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A Conditional Cycle

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A Conditional Cycle

James Wylie Deitch

“Who knew that buccaneers had bookkeepers?” is how journalist Nicholas Kulish begins his 2013 New York Times article about an accountant working for Somali pirates. The media has humorously likened the serious threat of Somali piracy, a trend that has steeply risen since 2005 (Keating, 2013, p.185), to the now-cartoonish figures of Captain Hook and Blackbeard. It turns out that these cheesy comparisons may not be so far flung. If comparing old and new piracy is actually warranted, then where does the similarity lie? It is easy to make an observatory conclusion that yes, all pirates are “motivated by the same incentives as their predecessors...the ability to steal some of the value created by others” (Keating, 2013, p.188). In seeking further analysis, the occurrence of piracy must be the result of exterior factors at play in the given time and region. Why, for example, did pirates exist in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries off the Irish coasts and as a force 150,000 strong in the South China Sea during the nineteenth century (Appleby, 2007 p. 44; Leeson, 2009 p. 203)? Economist Peter Leeson (2009) squarely summarizes Golden Age pirates as “history’s most notorious criminals” (p.1) and adds that, “modern pirates share little in common with their predecessors” (p. 203). To shut piracy away into the depths of history is to overlook its remarkable similarity to modern day pirates. In Golden Age England and modern-day Somalia, international market and political transformations making way for sudden domestic economic shifts coincided with an unregulated international resource struggle, which created a scenario that perpetuated piracy and incited nation-states to militarily respond.

A sweeping international economic transformation in the seventeenth century brought domestic economic upheaval in England. North American colonization and the resulting transatlantic trade created new foreign and domestic market opportunities (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000, p.17). In response, wealthy English landowners set forth on a massive enclosure movement that stripped rural civilians of their common land to the extent that by the late 1600s, “there were twelve times as many propertyless people as there had been a hundred years earlier” (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000, p.17). With no property, these vagrants, as they were called, were subject to the “terror of the gallows,” the chance of “impressment as practiced by the Royal Navy” while working on merchant ships, and the terrible, abusive conditions and poor wages aboard merchant and navy ships (Rediker, 2004, p.22, 43, & 9). The common seamen “had much to gain and little to lose by turning pirate” (Rediker 2004, 50). The few, grim options of employment England offered in the seventeenth century created economic conditions that led many expropriated commoners to choose piracy as a way of life. There was literally no room left for the poor at the time, no social ladder for them to climb, so thousands were forced outside of legal existence into the Jolly Roger’s realm (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000, p.18).

In the second half of the twentieth century, Somalia’s consolidation into a single nation-state and its subsequent rapid government shifts in the form of political coups altered tribal organization, inflamed tribal tensions, and changed its sustenance economy. Collectively, these developments changed the way of life for the average Somali. Somalis have always subsisted on nomadic pastoralism and agriculture, and have lived off a clan-based system (The Center for Justice and Accountability). When Italian and British colonial rule ended in 1960, the region consolidated to form the Somali Republic (The Center for Justice and Accountability). In 1969,

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General Siad Barre seized power and “forcibly relocated whole populations of herders into collective settlements and communal farms” (Bahadur, 2011, p.25). Just as English authority enclosed the rural poor, the Somali government consolidated and relocated its nomadic people to fixed, public spaces—mixing rival clans and brewing new political hostilities. Since 1991, Somalia has existed in a “power vacuum” with no government able to retain control (Keating, 2013, p.186). In the years since, Somalia has teetered on the border of a ghost state.

As “the whole idea of Somalia was a contradiction,” the semi-autonomous regions of Somaliland and particularly Puntland had been neglected “as a sterile and unproductive backwater” (Bahadur 2011, p.27 & 26). From 2002 to 2004, Puntland suffered its worst drought in 30 years, affecting 600,000 from the majority nomadic population by killing herds (Bahadur, 2011, p.40). This crisis was compounded by the 2004 Indonesian Sumatra tsunami, which directly hit Puntland as it sits on the tip of the Horn of Africa (Bahadur, 2011, p. 40). In Puntland the tsunami “devastated the region’s fishing economy” as it destroyed 600 boats and 75% of fishing gear (Bahadur, 2011, p.40). From 2006 to 2008, Puntland suffered from hyperinflation that was largely due to a surge in counterfeiting, and reduced the standard of living considerably (Bahadur 41, 2011). In 2008, the Puntland government ran out of money to pay its security forces—the largest source of employment for the 35% of the area’s population not remaining nomadic (Bahadur, 2011, p.35).

A new, substantial proportion of Somalis now relied on the new economy. However, with its weak new government unable to provide a safety net for the humanitarian and economic crises, “scant other opportunities were available” to Somalis (Bahadur, 2011, p.35). The laid off security workers who already possessed a gun turned to piracy as their only option (Bahadur, 2011, p.35). Ryan Jablonkski and Steven Oliver’s graph in their 2012 article in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* illustrates that from 2005 to 2009, as Puntland’s unskilled daily wage declined and its inflation rate grew, the probability of a piracy attack in the area also climbed (690). Thus, with the simple knowledge that Puntland’s geographic location offers it the best access to the Gulf of Aden, the larger national instability and forced transformation, resulting in Puntland’s economic crisis, created conditions that engendered the 2008 explosion of piracy in the region.

The early eighteenth century, an era termed the Golden Age, saw a scramble for resources, conflict between European states, and a land grab in the relatively un-policed New World. The sailors working on British merchant ships traversing the Atlantic knew a large amount of the new mercantile wealth was “based on the key commodities of the Atlantic trades in which [they] worked” (Rediker, 2004, p.21). These formerly disadvantaged people were not oblivious to the fact that they possessed the skills to navigate the Atlantic, were far away from any landed authority, and were in arms reach of this wealth at all times (Rediker, 2004, p.37, 24-25, & 21). Many seamen became hired privateers for England or Spain, but gradually broke off to become full-fledged pirates (Rediker, 2004, p.8). “Practic[ing] indirect terror against the owners of mercantile property,” these new pirates “disrupted trade in strategic zones of capital accumulation” by “us[ing] the threat of violence to get booty” (Rediker, 2004, p.15, 9, & 14). Pirates hid in “poorly defended regions populated by poor people” like the Bahamas and Madagascar (Rediker, 2004, p.28 & 30). Golden Age merchantmen in the uncontrolled area of the Atlantic Ocean found themselves in the middle of the biggest, most lucrative resource scramble to date, and could not help but intervene on their own behalf.

From the late 1900s up until today, the combination of Somalia’s inability to exercise control over its territorial claims and a global, commercial resource grab resulting in the abuse of

Somalia's resources has placed Somalis in another disadvantaged position. With "no sovereign government defending its exclusive economic zone"—the two hundred mile area from a country's shoreline that it has exclusive rights to—"Somalia's coastal waters have become a crack in the global system" (Keating, 2013, p.186). That is, dumped toxic waste and Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean fishing fleets that employ trawling techniques "banned elsewhere because of their harmful effects on fisheries and the environment" have netted "the future livelihood of nearby coastal people along with the day's catch" (Keating, 2013, p.186; Bahadur, 2011, p.16). The fishing industry, along with agriculture, is a massive source of employment in Somalia. The 2004 tsunami's toll on the fishing industry was huge, but also washed the toxic waste that had been dumped out at sea onto the Somali coast, sickening many and poisoning reefs (Bahadur, 2011, p.40). Somali "livelihoods [were] under attack" and no government was able to provide them with a social safety net, so many Somali fisherman turned to "defensive piracy," calling themselves the Somali Volunteer National Coastguard and protecting the waters they rely on (Keating, 2013, p.186). As they watched their resources and employment washing away from them, and saw vast amounts of property floating by off their coast, many Somalis were left with piracy as their only option.

For the Golden Age pirates and their Somali counterparts, economic transformations and a resource grab in the absence of regional authority created an environment where piracy was the only legitimate pursuit. Reduced options and new conflict, capital, and lack of formal laws brought on conditions that perpetuated the success of piracy. Piracy was so lucrative during its Golden Age peak in the early 1700s that it shut down trade in the Chesapeake Bay, Charleston, Philadelphia, and Antigua, and even affected industry in England (Rediker, 2004, p.32 & 33). In fact, some claimed piracy did more damage to trade than the War of Spanish Succession between Spain and France (Rediker, 2004, p.33). In November 2008, pirates hijacked the Saudi oil tanker *Sirius Star* a stunning 400 miles out to sea, as it was carrying 100 million dollars in oil to the United States (Kraska and Wilson, 2008, p.41). Somali pirates have become much more ambitious in recent years, as they get more technologically savvy, and have no domestic restrictions (Kraska and Wilson, 2008, p.41). The average per capita income in Somalia is \$600, whereas the average Somali pirate can attain \$10,000 in one successful raid (Keating, 2013, p.188). In summary, pirates are driven by the same rational, incentive seeking self-interest as everyone else (Leeson, 2009, p.5). Hence, conditions in the Golden Age and in Somalia that pushed people into piracy led to piracy becoming a lucrative business.

As Golden Age and Somali piracy consequentially disrupted world trade, nation-states responded with a military crackdown. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, piracy became such a crime that both Britain and the United States sought to equate the slave trade to piracy within international law, in an attempt to abolish it (Martinez, 2012, p.45, 50 & 60). People even went as far to say that if the slave trade became a form of piracy, it "would become perfectly extinct; that no one would incur the penalties and perils which the commission of acts of piracy would involve" (Martinez, 2012, p.114). Sir Edward Coke added the Latin Roman law phrase, *hostis humani generis*, making pirates legally "enemies of mankind," to the 1700 "Act for the More Effectual Suppression of Piracy" (Rediker, 2004, p.26; Martinez, 2012, p.114). The English effort to "cleanse the seas" coincided with public hangings of pirates across the English empire so that by 1726, pirates were all but extinct (Rediker, 2004, p.127 & 147). Piracy became such a threat to England's commerce-based wealth that it not only illegalized it, but completely alienated pirates.

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In recent years, the international community has beefed up its offense on Somali piracy, too. Seeking to increase the risk of piracy to Somalis, thirty countries contribute to three naval operations off the Horn of Africa to stop piracy: Operation Atalanta was launched in 2008 by the European Union, Operation Ocean Shield by NATO, and the Combined Task Force 151 by a multinational force in 2009 (Keating, 2012, p.189). In fact, the number of naval vessels committed to anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden increased from fourteen to forty between January 2008 and July 2009 (Jablonski and Oliver, 2012, p.689). In 2008, the UN Security Council passed resolutions that “expanded the authority of international armada to conduct anti-piracy measures off the coast of Somalia, as well as in the territorial waters and within the actual territory of Somalia,” which included language associated with military force such as “any means necessary” (Heinze, 2013, p.48). In monetary terms, Indian and Pacific Ocean maritime piracy costs shipping companies roughly \$13 to \$15 billion dollars annually, and insurance premiums for one transit through the Gulf of Aden have risen from \$500 to \$20,000 (Kraska and Wilson, 2008, p.43). Somali piracy has become a massive threat to world trade since the early 2000s, as shown by increased cargo ship and supertanker hijackings. The entire international community has and is aggressively attempting to curb piracy, but even with increased military intervention, these efforts have not wiped piracy out, nor have they reduced the financial costs to international trade (Keating, 2013, p.190).

Whenever these two conditions exist throughout history, piracy emerges. It plays out as a cycle, occurring in the Golden Age, the Gulf of Aden today, and its other stages in between. A journalist’s simplistic comparison between Golden Age and Somali pirates is not only warranted, but also helps elucidate the problem of piracy today. A changing international economy displaces people and leads to a scramble for resources, which results in piracy as an attractive option for many, and forces nation-states to brutally crackdown. Unless, however, the underlying problems of piracy are addressed, it will continue to exist throughout history. Without an alternative “benefit” of actual occupation on land for Somalis, the naval armada will be stuck simply trying to increase its “cost” (Bahadur, 2011, p.23). The international community must invest in Somalia, not against it: “until effective political authority and improved economic opportunities permanently alter the cost-benefit calculations of Somali pirates, the underlying incentives driving Somali piracy will remain unchanged, necessitating extensive and indefinite naval operations” (Keating, 2013, p.185). In illustration of this point, the combined costs to government and industry of Somali piracy in 2011 were \$6.6 to \$6.9 billion, whereas only \$160 million of this went to ransoms (Keating, 2013, p.190). The rest of this money goes to military spending, and the net trade loss from piracy (Keating, 2013, p.190). Though naval security in the region has been heightened substantially, insurance premiums for these ships have not gone down (Keating, 2013, p.190). To invest in the people responsible for Somali piracy would be cheaper in the long run, than investing against them. Piracy has always been a remnant of oppressive circumstances, and its continued existence in the world should be a reminder that there are “powerful people and oppressive circumstances to be resisted” (Rediker, 2004, p.176). If piracy, in its depths, is simply poor people reacting to bad conditions, then the international community need not attack pirates but instead help them.

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