



HAL
open science

Comment on a paper entitled "Maritime Piracy and the Ambiguous Art of Existential Arbitragel," by Adrienne Mannov, *Current Anthropology*

Hélène Artaud

► **To cite this version:**

Hélène Artaud. Comment on a paper entitled "Maritime Piracy and the Ambiguous Art of Existential Arbitragel," by Adrienne Mannov, *Current Anthropology*. 2023. hal-04071675

HAL Id: hal-04071675

<https://hal.science/hal-04071675>

Preprint submitted on 21 Apr 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Hélène Artaud

Assistant professeur at the French National Museum of Natural History, Paris

Laboratory of Local Heritage, Environment and Globalization PALOC, UMR 208 IRD – MNHN French National Museum of Natural History

artaud@mnhn.fr

Comment on a paper entitled “Maritime Piracy and the Ambiguous Art of Existential Arbitragel,” by Adrienne Mannov, *Current Anthropology*

Who could doubt that piracy is a hindrance to the prosperity of global trade? The author doubts and through this original and audacious paper gives us reasons to share her misgivings. The hypothesis she supports is that piracy, which popular culture has widely interpreted as an act of resistance to the domination of empires, contributes on the contrary to their expansion and "is embedded in and subject to the logistics of global finance". This proposition is certainly not completely new: several studies have indeed demonstrated that piracy has participated in the development of capitalism or have highlighted its importance in the global financial system (Struett *et al.* 2013)¹, but few have done so through ethnographic data. However, this is precisely what the author does. To "understand what role the risk of piracy played in the seafarers' lives", and more globally in the global shipping industry, the author uses indeed unpublished ethnographic data collected during 16 months spent "on board five ships flying different flags and across 9,000 nautical miles ". The originality of the approach adopted by her is thus to renew the analysis of the link between piracy and capitalism by proceeding to a subtle analysis of the notion of risk, and by investing, to do so, the point of view of an ethnography of global connections (Tsing, 2011²) multi-scalar, multi-situated and mobile.

The author, who chooses to conduct her reflection from the discourses of seafarers and managers, never falls into the pitfall of caricaturing the different perspectives. As she writes: "these relationships appear to me more complicated than the exploiter/exploited binary suggests". The most obvious example of the "ambiguity" that infuses the discourses of both seafarers and managers, and thwarts any binary reading, appears in the analysis of the "High Risk Zone" (HRZ). This zone, in which the risks of piracy are particularly high, is perceived by both seafarers and managers as an opportunity for additional benefit. This mutual benefit, which induces tacit alliances that the seafarers reveal, not without irony, by pointing out that "the guards and the Filipinos are working together with the pirates" should not, however, mask the inequity of the logic on which it is based. Concealed by the managers, who carefully avoid mentioning it, the threat to which the seafarers are exposed is well known to them and is therefore the object of a deliberate choice. It is, however, only after a pragmatic and "existential" calculation: comparing this risk to the one they or their families face in their home countries, that non-Western seafarers agree to work in these areas. The "reasonable

¹ Struett, M. J., Carlson, J. D., & Nance, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Maritime piracy and the construction of global governance*. Routledge.

² Tsing, A. L. (2011). *Friction: An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton University Press.

trade-off" that leads some seafarers to embark in HRZ, can only be understood if one includes in the equation those risks that are not directly associated with seafaring activities but that are linked to the highly differentiated political (war) or environmental (natural disaster) contexts from which the seafarers originate. The notion of "arbitrage" on which the author bases her analysis and which she defines "as trading that seeks to make low-risk profits by exploiting discrepancies in the price of the same asset or in the relative prices of similar assets" thus implies in a structural way the existential dimension. Using precise ethnographic sequences, the author demonstrates this and uncovers the foundations of a brutal system that makes violence a strategic cog in the global maritime supply chain.

If the interest of the article is thus indisputable, as an anthropologist of the sea, I regret, however, that the specificities of the ocean are so timidly explored, despite the added interest they could bring to the author's demonstration. The choice to make the ocean an epiphenomenon in the analysis of risk ("this article deals with the ocean as the *medium* across which international trade is facilitated"), may sometimes seem to contradict the author's intention of "explor[ing] the ways in which maritime labour, maritime risk and seafarers' survival are embedded in the financial logics". Indeed, one could question whether "maritime labour" and "maritime risk" can be so easily detached from the ocean and presented as prototypes of all other forms of "labour" and "risk". By favouring this approach, and opting for a maritime context without considering its spatial specificities (cf. Campling and Colás, 2021)³ or addressing the representations and the contrasting histories associated with it on both sides, doesn't the author deprive herself of an important heuristic dimension? Perhaps an analysis of the links that each of the seafarers has forged with the ocean would have facilitated the understanding of the "choice" some of them make to risk their lives in it. Perhaps a closer look at how the ocean is traditionally perceived in the West as placeless: a lawless, unregulated, empty, and silent place (cf. Steinberg, 2001⁴; Artaud (in presse)⁵) would also have helped to understand that a "systemic inequality and violence" is crucially taking place there.

³ Campling, L., & Colás, A. (2021). *Capitalism and the sea: the maritime factor in the making of the modern world*. Verso Books.

⁴ Steinberg, P. E. (2001). *The social construction of the ocean* (Vol. 78). Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Artaud, H (In press), *Généalogie de l'écume. Comment les océans viennent à notre rencontre*. La Découverte.