

Policante, Amedeo  
**The Pirate Myth**

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This book is a significant contribution to understanding the origins of the 'pirate myth' in the Western political imagination. *The Pirate Myth* also intends to contribute to what the rhetorical, strategic and political function served by the figure of the pirate is and why, throughout the centuries, empires have always claimed the burden of protecting humanity from pirates and from 'those who are like pirates'. Moreover, in this book, Amedeo Policante tries to observe if there are pirates among us today and who they are they.

The research questions are clearly stated in the introduction of the book. In this sense, the author makes clear that the fundamental question that has oriented this study is the following: how did a marginal figure such as the pirate come to be defined as the first enemy of the human race? There are other interesting research questions that Dr. Policante answers in the different chapters: how did the pirate come to host fantasies of an outside at once desired and feared, an outside that sets itself in contrast with the order of the state, of civilization and even of life itself? When did sea-robbers begin to be portrayed as monstrous beings against which all states must coalesce? Why, at a certain point in history, did European states decide collectively to appropriate, organize and subject to the legal yoke the oceans of the world?

This book shows that the history of piracy – the ways in which pirates have been used, outlawed, criminalized, condemned and suppressed by European powers – has been, and continues to be, a fundamental element in the formation of the world market. The author states that there is not a single discourse about piracy, which makes this book interesting to people working on political studies, law, history, philosophy, literature, among other disciplines.

The book has a clear structure and organization; it is divided in 2 parts: part 1 covers 4 chapters that deal with Pirate figures (1400–1800) and part 2 covers 3 chapters paying attention to Pirate spectres (1800–2012). Each chapter is divided in three sections: the first introduces the fundamental characteristics of the global order under scrutiny; the second focuses on the ways in which the image of the pirate has been constructed in each historical period; and the third discusses some of the paradigmatic pirate figures of the age and examines their role in history, philosophy and literature. This linear mode of exposition is followed throughout the first and the second part, with only occasional variations.

The aim of the book's structure is to contextualize systematically how and why particular individuals and groups were perceived and described as 'piratical' in a certain historical and geographical context. In this way, it becomes possible to

consider the significant historical continuities that underlie different discourses that, throughout history, have made use of the concept of ‘the pirate’; but also, it enables us to follow the ways in which the meaning of that same concept changed in passing from one global order to another. There is a sense in which pirates have always been with us and yet, beneath the superficial timelessness of the subject, we discover fundamental discontinuities, sudden turnarounds, discursive shifts that transform the meaning of what a pirate is supposed to be.

The first part of the book is dedicated to a study of the pirate figure as it appears in the context of various global orders from antiquity until the early eighteenth century. The first chapter (*Persecutio piratarum*: pirate outlaws and the Roman Empire) introduces the main line of argumentation and analyses the structural relationship between the concepts of piracy and Empire. This is done through an investigation of how these two concepts were originally constructed in the context of Roman Imperial law. The second chapter (The Christian Commonwealth: pirates, heretics and inquisitors) explores the evolution of the concept of Empire in the medieval *res publica Christiana* and the ways in which the figure of the pirate emerged once again in the context of an epochal conflict between Catholic Spain and the major Protestant countries, over the right to preach, trade and conquer in the lands of the New World.

The third chapter (Zones of plunder: piracy and primitive accumulation) discusses the ways in which a new global order, based on a strict division between Europe and the New World, emerged in the second half of the sixteenth century. This chapter reflects upon the ambiguity of the classical figure of the pirate. In the fourth chapter (Enemies of all nations: piracy and the world-market), Dr. Policante concentrates on what has been defined by modern historians as the ‘Golden Age of Piracy’, covering approximately 1670 to 1720. It is pointed out that in this half a century, an unprecedented military mobilization against piracy gradually unfolds. There are some illustrations in this chapter that facilitate the contextualization of the historical facts that the author refers to in this chapter. In a brief intermezzo, the author discusses the profound fascination that the pirate character has exercised on the imagination of almost three centuries of readers and writers.

The second part of the book is concerned with the ways in which the image of the pirate that emerged in the early-modern period captured the European imagination, and left a profound trace in the evolution of the modern international order. This part studies the ways in which the spectre of eighteenth century piracy continues to haunt modern international law, playing an important role in the history of European Imperialism, in the escalation to total war in the twentieth century, and today in the context of the war on terror.

The fifth chapter (The empire of free trade: liberal Universalism and the pirate states) is concerned with the ways in which the concept of the pirate continued to dwell in the colonial world of the nineteenth century. Amedeo Policante points out

that it is in the context of European Imperialist expansionism that the figure of the pirate continued to play an important role in global history, well after the end of the Golden Age of piracy. In addition, the sixth chapter (Pirate spectres: rightless outlaws in the age of total war) follows the post-colonial trajectory by which the modern concept of the pirate as 'enemy of the human race', which served an important role in the history of Imperialism, eventually travelled back to the European centre. The final chapter (Terrorists and pirates: global police and *humanitas afflicta*) discusses the many ways in which the spectre of the pirate continues to guide contemporary transformations of international law, projecting itself over ever-changing subjects, taking newfangled clothes and names, disguising itself. The last chapter makes clear that the pirate continues to be the figure that most perfectly embodies the idea of an apolitical pest to be suppressed and removed.

The book ends with some very clear conclusions in which the author states that *The Pirate Myth* has tried to reflect upon the history of the piracy from antiquity until today. In order to do so, Dr. Policante has looked at the pirate as a legal category and as a semiotic construction, focusing on the role it played in different Imperial discourses. The conclusion is followed by an extensive and updated bibliography that consists on some classical references on the pirate and some contemporary ones, which shows that the author has made a literature review of the main references on the field.

One of the main ideas emphasized in *The Pirate Myth* is the fact that the pirate is always represented, first of all, as a transgressor of an ethical code which is considered, and enforced, as sacred and Universal. This study makes clear that the pirate, thus, has had an important role in the history of the international legal order, as well as in the history of the world market that has arisen and thrived in the interstices of that order. Moreover, this research shows that the pirate had an essential role in the authoritative discourses of sovereignty and the law. In this sense, the book offers an interdisciplinary perspective to the study of the significance of the figure of the pirate that would be of interest for philosophers, political theorists, lawyers and other professionals. All in all, this book constitutes an invaluable contribution to understand how a marginal figure such as the pirate came to be defined as the first enemy of the human race.

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