

From Pirates to Punk Rockers

Pedagogies of Insurrection and Revolution: The Unity of Utopia

Curry Malott

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We can't live like the rest, the seven seas have ruined us
Duane Peters and The Hunns (2000), *Unite, "Crossbones."*

Reminiscent of an affronted hammer man grinding the gears of a twenty-something-year-old muffler-less muscle car struggling to *hammer on*, legendary punk rocker and skateboarder, Duane Peters, growling out the above lyrics in the punk rock pirate barroom anthem "Crossbones," draws on pirate imagery, which, for me, signifies the psychological implications of having a taste of freedom stemming from the experience of feeling separated from the alienation of capitalist wage labor through the life-long journey on the margins of society touring as an underground punk rock icon and skateboarder since the 1970s. In other words, once one has experienced the freedom, however partial, to *write your own ticket* through non-alienated labor, it is almost impossible to return to the plantation, to wage slavery and the drudgery of creating a world in someone else's image for wages far less than the value your labor produces.

Analyzing punk rock cultural practices as an example of creating spaces of nonalienated labor outside the boundaries of dominant society is informed by both Marxist and Anarchist theory. For example, the anarchism employed herein has traditionally been referred to as anarcho-syndicalism, which for Chomsky (2005),

... Regarded anarchist ideas as the proper mode of organization for a highly advanced industrial society. And that tendency in anarchism merges, or at least inter-relates very closely with a variety of left-wing Marxism, the kind one find in, say, the Council Communists that grew up in the Luxemburgian tradition ... (p. 136)

Melding particularly well with Chomsky's (2005) conception of anarcho-syndicalism Hakim Bey's notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, a concept that defines a philosophical conception of emancipation and struggle in practice, is particularly useful in its explanatory power in describing many current socialist and/or anarchist-informed, as well as organic, insurrections in today's advanced industrial global new world order. The thrust of the argument is that in the search for meaning and the freedom to be the sole governor of one's mind and body humanity has repeatedly sought undetected spaces where there are temporary opportunities for the creation of non-alienated labor and free culture manifesting themselves in increasingly complicated and contradictory ways as the basic structures of power (i.e. capitalism), in its insatiable thirst for profits, encroach on more and more aspects of social life, such as sexuality, education and entertainment (McLaren, 2005; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005).

Such spaces of temporary autonomy, the argument goes, illuminating and fading away across the social landscape like the glow from a field of fire flies in a US mid-Western summer's evening, argues Bey (2003), offer the possibility of changing the basic structures of power one successful TAZ at a time as the sensibilities are awoken from the experience of enlightenment, which is obtained during moments of insurrection through the creation of windows of perception illuminating opportunities for an undetermined future. In short, temporarily liberated spaces, coupled with other tactics, can provide the individual-by-individual foundation needed for the emergence of a new society, which, by definition, is a never-ending process of reflection and action, to paraphrase, what can be argued as the late Brazilian world-renown critical educator, Paulo Freire's anarchist tendencies. Marxists, including Paulo Freire, especially in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1998), on the other hand, argue for socialist revolution and transformation implying the direct

confrontation with guardians of power and privilege, giving way, historically, to martyrdom or a new state apparatus, and thus, for many anarchists, the immediate betrayal of the revolutionary spirit and autonomy realized during the stage of insurrection. It is during insurrectionary moments for both anarchists and socialists that a glimpse of an unrealized future can be seen. From my own perspective I define insurrection broadly including the praxis of radical teachers to the movement of counter-hegemonic punk rockers.

From my own Marxist *and* anarchist approach the radical potential of punk rock skateboarding resides within the glimpse of a new world it's practitioners can find themselves seeing, weather intentional or not, and therefore, out of pure excitement and joy, be inspired to share with others. For anarchists such as Hakim Bey, this translates into multiple uprisings always disappearing before state detection. For many Marxists the hope within sk8punk resides within their revolutionary potential (Malott & Carroll-Miranda, 2003; Malott & Peña, 2004), hence, the organic intellectual as an embodiment of the revolutionary leader in the process of becoming (Freire, 2005). However, from both Marxist and anarchist perspectives the implications here are not that punk rock pirates, alone, will liberate humanity from capitalism. No. Punk can only liberate themselves and perhaps inspire others to find their own voice and join the *party* against oppression in whatever way that has meaning for them (from either anarchist, Marxist or another perspective and as hip hop artists, teachers, labor organizers, flying pickets, etc.). I refer to this phenomenon as *the virus of freedom* that humanity, it can be argued, has an innate propensity for and a point of unity between Marxists, anarchists and other radicals such as Earth First! eco-defenders.

Throughout the long history of human existence, despite ruling-class' many attempts to create what Noam Chomsky (1999) refers to as a *utopia of the masters* and thereby squelching it once and for all, this *virus*, often in the form of the TAZ, continues to reemerge, set on humanity's complete liberation from all forms of oppression. A space for a strand of this stubborn *virus* opened up in the US in the late 1970s when the skateboard, which is a mode of transportation that incorporates tricks as a central part of its existence, and the Marxist/socialist/anarchist/street-gang politics and practices of punk rock were united. Quite often what tended to emerge was roving *temporary autonomous* gangs of disgruntled youth being introduced to radical politics to help make sense of their lot in life, and the attitude and style of punk rock manifesting itself on the skateboard. Much of what came to be was self-destructive, and at its worst, sexist, homophobic and racist, but a lot of what took root offered hope and continues to offer a beacon of light to this day (Malott & Carroll-Miranda, 2003; and Malott & Peña, 2004).

Regardless of the political bent, outside of LA and New York, where the sk8punk scene, at its finest moments, has been characterized by an interracial unity, the US witnessed noticeable (however small) segments of the country's white class of workers, who have traditionally been the backbone of ruling class support, with the exception of the occasional intra-system tinkering demanded by the labor movement (see McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005 for a discussion of whiteness as an ideological tool created to maintain class structure), rejecting much of what has been prescribed, which must have been quite a scare for the powers that be, who have traditionally tended to respond hysterically to anything deemed to possess the slightest hint of a threat to the basic structures of capitalist power (Kaye, 1997; Zinn, 2000).

Duane Peters, summarizing the political atmosphere for sk8punks during this time, argued that when you stepped out of your house onto your board as a skateboarding punk rocker, you found yourself in the middle of a war dominant society was waging against you and all that you

represented as a sk8punk (Taylor, 2005). Offering credibility to Peters' assertion is the well documented criminalization of young people, which gained national recognition during the 1980s as the media coverage of youth crime skyrocketed while statistical rates remained relatively constant, coinciding with the explosion of new private-for-profit juvenile detention and rehabilitation centers (Glassner, 1999).

The backdrop of this campaign was the restructuring and large-scale relocation of industrial production and the subsequent weakening of the world's working class (Albelda, et. al., 1988; Chomsky, 1999), who, in the US during the 1960s and 1970s, had led radical left-wing social movements and, at times, engaged in physical confrontations with the state (Abu-Jamal, 2000). Arguably the most noteworthy of the radical organizations created during this time was the *Black Panther Party*, who, it has been argued, led a social and cultural revolution that posed a real threat to the basic structure of power within the US (Cleaver & Katsiaficas, 2001). In short, the criminalization of young people during the 1980s, who have historically been some of the most potent leaders of working class revolutions and insurrections (for example, Fred Hampton, Deputy Chairman of the Chicago Chapter of the Black Panther Party, was 21 when he was gunned down by local and federal agents; Ernesto "Ché" Guevara was 29 when he met Fidel Castro in Mexico joining the Cuban revolution), was part of the ruling class' effort to regain control over those they depend on to create their vast fortunes, that is, everyone who depends on a wage to survive.

As a result, during the 1980s the majoritarian political and social apparatus, in general, tended to portray youth, especially those outside the expected norm, such as youth of color and those who belonged to subcultures like sk8punks, as a potential threat, whether real or imagined. For many of us who came of age during Reagan's conservative 1980s, who have not bought into the hegemony that inverts the oppressor/oppressed relationship, we know through experiential knowledge the inherent injustices imbedded within *the system* such as the drive to control and regulate by whatever means necessary the entirety of social existence, the institutionalization of white supremacy, and the commodification of humanity through the exploitation of human labor power as capitalists engage in their never-ending quest to increase their margins through the accumulation of unpaid labor hours better known as *profit* (Kelsh & Hill, 2006).

Because we are in control of that which produces wealth, our labor power, *we* are capital's weakest link (Rikowski, 2005), and *always* a *potential* threat to capital. That is, the ruling class depends on the unpaid labor hours of vast majority of humanity, the working class, for the accumulation of surplus value/profit/capital. The working class does not need the bosses to survive, they are a burden, they hinder our existence, and we do not need them. This is why, as Kelsh and Hill (2006) point out, "... classical Marxism understands ... there to be only two classes fundamental to capitalism, and [that] ... it understands both of them to be constituted at the level of production, and not at the levels of culture or politics" (p. 4). The goal is therefore not to glorify work as some Marxists have in the past, but to cease to be workers as a result of the destruction of the class system through a frontal assault on the root of capital, the labor (workers)/capital (bosses) relationship.

It is the countless hordes of unsung creators of Do It Yourself (DIY) rebellious (i.e. free) cultures, such as the old-school Sk8punx and hip hop artists, that possess a potential threat to the rule of capital through the TAZ. Because US capitalism currently requires an obedient, passive workforce who do not question the fact that "... through exploitation enabled by property ownership, owners live off the laborpower of workers: owners source of income is not wages but profit,

the expropriated labor-power of others” (Kelsh & Hill, 2006, p. 6) and because the TAZ fosters criticalness, that cultures of resistance embody the potential for severe insurrection.

Many punk rockers who have experienced the freedom of the TAZ are not interested in living for others and creating a world in their image, but rather seek to continue to find new ways to live for self and create a world in their own image based on the anarchist principle that anything goes as long as what I want does not hinder what you want. In other words, as long as my sense of freedom does not threaten your freedom, everything is copasetic. Capitalism does not fit within this sense of justice because capitalism is based on the few dominating the many. Supporting the expansion of such cultures of resistance created against oppression and exploitation in their Marxist analysis of postmodernism’s contributions to liberatory movement Ramin Farahmandpur and Peter McLaren (2005) argue that “... we need to expand our struggles by way of culture, language, and discourse in order to contest the contemporary triad of social, economic and political oppression” (p. 87).

It is Duane Peters who many argue was largely responsible for creating the spark that ignited this potential skateboarding punk-rocking cultural threat against the forces of oppression, and has therefore consistently been deemed the quintessential sk8punk pirate by his contemporaries, such as rock critics like Todd Taylor, author of *Born to Rock: Heavy Drinkers and Thinkers: A Collection of Interviews and Essays* (2004). That is, Peters has been credited with unifying skateboarding with punk rock planting the seeds of a generation of sk8punks who would rise out of the most unexpected places thousands of miles from Peters and the Southern California landscape where sk8punk first drew breath. An innovator and inspiration are not exaggerated adjectives to describe Duane Peters, the “Master of Disaster.” While punk rock skaters are undoubtedly a real part of social life throughout much of the developed world, North America in particular, what grounding in reality can we find the existence of democratic-minded pirates during colonialist times, to refocus our attention on one of the central themes of this essay?

Put a different way: the question must be asked: is there any real connection to the sixteenth century pirate phenomena and struggles for freedom or is this an imagined anti-imperialist romanticization of the colonialist era? In the first section that follows I answer this question with a thunderous *yes*. The next section then outlines the specific ways in which the most progressive strands of the punk rock movement embody what I argue can be defined as *democratic pirate pedagogy*. In the final section I make the case for the need for enhancing the insurrectionary/revolutionary potential of punk rock pirate pedagogy of hope and liberation. Although not explored in this paper, one of the primary sites where the ideas presented herein can more fully manifest themselves is education. Included in this future foray should be possibilities, at this particular historical juncture, for where we might set our collective sails, and the various ways and implications for raising our metaphorical Jolly Rogers.

The Jolly Roger¹: Enter the Pirate

These men cannot live in regular society. They are too idle, too talkative, too passionate, too prodigal and too shiftless to acquire either property or character. Timothy Dwight (1821/1969)

Popular legend would have us believe that the pirates of old were nothing more than savage brutes that raped, tortured, terrorized and stole from hard working merchants/colonizers and settlers. Playing a major role in re-writing the history of Euro-American piracy of the 16th century in the contemporary public mind as a manifestation of the epitome of working class depravity conveniently forgetting that it was a tactical invention of war and privateering used largely by the French, Dutch and English to gain control of the Spanish empire created off of the vast wealth plundered from Native Americans, has been the production of dominant society's Hollywood movies and the publication of popular books for at least the past century. It was the men who worked on the *old world's* naval ships occupying the lowest rungs of society who, after enduring brutal conditions and unprecedented exploitation, employed their pirate training on their countries of birth they came to despise. From the earliest silent movies, *The Black Pirate* (1926) and *The Beloved Rogue* (1927), to the films of the 1950s like *Blackbeard the Pirate* (1952) and *The Buccaneer* through the 1960s and 1970s with *Pirate of the Black Hawk* (1961) and *Treasure Island* (1972) and the pirate movie explosion of the 1980s with *The Pirate Movie* (1982) *The Pirates of Penzance* (1983) *Return to Treasure Island* (1985) *Pirates* (1986), among many others, into the 1990s and the twenty-first century with *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003; 2006), piracy has been portrayed in this historically inaccurate light serving to both absolve colonialist powers of any activity short of hard work and ingenuity, and to predate the criminalization of the vast majority of humanity, the poor and the powerless, before the emergence of capitalism justifying the current condition where the few dominate the many.

For example, the pirates in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) were portrayed as amoral drunken brutes cursed by greed. The colonists, on the other hand, represented goodness and purity, under the threat of the pirates terrorist attacks. This is a common role reversal where the oppressors become the victims, and the oppressed become terrorists too corrupted to respect law and order and too lazy to make an honest living. Never once were the injustices of colonization committed against the many peoples of the world highlighted. Such a message is important for ideological control because it assumes that if we were to be left to our own devices, we would surely resort back to depravity and degradation (Chomsky, 1999, 2003; Wilson, 2003).

The representation of pirates as terrorists by the mainstream media should not be surprising given the long history of oppressor's attempts to convince the oppressed that the very essence of their being is barbaric, and without the enlightenment of the colonizers (oppressors), they would immediately return to their *wicked* ways. When the oppressed rise up against their aggressors, as was the case with many early renegade pirates, the response we have witnessed throughout the history of European colonialism in particular has been savage, to put it mildly, as argued below. Lying bare the psychological warfare European colonizers have used against those they oppress

¹ The Jolly Roger refers to the skull and crossbone flag, better known as the "pirate flag." Jolly Roger is most likely derived from Jolie Rouge, referring to the outlaw nature of extra-state piracy. Originally red, the international symbol of proletarian revolution, the Jolly Roger was later changed to black, historically signifying anarchy. Traditionally, the pirate flag would be hoisted before going into battle, or as a warning for other vessels to stay away.

(including Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans, the groups comprising the ranks of early renegade pirates) through colonization Frantz Fanon (1963) in his ground-breaking *The Wretched of the Earth* argues,

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it ... When we consider [such] efforts ... we realize that nothing has been left to chance and the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. The effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives' heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality. (Pp. 210–211)

Not only has the history of the democratic impulses of renegade pirate culture been mutated into evidence that without intelligent men (i.e. the ruling classes) that we (i.e. everyone else), left to our own barbaric devices, would destroy ourselves and everything in our path, but the complex history of piracy as a state-sponsored act of war against competing nations been erased from official history. What is more, there is ample evidence that supports the opposite of the official discourse summarized by Fanon (1963).

For example, in “Caliban’s Masque: Spiritual Anarchy & The Wild Man in Colonial America” (1993) Peter Lamborn Wilson revisits what came of those people brought as workers for one of the first English settlements in the Americas. These people, after being left by their state-sponsored investors and nobility to work the land, vanished from their island encampment leaving no evidence of their whereabouts other than an engraving on a tree reading “Gone to Croatan.” The Croatans were a local Nation of Indigenous Americans. Their English investors, after returning to the place of their investment and having realized there would be no returns/profits, claimed their laborers were brutally slaughtered by the “savage Indians” yet providing no evidence of human remains or struggle. The settlers, it turns out, having merged with the Croatans as well as Africans unhappy with the oppressiveness of colonial rule, created a “tri-racial” community living deep in North Carolina’s swap lands for centuries. The people of this community know exactly who they are to this day, some of which continue to possess the names of their English ancestors who carved those famous words on that tree, “Gone to Croatan.” What this story highlights is the fact that not only can humanity exist without the presence of a small ruling elite, but our survival perhaps depends on it.

Providing further evidence that humanity, intuitively realizing the unhealthy nature of oppressor/oppressed relationships, is the example of the emergence of temporarily autonomous zones of floating pirate utopias. The brutal conditions of Europe’s merchant ships of the 17th century provided the spark that would spawn a pirate movement nearly crippling the colonialist super-power empires. The sailors of Europe’s merchant ships, often accompanied by enslaved Africans and Americans (that is, First Nation’s Peoples) occupied the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. Conditions were brutal, far more inhumane than the most horrendous conditions in the earliest of industrial factories. Situating early renegade piracy in a larger context Peter Lamborn Wilson (2003) in *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs & European Renegades* argues that,

... By the 17th century the maritime world already revealed certain aspects of the Industrial Age which loomed so closely on the future's horizon. Ships were in some ways like floating factories, and maritime workers constituted a kind of proto-proletariat. Labor conditions in the merchant marines of Europe presented an abysmal picture of emerging capitalism at its worst

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Author affiliation: D'Youville College, Buffalo, NY, USA

Author's Details: Curry Malott, "the roving professor," currently teaches, skateboards and rocks out in Buffalo, NY

Correspondence: currymalott@hotmail.com

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