David Graeber's Pirate Utopias

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a review of
Pirate Enlightenment, or the New Libertalia by David Graeber. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2023

David Graeber left us one last book before he died, sadly, at the height of the Covid pandemic in 2020. *Pirate Enlightenment, or the New Libertalia*, originally published in French in 2019, brings together the related projects that bookended his career: the anthropology of Madagascar, including how its highland communities avoid (one of David's favorite words) the state, and the many ways that humans have organized themselves into complex, non-hierarchical societies throughout history.

The subject of his last book (really, a long essay) is once again the island where David did his doctoral field research, and his knowledge of the place is so deep that he can load the text with suppositions and speculation and still build a strong, convincing story out of scanty materials. In particular, he examines the communities in the northeast quarter of the island that developed out of the encounters between pirates and Malagasy people during the late 17th and early 18th centuries: the golden age of piracy.

As he did in *The Dawn of Everything*, the monumental study of early human societies that he co-authored with archaeologist David Wengrow, he knits together an alternative history of the Enlightenment era in which the pirate settlements that melded with the Indigenous peoples and were already the subject of legends and popular entertainment by the time of Voltaire, formed, "in a sense, the first Enlightenment political experiment."

Some of the pirate crews that set up shop in Madagascar were already creating intentional, non-hierarchical communities aboard ship, David notes, and when they established settlements on land, they tried to replicate the form there. But they had no economic or cultural capital other than the booty they brought with them from raiding, and so they had to join forces with existing Malagasy communities: most importantly, with local women who were adept at raising and trading cattle, then the island's most valuable agricultural commodity, and turning the pirates' loot into capital.

Together, they "re-created local society," igniting an "egalitarian revolution" that produced the Betsimisaraka confederation or kingdom, which flourished in the mid-18th century under a leader named Ratsimilaho, said to be the son of the Anglo-American pirate chief Thomas Tew, and which still gives its name to the second largest ethnic group on the island.

David's aim in this book is to trace the Betsimisaraka confederation's relationships with its neighbors and tease out what kind of community or polity it really was. Mostly, his tools are 18th century European accounts, all biased and many of them far from first-hand, along with some scanty archaeological finds. But all of this is great fodder for an anarchist anthropologist and historian, because as anarchists, many of us have a deep affection for cultural fusions, disappearance and evasion, and the "profoundly proletarian vision of liberation, necessarily violent and ephemeral," that pirate culture has come to represent.

This perspective enables David to detect a story in the existing sources that's quite different from the ones that traditional or even Marxist historians have told. In their accounts, pirates bearing booty allied themselves with local Malagasy elites to accumulate power and wealth, much like European capitalists.

In David's version, by contrast, the pirates allied themselves with independent-minded women and outsider or subject peoples against the elites, aiming to create their own participatory, self-governing communities: a "creative synthesis of pirate governance and some of the more egalitarian elements in traditional Malagasy political culture."

Instead of prefiguring the absorption of the Malagasy peoples into global capitalism, the pirates and their Indigenous comrades were searching for ways to avoid it. Whether you agree with his take or not—and he argues it very well—David in his last book has made a fascinating contribution to the literature on pirates that complicates how we understand first encounters between Europeans and the Indigenous in the lands that European states would later colonize. He asks us, implicitly, to consider whether it had to turn out the way it did.

This, of course, is what anarchist history is supposed to do: to not just accept the story handed down from above, but to challenge our received ideas about who can be an actor in history. As in *The Dawn of Everything*, David refuses to treat non-European peoples as either primitives or pure victims. In his interpretation, they were savvy, sophisticated people who made pragmatic, consciously political pacts with newcomers to further their own interests against both their own elites and the European states that would soon be attempting to take over the island.

What if, for example, the Europeans who came back from Madagascar with stories of strange pirate kingdoms had, in fact, been hoodwinked by the people they met there, sold a yarn that was tailored to meet their state-capitalist expectations? Was Ratsimilaho really a mighty king, or just a first among equals, a mock king using pirate loot to play the role of monarch?

"Much as on pirate ships," David writes, "it was convenient to develop the reputations of all-powerful and bloodthirsty captains to overawe outsiders, even if internally, most decisions were made by majority vote, the founders of the [Betsimisaraka] confederation found it useful, especially when dealing with outsiders, to maintain the pretext of having an all-powerful king, and the existence of so much stolen finery made it easy to create something that looked like a royal court without having to make any significant reorganization of internal labor regimes."

This proposition brings us back to the idea of avoidance, and the question of what indigenous peoples did when they encountered the agents of far-off states and had to decide how to establish relations without being absorbed or destroyed by them. Was the best course to imitate them, setting up their own states and playing the power game, as later Malagasy monarchs did in the face of French colonial pressure, or Hawaii's kings when confronted with a creeping American takeover of their economy? Or, was it to evade, dissemble, and relocate as necessary?

Pirate Enlightenment doesn't directly raise these questions, but David's analysis of the Betsimisaraka confederation suggests a direction he might have taken in the second volume of his study with Wengrow; an examination of the often thin line, historically, between states and mock states, and a challenge to the materialist view of society.

Do people always set up new communities or polities to amass wealth and power—to "create economic value," in capitalist parlance—or do they have other motivations? Elites, David writes, "are assumed to be in all important ways the same," always "primarily in the business of accumulating wealth and power, and that if they can be differentiated, it is mainly by how much wealth and power they have so far managed to accumulate."

Popular movements and intellectual currents that don't fit this mold—"cosmology value, meaning—are largely written out of the picture" and humanity is "cursed to obsessive-compulsively enact the exact same play." We are not, David contends, and this becomes clearer in the pages of Pirate Enlightenment, where he demonstrates once again that human history is far more varied, quirky, and entertaining than we've been taught.

Only a couple of generations separated Tom Tew and Ratsimilaho from Tom Paine in the American Revolution and Gracchus Babeuf in the French, and only a couple more from Proudhon and Bakunin. So, it's fair to argue, as David does, that the tales Europeans imbibed about these shadowy figures on an island thousands of miles to the south, however garbled, are part of our anarchist heritage as well.

Eric Laursen is a longtime anarchist writer, journalist, and activist. His latest book is *Polymath: The Life and Professions of Dr. Alex Comfort, Author of "The Joy of Se"* [see review in FE #414, Fall 2023 — Web archive note].

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