

Sebastian Prange

Outlaw Economics: Reading Capitalism from Beyond the Pale

This paper offers a reading of the historical development of capitalism through the lens of outlaw enterprises. Its central argument is that because they operate outside the bounds of official rules and regulations, outlaws are in some ways the most authentic capitalists. Outlaw enterprises, therefore, can provide a microcosm of the imperatives, opportunities, practices, and institutions that have defined capitalism during different phases of its evolution: they serve as case studies of capitalism-in-practice. The paper will explore on one specific phase in the development of capitalism—the period historians describe as “merchant capitalism” —and one particular type of outlaw enterprise: pirates. It proposes that from understanding the business model and wider socio-political context of early-modern pirates, more general lessons about the development of capitalism can be abstracted. The focus will be in particular on Asian pirates, in order to question long-held assumptions about the European origins of capitalism.
