

An-arrgh-chy! What Blackbeard can teach us about politics

Pirates, like gangsters, highwayman, and other colorful outlaws, have always carried a certain romantic appeal with them upon the high seas. Thanks to a certain movie trilogy, they are the most appealing of the outlaws at this moment.

And the language...y'arrgh! But exemplars of democracy"? In a swashbuckling and daring new article for the *Journal of Political Economy*, "An-arrgh-chy: The Law and Economics of Pirate Organization," Peter Leeson explores the fascinating "golden age" of piracy during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and finds that these criminal organizations were able to establish a remarkably stable form of self government.

While economists have long been fascinated with the financial organization of criminal enterprises, the impact of their political structure has long been overlooked. Piracy was a capital crime, so both the costs and benefits were quite high. But, as Leeson shows, pirates never lacked for "Brethren in Iniquity." Plumbing the (often entertaining) court records of pirate trials, Leeson allows the pirates to speak for themselves as to why the pirate's life was for them. Piracy exploded along with trade to the far-flung colonies. A captain of a trading ship was the representative of land-based merchants, and thus wielded complete authority—which was often abused—over the crew. Although a captain of a pirate ship wielded absolute authority in battle the pirates, in the words of one of their own, "constituted other Officers besides the Captain; so very industrious were they to avoid putting too much power into the hands of one Man." Foremost among these officers was the quartermaster, who oversaw the distribution of provisions, division of booty, and general order aboard the ship.

Pirates entered into an agreement called the *chasse-partie* that dictated the division of booty. But they also drew up articles for a voyage, most of which were institutionalized as the "Custom of the Coast" or the "Jamaica Discipline," that covered all aspects of government, and life aboard a ship "for the better Conservation of their Society, and doing Justice to one another." Records of these articles still exist, and Leeson helpfully reproduces one within his article. Even a court that stood in judgment gave the pirates the backhanded compliment that they were "wickedly united, articed together." Modern piracy, Leeson notes, is a different affair. Mainly land-based and short term in its commitments, it no longer requires the same sort of organization. The days of "an-arrgh-chy" have passed.

Citation: Leeson, Peter T. "An-arrgh-chy: The Law and Economics of Pirate Organization" *Journal of Political Economy* 116:6

Source: University of Chicago

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.