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The pirate is the original enemy of humankind. As Cicero famously remarked, there are certain enemies with whom one may negotiate and with whom, circumstances permitting, one may establish a truce. But there is also an enemy with whom treaties are in vain and war remains incessant. This is the pirate, considered by ancient jurists to be "the enemy of all."

In this book, Daniel Heller-Roazen reconstructs the shifting place of the pirate in legal and political thought from the ancient to the medieval, modern, and contemporary periods, presenting the philosophical genealogy of a remarkable antagonist. Today, Heller-Roazen argues, the pirate furnishes the key to the contemporary paradigm of the universal foe. This is a legal and political person of exception, neither criminal nor enemy, who inhabits an extra-territorial region. Against such a foe, states may wage extraordinary battles, policing politics and justifying military measures in the name of welfare and security.

Heller-Roazen defines piracy by the conjunction of four conditions: a region beyond territorial jurisdiction; agents who may not be identified with an established state; the collapse of the distinction between criminal and political categories; and the transformation of the concept of war. The paradigm of piracy remains in force today. Whenever we hear of regions outside the rule of law in which acts of "indiscriminate aggression" have been committed "against humanity," we must begin to recognize that these are acts of piracy. Often considered part of the distant past, the enemy of all is closer to us today than we may think. Indeed, he may never have been closer.