

The Open Economy of Piracy: Being Outside of the Law

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1. *One Piece*: A Worldwide Hit

Let me start by talking about the worldwide mega-hit Japanese manga, *One Piece*. It first appeared in *Shōnen Jump* magazine in 1997, and since then has been serially published. It now totals 81 volumes. The magazine is described as focusing on the themes of “friendship,” “effort,” and “victory,” and *One Piece*, of course, contains all of these themes. The story line is as follows.

The main character, Monkey D. Luffy, is a 17-year-old boy who dreams of becoming the king of pirates, and he and his companions sail the Seven Seas of adventure in search of the elusive set of great treasures called “One Piece.” The manga’s official U.S. website describes the story as being about “Monkey D. Luffy and his swashbuckling crew in their search for the ultimate treasure, the One Piece.” It made a Guinness World Record in 2004 for “most copies published for the same comic book series by a single author.” Indeed, it is published in over 35 countries, its animated films are available in over 40 countries, and the series has won at least 45 prizes as of December 2014. It is always among the three most-read Japanese manga around the world. While there are no typical Japanese themes like ninjas or *yōkai* in the stories, it is very popular among kids all over the world. Why is this the case?

First, it follows *Shōnen Jump*’s strategy of emphasizing “friendship,” “effort,” and “victory.” And second, its story structure is typical of popular children’s book: leaving one’s ordinary life, experiencing adventures leading to growth with supportive and true friends, and returning to one’s origin point as a grown-up. Because of Luffy’s strong desire to become the king of pirates, the general image of “pirates” presented by him for us readers can be summarized as love, bravery, and freedom in extra-ordinariness. This image doesn’t directly connect to our ordinary view of piracy.

Piracy generally refers to robbery, illegal copying, or the violation of others and their legal rights. But let’s extend this to “being outside of the law” in order to understand its ambiguous attractions.

2. Being Outside of the Law

The French thinker Georges Bataille’s anthropology divides beings into three dimensions: animality, humanity and sovereignty. Animality is described as “immediacy or immanence.” Bataille says, “[E]very animal is *in the world like water in water*. The animal situation does contain a component of the human situation; if need be, the animal can be regarded as a subject for which the rest of the world is an object, but it is never given the possibility of regarding itself in this way. Elements of this situation can be grasped by human intelligence, but the animal

cannot *realize* them.”¹

According to Bataille, we humans started to divide the world into subject and object due to the fear of death and strove to avoid death by using tools. Our world thus became enclosed within the circle of utility. Here we must sacrifice the present moment for the sake of a better future. In this sense, the Bataille’s dimension of humanity is one of utility. This utility is promoted by the principle of exchange, of which labor and the market economy are representative examples. However, nobody can live only within utility. We also contain the tendency to deny our humanity and utility, to go beyond them to uselessness, ordinariness, and sovereignty. Utility is characterized by exchange, and sovereignty by pure gift. The movement between them (going beyond limits to sovereignty and returning to utility) is what the human does, Bataille says. The ultimate case is found in ancient religious rites, when people transgressed taboos and touched the sacred. Thus the boundary that limits us and makes us subordinate is called the “law.” In Bataille’s thought, being outside of the law is how one re-unites with the world itself. Thus, he saw “humans” as being characterized by movements of excess energy and describes them as two different economies. Jacques Derrida develops Bataille’s thought and discusses it in terms of the differences between “the restricted economy” and “the general economy.”² Almost all products are consumed and re-produced due to expenditure, but there is also unproductive expenditure as well. According to Bataille, examples of this include “luxury, mourning rites, wars, cults, the building of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, the arts, perverse sexual activity (that is, what is turned away from genital finality).” These “represent so many activities which, at least in primitive conditions, contain their end within themselves. It is necessary to reserve the word *expenditure* for these unproductive forms, to the exclusion of all the moods of consumption which serve production as a norm.”³

Bataille’s thought might be dangerous to our ordinariness, but it is also essential to us. For example, solar energy is the source of life’s abundant development. It is more than just necessary for maintaining life, and its excess energy can be used for the growth of a system, like an organism. However that growth is in turn subject to an array of limitations. The excess energy that is beyond the limit must then necessarily be lost without profit, as it is not applied to production. It is a fact that expenditure is gloriously or catastrophically considered a loss for individuals or society, but when considering energy as a whole, this expenditure is an outcome of energy’s overall dynamic flow. The overall picture becomes apparent when economics deals with the universe’s energy as a whole without applying limits.

¹ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 19. Translation of “Théorie de la Religion,” in *Oeuvres complètes VII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 292.

² Jacques Derrida, “De l’ économie restreinte à l’ économie générale: un hégélianisme sans réserve,” in *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1967), 369–408. For translation, see Alan Bass, trans. and ed., *Jacques Derrida: Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001).

³ Michael Richardson, ed., *Georges Bataille: Essential Writings* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 70. Translation of Georges Bataille, “La notion de dépense,” in *Oeuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 305.

3. The Open Economy of Piracy

Philosopher of education Paul Standish discusses this issue in terms of the “closed economy” and “open economy.”⁴ According to Standish, a “closed economy” is a collective designation for all forms of thought and activities related to the “exchange and the satisfaction of needs.” All phenomena involving education are based on a closed economy. These forms serve to regulate education based on established standards of evaluation. Learners expect to receive efficient instructions that will allow them to achieve certain standards, and educators establish indicators based on those needs, and then provide instruction and evaluation.

In contrast to this, an open economy focuses on experiences that allow us to feel the joy gained from learning in and of itself. This joy and learning leads us to the exciting realization of newly opened learning. As such, Standish’s reflections on the closed economy of education today and his perspective on the potential of an open economy for education exhibit continuity with the ideas of “alterity” (E. Levinas) and “intensity” (F. W. Nietzsche), as well as indicate the principle of the “gift,” which is unconnected to exchange.

The concept of the gift as developed by Mauss’ anthropological findings cannot be completely defined in terms of utility (which is an expression of a goal-method relationship), exchange (which is the basis for utility), or its relation to unproductive expenditure—excess must be promoted as a principle in which conduct is a goal in and of itself.

Now let’s go back to the original question: why is *One Piece* so popular around the world? I think it is mainly because the hero wants to become the king of pirates, and his pirate image is representative of friendship and freedom, which is attractive to the child inside us. So, the image of piracy itself, at least in children’s books and among children, exists in the dimension of sovereignty, where we finally become free as a whole being in the moment. Thus, re-thinking world history in educational discourses from a pirate’s perspective would open the possibility of seeing ourselves in a new way.

⁴ Paul Standish, “Toward an Economy of Higher Education,” *Wiley Online Library*, 2005 (DOI: 10.1111/j.0011-1562.2005.00614.x).