X-Post Review: H-Net Review [H-Diplo]: Vann on Amirell, 'Pirates of Empire'

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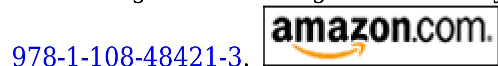
Vann on Eklöf Amirell, 'Pirates of Empire: Colonisation and Maritime Violence in Southeast Asia'

Stefan Eklöf Amirell. *Pirates of Empire: Colonisation and Maritime Violence in Southeast Asia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Maps. 272 pp. $99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-108-48421-3. 

Reviewed by Michael G. Vann (California State University, Sacramento) **Published on** H-Diplo (November, 2020) **Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

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It is always a great pleasure to read an academic work that brings together my intellectual interests and life experiences. As a scholar of Southeast Asia who was raised on boats in the Pacific and has spent a fair amount of time at sea and on the rivers of this region, I was delighted to pick up Stefan Eklöf Amirell's *Pirates of Empire: Colonisation and Maritime Violence in Southeast Asia*. Admittedly, the book was personally triggering, reminding me of tense discussions with my father about dealing with unknown individuals trying to board our yawl off Moloka'i's isolated north coast, stumbling upon illegal dynamite fishing in West Timor, witnessing the brutal treatment of poachers in the Hinanko island chain, seeing maritime criminals chained together in Nias, and being extorted by the Bengkulu harbor police who had seized our passports. It is difficult to explain the terrifying realities of maritime crime for those unfamiliar with life at sea. Full of numerous hair-raising tales, *Pirates of Empire* succeeds in this regard. But Amirell adds sociopolitical nuance and historical context to such pirate stories, dismissing romantic notions that infect the portrayal of piracy in popular culture from Robert Louis Stevenson to Johnny Depp. As I have also written on the French responses to the river pirates of colonial Vietnam, I was professionally pleased with the way Amirell situates piracy as a crucial fact in the history of imperialism in Southeast Asia.

In terms of research, *Pirates of Empire* is a significant achievement. Amirell, a polyglot Swede, consulted some two dozen administrative and diplomatic archival collections in France, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. He also used compilations of legislations and treaties, parliamentary papers, and various published official reports. In addition to this impressive array of

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archival records, he consulted scores of newspapers in French, English, Dutch, and Spanish from Paris, London, Madrid, Saigon, Bourg, Manila, Zamboanga, Penang, New York, and Singapore and numerous books and journal articles published in the era of his research. *Pirates of Empire* shows his mastery of the historiography and political theory of piracy both in Southeast Asia and throughout the world. While some area studies experts might point out that his sources are almost exclusively from the perspective of the European and American colonizers and Amirell does not present many Southeast Asian voices, this would be an unfair criticism of the scope and aim of the work. Furthermore, such documentary evidence would be difficult to find and would require an entirely different linguistic skill set. That said, hopefully specialists will soon contribute studies grounded in local languages to complement this excellent book's accomplishments. *Pirates of Empire* deserves much praise for its ability to engage in trans-imperial research. In this regard, the book is a major contribution to Southeast Asian studies, a field often characterized by a postcolonial siloing of these nation-states.

In addition to its impressive research, *Pirates of Empire* is a model of organization and clarity. With engaging prose, Amirell presents a brief introduction, a chapter that discusses and theorizes piracy in world and Southeast Asian history, three chapter-long geographic case studies, a summary conclusion, and an epilogue that reflects on piracy and decolonization. Each chapter is also extremely tidy with a clear introduction, well-selected evidence to prove that chapter's argument, and concise summary.

Chapter 1 provides a conceptual framework for Amirell's case studies. This chapter also offers a strong historical context from European (but not Asian) antiquity to the nineteenth century, pointing toward the importance of piracy in the long history of European expansion and contrasting European and Asian conceptions of piracy in the early modern era.

Chapter 2 explores Spanish and American understandings of Moro piracy in what James F. Warren called the "Sulu Zone" (*The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* [2007]). The Sulu Archipelago is important as it was an Islamic borderland that the Spanish never really controlled. Only through a series of military operations were the Americans able to establish their imperial presence. Moro religious identity was crucial to both the Spanish understanding of this region as an area outside of Catholic hegemony and the local Muslims who resisted authority from the north, be it the historic Iberian and American colonial regimes or Tagalog majority Filipino nation-state today. Importantly, Moro pirates from the Sulu Zone were some of the most feared in Southeast Asia. They were infamous coastal raiders who were active in the slave trade. Amirell argues that as the Philippines became better integrated into the global economy after 1770, localized pockets of prosperity induced new waves of maritime crime and violence, including attacks on merchants, raids on ports, and enslavement of coastal villagers. While the Spanish began to suppress Moro piracy after the 1860s, the American invasion of the Philippines in 1898 spread chaos throughout the sprawling archipelago, causing a renewal of Moro raiding. Amirell argues that as long as the victims were Moro or Chinese merchants, the Americans did not view such piracy as a serious security concern. A lull in piracy between 1903 and 1906 was a cause for optimism. However, as the Americans encouraged an intensified exploitation of the Sulu Archipelago's natural resources, with pearls being high on the list, Moro anger against outsiders profiting from the region's riches fueled a resurgence of maritime violence. Robust American counterinsurgency efforts finally subdued piracy in the region for the rest

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of the colonial era. Yet, in the uncertainty of post-World War II Asia and with the spread of firearms and motorized boats, the new Filipino nation-state saw a return to maritime violence in its southern waters.

Chapter 3 takes us to the Strait of Malacca. This narrow body of calm and shallow water between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula is one of the most important maritime passages in the world. Since roughly the 600s CE, the vast majority of the trade between East Asia and the greater Indian Ocean world flowed through the strait. Local rulers used their navies to either suppress piracy or made alliances with pirates and then offered safe port facilities for merchants. When the Portuguese violently seized Malacca in 1511, there was a sharp increase in maritime violence, often taking the guise of Catholic-Muslim conflicts. As Portuguese misrule drove the city of Malacca's once vibrant economy into the ground, the upstart Dutch East India Company took the city from them in 1641. Dutch rule entailed a massive use of violence against economic rivals, seizing strategic ports and slaughtering or enslaving tens of thousands of locals. To many Malays, the Dutch must have seemed like pirates, even though they insisted that their maritime violence was legitimate because it was done by the Dutch East India Company. The Calvinist Dutch, unlike their Catholic Iberian predecessors, were generally uninterested in spreading their faith, so religious tensions declined. Thanks to the superior martial prowess of the large and armed Dutch ships, piracy decreased in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Yet, as with the Moroland, the intensification of Southeast Asia's role in the global economy after 1770 triggered a return to piracy in the Strait of Malacca. In this period, the British became the dominant naval power in the region, with bases in Bengkulu (1686), Penang (1786), and Singapore (1819). Britain's steady growth in the China trade, which included shipping opium from Bengal to Southeast Asia and China, increased British concern about maritime security. Having taken the lead in the suppression of the slave trade in the Atlantic, the British set about hunting down slave traders in this region as well. Amirell points out that these aggressive and often violent anti-piracy campaigns were the product of local British officials' initiatives. Evidently these men-on-the-spot decided to interpret their directives as a carte blanche to use force, choosing not to seek permission from London or the British East India Company's headquarters in Calcutta. As with Spanish and American stereotyping of the Moros, the British viewed almost all seagoing Malays as potential pirates.

In the early nineteenth century, the Straits Settlements colonies drew pirates from all over Southeast Asia. Yet it was local merchant crafts and not the larger and often armed British ships that were victimized by the pirates. Nonetheless, the British suppression of Malay piracy in the 1830s and 1840s were brutal affairs with mass reprisals against suspected villages. But just as the Malay pirates appeared cowed, Chinese pirates began to hunt in the waters of Southeast Asia in the 1850s. Thanks to the chaos of late Qing rule, including the Opium War and the Taiping Rebellion, desperate sailors and captains turned to sea raids to make a living. Much to the chagrin of the British, bustling Singapore became a center for staffing, organizing, and outfitting pirate ships, as well as an active gun running trade. The free port's liberal laws made it difficult for the authorities to move against suspicious characters without direct proof. However, a series of arrests in 1858-59, the end of the Taiping Rebellion in 1864, and Qing anti-piracy measures in China brought the problem under control. When there was a renewal of Malay piracy in the late 1860s and early 1870s, the British used suppression of piracy as a rationale for colonial expansion into the northern Malay peninsula. Amirell shows how the British eschewed the violence of earlier decades in favor of negotiations and gunboat

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diplomacy in the late nineteenth century.

Chapter 4 discusses French Indochina. Noting a long history of Cham, Vietnamese, and Chinese pirates on the coast of what is now Vietnam, Amirell connects the widespread chaos of the Tay Son Rebellion (1771-1802) to a dramatic increase in maritime violence. Importantly, the upstart Tay Son dynasty encouraged Chinese raiders to attack their enemies, serving as a de facto navy. Once the more traditional Nguyen dynasty took control, these Chinese ships turned to outright piracy. It took the new king close to a decade to subdue them, but this ensured several decades of relative calm on the Vietnamese coast. By mid-century, the same wave of Chinese piracy that brought violence to the Strait of Malacca hit Vietnam. To make matters worse for the Nguyen court in Hue, France had imperial ambitions in Southeast Asia and sent a series of increasingly aggressive naval expeditions to Vietnam. Amirell contends (but does not exactly prove with his French sources) that the Vietnamese considered the European aggressors to be pirates and not legitimate enemies. Once the French began to seize territory in the 1860s, first the Mekong delta and then Cambodia, chaos broke out on the rivers with pirates attacking both the local population and French officials. There were also Nguyen loyalists who resisted the foreign invaders. The French responded by expanding the colonial footprint by annexing three more provinces and increasing brown water naval patrols. Once the Mekong proved unsuitable for navigation to China (France's real goal in this adventure), there was a series of incursions into Tonkin in the 1870s and 1880s, the first of which was a disaster as Chinese river pirates killed Francis Garnier, the French commander. While the humiliated French forces withdrew, French expansionists conspired to return. The French primarily justified their invasions as opening up the Red River for free trade, but also pointed to coastal raiders and human traffickers who kidnapped Vietnamese women and children to be sold in China. The second invasion, which saw the French commander Henri Rivière suffer an identical fate as Garnier, induced a war that pitted France against the Nguyen court, bands of Sino-Vietnamese river pirates known as the Black Flags, and the Qing dynasty. After brutal land, river, and sea engagements, the French established their control over Tonkin and Annam (the central Vietnamese province) in 1885 and added Laos a few years later. Despite the victory, this opened up what Amirell calls the "Golden Years of Tonkinese Piracy." The 1890s were characterized by pirates and bandits operating with relative impunity in the rivers, mountains, and coastal islands of northern Vietnam. Some of these bands were led by such famous figures as De Tham whose career began as a horse thief and ended as a quasi-nationalist hero in the early twentieth century. Despite some romantic notions about piracy in popular culture, the French colonial state resorted to a series of prolonged military campaigns and made a spectacle of pirate executions, even publishing postcards of severed heads and other grisly images. After piracy ceased to be a real security concern in French Indochina, "pirate" was a useful term for denying the political legitimacy of anti-colonial rebels and justifying brutal repression.

Amirell concludes with a chapter that summarizes his main themes in the book. He compares European and Asian perspectives on piracy and discusses the role of race and religion. This chapter also theorizes the relationship between anti-piracy and state sovereignty. It concludes with a discussion of anti-piracy as part of the soi-disant "civilizing mission."

With *Pirates of Empire* Amirell has made an important contribution to several fields of study, including Southeast Asian studies, diplomatic history, and theories of counterinsurgency. It will also find its place in the growing field of maritime history alongside works by Eric Tagliacozzo (*Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915* [2005],

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The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca [2013], and, coedited with Wen-Chin Chang, *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia* [2011]) and Kris Alexanderson (*Subversive Seas: Anticolonial Networks across the Twentieth-Century Dutch Empire* [2019]), two scholars who argue that history can be found on the seas of Southeast Asia. In terms of its archival research, organizational clarity, and ability to work beyond the artificial parameters of imperial or nation-state boundaries, *Pirates of Empire* is an impressive achievement.

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