



## Pirates and the uses of history

Martin Parker

**review of:**

Gabriel Kuhn (2010) *Life under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on golden age piracy*. Oakland, CA: PM Press. (PB: pp. 272, \$20.00, ISBN: 9781604860528)

Peter T. Leeson (2009) *The invisible hook: The hidden economics of pirates*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (PB: pp. 288, £11.95, ISBN: 9780691150093)

When research, teaching and writing about history is being done, it is usually justified with reference to the problem of induction. Though induction is called a 'logic', it is really a guess about probability. If the sun has risen every day for all of my life, then it will probably rise tomorrow. There is no necessary reason implied here, no deduction from principles, simply a guess based on spotting a pattern and then predicting it into the future. So the largely descriptive practice of history becomes articulated as a search for patterns which trail from then to then, from the crow's nest of now. Not always, because it could be justified as a literary or cultural practice which is being done for its own sake, or for commercial reasons of selling books and TV series, but when a loftier reason is called for it would usually be about 'learning' from history. If you don't know your past, you are doomed to repeat it. How can we know where we are going if we don't know where we've been?

In theory then, when it comes to wars, revolutions or financial collapses, we can go back and look at what happened and use it to shape our actions now with the benefit of hindsight. Is the collapse of 2008 like that of 1929, or 1837? There is no certainty in such analogies, and no time is exactly the same as any other, but it's probably better to have this information than not. Just as telling the story of the holocaust might warn us about what happens when economic crisis meets nationalism, so might the story of the great depression being addressed by the New Deal encourage us to think hard about the possibilities of Keynesian economics as an intervention in the current crisis. In the language of the classroom, the past teaches lessons, and so we need historians to translate the voice of history into stories with morals for policy and politics today.

There is a second variant in this strategy, one that encourages us to look back so that we can look forward, but by opening possibility rather than suggesting probability. This is the history of things that authors think were rather better then than now, a history that

doesn't so much to explain the present as contradict it. Let's call this utopian history – the search for reasons why the present doesn't have to be as it is and the future can be something altogether more exciting.

That is mostly why Gabriel Kuhn is interested in Golden Age pirates from the late 17<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. He sees them as an example of a proto-democratic and anti-imperial practice, and wants to suggest that we can learn from this past in order to open a different future. Rather than 'this happened in the past so it is likely to happen in the future', Kuhn says (against an implicitly neo-liberal present) that 'this happened in the past so it *can* happen in the future'. It's almost the opposite of induction in terms of probability. It's like suggesting that there was a solar eclipse yesterday so there might be one today, or that the dice will roll snake eyes for the seventh time. Rather silly, you might say, but perhaps also rather important in a historical context where policy makers and politicians assume a broad consensus that global capitalism is the end of history. Market managerialism and the efficient markets hypothesis then become, *ceteris paribus*, the answer, and the only interesting thing about history is how long it took us to get there. (Or perhaps merely to distract us on long aeroplane journeys.) Historicizing the present in such a smug contemporary context then matters, but for rather different reasons. If you don't know your radical past, you are doomed *not* to be able to repeat it. Or, how can we know where we *can* go, if we don't know where we have been?

Utopianism is easy enough to criticise of course. Castles in the air seem pretty pointless when compared to real castles, but we'll come to that in a while. Utopian history is a slightly different matter though, because it must be (in part) judged as history. If you claim knowledge of the 1837 depression, then you need a grasp of the facts that can be known. You need to be able to footnote dusty sources in forgotten corners of libraries, and to claim that you have spent a long time turning pages and bending over desks. So, if you claim knowledge of pirates, your sources matter here. Kuhn's book has a problem with this, because the sources are a problem. Though we can infer something about pirates from contemporaneous court records, newspaper accounts, travel books, broadsides and popular ballads, the pirates are always being spoken for in such accounts. They almost never speak themselves, with even their gallows speeches being written by moralists of radical or conservative stripe. Demonized by states and merchants, but glamorised by the common people and those who wished to sell stories, pirates are effectively constructed by the interference patterns between these different sources of representation. Their reality largely died with them, sunk in blue Caribbean bays or hanging raven-pecked from gibbets.

Such lack of evidence hasn't stopped people from making money by telling their story for three hundred and fifty years. The glamorous rogue of *Pirates of the Caribbean* has been sold many times, as has the violent psychopath who commits atrocities that are described in detail and then condemned with vehemence. Even the gurning figures of pantomime fun need to be located here, because they establish the conditions of possibility for the man with the hook and a chest full of treasure. Most importantly for Kuhn though, over the past thirty years a radical pirate has been constructed by social historians such as Christopher Hill, Marcus Rediker, Peter Linebaugh, Peter Lamborne Wilson, Stephen Snelders and others. This sort of pirate didn't really exist before in anything but fragments, but has increasingly become the representation of a tradition of

dissent which carries the skull and crossbones into contemporary debates about intellectual property, via the Paris Commune and G8 protests. *Life Under the Jolly Roger* adds little to any of these works, since it relies on the same materials, but Kuhn manages to summarise the sorts of issues at stake in this literature, at the same time as he endlessly repeats a warning against the dangers of romanticization. At times, the book is simply a long list of pirated quotations from other authors and ends up reading like a sort of textbook on what people have said about the radical pirate for those students doing a 'Piracy 101' module.

To summarise, this guerrilla pirate is an enemy of mercantile capitalism and the imperial state, and a social bandit who is supported by most common people. Such pirates are also tolerant when it comes to questions of nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability, and practice a form of rough democracy in which they elect their own leaders and are magnanimous to those who don't resist them. There is probably some truth in all of these claims, though perhaps not as much as some might like to believe, and hence it should not surprise us that pirates have come to matter for utopian historians. Searching for examples of practice that can shame the present, and shape the future, the historian presents the pirate ship as an anarchist collective populated by diggers and levellers. Educated guesses and suppositions fill in the gap between wishful thinking and desire. It's enough to make a historian turn in their grave, or break a quill.

I overstate the case, but do so deliberately. Kuhn is very often concerned to withdraw from such strong claims, pointing out that pirates sold slaves and raped women for example, but neither he nor PM Press would want that to be the marketing pitch for the book. The whole point is that this pirate opens things up, and allows for forms of thought about possibility to be laced with the smell of spiced rum and the exciting possibility of blood and shouting. It is fantasy, with all the identifications and projections which that involves, though that certainly doesn't mean that it can't be politics too. Kuhn's pirates also fly some other flags – Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault and Nietzsche. They become nomadic war machines, who resist biopolitics in the name of Dionysian excess. Casually dressed in fashionable theory, they swashbuckle their way into the radical imagination, post-structuralists before structuralism, anti-capitalists before capitalism. It's a powerful brew, and no wonder that writers from a wide variety of backgrounds get seduced by it – even if they work in Business Schools (Land 2007, Parker 2009)

Peter Leeson's *The Invisible Hook* (2009) uses the same sort of historical evidence as Kuhn's book, but reaches some rather different conclusions. Leeson's book (like Levitt and Dubner's *Freakonomics* and many other similar titles) is a primer in behavioural economics, and the title is intended as an echo of Adam's Smith's 'invisible hand', the aggregation of individual rational choices. Leeson is concerned to show that pirates were rational economic actors, and not irrational psychopaths whose behaviour was incomprehensible to all but them. I suppose he thinks that if he can demonstrate the logic of piracy, as Levitt and Dubner (2006) did with drug dealing, he will make some money himself, and prove that behavioural economics even works in the most unlikely situations. He seems to be aiming at rather a straw target, because I'm not exactly sure who Leeson is arguing against, but his analysis of the 'hidden economics of pirates' is

convincing enough in a peg-legged sort of way. He writes about why spreading stories about torture was a good idea to encourage the development of fearsome pirate reputation, which in turn saved resources when they were attacking ships. He shows how pirate democracy was a response to the principal-agent problem, and the Jolly Roger was a brand which signalled to the market. Admittedly he does make the pirates sound like autistic accountants, but it's a good yarn that he spins.

There are a variety of ways in which Leeson's analysis might be deemed a bit thin, as well as ideologically driven, but that's not really my point here. Whether you buy the book on Leeson's bounded rationalists in search of strategies to maximum benefit, or Kuhn's metrosexual autonomists engaged in potlatch economics, doesn't really depend on the facts of the matter or the quality of the analysis. Neither author can point to indisputable evidence, and both books use the same sources, and tell the same stories. (Pretty much as every book on piracy has been doing since the publication of Captain Charles Johnson's *General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates, and Also Their Policies, Discipline and Government* in 1724.) It's rather like a choice between Errol Flynn and Johnny Depp, both pirates who swing around on ropes a lot, but are very different in the way they play their parts. I think that the only basis for a choice between Kuhn and Leeson is what lessons we *want* to learn from history. Leeson wants to prove that most people, most of the time, behave according to a calculus of incentive and reward and that economics is the best way to understand what people do. Kuhn is looking for inspirations for a radical politics. These aren't necessarily incommensurable lessons for an anarchist libertarian, but they are clearly intended to sell to different audiences. Leeson's book ends up advocating markets and rolling back the state, as well as suggesting that 'workers democracy' is all very well, but you can't run Wal-Mart like a pirate ship. Kuhn suggests that the pirates show us something about the potential for revolutionary organizing, and doesn't mention Wal-Mart, but I would guess he wouldn't shop there.

Personally, and for what it's worth, I think that Leeson's book is better. It adds to the panoply of ways in which pirates can be understood, and assumes that they were engaged in forms of rational economic action. It doesn't moralise that much, except about his one dimensional version of economics, and forces you to think about what you know (although he does make some rather odd comments about homosexuality.) Kuhn's book is not a paradigm shift, despite his name, and he doesn't really end up thinking very hard about what he wants the pirates to do for 'radicals today'. He warns not to get carried away with our romanticization of a bunch of people most of us would cross the street to avoid, but then goes ahead and does it anyway. I prefer my fantasies to be thoroughly fantastic, so Leeson's determined refusal to attach a politics to piracy ends up being the more challenging thought experiment. I might not agree with Leeson's version of the imperialism of economics, but *The Invisible Hook* has a lot to say to present day politics too.

If we take the current examples of piracy off the coasts of Somalia, Indonesia, Nigeria and so on, and apply Leeson's dispassionate calculus, we are left without a peg-leg to stand on in terms of justifying present day policies. If any of us lived in poverty, and saw huge ships trundling along on the horizon, we would probably feel rather hostile to the 'laws' that govern international trade and the relations between states. Another book

published in 2009, written by balding British TV hard man Ross Kemp, makes this point too. Kemp's breathlessly ordinary attempts to meet pirates are good 'content' for a book and a BBC TV show, but they are also quite convincing demonstrations of the inequalities of the international order. Kemp shows us that pirates have reasons for being pirates, and ironically one of the main reasons is the dominance of ideas of the market which Leeson finds so compelling. I'm not sure that Somalians would see the irony though, as industrial waste washes up on their poisoned beaches, and killing has become a national industry. It seems that the unintended consequence of applying neo-liberal economic policies on a global scale is to provide very rational reasons for some people to fire rocket propelled grenades at container ships.

There is no definitive answer to the question of what we can learn from pirate history, but there are two things that might be provisionally concluded. One is that representations of pirates will continue to be sold by other people for money. Kuhn and Leeson are in that respect not much different from Captain Johnson, Johnny Depp and Ross Kemp. The second is that since we don't seem to agree about what we learn, we might as well be clear about what we want to learn. There's an odd paradox in the very idea of historicising the present. It could lock us in to history in ways that make path dependency inevitable, and prevent us from imagining anything that isn't now. But it could also show us that now wasn't always the case, and that things have been done differently in other places and times. Leeson shows us that this is not necessarily a romantic or nostalgic argument and he doesn't need Kuhn's radical baggage to show why piracy made, and makes, sense. What Leeson lacks is any sense that the future can be substantially different from the past, assuming that the lesson that we learn that is that we should learn the lessons of economics. But if recent history is anything to go by, we would be better assuming that many economists don't understand politics, and hence the possibility of change in the social conditions that produce rationality and market exchange. It is this very possibility for change that shows us why those sympathetic to pirates should be suspicious of arguments that assume that history teaches lessons, unless the lesson is that the future is open.

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#### the author

Martin Parker works in a leading university based Business School somewhere near Coventry.  
E-mail: martin.parker@wbs.ac.uk