

Lost Conversations: Pirates and Authoritative Discourse

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David Graeber’s slim and disarming *Pirate Enlightenment*, first published in English in 2023, offers an intriguing challenge to the Eurocentric narrative of how the principles of Enlightenment developed and disseminated in the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment, Graeber suggests, was born out of conversations, now irretrievably lost, out of ideas that percolated through communities, and were tried out as experimental social organizations in remote places like Madagascar. Graeber argues that the European pirates who settled on Madagascar attempted to bring the democratic administration of their ships to a land settlement, but that, in settling and mingling with the local population, they found themselves assimilated into larger conversations about power and organization. The descendants of the Malagasy-pirate settlements remain even today as a self-identifying group, the Zana-Malata, who derive status from participation in those long-ago negotiations. Although these conversations went unrecorded, then, their effects mattered greatly in Madagascar, and, Graeber insinuates, even filtered back to Europe, strands of the complex web of ideas that we understand as The Enlightenment.

So far, so good—except that this supposed conversational discourse runs up a rather interesting textual wall: pirates, in Europe at least, appear primarily as criminals, and are presented mainly within the context of the Law. We see this most obviously in the published trial accounts and their ancillary texts, such as the “dying confession” pamphlets that attended pirate executions. Even that remarkable compendium of pirate stories, Charles Johnson’s *A General History of the Pyrates*, is careful to locate pirates within their legal designation as *hostis humani generis*, the enemy of all humanity. If Graeber is correct, however, pirates were not a criminal ruling class in Madagascar, but an important element of complex social hierarchies and the formations of new governmental arrangements there. This pushes us to ask: how can we begin to understand marginalized figures such as pirates outside of the sanctioned discourses that have constructed them? Speaking more practically—what happens when two textual editors and pirate scholars attempt to present a definitive scholarly version of Johnson’s *General History*, well aware of the discursive difficulties and hermeneutic gaps present in the text itself?

Our paper, then, rather than considering the question, “Why study the eighteenth century,” considers “What kind of eighteenth century are we studying?” Our experience as co-editors of Charles Johnson’s *General History of the Pyrates* has raised significant issues of textual authority, authorial presence, and audience and context, but it also raises the question of how pirates—who rarely, if ever, are allowed to speak freely about their own experience—participate in a discourse that operates apart from, even beneath, the authoritative discourses associated with print culture. Like Graeber’s conversations, much of what constituted “the pirate” in the period, which existed outside of print, is also largely vanished, leaving a blank space that can be filled in popular culture by swashbuckling heroes, bloodthirsty monsters, avaricious dandies—or Robert Newton and Taika Waititi. In scholarly discourse, the pirate outline is filled in with anti-capitalist socialist warriors, radical abolitionists, and queer countercultures. To locate the pirate in the eighteenth century is to chase a verbal ghost—or race through a hall of mirrors, fixating only on the distortions that please us. A clear-eyed view on the *General History* means accepting two things: what we actually know, and what we’ve lost forever.