

Work First! Then Eat – Skipper/Crew Relations on a French Fishing Boat

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“We all work together, share the same risk: both physical and financial. The crew is like a second family. You spend 15 days at sea with your shipmates and two days at home. It’s always a fight at home. You know your crew better than your family.”

– Michael Loti, Union representative and former boat-owner.

What does it mean to compare one’s work group with one’s family but then to imply that the ‘real’ family is beset by conflict? According to Michael Loti¹, former skipper and district union representative on the local fishing committee, skippers and crews share a common interest: “We’re all workers. The skipper-owner is every bit as much a worker as are his crewmembers.” However, there are clearly identifiable social and economic distinctions between crews and skippers in terms of social networks and material assets. In this paper I examine the “family at sea,” how is it constituted, in what sense can we speak of social class on the fishboat, and in what ways the interests of skippers are parallel to and/or antagonistic to those of their crews.

This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in the Bigouden region of France between 1992 and 2001. The region is noted for its cultural particularisms (see Segalen 1991) and for the economic importance of its artisanal fishing fleet. The regions’ annual production of fish is fourth largest after the industrial ports of Lorient, Boulogne, and Concarneau. Its fleet of more than 400 vessels represents the largest concentration of family-owned fishing vessels in France.

Elsewhere I have discussed the origins of the Bigouden fishery (Menzies 1997), the economic difficulties the fishery experienced in the early 1990s (Menzies 2000), and the entwined politics of identity and survival employed by boat owners in their struggle to survive in the global market for fish and fish products (Menzies 2001). In this paper I am interested in the manner by which onboard reactions between skipper and crew interact with the productive and reproductive dynamics of small-scale capitalism in the Bigouden Fishery. My argument is that the social complexities of class onboard the Bigouden fishboat must be approached from two separate though interconnected positions: (1) from the deck

of the fishboat. How are the skipper’s prerogatives maintained and enforced on the boat? How is the boat organized as a site of production?; and (2) from the perspective of the family enterprise. In what way does the structure of familial ownership shape and/or constrain the social relations between crew and skipper through the reproduction of the fishing enterprise as a unit of production?

These two vantage points – from the deck of the fishboat and from the perspective of the family – give rise to the following questions: How are boat-owning fishers to be conceptualized in class terms? – as peasants? – petty bourgeois? – disguised wage laborers? Where do their crews fit into the picture? Are crews unambiguously labor as against skippers, who are capital? How do ties of kin and community mediate or disrupt theoretical abstractions such as class?

Social class is, in this sense, more than just an objective relationship to the means of production: it must also be situated within the flow of time. It is my contention that a snap shot view of class obliterates the processes by which and through which individuals become members of social classes. In reverting to the ethnographic present, classes fade from view and we are left with a field of social actors and a multitude of individual experiences. Abstracting social classes in this manner risks confusing stages in an individual’s life history with actual class relations.

That all of these local processes operate within the context of a global or international market of fish and fish products is perhaps a truism. It is important, nonetheless, to highlight two aspects of the wider context before turning to the primary focus of this paper. First, fisheries, especially fisheries of the late 19th and 20th centuries have, practically by definition, been encapsulated within global markets and a global system of production. Second, the move toward neo-liberal policies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have not resulted in fundamental change. Rather, the resurgence of neo-liberalism has merely intensified the effects of more than a century of globalization within fisheries.

Commercial fishers, particularly since the late 1880s, are almost by definition ‘global.’ As with other staple commodities (Innis 1954), commercially harvested fish and fish products are typically caught in one region of the world and marketed in another (see Jane Jacobs as an example). Pacific salmon, caught since the 1860s in

northwestern North America, was first part of an industrial canning industry in which processed salmon was sold in Western Europe and then, in the late 20th century, sold in Asia as a luxury commodity. Sardines from the Bigoudennie were canned and then sold to urban workers in the industrial heartland of France and Western Europe. Cod from the Grand Banks of the North Atlantic was early on part of the triangle trade that connected Europe, Africa, and the Americas in the trade of human beings.

The history of globalization in fisheries involves not only flows of fish from the periphery to the center, but also flows of capital from the center to the margins (though rarely in a way that leads to self-sufficiency in the hinterland. See, for example, Sider's discussion of capital draining effects of merchant investment in the Newfoundland outports, 1986). The early salmon fishery in British Columbia, for example, was financed by British investment capital. From tuna to salmon or to sea bass, a relatively small cohort of transnational firms play the processing, brokerage, and distribution game of fisheries. These shadowy forces of real power are often hidden from view from the vantage point of the fishboat. However, their impact in setting the price for fish is clearly felt by fisherman. From Brittany to Kerala, fisherfolk are cognizant of the global market and its impact on their ability to make a living and they have been for generations.

The changes in the global economy during the last decades of the 20th century have been understood by some to be epochal in nature. Changes in information technology in particular and the triumph of transnational elements of the world capitalist class in general have been accepted by these analysts as sufficient to proclaim the arrival of a post-industrial, information age. Yet, the fundamental relations of production, of control over labour and the accumulation of capital have not been altered in any fundamental way irrespective of the bright shiny newness of computer assisted communication or production facilities. However, to deny that trade and regulatory changes and technological developments have had no effect on local experiences in places like the Bigoudennie is to deny reality itself.

Changes in the European Union's import policy and the downward spiral of Spanish, Italian, and British Currency on world markets in the early 1990s combined to create one of the worst economic crises experienced by Bigouden fishers since their earlier struggles against sardine canners (1890s-1920s). Computer technology tied to SONARs, depth sounders, auto pilots, and Global

Positioning Satellite devices has made locating fishing grounds less an art and more a technical skill. Fishers can now tailor their at-sea catches to market demands on an almost hourly basis with the assistance of satellite phones and electronic auctions. These technological changes increase the pressure on family-based fishers to increase their capital investment in equipment and facilitate further rationalizations of capitalist production.

As is, if capital demands are not enough of a burden, the ideology of neo-liberalism has also influenced the management of fisheries. Whereas the conventional model of regulation leading to the end of the 20th century relied upon regulations of fishing practices (limitations on days at sea, times of fishing, and where fishing can occur), free-market inspired management systems involving the privatization of fishing rights (in terms of individual vessel quotas) and regulation (oversight of fishing regulations are being contracted out to private firms in many jurisdictions) became the norm during the last decades of the 20th century. The net effect of these factors has been to intensify the pressure for family-based firms to make the leap to fully-formed capitalist form of production or risk losing everything in a downward spiral of debt. It is within this wider context that the shipboard relations that I will now turn to exist. The relations between skipper and crew at sea become a key site of struggle in defining the survival of petty capitalists who are struggling to hold onto their boats in the swirl of a world system of production and distribution.

Work First! Eat Later: Social Class at Sea

The social relations on board a fishboat are typically governed by the necessity of the work process. The skipper runs the boat, chooses the fishing grounds, and gives the command to set and haul the fishing gear. The crew is responsible for the physical aspects of the fishing process, from setting the gear to sorting the fish. The social space is implicitly divided into crew's space and skipper's space. This division is part functional (it would be next to impossible for the skipper to run the boat from the engine room) and part symbolic (several skippers actively discourage their crew from entering the wheelhouse unless they have been explicitly invited to enter). On one fishing trip I witnessed a scene that, though atypical, clearly lays bare the social relations between crew as labor and skipper as capital.

The two deckhands had been busy sorting fish on their hands and knees for most of the morning. Occasionally, the skipper would walk back along the upper deck and yell down: "What's taking so long. There's nothing there!" Near noon,

he came back and called out to one of the men: "It's time for lunch. Better put something on." The designated cook left the sorting and began to prepare a meal of boiled meat and chips for the skipper (the stove was too small to cook more than one meal at a time). When the meal was ready he knocked on the wheelhouse door and handed it up to the skipper. He then started preparing a meal for the other crewmember and himself.

I heard the skipper rev up the engine a notch. Then he stuck his head down the companion way, looked around the galley, and told the cook to get ready to haul back the net. When the cook protested, the skipper simply reached across the stove and turned it off. Turning to the crewman he said: "Work first! Then eat."

This particular episode is singular in my observations in the *Bigoudennie*. Nonetheless, the actions of the skipper expressed his ultimate authority to command the labor of his crew. In his actions he clarified the divergent social interests of crew and skipper. The skipper overlooks the time it takes for his crew to prepare his meal – in fact demands that time be taken. However, the skipper does not tolerate the crewmember taking time to prepare food for himself and the other crewmember: to do so is to take time away from the production of wealth for the skipper.

The social relations between crews and skippers are forged in a process of work that is both intimate and intense. Commercial fishers, especially on small to medium scale vessels, must constantly rely upon their work mates, not just to 'get the job done,' but very often for their personal safety and well-being. The intensity of the emotions that arise can create enduring friendships and deeply felt animosities. In such a context the social cleavages of class become obscured by the experience of having to personally rely upon each other at points of crisis. Crews which are unable to function in this manner do not stay together long. Yet, there is a fundamental difference between the objectively defined interests of skipper-owners and crews. As owners of productive property the skippers ultimately control the labor power of their crews irrespective as to whether the crews are family, friends, or strangers. However, in order to maintain their productive enterprises, the skipper-owners rely upon the solidarity of their crews. As I have discussed elsewhere (Menzies 1997, 2001), social solidarity has been maintained through an ideology of the local and in a collective memory of past social protests. In this way, the divergent social interests of skippers and crews are erased in the cultural construction of a local identity.

Class is important but, as I argue here, it has to be understood in a specific relationship to the

messiness and situatedness of everyday life. Abstract models, appealing though they may be, can only be understood as guides to making sense out of social reality, not social reality itself.

Social Class and the Artisanal Fishing Enterprise

Much of the debate about class is essentially an argument of classification – "in many cases a survey of the typology of class boundaries rather than a study of the process of class formation and the real historical battles which produce the ever-shifting lines of demarcation" (Stark 1980:77). It is important to be cognizant of the "typologies of class boundaries" if only as a starting point in understanding the process that creates class. However, the explication of these typologies should not be an end in itself.

Simple typologies of class boundaries typically employ a rigid structuralism that ignores the contradictory and situational context of artisanal fishing communities such as Le Guilvinec. For example, Clement's notion of independent commodity producers (ICP) –which refers to those producers who are linked "with capital through the mechanism of the open market...and are free of contractual obligations to capital" (1986:64) – tends to ignore a common situation of occupational multiplicity among fishers.²

Clement's framework includes a simultaneous consideration of social relations of production within the unit of production (i.e., the fishboat) and between units of capital (i.e., boats, processing firms, fish auctions, etc.); other typologies do not. The range of single focus typologies stretches from the self-referential –"the fundamental division crosscutting all others is between those who think of themselves as labor and those who take on the self-image of owners, free enterprisers, or entrepreneurs" (Marchak 1984:124) – to a structuralist materialism in which boat ownership is used as a measure to produce "a simple threefold categorization of class...fishermen as owners; fishermen as renters; and crewmen, who generally receive payment based on a predetermined share of the catch" (Guppy 1986:19).

Other writers exclude the concept of class completely from their analysis. They adopt concepts such as network, action set, community, or adaptation in the studies of fishing peoples. Acheson (1988), in his work on the lobster fishers of Maine, emphasizes networks and action sets as an adaptive mechanism in the face of uncertainty and risk. Anthony Cohen's work on Whalsay is concerned with the symbolic construction of community. As such, he is only concerned with the symbolic significance of fishing for the community of Whalsay "with its embeddedness in

and influence on cultural and social relations." According to Cohen, "the fishing crew should be regarded as the community at sea" (1987:145). John Forest inverts the relationship between social relations and ideological constructs and finds that "the decision to be a waterman [fisher] is itself founded on aesthetic desires" (1988:105). These models or approaches do describe some aspect of the lived reality of fisherfolk. They don't, however, have the explanatory power to make sense of how such diverse groups of fishing people interact with the wider political economy within which they are embedded.

A more effective way to analytically situate fishers is to isolate the enterprise of production (in our case the family owned fishing vessel) and to analyze it at two levels: "at the level of each enterprise [form of production] and at the level of the social totality of enterprises [mode of production]" (Banaji 1977:9). Form of production "refers to the structure of the basic unit of production, as in, for example, the fishing crew" (Sinclair 1985:15). This is in contrast to the more comprehensive concept of the mode of production: "the dominant economic forces and relations of production in a society" (Sinclair 1985:15).

By separating these elements of fishers' lives we can see: (1) the structural similarities of their respective labor processes; and (2) come to terms with the different historical developments and interactions between the fishers' units of production and the encapsulating capitalist mode of production. Thus, we can see how "the social formation provides the context for the reproduction of units of production [yet, is] not uniquely determinative of the form of production" (Friedmann 1980:160).

The identity of the form of production extant on the Bigouden fishboats is ambiguous. Depending upon one's vantage point (i.e. from the basis of the ship-board crew or the household enterprise) the form of production can be described either as a capitalist form of production or as a simple commodity form of production. From the vantage of the shipboard crew the enterprise is best described as capitalist commodity production. However, from the vantage point of the household, these enterprises are more accurately described as simple commodity production.

Capitalist commodity production "separates the direct producers from the means of realizing their labor and compels them into wage labor (or its equivalent, such as shares or piece-rates). Capital directly organizes production based on social labor, and the proletariat controls neither its product nor the labor process" (Clement 1986:63). Hence the skipper gives the order to fish and

intervenes in the crews' life by commanding them to 'work first, then eat.'

Simple commodity production "is a form of production which draws on the household for its labor supply and organizational structure; it depends on articulation with commodity markets to realize the value of what is produced and to acquire both personal and consumption goods and the means of production" (Sinclair 1985:18). Furthermore, "in simple commodity production, the combined return to the enterprise and to labor generates no...tendency towards increased scale of individual enterprises" (Friedmann 1978:88). One of the outcomes of the last two decades has been a declining reliance in the Bigouden upon household labour both as crew on the boats and in work on shore support activities. This situation generates a context in which family owned vessels exist within an ideology of household production while actually employing or relying on very few household members to operate their enterprise.

Capitalist and simple commodity production are also distinguished by the form in which the reproduction of the enterprise occurs. The regeneration of the enterprise through time, from one cycle of production to the next, occurs in accordance with the logic of the form of production. In capitalist production "the appropriation of surplus value leads to accumulation within the enterprise; this generates an inherent tendency toward concentration or increased scale of production independent of technological advances" (Friedmann 1978:88). Excepting, for the moment, changes in the scale of production resulting from technological innovations "there are no economic pressures in simple commodity production for expanded reproduction; that is simple reproduction, or maintenance of production at the existing level, is adequate for survival of each unit of production" (Friedmann 1978:87). Simple commodity production is, however, subject to "demographic pressures which lead enterprises with more than one son to seek expanded reproduction" (Friedmann 1978:87).

The process of expanded reproduction differs depending on the form of production. Under a capitalist form of production, expanded reproduction tends toward concentration and accumulation. In simple commodity production, expanded reproduction tends "toward fission, in which income generated in one household enterprise is used to establish a new one on the same scale" (Friedmann 1978:88). Thus, expanded reproduction within a simple commodity form of production will increase competition between units of production, whereas it decreases such

competition under a capitalist form of production. This is especially important in open access fisheries.

The notion of capitalist commodity production allows us to identify a set of antagonistic social classes (capital/labor or, in this case, skipper/crew). The concept of simple commodity production identifies "a class of combined laborers and property owners within a capitalist economy... the circuits of reproduction of simple commodity production intersect with those of commodity, landowning, and banking capital, and with markets in labor power, in abstractly determined relations" (Friedmann 1980:162). The analytic task is to link abstractions, such as class typologies, with lived experience but without recourse to a naïve empiricism in which the uniqueness of the group of fishers is over emphasized.

In the Bigoudennie we are faced with an artisanal, family-based fishery that is moving, almost inextricably, toward an explicitly capitalist form of production. This development is by no means inevitable (in many situations the existence of family fishing firms is the by-product of large-scale capital and/or government design or intervention). However, in the current moment of increasing neo-liberal trade and production policy, family firms are being pulled, irrespective of their desires or intentions, into becoming more fully capitalist in their form and operation.

In the story - work first, eat later! - the skipper was clearly attempting to demonstrate and enforce his authority. This particular boat was newly purchased and in the context of declining fish prices every minute the fishing gear lay dormant directly translated into lost income for the skipper. In this case the lines between boss and worker were clearly drawn. But there is also that other image, the image of the family as invoked by men like Jean Loti, when they talk about the family-like relationship between skippers and crew and why they belong in the same union. Both images contain a kernel of truth, yet both are only partial images. This is the ambiguity of a form of production that has its roots in a reliance upon kinship and friendship-like relationships - ultimately as idioms of community- caught within a moment of increasing liberalization of trade and rationalization of capitalist production.

The paradox of family-based fisheries, especially those as described in the Bigoudennie, is that they find themselves perched on an economic precipice. They face a choice between becoming more fully capitalist in their economic operations or falling into economic collapse and risk losing their boats and other family property. The

resurgent neo-liberalism of the late 20th century has intervened in the local arena in such a way that economic survival for Bigouden fishing skippers resides in their ability to assert their role as capital and ultimately to squeeze as much surplus labour as possible from their crews. In the absence of an alternative vision for the future, small boat owners the world over are joining with the profit mongers of western capitalism and thereby becoming active participants in their demise as artisanal fishers.

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Notes

1. Michael Lott is a pseudonym. I have chosen not to name the union as that would clearly reveal the identity of M. Loti.
2. It is important to recognize that the situation of occupational multiplicity varies from fishery to fishery and, as in the case of the fishers in Le Guilvinec, is not always the rule.

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Globalization and the Local Hero: Becoming a Small-scale Entrepreneur in Scotland

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In the conclusion to his massive study, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (1992), Herbert Applebaum contends that

We have now reached the stage where people need to know what they should be working for rather than just working. The advance of technology now provides industrial cultures with the possibility of choice - choice of work and choice of what useful things to make, so as to restore work to its human dimensions and meanings. (pp 590)

In his book on the American work ethic (1998), Applebaum asserted that workers were the real heroes of history. This paper addresses both of Applebaum's themes: the attempts of individual workers to exercise choice in how they work and what they make, and that they are heroes, and sometime so recognized officially. The setting of my field research is Central Scotland, and the designation of "hero" derives from Scottish film maker Bill Forsyth's engaging 1983 movie "Local Hero," in which a shrewd Scot manages to persuade the

executives of an American oil firm to adopt a humanistic rather than exploitative perspective in their dealings with a Scottish village conveniently close to the North Sea oil fields. The Scottish "local heroes" that I have in mind, however, live and work in Central Scotland, rather than in remote villages, and are owner/managers of small high technology firms. All 30 of the owner/managers whose careers I have followed began their work careers as employees of other firms. While their career narratives are framed in terms of struggle and risk-taking with minimal outside assistance, they have been celebrated, collectively, as heroes, first by politicians who wish to encourage an "Enterprise Culture" in the UK, and second by Scottish development agencies that wish to celebrate a particular kind of entrepreneur, the indigenous Scottish local hero. My contention is that the Scottish entrepreneurs in my sample see themselves fitting less well as heroes of the Enterprise Culture than as indigenous local heroes.

Scottish High Technology Firms in Global Context

For more than a decade I have been studying the careers of indigenous high technology entrepreneurs