

An Excerpt from *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*¹
By Nadya Tolokonnikova

Rule № 1
BE A PIRATE

Look for the truth that explodes existing boundaries and definitions. Follow your instincts and you'll get a chance to break prevailing rules so beautifully you may even end up establishing a new norm, a new paradigm. Nothing frozen is perfect.

In my own country I am in a far off land.
I am strong but have no power.
I win all yet remain a loser.
At break of day I say goodnight.
When I lie down I have great fear of falling.
FRANÇOIS VILLON

I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.
MICHEL FOUCAULT

Independence is my happiness, and I view things as they are, without regard to place or person; my country is the world, and my religion is to do good.
THOMAS PAINE, *RIGHTS OF MAN*

Words
pirate people's republic

“I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.” So says Michel Foucault.

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If you are eager to eat your old identity and turn it into fertilizer for somebody else, you're going to burn, and your flesh will be violently and rudely scattered all over the planet, and birds will peck your liver. But it's rewarding. You're going to rise from the ashes, renewed, young, and beautiful—forever.

I want to intensify my life. I want to reach maximum density, live nine lives in one. It's a search for lives, not experiences. As I see it, a search for experiences is a Diet Coke, fat-free version of seeking to have nine lives in one. There's no time when I'm just living by default, just because I was told "it's supposed to be like that." I don't take that as a valid statement.

Punk culture has taught us that being moderate and restrained is often the wrong choice. When your intuition is telling you to leave moderation behind, let it go.

the international waters of piracy

I'm suspicious about all kinds of limitations that have been imposed on me. Sex, nationality, race, hair color, the timbre of my voice, the way I fuck or brush my teeth.

If I can be helpful at all, it is by offering the perspective of a human being who's not particularly Russian, or Chinese, or American, who's trying to live and breathe in her own way.

The perspective of a pirate.

As a pirate, I'm a sailor and an adventurer. But as a pirate I know too how crucial it is to have your community, people you trust who are committed enough to walk with you on a guerrilla's path, if needed. My home is in my heart and in the hearts of those in my tribe.

NEVER TRY TO GIVE A DEFINITION OF PUNK

Being a punk is about constantly surprising. It's not about having a mohawk hairstyle and keeping it your whole life. **Being a punk means systematically changing the image of yourself, being elusive, sabotaging cultural and political codes.**

Punk is a method. Bach and Handel are my main punk influences. I don't like the concept of a punk subculture, where you are really stuck in the image. The performance artist Alexander Brener criticized a person who wears skinny jeans, tears them, and considers himself punk as fuck. Punk demands more. On the first day, tear your jeans; on the second, wear stolen Louboutin shoes; on the third, shave your head; and on the fourth, grow butt-length hair somehow. Undermine, transform, exceed expectations. That's what punk means to me.

Another job of mine is to be an investigator of life and political orders. My art is to sharpen my mind and keep my eyes open and clear. I promised myself to remain critical and, if I have to, be ready to perform coldhearted analysis, dissection, penetration. . . . At the same time I oblige myself to stay loving, open, and connected: sympathy and compassion are the only truly reliable friends for someone who thrills at being finely tuned to the world, who wants to resonate with the time she lives in, who's thirsty to hear the music and harmonies of the universe that are being played on an incomprehensible variety of strings.

“The intellectual as buccaneer—not a bad dream,” notes the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk writing about Pasolini's *Pirate Writings*. “We have scarcely ever seen ourselves that way. The buccaneer cannot assume fixed standpoints because he is constantly moving between changing fronts.”

It's fascinating to see when somebody is trying to think about reality in the clumsy and constipated terms that empires use. I never got it. I've never understood the empty talk about enemies of the state, external enemies . . . the list is pretty much endless, for example:

- | | |
|-------------|------------|
| Russkies | Mexicans |
| commies | witches |
| Uncle Sam | lesbians |
| Muslims | Pussy Riot |
| Yankee pigs | |

..... ←insert your name here
..... ←insert your mom's name here

When you want to see and tell the truth, you're leaving the area of the known (by default), so I can guarantee you'll look ridiculous, sometimes silly, not be well respected at all; and you should let yourself love your failures, because they constitute your path to the sublime. Enter the international waters of the unknown, where the only business is being a pirate.

Nothing frozen is perfect. The queer, liquid world is real; it's nice here. Otherwise you have what? A belief that dog people should marry dog people and cat people should marry cat people?

As a liquid you're free to take any shape and to mix with other liquids too. It's no fun to be ice; I'd rather be water. Seduce and let yourself be seduced into radical questioning.

**Deeds
no borders**

I was born in Norilsk, a very industrial and very Siberian city. Siberia is the shape of a giant cock. My hometown is located at the head. Every summer I'd go to my grandma's place, which is right between the balls and a four-hour flight away.

The air in my hometown consists of heavy metals with a little oxygen. Life expectancy is ten years less than in other regions of Russia, the risk of cancer two times higher.

I grew up around persistent, independent, focused adults. My mother is a maximalist and has an incredible work ethic, as does her husband, my stepfather. My mom can point at a dog and tell you it's a cat, and you know, you'll believe her. She has a gift to convince and lead. My father is in charge of all the divine insanity in my life. He's a writer, artist, cynical romantic, stoic, nomad, adventurer . . . and, of course, pirate. "When she was four," my father writes about me, "Nadya absolutely, consciously, strictly, and business-like said to me, 'Papa! Never force me anything.' I don't remember what the occasion was, but I immediately understood it was a declaration of independence. And I have never 'forced her anything.' I have only motivated her. My point of departure was her inner willingness to do something. I cultivated her from within, like a crocus blossom."

My father is not a religious person in any usual fashion, but he understands the importance of culture and a language that speaks about transcendent experience. We would visit Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches, mosques, synagogues, and even Hare Krishna events when I was a kid. My father imposed no dogmas on me. We would freely, joyfully, playfully discuss our different impressions and write down some of them.

Where am I from? I'm from the most polluted city on the planet. I'm from the Milky Way. I'm from Russian literature and Japanese theater. I'm from every city where I fought or fucked. I'm from jail and I'm from the White House. I'm from punk records and from Bach's compositions, from my obsession with turquoise, coffee, and loud music.

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When your teen crush is Vladimir Mayakovsky, the Russian revolutionary poet, you're fucked. Sooner or later you will end up in politics. I was fourteen years old, and I thought the coolest thing in the universe was doing investigative journalism. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" my parents' friends would ask me. I don't like the whole idea of the question, that I have to define right now once and for all who I'm going to be. "I want to study philosophy," I'd say.

"But that's insane, who will pay you to be a philosopher? There is no such job as a philosopher." If I'm refusing to define myself anyway, what makes you think I'd want to be labeled for a monetary reason? I didn't feel ready to wrap myself in glittery paper to be sold.

I didn't read leftist books at that time. But our teenage intuitions usually are purely to the left (and we're right about them). I'm aware that I do sound fantastically naive, but I'm not going to say sorry for that. **Naïveté eventually brought me perhaps the best things in my life.**

"I don't care. I'm going to study philosophy."

"Why?"

"Because philosophy makes me happy?"

I left my Siberian town the second I got my high school diploma. I jumped on a plane to Moscow.

Being a teenage pirate is hard. You're struggling to find out who you are. You're bound by rules and bombarded with instructions and advice. But I wasn't about to be defined by anyone else. That was my job, and I took care of it.

Heroes diogenes

Diogenes of Sinope (aka Diogenes the Cynic or Diogenes the Dog) was a Greek philosopher born in the fifth century BCE, about 2,400 years ago. Living a life of poverty and simplicity, speaking truth to power and not giving a shit about what anyone thought of him, he has plenty to teach us today. He would walk around in daylight using a lantern to help him find an “honest man.”

One account says Diogenes was inspired by a mouse that runs here and there, not driven by looking for shelter or fancy food but simply *being a mouse*. Diogenes slept in his cloak wherever he wanted, talked to anyone, and lived in a giant wine jar. He was a “dog philosopher,” a Cynic, which comes from the Greek word **κυνικός**—*kynikos*, or “dog-like.”

Diogenes didn't like Plato, a contemporary of his. The biographer Diogenes Laërtius shows Diogenes criticizing Plato for being too full of himself and interrupting Diogenes's lectures to make a point. Plato's crime was turning philosophy into pure theory, while for Socrates and Diogenes philosophy was a combination of theory and practice. It was real life. The father of philosophy, Socrates never wrote a line in his life. Like Diogenes, Socrates liked walking around drinking and chatting. Plato and Aristotle are responsible for our modern idea of philosophy as something written on a piece of paper. But there was an alternative branch of philosophy, practical philosophy, when a philosopher taught by example, by his way of life. Deeds, not words.

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When I was eighteen, I tried to convince my professors on the philosophical faculty of Moscow State University to let me pass exams by doing actions instead of writing a paper. We reached a compromise and I wrote a paper on action philosophy.

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Diogenes is credited by the playwright Lucian with the first known use of the phrase “citizen of the world.” Diogenes is asked where he is from and he says, “Everywhere . . . a citizen of the world.” Ever the subversive, Diogenes was saying that he belonged to the world of ideas and not to any artificial political entity. Diogenes was a man with no stable social identity, the exile and outcast par excellence.

He was even unimpressed by Alexander the Great, the legendary conqueror. According to Plutarch, Greek statesmen and other celebrity philosophers had fawned over Alexander when he announced a military campaign against Persia. But not Diogenes. Alexander went to look for Diogenes and found him sunbathing. Alexander asked Diogenes if he wanted anything, and Diogenes said yes, stop blocking my sun. Fortunately, Alexander wasn’t offended. Another time, Alexander the Great said that if he didn’t have to be Alexander, he’d be Diogenes. Diogenes urinated on people who insulted him, defecated in the theater, and masturbated in public. On the indecency of this act he said, “If only it were as easy to banish hunger by rubbing my belly.”

Diogenes was quite happy to be called a dog. After all, he said (as quoted by Diogenes Laërtius), like a hound, “I fawn on those who give me anything, I yelp at those who refuse, and I set my teeth in rascals.”

We followers of Diogenes behave like dogs too: we eat and make love in public, go barefoot, and sleep in tubs and at crossroads.

He had no interest in money or status, and he thought that spending life seeking artificial pleasures only made you miserable. But it’s possible to find pleasure in the actual act of rejecting pleasure. So Diogenes asked statues for money to get used to being turned down. He rolled in hot sand in the summer and hugged frozen statues in winter to toughen himself up. When he did allow himself to relax, it was the simplest, most natural pleasures he looked for.

Diogenes Laërtius says of Diogenes, “Being asked what was the most beautiful thing in the world, he replied, ‘Freedom of speech.’”

Diogenes died like a pirate too, on his own terms. Nearing ninety, he killed himself by holding his breath. (Either that or he ate bad octopus or died from a dog bite, which is too ironic for Diogenes the Dog.) It is said he died on the very same day as Alexander the Great.