

International Journal of the Commons
Vol. 8, no 2 August 2014, pp. 688–689
Publisher: Igitur publishing
URL: <http://www.thecommonsjournal.org>
URN:NBN:NL:U:10-1-116433
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ISSN: 1875-0281

Book Review

Burkart, Patrick (2014). *Pirate Politics: The New Information Policy Contests*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

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Authors have skeptics. Patrick Burkart writes for his. Critics describe the pirate political movement as uninformed and unreliable. Burkart disagrees. He argues that pirates can help protect the digital commons from a dangerous upward ratchet of intellectual property rights (IPR). Activists within the pirate movement define the digital commons as information resources created by the Internet, including Wikipedia, remixes, and fan fiction.

This book has three parts. First, Burkart analyzes pirate politics as an anti-colonialist, cultural environmentalist movement to defend the “unpenetrated” digital commons from IPR regulation. The pirate political movement arose from a culture of online sharing. Circa 2006, “male software programmers and file-sharing geeks” broke out of the Internet and into normative politics. Tumultuous protests over a police crackdown on the Swedish file-sharing search engine, The Pirate Bay (TPB), marked the pirates’ formative years. Eventually, the party matured into a “generational movement,” spawned the Pirate Party International, and entered the European Parliament.

Second, the book details European antipiracy initiatives, which the text frames as EU domination over its member states. *Pirate Politics* particularizes the threat as IPR harmonization, which the pirates believe colonizes, or normalizes, the primeval Internet to “tame it for business.”

To be sure, a pre-colonized Internet has never actually existed. Yet, the colonization analogy helps to visualize the pirate struggle. In part three, *Pirate Politics* draws on Habermasian theories of the “new social movement” (NSM), and “communicative rationality,” to theorize pirate resistance to IPR harmonization. Burkart argues that pirates perform identity politics for networked publics.

Pirate Politics is an excellent resource for anyone interested in the digital commons, youth identity politics, or EU-member relations. However, this history

also adopts an explicit vantage. Geopolitical events gain meaning in the book when they help show that pirates “did not emerge ‘out of nowhere.’” In short, Burkart narrates struggle over the digital commons from the perspective of a pirate politics origin myth. Mostly missing are the details. What actions did pirates take, exactly? With what impact? How much credit should they get for IPR reform efforts, when broad coalitions all opposed European IPR harmonization? Burkart neither asks these questions nor provides the information to attempt answers.

Some readers may try to fill in the gap by imagining pirates with more agency than they actually have. Others may find that Burkart minimizes the movement: Pirate parties exist in sixty-nine countries and on every continent, but only Swedish, German, and British pirates appear in this book. A more global perspective would be a useful sequel.

Pirate Politics offers a rare peek inside the information-digestive track of the pirate movement. Yet, reading this book left me wondering whether it analyzes pirate politics, or participates in it. Burkart tells us his motive is to “flesh out” pirate agency. Does he mean to explain, or to enhance?

For example, it’s unclear whether the book’s vaguely Edenic portrait of a “natural” Internet describes the pirates’ view of a digital commons, or Burkart’s as well. On first glance, such author-subject fusion could be good: Mythmaking can be productive, after all. But Burkart need not have disavowed pirate mythology in order to identify and reflect on it. By declining to do so, the book misses an opportunity to theorize pirate mythmaking as a form of political agency in and of itself.

The problem with overlooking, or even reproducing, pirate mythology is that some of these fantasies are dangerous. The German pirates, who in 2011 entered the Berlin Parliament, found that their open access ideals came back to haunt them. First, acting on profound commitment to government transparency, they aired their internal squabbles. Next, strong belief in direct democracy left them vulnerable to neo-Nazi infiltration. Finally, faith in a knowledge commons built from radical free communication inhibited the pirates’ capacity to contain hate speakers. Media amplified these challenges, and discredited the pirates as incompetent leaders.

To be fair, Burkart acknowledges the “regressive potential” of some ecological arguments. “Some” cultural politics that seek to recover nature, he cedes, “can wind up as...racism.” But the book as a whole mostly elides the paradox that some pirates’ defense of the digital commons bleeds into anti-EU nationalism. Rather than examine the “regressive potential” in depth, Burkart asks whether a populist, xenophobe’s financial investment in TPB undermines Burkart’s own attempt to theorize pirate politics as a “new social movement.” This question misses the point.

Pirate politics, complete with its digital commons mythology, wields both productive and problematic agency. Overlooking its seedy, neo-fascist undersides leaves the movement susceptible to cooptation from undesirable coalition participants. A more holistic theory of commons ideologies might avoid this result.

Burkart builds a forceful case that pirate politics matters. Most impressive, he achieves what is also one of the pirates’ greatest accomplishments: making Internet politics accessible, and thereby paving the way for a more inclusive digital commons movement.