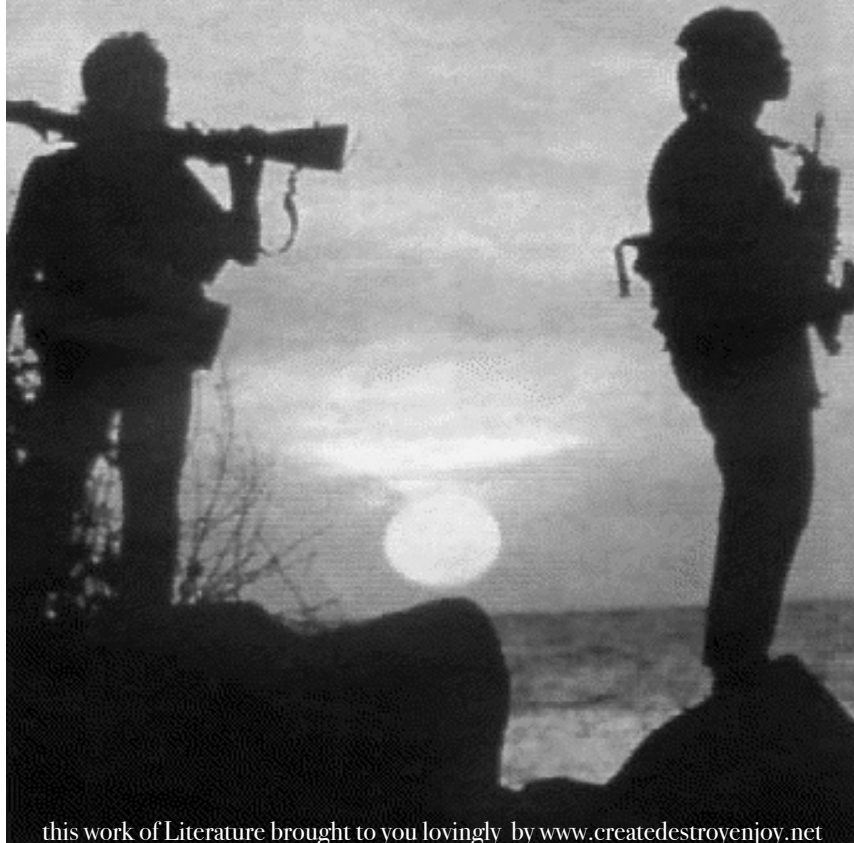


It is both ridiculously simple and mindbogglingly complex. The only way to truly address the piracy problem is to reform our entire system of global economics—our entire global culture. Piracy is only one more reason to create another future; an environmentally friendly future of socioeconomic justice and community living. If we don't, bandits on land and pirates at sea will just take advantage of our increasing postmodern chaos and kill us all¹⁰. The End.

1. Gottschalk, Jack, and Brian Flanagan. *Jolly Roger with an Uzi*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000, 5. 2. *Ibid*, 116. 3. *Ibid*, 24. 4. Dinakar, Sethurama. "The Jolly Roger Flies High... As Piracy Feeds the Hungry." *Business Week Online* 24 May 1999. 5. Burnett, John. *Dangerous Waters: Modern Piracy and Terror on the High Seas*. New York: Dutton, 2002, 11. 6. Langwiesche, William. "Anarchy at Sea." *Atlantic Monthly* Sept. 2003, 63. 7. *Ibid*, 52. 8. *Ibid*, 52. 9. *Ibid*, 74. 10. I would rather be killed by a pirate than die alone in a nursing home; would you?



POSTMODERN



PIRACY

*murder and mayhem
on the 21st century's
increasingly high seas*

IN THE OCEAN of information and news headlines we swim through daily, here's one you might have missed: Piracy is on the rise. In fact, piracy incidents have been steadily increasing for the past decade. I refer not to software piracy or CD pirates, however, but to good old-fashioned piracy on the high seas—with a postmodern twist. Today's tricky pirates are a new breed of maritime terror, and although the rising piracy problem is often ignored, we should really take a look at it.

Postmodern pirates follow some of the same principles as their privateer ancestors: they haunt the waterways where the pickings are good (currently, Southeast Asia, Brazil, and the African coast); they operate in areas where law enforcement is low; and they seek out safe havens where they can hide

and conduct business¹. Their motivations are also similar to those of historical pirates. They are people who want riches and don't mind stealing (and killing) to get these riches. Whether it is gold coins, rum, and cochineal; or aluminum, petroleum, and high-tech goods, pirates are still hungry for treasure.

Postmodern pirates don't operate much differently from those of pirates in the Golden Age, either. Typically, a crew of six to ten pirates will cruise up to a freighter in a speedboat, stealthily board it using grappling hooks or bamboo poles, and detain or murder the ship's crew. From there, they can either steal cash and personal items from the officers, steal the goods from the ship and then leave it adrift, or steal the ship and all of its contents. In the case of the latter, a "phantom ship" is created. Efficient pirates can paint over a ship in one day, create a false (or even legal) registration for it, and presto, a new ship is prowling the seas.

And pirates today are efficient. Many of them are allied with organized crime, which allows them access to information and intelligence about shipments that traditional pirates never had. Furthermore, the organized crime connections allow them to easily sell off their stolen goods—an independent pirate wouldn't necessarily know what to do with 30,000 tons of aluminum, for example. These organized gangs are entangled with the sex and arms industries, terrorist organizations, and warlords. Moreover, corrupt nations themselves are involved in piracy. As Jack Gottschalk and Brian Flanagan report in their study, *Jolly Roger with an Uzi*, ships sailing off the coast of Somalia have been attacked by criminals who are allegedly members of the Somalian coast guard; furthermore, Chinese

specific crime, and creating private navies and private security forces. However, I do not believe any of these approaches will suffice. Not only would they be hard to implement universally, but they are approaching the problem in the wrong way. They are addressing the symptom rather than the cause, for piracy is but a symptom of a much larger issue.

What I propose is both radical and difficult, but necessary: we must see piracy in the context of globalization. In fact, the piracy problem is endemic to globalization. It is tied to a world of economic inequality: where you have impoverished people shipping goods to wealthier nations, you will certainly have impoverished people attempting to right the balance and steal these goods. After all, they have little to lose and everything to gain. Obviously, there's no quick remedy for this problem; equally obviously, piracy is but one facet of the problem. Globalization has immense social, economic, and environmental consequences, and it is way beyond the scope of this paper to list them all. What we need to do is simply not ship goods. (Yes, I know... wish me luck with this one, but I'll continue anyway). If goods were locally produced, the environment would benefit, the people that produced the goods would benefit, and the people that consume the goods would benefit. Not only would we save incalculable amounts of energy and fossil fuels, but wealth would remain in the community that produced it... self-reliant communities are less alienated communities... and locally produced goods fight the blandness of global monoculture.

The benefits of staying local versus going global are innumerable. If we shipped less goods, it would help to end global inequality; if people had enough, they wouldn't have to steal.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not advocating law and order for the seas in some regulatory fashion: I'm intrigued that the seas are still a zone autonomous from conventional reality. Piracy is so alluring because of its lawlessness and freedom; the vastness of the sublime seas is worthy of wonder and terror, and I'm kind of glad we still have pirates to reflect the sublimity of the seas. I mean, if the seas got regulated, what unmediated space would we have left? On the other hand, piracy is kind of



The Straits of Malacca are among the busiest shipping lanes in the world.

scary because cargoes today are simply more lethal than ever before. When pirates attack, these toxic substances are often going unwatched. Imagine a ship filled with oil careening through the busy Straits of Malacca unmanned, and you have an environmentalist's worst nightmare. Imagine ships filled with toxic waste or chemicals, and the picture gets even grimmer. While we may see a freighter moving goods around, somebody with a terrorist's agenda may see an enormous, moveable chemical bomb waiting to be exploded.

The few people who are even considering the piracy problem are focusing on typical solutions: installing bright antipiracy lights, relying on new technology to provide better tracking of ships, pleading to the governments for better law enforcement, attempting to create laws that define piracy as a more

military units are known to forcibly board ships and seize cargo². In a corrupt world, it can be difficult to separate the criminals from the law officers, which is just one of the problems that is causing the rise in postmodern piracy.

The major factor in the increase of piracy is global economic hardship (and particularly the currency crises in Southeast Asia, where the pirate menace is the most troubling). The secretary general of the International Maritime Organization has "warned the maritime community to exercise extra levels of vigilance" because of the downturn in the global economy³. There are simply a lot of poor, desperate people who see piracy as an easy means to make a living.

While being a pirate might not seem like a laid-back get-rich-quick kind of job (piracy does sound like a high-risk occupation), it actually is relatively easy, thanks to the lack of law enforcement—another important factor that has contributed to piracy's rise. The oceans are simply too vast to patrol, and there's no real international navy to patrol them. Firstly, many nations don't have the resources to deal with piracy, or they are corrupt enough that they are engaged in it themselves. Secondly, pirate attacks often go unreported. This is because the authorities often can't do anything after the fact, and the shipping lines don't want bad press or an increase in insurance premiums. According to a report in *Business Week*, "many incidents are not reported at all because of concerns that an inquiry would disrupt schedules ... 'We make money when a ship is sailing, not when it's grounded,'" says an official from Bangkok-based Great Eastern Shipping"⁴. So, not only are the seas hard to patrol, but there is little interest in patrolling them. Catching pirates is a completely unprofitable

enterprise. Though people die bloody deaths at the hands of pirates—241 mariners were killed in pirate attacks in 2001 alone⁵—it is economic interest, not human interest, which motivates political and legal action.

We do have, however, the International Maritime Organization to provide some kind of law and order to the oceans. The IMO is a London-based UN agency that was created in 1959, and its job is to set the standards for operating ships at sea. However, while the IMO sets standards for operating ships, it has no power to enforce these standards. Instead, ship owners hire independent “classification societies” to enforce regulations⁶. This is, of course, an enormous conflict of interest, but nobody really cares; the result is that the ocean looks well-regulated on paper, but it is in fact a chaotic, lawless expanse that covers most of our planet.

The problem of regulating the seas relates directly to piracy, especially when one considers the “flags of convenience” system that enables pirates to do their work of converting stolen ships into legal ships. According to official registries, Panama is “the largest maritime nation on earth, followed by bloody Liberia,” which is in actuality a company from Virginia⁷. A ship that hails from “Cambodia” is actually registered by a South Korean company, and there are ships that hail from landlocked Bolivia or the Mongolian desert⁸. Ships (which are often managed by secretive, just-on-paper companies in obscure countries) choose the nations with lax environmental laws or safety concerns to register their ships in. With this international legal mess, which nobody really has a motivation to sort out, it is no wonder that illicit activity can flourish; no surprise that a stolen ship can reappear as a new ship with-

out anybody noticing. After all, there are tens of thousands of large freighters constantly circulating upon the vast seas, not to mention smaller craft—as one Coast Guard official scoffed, when asked about the problem of patrolling the seas: “We’ve got thirty million boats out there”⁹.

It is this multinational, global confusion that makes these pirates not just modern, but postmodern. Today’s ships are diverse not only in their paperwork, but also in the mariners who work on them. A typical ship might have Spanish, Malaysian, Romanian, Chinese, and Croatian men all working alongside each other, speaking different languages, but all comprehending the language of the sea. The pirates, too, cross borders in their ethnicity and their transactions. The maritime world is fragmented, yet global; it has no boundaries, yet remains confusing and chaotic rather than unified and cohesive. This is what the oceans look like in our postmodern era.

Piracy is definitely linked to the problems our planet currently faces, and we should approach piracy systemically, rather than trying to solve the problem through isolating it. And it is a problem worth addressing. Though it may not seem economically prudent to try to combat piracy, it will be: this is, after all, a “post-9/11 world”. The line between piracy and terrorism is often vague. The discriminating characteristic is that pirates are purely greedy, while terrorists have some kind of ideology, but the methods are the same. It is surprising that there has not been some kind of maritime attack already, considering the number of ships prowling the lawless oceans. The Customs Service, now part of the Homeland Security department, has begun to run checks on overseas ports; still, the piracy problem is too confusingly widespread to control.