

Peter Gelderloos

Life Under the Jolly Roger

2009

In *Life Under the Jolly Roger* (PM Press 2009), Gabriel Kuhn takes on the far flung sources regarding golden age piracy (primarily in the Caribbean at the end of the 17th century and beginning of the 18th) not in order to establish a definitive truth about them but to dispel myths, clarify what we can know for sure about the pirates and what realistic questions remain, and to elucidate what the pirate legacy might mean for people today who also see themselves as excluded by or at war with the developing global order.

With a mastery of social theory and a comfortable deployment of the great body of research he has mined, Kuhn examines the pirates ethnographically and sociologically and subjects them to the theories of Clastres, Foucault, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari, and sundry others. None of this is to say that the book is dense or obscure. Quite the contrary. Kuhn certainly writes for the agile reader, but rather than dropping names and assuming one can automatically place the reference within a well developed theoretical framework, Kuhn quotes at length to show how golden age piracy fits into these influential social theories and thus fills in a missing piece in our understanding of the world. In this way, Kuhn's sincerely curious, detailed, and multifaceted investigation of piracy helps us reconfigure our historical understanding of such broad themes as the development of capitalism, colonialism, race, discipline and the human body, physical disability, rebellion and political violence, guerrilla warfare, and more. The book has the potential of becoming something of a milestone achievement in this regard, similar to Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, though Kuhn's subject matter is decidedly more limited.

Sometimes the limitations he sets leaves me feeling like part of the picture is missing, and leaves important questions unanswered, such as: what was the connection between the golden age Caribbean pirates and the earlier Muslim and renegade pirates of North Africa, studied by Peter Lamborn Wilson? But in general Kuhn is just being specific and disciplined, setting himself a subject matter distinct enough that it can be properly analyzed, rather than going after all pirates, anywhere, at any time. And he also maps out at length the direct predecessors of the golden age pirates, the buccaneers, so the sense of history is not left lacking.

I found particularly fascinating the analysis of the transatlantic ship as a space for the creation of new social relationships that laid the ground for factory production; Kuhn makes clear how historically significant a few thousand pirates were in negating and temporarily opposing the development of capitalism, given the antiauthoritarian and undisciplined counter-model of the pirate ships.

The book is definitely written in an academic style, and it seems Kuhn is attempting to intervene and leave his mark in the professional discourse on piracy as much as he is trying to talk to fellow anarchists about pirates. I have long been

curious about the attraction the academy exerts on some anarchists, and I think there is as much to gain as there is to lose from this liaison. On the positive side, a more disciplined style of research us shed the incorrect and self-serving histories that have found their way into anarchist folklore, so that, for example, we don't go around like idiots talking about a pirate utopia, Libertalia, that probably never existed and in any case is exemplary of liberal democracy rather than anarchy. (I've fallen for that same lie, sadly in a text that is now going to print. If only I had read Kuhn's book first!)

But the detraction of academic discourse is its conservatism. Perhaps the most powerful criticism within that milieu is the charge of romanticism, and anywhere one looks one sees academics falling over themselves to run in the opposite direction. And while I daresay Kuhn does not fall or stumble in the course of this book, I do notice a certain conservatism that is surprising coming from a fellow anarchist. For example, there's the occasional usage of words like "cutthroat" as though it has any meaning, terms loaded with a bourgeois weight, like "crooked merchants" to describe traders who took plundered goods from pirates. Kuhn seems to privilege conservative myth-busting to radical romanticism. I appreciate his honesty in exposing the racism of the pirates and their participation in the slave trade; however in his presentation he heavily privileges this information at the expense of information on the connection between piracy and slave rebellions, which was in fact so strong a connection that it motivated the legislation of race and segregation in the new colonies. Kuhn mentions this latter information, but in passing, making it seem that he is more interested in busting the myth of racially liberated and liberating pirates than in exploring the complexity that this contradiction between pirate slavetrading and pirate support for slave rebellions suggests.

After all, a goal of anarchists is to inspire people. To do this, we don't need to tell lies, but we do need to accomplish a certain unbalanced telling of facts and stories, and by unbalanced I do not mean skewed but in motion, infused with a crazy hope that this system is sinking and we can help send it to Davy Jone's locker, as it were. Gabriel Kuhn does not at all hide his politics, but he also engages in a preexisting discourse that doesn't rock the boat too much. He does us a service of disabusing us of certain tall tales, but it seems that whenever he offers information about the pirates that might be inspiring, he does so in a very balanced, grounded way that is more useful to academics than to anarchists.

But even as he discrediting pirate myths that anarchists have long cherished, he offers us something even more helpful: the observation that, in fact, fairy tales do not become any less important than real histories, because of what they represent for an insurgent imagination. As Kuhn suggests, the romanticization of pirates as antiauthoritarian rebels seems to be part of the pirate phenomenon

from the beginning, and that imaginary myth may have played the important role of keeping radical dreams alive throughout a century when these dreams could find no solid expression in the reactionary socio-political order that reigned from the mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries, between the era of the Ranters and Levellers to the era of democratic revolutions.

In the end, Kuhn does a masterful job of convincingly detailing life under the jolly roger, but he does far more than that, by calling on this phenomenon to deepen our understanding of contemporaneous processes in history at a point when capitalism was first starting to develop, and by hinting at the importance of imagination in the course of history. Thus all the romanticism surrounding pirates is not meaningless: people thirst for rebellion and unfettered freedom, and if they cannot live it themselves, they will create in an imaginary world or see it in the frontier region of this one, until such time as they can seize it for themselves.

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