappropriate the fruits of their labours. Instead they were determined to act on their immediate desire for a direct expropriation of wealth. And what better place to find it than at a bank.

Building on the anti-propertarian theories of P-J Proudhon and Elisee Reclus, along with a strong dose of egoist individualism a la Max Stirner, articles on illegalism appeared in the early twentieth century French periodicals, *l'Anarchie* and *le Libertaire*. In these pages of the anarchist press, illegalists were celebrated as insurrectionary rebels in permanent revolt against the present order.

Even the aesthete anarchist journal, *l'Action d'art*, referenced them in its 1913 manifesto, which stated, "Revolt for us is the action of art." Such articles linking art and anarchy in turn inspired incipient surrealists, Robert Desnos and Andre Breton, who sung the praises of the Bonnot Gang. And it should come as no surprise that, even before the Bonnot Gang's getaway car galvanized the dreamscape of the French imagination, one of the most romantic and celebrated turn of the century anarchist burglars, Marius Jacob, had, as a youth, shipped out for the Indian Ocean on a pirate vessel at 13 years of age.

Buccaneers at Sea

While to some, the pirate is merely a sword-wielding terrorist or fodder for Hollywood exotica; to others, pirates are, like the illegalists, quintessential social rebels, who eschew the wage slavery of the sailor for the freedom of life under the Jolly Roger.

As Marcus Rediker has pointed out, "In fashioning their own social order, buccaneers drew on the peasant utopia called the Land of Cockayne, where work had been abolished, property redistributed, social distinctions leveled, health restored, and food made abundant. They drew on international maritime custom, in which ancient and medieval seafarers divided their money and goods into shares, consulted collectively and democratically on matters of the moment, and elected consuls to adjudicate differences between captain and crew."

Compared to the downtrodden life of the typical sailor in what is commonly referred to as the Golden Age of Piracy (1650–1730), the buccaneer's life no doubt seemed quite appealing to those who were up for the adventure.

In a more contemporary vein, to quote Somalian pirate, Sigule Ali, on the continuing appeal of the politics of expropriation on the high seas, "We consider sea bandits those who illegally fish, dump waste and carry weapons in our seas. We are simply patrolling our seas. Think of us like a coast guard."

At one level this is a self-serving statement by a member of a much maligned group, which is argued in terms of legalities. However, at another, it represents a radical reversal from below initiated by the marginalized themselves in autonomous fashion within an anarchic framework of self-organization.

Not all pirates would identify with the egalitarian utopianism of fictionalized buccaneers like Charles Johnson's Captain Mission (whose mythic biography was originally attributed to Daniel Defoe and, more recently, embellished by William Burroughs), or the apocalyptic revenge dreams of Pirate Jenny in the Kurt Weil/Bertolt Brecht theatre production, *Three-penny Opera*. Nor can their complexity be fully explained by the radical challenge to gender of larger than life pirates like Mary Read and Anne Bonny, or the "liberty belongs to them that takes it" credo that they share with anarchist bank robbers like the Bonnot Gang or contemporary practitioners of "banking disobedience" like the wildly popular Robin Hood figure, Enric Duran, in Spain.

However, what all pirates have in common is a refusal to obey the law, whether out of a sense of injustice at social inequalities, a defiant libertarian ethos, or a playful sense of anarchic self-realization. Their transgressive projects can all be placed on an illegalist continuum. On such a continuum, illegality is often viewed in a positive light rather than being vilified and dismissed. In this felicitous sense, it is the emancipatory implications of illegalism that originally sparked the thinking on radio piracy that follows.

Radio Pirates

Transgression can take many forms in relation to pirate radio, from floating islands of sporadic insurrection and temporary autonomous zones to more permanently-situated islands of resistance that are rooted in geographical, ethnic or cultural forms of community. It is the interrelation and interaction between these transgressive pieces of the puzzle that allows us to understand the larger picture.

In the dominant culture, where bureaucratic regulation is enshrined and taken for granted, intentionally unlicensed radio pirates are a threat by example if nothing else in that their actions might inspire others to freely go on the air or even question the authoritarian fabric of legality itself. They challenge the unequal distribution of access to the airwaves through direct action. A similar group whose everyday acts of resistance have been labeled pejoratively is "poachers." In the case of the latter, the historical roots of their resistance lie in their refusal to accept the enclosure of the commons, and with it the loss of their former ability to freely hunt and gather on the land.

In both cases, poachers on land and in the air actively contest institutionalized restrictions on access to the public domain. Both claim what has been stolen by royal edict, market forces or government proclamation, as do squatters in relation to habitat. To be a radio pirate then is much like squatting the airwaves and removing them from the domination of the powers that be and the bureaucratic apparatus that has been put in place to guard the latter's vested interests.

An interesting rubric that can be used to conceptualize the emancipatory potential of such radio transgressions is what Stephen Shukaitis calls a "minor cultural politics."

Here minor is not meant to diminish the importance of such a politics, but rather to situate it as a form of self-organization that may not be as grandiose as the all or nothing quality of revolutionary rhetoric allows, but which has serious implications in liberating the radical imagination.

According to Shukaitis, "It is this form of politics based not upon projecting an already agreed upon political solution or calling upon an existing social subject (the people, the workers), but rather developing a mode of collective, continual and intensive engagement with the social world that embodies the politics of minor composition."

Shukaitis does not reference pirate radio in particular as a form of "minor cultural politics," but he does point to the oppositional aspects of punk culture (particularly invoking the powerful irony embedded in the name of the band, Minor Threat). In essence, the DIY processes of "minor composition" that he focuses upon lend themselves very well to explaining the radical dimensions of pirate radio since they are articulated through forms of what he calls "collective enunciation."

And, if radio pirates are about any one thing, they are, in all their glorious diversity, about using the airwaves as a means of enunciating collectively.

Endnotes

Kasolowsky, Raissa and Simon Webb. "Somali Pirates Seize Oil-Rich Supertanker" (*Globe and Mail*, November 18, 2008, A3).

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Rediker, Marcus. *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

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Sonn, Richard D. *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siecle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

This article originally appeared in *The Oystercatcher*, May 2009. Ron Sakolsky's anthology, *Islands of Resistance: Pirate Radio in Canada* (coedited with Andrea Langlois and Marian van der Zon), will be out in 2010.

Thanks to ChristieBooks for the use of Flavio Costantini's print on Page 15 from the Bonnot Gang series. As well as images from the artist's Art of Anarchy, the site features a short related documentary—Flavio Costantini: Iconografia dell Rabbia—posted on the Films and Documentaries page on the ChristieBooks site www.christiebooks.com.

More of Flavio Costantini's work, as well as articles about him, are archived by the Kate Sharpley Library at www.katesharpleylibrary.net/zkh260.

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