PIRATE ENLIGHTENMENT, OR THE REAL LIBERTALIA



CO-AUTHOR OF *THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING*

AUTHOR OF *DEBT: THE FIRST 5,000 YEARS*

DAVID GRAEBER

'Feisty, heroic ... a highly original thinker and a wonderful writer'

PETER FRANKOPAN, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

PENGUIN BOOKS

PIRATE ENLIGHTENMENT, OR THE REAL LIBERTALIA

'Open and imaginative . . . Graeber is writing in a hybrid genre of poetic history' *New Statesman*

'Daring, carefully speculative, and intellectually ambitious: all qualities that we had come to expect of the late David Graeber. *Pirate Enlightenment* is a splendid example of Graeber's transformative and convincing case that the Enlightenment was a cosmopolitan and plebian concoction, fabricated far from the European centers of Enlightenment thought' James C. Scott

'Could the Age of Reason have been founded on the shores of Madagascar? . . . it is good fun. It's about pirates, after all' Dan Jones, *Sunday Times*

'Like any pirate worth his salt, Graeber spins a spellbinding yarn' Stuart Jeffries, *Spectator*

'In*The Dawn of Everything*, David Graeber urged historically minded scholars to consider the ways that human beings have continually pursued three basic freedoms, including the freedom to create new forms of social relations. In this book, he provides a fascinating example of the transformative potential of this proposition. Showing how rumoured 18th century 'pirate kingdoms' established in Madagascar can be understood from the perspective of the local Malagasy population, Graeber gives us a glimpse of people, men and women, taking control of the society in which they lived, making new forms of sociality . . . *Pirate Enlightenment* is, as the author writes, a provocation but also an inspiration; and a great piece of story-telling' Rosemary A. Joyce, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley

'In uncovering the history of coastal Madagascar, Graeber, in a final contribution to literature, shows just how universal the urge for freedom and equality truly has proven' Michael M. Rosen, *Washington Examiner*

Copyrighted Material

'A tour de force of anthropological scholarship and an important addition to Malagasy history . . . Certain to be controversial, but all the more important for that' *Kirkus Reviews*

'Pirates captured the imagination of writers and readers centuries ago, and David Graeber reveals why. He has produced one of the most fascinating, original, and altogether brilliant books ever written about these unruly outlaws' Marcus Rediker, author of *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Graeber was a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics. He is the author of *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* and *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, and was a contributor to *Harper's Magazine,* the *Guardian*, and the *Baffler*. An iconic thinker and renowned activist, his early efforts helped to make Occupy Wall Street an era-defining movement. He died on 2 September 2020.

Copyrighted Material

PIRATE ENLIGHTENMENT, OR THE REAL LIBERTALIA



DAVID GRAEBER



Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Originally published in French as *Les pirates des lumières* by Libertalia Press 2019
First published in the United States of America by Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2022
First published in Great Britain by Allen Lane 2023
Published in Penguin Books 2024
001

Copyright © David Graeber, 2019

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

ISBN: 978–1–802–06156–7

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Copyrighted Material

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

CONTENTS

Preface vii

PART I
Pirates and Mock Kings of the Malagasy Northeast
1

PART II
The Advent of the Pirates from a Malagasy Point of View
41

PART III
Pirate Enlightenment
85

CONCLUSIONS
139

Appendix: Pirate and Enlightenment Time Line 151
Notes 157
Bibliography 165

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PREFACE

This essay was first written to be a chapter of a collection of essays about divine kingship that I coauthored with Marshall Sahlins. When I had been carrying out my original field research in Madagascar between 1989 and 1991, I first learned not only that many of the Caribbean pirates had settled in Madagascar, but, even more, that their descendants remained there as a self-identified group (a fact I discovered when I was briefly romantically involved with a woman whose ancestry harked back to Sainte-Marie). Later I was startled by the fact that no one had ever carried out systematic field research among them. I even made plans, at one point in my life, to carry out a fieldwork project among them—plans that ended up short-circuited by life contingencies of one sort or another and never came to fruition. Someday I still might do it. I acquired a photocopy around that time of the Mayeur manuscript, after a visit to the British Library, which for a very long time sat in a pile of books and documents near a

Copyrighted Material

large picture window in the room in which I'd grown up in my apartment in New York, on extremely large sheets of paper, barely legible in its eighteenth-century handwriting. For many years I often felt it was slightly reproachfully beckoning to me from across the room as I was trying to work on something else. Then when I lost my home to the machinations of Police Intelligence in 2014, I had the whole thing scanned, along with various family pictures and documents too bulky to bring with me to London, and eventually, I arranged to have it transcribed.

It was always something of a mystery to me that the text itself had never been published: especially since the British Library original, which had been composed in Mauritius, contained a little note explaining that a typescript version of the text could be found in the Académie Malgache in Antananarivo, and that if one wished to view it, one should consult with a certain M. Valette. Several essays by French authors who had clearly consulted with, and summarized, portions of this typescript had appeared, but the original manuscript—a scholarly tome in its own right, replete with numerous critical footnotes—never had.

Eventually I realized I had accumulated enough material on the pirates to make an interesting essay in itself. The original title—since it was supposed to be in an essay for a book on kings—was "Pirate Enlightenment: The Mock Kings of Madagascar," the subtitle being a reference to a short book by Daniel Defoe about Henry Avery. In the process of writing, however, the essay grew and grew. Before long it was a good seventy single-spaced pages, and I began to seriously wonder

Copyrighted Material

both whether it would make the resulting compendium itself too long and whether the subject matter had drifted too far away from the original emphasis on fraudulent kings (and larger questions of whether all kings were in a sense impostors, with the differences between them being only matters of degree) to really justify inclusion.

In the end I decided: everyone hates a long essay; everyone loves a short book. Why not turn the essay into a freestanding work and let it stand on its own merits?

And that is what I have done.

☽

The opportunity to publish the book with Libertalia Press proved impossible to resist. The image of Libertalia, the utopian pirate experiment, has remained an endless source of inspiration for those on the libertarian left; it has always been felt that even if it did not exist, it should have existed; or even if it did not exist in any literal sense, even if there was never any actual settlement that bore that name, the very existence of pirates and pirate societies was itself a kind of experiment, and that even at the deepest origins of what has come to be known as the Enlightenment project, one now seen in revolutionary quarters as a false dream of liberation that has instead unleashed unspeakable cruelty upon the world, there was a kind of redemptive promise of a genuine alternative.

Intellectually, this small book can be seen as one contribution to a larger intellectual project that I first laid out in an essay called "There Never Was a West" (which also

Copyrighted Material

appeared as a small freestanding book in French), and that I'm now pursuing as part of a joint project with the British archaeologist David Wengrow. In the language currently fashionable, it might be referred to as a project of "decolonizing the Enlightenment." There can be no doubt that many of the ideas we now see as products of the eighteenth-century European Lumières were, indeed, used to justify extraordinary cruelty, exploitation, and destruction, not just on the working classes at home, but on those who lived on other continents. But the blanket condemnation of Enlightenment thought is in its own way rather odd, when one considers that this was perhaps the first historically known intellectual movement organized largely by women, outside of official institutions like universities, with the express aim of undermining all existing structures of authority. What's more, if one examines many of the original sources, Enlightenment thinkers were often quite explicit that the sources of their ideas lay outside what we now call "the Western tradition" entirely. To take one example, which will be developed in another book, in the 1690s, just around the time the pirates were establishing themselves in Madagascar, there was something of a proto-Enlightenment salon being held in Montreal in the home of the Comte de Frontenac, then governor of Canada, in which he and his assistant, Lahontan, debated questions of social importance—Christianity, economics, sexual mores, etc.—with a Huron statesman named Kandiaronk, who took the position of an egalitarian and skeptical rationalist and held that the punitive apparatus of European law and religion was made necessary only by an economic system arranged in such a way that it would

Copyrighted Material

inevitably produce precisely the behaviors that apparatus was designed to repress. Lahontan was later to release his own redaction of his notes from some of these debates as a book, in 1704, and that book rapidly became a bestseller across Europe. Almost every major Enlightenment figure ended up writing an imitation of it. Yet somehow, figures like Kandiaronk have been written out of history. No one denies these debates actually happened; rather, the assumption is always that when it came time to write up accounts of what happened, men like Lahontan simply ignored everything Kandiaronk actually said and substituted some kind of "noble savage fantasy" drawn entirely from the European intellectual tradition. In other words, we have projected backward the idea that there was a self-contained "Western civilization" (a concept that didn't even really exist until the early twentieth century) and, with a genuinely perverse irony, used accusations of racial arrogance on the part of those we designate "Westerners" (basically now a euphemistic code word for "white people") as a pretext to exclude everyone not designated "white" from having any influence on history, and intellectual history in particular. It's as if history, and especially radical history, has become some sort of moral game where all that's really important is to make clear just how much one is not letting the Great Men of history off the hook for the (obviously, very real) racism, sexism, and chauvinism they displayed, without somehow noticing that a four-hundred-page book attacking Rousseau is still a four-hundred-page book about Rousseau.

Copyrighted Material

I still recall as a child being very impressed by an interview with the Sufi writer Idries Shah, who remarked how curious

it was that so many intelligent and decent human beings in Europe and America spent so much of their time in protest marches chanting the names and waving pictures of people that they hated ("Hey hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"). Didn't they realize, he remarked, how incredibly gratifying that was to the politicians they were denouncing? It was remarks like that, I think, that eventually caused me to reject a politics of protest and embrace one of direct action.

Some of the indignation that can be traced in this essay flows from this. Why do we not see a man like Kandiaronk as an important theorist of human freedom? He clearly was. Why do we not see a man like Tom Tsimilaho as one of the pioneers of democracy? Why have the contributions of the women who we know played such important roles in Huron and Betsimisaraka society, but whose very names have largely been lost, been excluded even from the stories we do tell about such men—as, for that matter, the women who organized the salons have largely been excluded from the story of the Enlightenment itself?

If nothing else, what I'd like this little experiment in historical writing to bring home is that existing history is not just deeply flawed and Eurocentric, it's also unnecessarily tedious and boring. There is a surreptitious pleasure in moralism, yes, just as there is a kind of mathematical glee to be found in reducing all human action to self-aggrandizing calculation. But these are ultimately tawdry pleasures. The real story of what happened in human history is a thousand times more diverting.

Copyrighted Material

Let us tell, then, a story about magic, lies, sea battles,

purloined princesses, slave revolts, manhunts, make-believe kingdoms and fraudulent ambassadors, spies, jewel thieves, poisoners, devil worship, and sexual obsession that lies at the origins of modern freedom. I hope the reader has as much fun as I did.

☽

The first Greeks were all pirates.

—Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*

This is a book about pirate kingdoms, real and imagined. It's also about a time and place where it is very difficult to tell the difference between the two. For about a hundred years, from the end of the seventeenth century toward the close of the next, the east coast of Madagascar was scene to a shadow play of storied pirate kings, pirate atrocities, and pirate utopias, rumors of which shocked, inspired, and entertained the clients of cafés and pubs across the North Atlantic world. There is absolutely no way, from our current vantage, to disentangle these accounts and establish a definitive narrative of which were true and which were not.

Some clearly weren't. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, for instance, many in Europe believed that a great kingdom had been created in Madagascar by a certain Captain Henry Avery and ten thousand pirate henchmen, a kingdom that was on the verge of establishing itself as one of the world's preeminent naval powers. In fact, this kingdom did not exist. It was a hoax. Most historians are now convinced

Copyrighted Material

the same could be said of the story of the great utopian experiment of Libertalia, a story also set in Madagascar, which appears in a chapter of a certain Captain Johnson's *A General History of the Pyrates* in 1724. Johnson describes Libertalia as an egalitarian republic, in which slavery had been abolished and all things were shared in common and administered democratically, created by a retired French pirate captain named Misson under the philosophical influence of a defrocked Italian priest. But historians have found no other evidence that either a pirate captain named Misson or such a defrocked priest (his name is given as Caraccioli) actually existed—despite the fact that almost all the other pirates mentioned in the book *can* be documented from archival sources. Similarly, archaeologists have been unable to locate any evidence for the physical existence of Libertalia. As a result, the general consensus is that the whole story is simply made up. Some are willing to allow it might have been a sailor's legend that the author of *History of the Pyrates* just felt was too good not to include, even though he presumably knew the events in question never really happened. Most simply Captain Johnson (whoever he was) fabricated the entire incident. Few, however, seem to feel it matters much, one way or the other, because the only important question is assumed to be: "Was there ever really a utopian settlement of former pirates called Libertalia on the Malagasy coast?"

To my mind, this is a rather trivial question. It would appear likely there was no Misson or Caraccioli, or a settlement with precisely that name, but there most certainly were pirate settlements on the Malagasy coast, and what's more, they were

Copyrighted Material

the place for radical social experiments. Pirates did experiment with new forms of governance and property arrangements; what's more, so did members of the surrounding Malagasy communities into which they married, many of whom had lived in their settlements, sailed in their ships, formed blood brotherhood pacts, and spent many hours in political conversation with them. One way the story of Captain Misson is indeed deceptive is that it arranges the story in such a way that the Malagasy are kept out of it, providing the pirates with shipwrecked foreign wives and reducing the surrounding people to hostile tribes who eventually overwhelm and kill them. But this just makes it easier for historians and anthropologists to do what they are inclined to do anyway in such circumstances: that is, to treat the political affairs of those identified as Europeans, and those identified as African or anyway nonwhite, as entirely separate domains of inquiry, separate worlds, which were unlikely to have any serious political, let alone intellectual, influence, one on the other.

In fact, as we'll see, the reality was much more complicated. But also much more interesting and hopeful.

So: stories about Libertalia, or for that matter Avery's pirate kingdom, were in no sense isolated fantasies. What's more, their very existence and popularity was a historical phenomenon in its own right. In a certain sense these stories might even be said, to adopt Marx's phrase, to be a material force in history. After all, the Golden Age of Piracy, as it's now called, really lasted only forty or fifty years; it was quite some time ago; but people all over the world are still telling stories about pirates and pirate utopias—or for that matter, elaborat-

Copyrighted Material

ing on them with the kinds of kaleidoscopic fantasies about magic, sex, and death that, as we'll see, have always accompanied them. It's hard to escape the conclusion that these stories endure because they embody a certain vision of human freedom, one that still feels relevant—but one, at the same time, that offers an alternative to the visions of freedom that were to be adopted in European salons over the course of the eighteenth century, and that still remain dominant today. The toothless or peg-legged buccaneer hoisting a flag of defiance against the world, drinking and feasting to a stupor on stolen loot, fleeing at the first sign of serious opposition, leaving only tall tales and confusion in his wake, is, perhaps, just as much a figure of the Enlightenment as Voltaire or Adam Smith, but he also represents a profoundly proletarian vision of liberation, necessarily violent and ephemeral. Modern factory discipline was born on ships and on plantations. It was only later that budding industrialists adopted those techniques of turning humans into machines into cities like Manchester and Birmingham. One might call pirate legends, then, the most important form of poetic expression produced by that emerging North Atlantic proletariat whose exploitation laid the ground for the industrial revolution.* As long as those forms of discipline, or their more subtle and insidious modern incarna-

* It was Eric Williams (*Capitalism and Slavery*) who first developed the idea that European slave plantations in the New World were, in effect, the first factories; the idea of a "pre-racial" North Atlantic proletariat, in which these same techniques of mechanization, surveillance, and discipline were applied to workers on ships, was elaborated by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (*The Many-Headed Hydra*).

Copyrighted Material

tions, govern our working lives, we will always fantasize about buccaneers.

This is not, however, primarily a book about the romantic appeal of piracy. It is a work of history, informed by anthropology; an attempt to establish what actually happened on the northeast coast of Madagascar at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth when several thousand pirates made that place their home, and to make a case that in a broader sense Libertalia did exist, and that it could indeed be considered, in a sense, the first Enlightenment political experiment. And that many of the men and women who brought this experiment into being spoke Malagasy.

☽

There is no doubt that stories about pirate utopias circulated widely, and that they did have historical effects. The real question is just how widely, and how profound, those effects actually were. I think a good case can be made that they were extremely important. For one thing, these stories began circulating very early, in the time of Newton and Leibniz, long before, say, the emergence of the political theory that came to be identified with Montesquieu and the Encyclopedists. Montesquieu of course made the argument that all nations first emerged as something very like utopian experiments: great lawgivers imposed their visions, laws came to constitute the character of great nations. In stories such men had undoubtedly heard in their childhood and adolescence, pirate captains like Misson or Avery had been represented as attempting to do exactly

Copyrighted Material

that. In 1707, when Montesquieu was precisely eighteen years old, Daniel Defoe was writing a broadside in England that compared the pirates settling Madagascar to the founders of ancient Rome, brigands who established themselves in a new territory, created new laws, and eventually grew to become a great conquering nation. That much of this excitement surrounding such pronouncements was due to wildly inflated propaganda or even outright fraud doesn't make much difference in terms of how such matters were received. We don't know if that particular screed was translated into French (it probably wasn't), but we do know that men claiming to represent the new pirate kingdom did visit Paris around the same time, seeking some kind of alliance. Did the young Montesquieu hear about this? Again, we don't know, but it's hard to imagine it wasn't just the sort of news that students at the time were joking and arguing about, and that was most likely to catch the imagination of an ambitious young intellectual.

Some things we do know. Perhaps it might be good to start by listing them. We know that a very large number of seventeenth-century pirates, from the Caribbean and elsewhere, settled along the northeast coast of Madagascar, where their Malagasy descendants ("the Zana-Malata") remain a self-identified group to this day. We know that their arrival set off a series of social upheavals that ultimately led to the formation, in the early eighteenth century, of a political entity called the Betsimisaraka Confederation. We also know that those who live in the territory once controlled by this confederation—a coastal strip almost seven hundred kilometers long—still refer to themselves as Betsimisaraka and are considered one of

Copyrighted Material

Madagascar's most stubbornly egalitarian peoples. We know the man who is considered to be the founder of this confederation was named Ratsimilaho, that Ratsimilaho was said at the time to be the son of an English pirate from a settlement called Ambonavola (most likely the town now known as Foulpointe), and that Ambonavola is described in contemporary English accounts as itself a kind of utopian experiment, an attempt to apply the democratic principles of organization typical of pirate ships to a settled community on land. Finally, we know that Ratsimilaho was eventually declared King of the Betsimisaraka in that very city.

All of this we can say with a fair degree of certainty. Beyond this, though, our sources become extremely confusing. The accepted chronology, for instance, established in the colonial period, holds that Ratsimilaho reigned as King of the Betsimisaraka from 1720 to 1756. Accounts written two generations later represent him as a kind of Enlightenment philosopher king who created the Betsimisaraka from his own personal genius, but whose ambitious plans to introduce European science and civilization were ultimately frustrated by the eventual defeat of his pirate allies and depredations of French slave traders. This, however, is extremely difficult to square with accounts written at the time, which represent this same person—or what at any rate appears to be the same person—sometimes as a king, but also sometimes as just one of a collection of local chiefs, and in one case as the second-in-command for a Jamaican pirate "king" named John Plantain. Another account represents him as the second-in-command for a Malagasy monarch in an entirely different part of the country.

Copyrighted Material

What's more, archaeologists have found no evidence that there actually was a Betsimisaraka kingdom, in any recognizable sense of the term, at all; states that were created in other parts of Madagascar at the time show distinct material traces, but along the northeast coast there is no evidence of the building of palaces and public works, creation of systems of taxation, hierarchies of officials, or standing armies, or of any significant disruption to older patterns of rural life.

What is one to make of all this?

In this small book I might not be able to provide a comprehensive explanation of the existing evidence—that might well be impossible anyway—but I will attempt to provide a general framework within which it might be interpreted. There are several points at which my analysis breaks with conventional understandings of the period.

First of all, I'll argue that in Madagascar at the time, and particularly in areas influenced by the pirates, stories of mighty kingdoms, or even the actual existence of what looked like royal courts, should not necessarily be taken at face value. All the materials existed on the coast at the time to set up Potemkin courts to impress outsiders, and it's quite clear that at least some of the "kings" encountered by foreign observers were simply playing a game of make-believe, with the active complicity of their ostensible Malagasy retainers. Pirates were particularly good at such games. In fact, one reason the Golden Age of Piracy remains the stuff of legend is that pirates of that age were so skilled at manipulating legends; they deployed wonder-stories—whether of terrifying violence or inspiring ideals—as something very much like weapons of war,

Copyrighted Material