

Conclusion: Piracy Past and Present



Introduction

So, in light of the readings, activities, and discussions that you completed over the course of this module, what is piracy, after all? Do you feel more able to answer this question now than you did at the start of this unit, or less? It is a strange feeling to hope that students feel less certain about the subject matter of a class at the end of the course than at the beginning, but in this case, one of the main points that this module has tried to make is that defining piracy is much harder than it seems at first glance. Just what makes something an act of “piracy” (as opposed to some other kind of crime, or no crime at all) was –and is—often a question of perspective. One colonial governor’s “pirate” was another impoverished and isolated community’s hero. Were buccaneers more violent and lawless than the rough communities that surrounded them? Were they more or less ethical than the emerging imperial governments that sought to seize control of distant lands, people, and resources and the profits they produced?

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Historical Realities vs.
Popular Portrayals

What Makes a Gold-
en Age of Piracy

Historical Realities vs. Popular Portrayals

Without divulging any secrets that might get you into trouble, ask yourself: have you ever committed an act of piracy? Did you consider it “piracy” when you did it? In other words, what are some activities today that are considered “piracy”, and do they all take place at sea? Do they all involve acts of physical violence? Does it matter? These questions are interesting to contemplate and hard to answer. No wonder our cultural obsession with pirates has continued to this day! Another main point of this module, however, has been that our love of pirate stories has obscured the brutal realities that produced piracy.

There is no better example of this than the depiction of eighteenth-century Jamaica in the original *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie. In the movie, the character played by Keira Knightly lives in a beautiful mansion attended by white servants. Most of the people depicted on the island are white—indigenous people and enslaved Africans and their descendants are not shown as being important parts of the island’s population. In reality, as you know from this module’s readings, by the early eighteenth century, the island’s indigenous inhabitants had either died from disease and/or violence or been displaced by colonial settlements. English-controlled Jamaica’s transition to a plantation economy sustained by enslaved African labor was well underway, with free whites outnumbered by enslaved Africans nearly 6 to 1 (Reading 3). White servitude (indentured labor) was vastly diminished. Large holdings of profitable plantations owned by very wealthy men focused on the cultivation of sugar by enslaved Africans.

This was backbreaking, brutal work, enforced through unspeakable violence and ever-hardening racial inequalities. The movie whitewashes—literally—this historical reality, knowing that viewers would prefer not to confront these harsh truths about the past and instead offering a fake imagined island in which white free inhabitants are the majority and people of color scarcely appear. This whitewashing not only erases the reality of the importance of slavery to the prosperity of the Caribbean and the Americas, it also makes it impossible to explain why the pirates existed in the first place. There was a tremendous amount of wealth circulating on the high seas during the “Golden Age” of Atlantic piracy and violent disputes about who should control it. Reducing pirates and piracy to a caricature neutralizes both the appeal of piracy and the very real threat it did—and does—pose to prevailing governments, individuals, and systems of international exchange.



Depiction of French pirates sacking and burning Havana, 1595

People joined pirate crews for many reasons, but it is impossible to understand the real appeal of these communities of renegades if we do not understand the historical realities that produced the so-called “Golden Age” of Atlantic piracy. The pirate lifestyle was made possible by landscapes and sea routes transformed by colonialism and by the abundance of unequally distributed wealth that flowed throughout the Atlantic world. Piracy thrives in situations of inequality and disputed control: and we cannot understand Atlantic piracy without understanding the transformation of the landscapes and populations of the lands on which they made a living and the needs and complaints of the communities that both sustained them and persecuted them, from England to Spain, and from Tortuga to Philadelphia and Providence, Rhode Island.

What Makes a “Golden Age” of Piracy?

As this module comes to a close, ask yourself: what makes a “Golden Age” of piracy? If growing inequality is at least part of the answer—creating many opportunities for disgruntled people to seize a bigger piece of pie for themselves—then, the Golden Age just keeps on going into the present. Where does the future of piracy lie? What do you think? A quick google search for contemporary pirate attacks brings up a whole host of news stories that speak to the ongoing relevance of piracy in the modern world. And for all the important changes that have occurred between 1500 and the present, that classic site of pirate activity—the ocean—remains, in many ways, a wilderness, in which people, including pirates, battle for control of maritime resources and shipping lanes just as they did 500 years ago.

Over the course of this module, we have learned that Atlantic piracy during the period c. 1500-1750 was very much a reflection of the opportunities and inequalities of the era. We must ask ourselves whether piracy today is any different. We all agree that piracy—of all sorts—is still very present in today’s world. Think about the various forms that piracy takes across the globe. From relatively passive individual acts of piracy (I include in this category illegally downloading music, movies, videogames, or pretty much anything available on the internet) to larger acts of commercial fraud and/or illegal dealings online, to maritime violence



Anti-piracy operations in the Arabian Gulf, 2013

on the high seas, piracy remains a very common phenomenon today. Piracy is a phenomenon that appears on frontiers—it is a sign that things are up for grabs; that the rules are not yet agreed upon; and that many visions are competing for control of a new space, a new industry, or a new good. Certainly, the Atlantic was a frontier of imperial control in the period covered in this module. But it is hardly the only frontier in world history.

To get a sense of the enduring threat of maritime piracy (and outlaw behavior and injustice of all sorts) on the high seas, take a look at the International Maritime Bureau report on maritime piracy. Or simply take a look at the [IMB's Live Piracy Map](#). Where is piracy is happening today and why? Look at the regions where piracy is spiking (it is always spiking somewhere)—what is the political economy of that region? Who is making money and from what resource? How is that resource harvested and distributed? Who stands to gain from control of that resource, and who stands to lose? The answers to these question swill tell you a lot about the shape of piracy in that particular region.

Piracy is always a canary in a coal mine: where there is piracy, there is a struggle for control of something or other. Who are the players? Who are the pirates? Who has the power? What is being pirates and where are the pirated goods being taken? These questions are as relevant today as they were four hundred years ago during the Golden Age of Atlantic Piracy.

Image Citations

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