

BETWEEN THE STATEROOM AND THE FOC'S'CLE:  
Everyday Forms of Class Struggle Aboard a Commercial Fishboat

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ABSTRACT

This paper charts the path of one fishing crew's resistance to the attempts of their skipper to force them to comply with his wishes over the course of the fishing season by drawing upon the personal journals of the author, a commercial fisher of twelve years. The struggle, between skipper and crew, capital and labour, manifests itself on fishing vessels in British Columbia in the mundane activities and conversations of everyday life in which crews attempt to exert control over the conditions under which they work. By developing and maintaining social solidarity, crews are able to subvert the authority of the skipper and effect greater control over their work environment. However, to have any lasting effect on the relations of domination, the subordinate's challenge of authority must be self-consciously aware of the social process of production within capitalism.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit les formes de résistance des membres d'une équipe de pêche aux tentatives de leur capitaine à les forcer à se soumettre à ses volontés pendant une saison de pêche. L'auteur, un pêcheur commercial pendant douze ans, utilise ses journaux de bord personnels pour documenter ces événements. Le conflit, entre capitaine et équipage, capital et main-d'oeuvre, se manifeste dans les activités et les conversations quotidiennes, parmi lesquelles l'équipage tente d'exercer un certain contrôle sur leurs conditions de travail. En développant et maintenant une solidarité sociale, l'équipage est capable de subvertir l'autorité du capitaine et d'effectuer un plus grand contrôle sur leur environnement. Par contre, afin d'avoir un effet permanent sur les relations de domination, le défi des subordonnés doit être conscient des processus social de production capitaliste.

I watched him coming with a smile which, as he got into point-blank range, took effect and froze his very whiskers. I did not give him time to open his lips.

"Square the yards by lifts and braces before the hands go to breakfast." It was the first particular order I had given on board that ship; and I stayed on deck to see it executed, too. I had felt the need of asserting myself without the loss of time. That sneering young cub got taken down a peg or two on that occasion, and I also seized the opportunity of having a good look at the face of every foremast man as they filed past me to go to the after braces.

-- Joseph Conrad (1969:169-60), *The Secret Sharer*

There are many times when crew members are "taken down a peg or two" by their skippers. Just as in Conrad, fishing skippers in British Columbia will order their crews in technical language that, if competent, the crew will understand. Like Conrad's captain, fishing skippers have no need to refer directly to their power to ensure compliance. Their use of the technical language makes no claim of correctness for the command; only that it is comprehensible (Knutson 1987:113). The skipper's order contains a dual intention, the most obvious of which is the successful supervision of a technical operation. More important, the captain asserted his command of the ship by usurping the second in command. He spoke first, thus silencing the mate. The captain accomplished this in a manner that was beyond questioning by the crew. The humiliation of the mate was embedded within the 'neutrality' of the technical language. The tone of his voice and his physical stance said to the crew: "you are less than me remember that". Because of the manner of the communication, all that can be questioned is the technical comprehensibility of the command, not the insult embedded in the manner in which the order was conveyed (Knutson 1987:114). No one can respond to the tone of voice in the order in any way other than compliance without directly challenging the underlying social relations that created the 'consensus' of the technical language.<sup>1</sup>

If the skipper hesitates to speak first, if he wavers in his command of authority, a door is opened that allows his subordinates space to challenge his authority. These challenges may be individual or collective, but to be successful they must be collective. The skipper's authority is based upon his/her ownership and/or control of the means of production. Thus, to have any lasting effect on the relations of domination, the subordinate's challenge of authority must be aware of the social process of production within capitalism. To act otherwise condemns the

subordinates to repeating a cycle of brief moments of liberation followed by repression. In this paper I examine an episode where the skipper did not speak first, resulting in the disruption of his power on board the boat. The events described here arose on a fishing boat on which I was a deck hand. The struggle between skipper and crew, capital and labour, manifests itself in the mundane activities and conversations of everyday life. What follows is an analysis of situations and the use of language in which those in positions of power attempt to force their subordinates to comply with their wishes.

The particular challenge of authority that I describe here began on the halibut grounds during the last day of a halibut trip. I was aboard this trip and this paper arises out of the complexity and contradictions of my life, being both fisherman and student.<sup>2</sup> Since 1982 I have filled several journals and notebooks with my thoughts, observations, and with the stories told by fishers during eight fishing seasons. In the brief periods of rest between the frenetic bursts of activity that compromise the fishing process, I recorded dialogue, events, snatches of description, even poetic musings -- thoughts and words that had meaning to me as a fisherman. I did not keep my earlier notes systematically, but as my interest in anthropology grew, so too did the detail and sophistication of my records. There is a rambling, almost chaotic, tone to the earlier entries; a tone reflective of the pulse of the boat and its crew. The events described are recorded from the perspective of a participant; an actor in the drama that is about to unfold. I say this in recognition of Clifford's warning that "no sovereign scientific method or ethical stance can guarantee the truth of [these] images. They are constituted . . . in specific historical relations of domination and dialogue" (1988:23). What follows is the account of a partisan in the conflict over the control of elements of the work process and working environment.

The present conflict arose out of the crew's desire to effect greater control over their work environment. The challenge to the skipper's authority was not self-consciously designed to usurp the skipper's control of the vessel; we simply wanted to keep fishing. The consequence, however, was somewhat unexpected. What began as an attempt to convince the skipper to continue fishing against his will became a collective challenge to the authority granted him by virtue of ownership.

We are in the middle of Hecate Strait, an open body of water sixty miles across at its widest point, and have just finished hauling back five strings of gear. It is the last full day of fishing left in the halibut trip and we are eager to make the most of it. Luke, the tacitly recognized deck boss, has been goading us on since 5:00 a.m. to work fast and "murder fish". Luke has more energy than one would expect for a fifty-eight year old who had recently suffered a stroke. As the meal hour approaches we

begin calling out to the cook: "Quit fooling around, get the lead out, and put some grub on the table". We are more interested in fishing, than in eating. In the past our skipper has become "disgusted" with the last day of fishing. Several times he has told us to "shack the gear<sup>3</sup> and ready the boat for town even though we still have had time left to fish. Though we might still catch several thousand more pounds of fish, our skipper is attempting to structure his arrival in town so that as little time as necessary will be spent unloading the vessel. He has been talking about putting the boat into the local shipyard. However, if we fish to the end of the opening it is unlikely he will be able to have any work done on the boat for several weeks. Unlike the crew, who are free to go as soon as the fish is unloaded, he is "tied to the boat". We, however, want to fish "down to the wire". We have spent the last few hours talking about how we plan to spend our profits during the three week layover between fishing trips. Everyone has a trip planned. The extra hundred dollars or so we might make fishing down to the wire would, as Luke puts it "be the gravy on an already excellent trip". As the scene unfolds, we can see the skipper anxiously passing back and forth from the bridge to the pilot house. He is ready to quit fishing and "make the move to town".

#### THE LAST STRING

(Journal fragments are indicated by italics.)

*After hauling the first five strings and setting them back, the crew is congregated in the baiting area on the boat's stern getting ready for lunch. Ron, the ship's inbreaker (the greenhorn), comes out to us, having spoken with the cook. He says "Don't bait any more hooks, this is it."*

*Luke says, "Come on! you're joking."*

*"No, it's for real," says Tommy.*

*"For Christ's sake," Luke says, "we might be able to pick up a few tomorrow if it's anything like today."*

*"Yeah, maybe 500 pounds. I'd rather be in town than rolling around catching 500 pounds," says Tommy.*

*"It's a thousand bucks!"*

*By now most of us have made our way into the galley. The skipper joins us at the galley table for lunch. "Is Rick lying again?" Luke asks the skipper. Robert looks up. He doesn't follow Luke's reference. Luke tries again. "This true we're not baiting any more?"*

*"Yes," says Robert, "The bait is 6-8 days old and there is a gale warning out for tomorrow."*

*"The weather looks pretty good now," I offer.*

*"Won't last: no we'll shack the gear off and head in tonight." After the skipper leaves the galley we sit there, glumly thinking about the fish we won't catch. The only happy face is Ron's. He is eager to get home and see his girlfriend.*

*"We've got two baited strings, you know," I say to Luke. "We can't just let that go to waste."*

*"Is the bait good?"*

*"Looks fine to me, Luke. Maybe he'll want to put that gear in the water anyway." We decided to go up and see what Robert says about putting in the baited strings. The rest of the crew is keen to keep fishing.*

*Robert is on the radio talking to another skipper when we arrive in the pilot house. He ends the call and Luke says "We got two strings baited and ready to go. The bait looks okay. What do you think?" Robert doesn't say anything for a couple of minutes. He's busy studying the loran. Finally, "How much we get that last string Charlie?"*

*"Five hundred, maybe 750 pounds, plus another 500 the string before."*

*"The boys don't mind a little work," says Luke. Smiling to each other, Luke and I went down to the galley. "Let's go ladies," Luke says to the crew. "We got some work to do."*

*We didn't stop hauling gear that day till midnight. Then we started again at four the following morning. Having decided to keep fishing Robert made us work hard; we fished harder that last day than we fished the entire trip.*

Situations such as this show that the power of the skipper is limited. Robert clearly wanted to leave the fishing round. From Robert's point of view there is an economic advantage to quitting early. By quitting a half day early, Robert would beat the rest of the fleet to town and be unloaded, ready to have the shipyard work done before the next fishing trip. The crew, however, want to prolong the trip. For us, leaving the fishing grounds early this trip is of no particular advantage. Once we unload the fish we are free until the next trip begins. Despite his legal right to make the decision whether to continue fishing, Robert's choice in this matter is limited by the desires and actions of the crew. It is at this level of decision-making that the implicit, everyday struggles between skipper as capital and crew as labour occur. Robert's decisions are motivated by the interests of capital -- he has a long-term view that allows him to sacrifice potential shortterm earnings if it allows him to maintain his investments, hence his ability to make money. The crew, as labour, is interested in how much money can be made from the trip. It is

always possible to move to a better chance, a better boat. As Robert would say: the crew is not "tied to the boat. They're free to pick up their gumboots and leave anytime."

There is an intriguing dynamic between the domains of control of the skipper and the crew. Between the two domains is a liminal zone; a no-man's land of contested decisions and control. The boundaries between the two zones are neither fixed or formally defined. The rough outlines of the domains of control exist within an ephemeral body of myths, stories and legal documents that stand as a

pragmatic charter of ... faith and moral wisdom ... [It fulfills] an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man (Malinowski 1954 [1948]:101).

This mythic charter informs the range of possible actions that the men I fished with perceive to be possible. The charter is an ideological manifestation of social entrapment; "the way in which a people's understanding of themselves, their world, their past, and their future limits their possibilities" (Crapanzano, 1985:xiii). The charter forms part of (and arises out of) the structural limits of human agency to which Marx refers when he says:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past (Marx 1969:398).

This body of beliefs (or consciousness) I have called the charter establishes the rules by which interactions between skipper and crew are regulated. Yet the ambiguity of the domains of control and of the charter itself leave room for the outcome of skipper/crew interactions to change the 'rules of the game'. Our intervention into Robert's decision-making process occurred within the rules of the charter but in a way that fundamentally challenged it.

Luke's insistence that we continue fishing, despite Robert's expressed wishes, was the first in a series of challenges to Robert's control. Ostensibly, Luke's urging to fish reflects a neutral desire to help the work process. Yet it is also an implicit challenge to the skipper's authority, intended to secure a greater degree of control over our conditions of work,

our very ability to make a living. None of the crew wanted to stop fishing. Given the necessity for cooperation aboard ship, explicit disagreement or hostility cannot be directly expressed. To do so is to provoke sanction from the skipper.

In the journal fragment *The Last String*, Robert, Luke, and I operated with an "[apparent] consensus concerning the basis of our communication" (Knutson 1987:10). Our communication seemed oriented toward an efficient execution of the fishing process. In reality, however, underlying relations of production constrained our communication; relations normally concealed by an image of collegiality (Knutson 1987:10). If we had directly confronted Robert and said "There is no reason to quit fishing, we have lots of bait and the weather is fine", the relations of power and control would have become immediately apparent. To do so would be a direct challenge to the legitimacy of Robert's authority; i.e., a repudiation of ownership's claim to rights of control.

Crewmembers, like subordinates employed in similar occupations, are inhibited in their ability to challenge the skipper's domain of control. Challenges to the skipper's domain of control typically occur within a value-neutral discourse superficially concerned with the functioning of the vessel. Crew members rarely subvert this discourse. While there are instances of a collective subversion of this discourse, in which the crew is temporarily able to remain unpenalized, crew members who act individually are likely to be fired.

*The crew off the Silver Crystal were overhauling their seine in the co-op netloft today. Red was drunk again. Despite this he was able to function without difficulty. When the net was nearly finished the crew encountered a problem that required major repairs. The 'gang' discussed the problem and possible solutions after which the skipper decided on how he wanted it fixed. "We'll tie the two ends together, lace the web in and leave it till our major overhaul at the end of the season". Red, who had vigorously argued for a more complete solution, told the skipper "You're fucking well doing it back-assward". Red and the skipper began to argue. "If you don't like the way things are done around here," Bill, the skipper, told Red, "Then get the hell off my boat. You're fired!"*

*At first Red didn't react; now silenced, he stood arrested in the middle of a sentence. "You fucking bitch. Don't worry about me, I plan to quit anyway." Bill laughed. He didn't bother to grace Red's further insults with a reply. All through this incident men*

*from several other boats were working nearby. Red, only now aware of this, quickly and quietly left the netloft.*

*Later, over lunch at the cafe, the firing came up in discussion. The Silver Crystal's crew, skipper, and several other skippers were sitting together. "He never breathes a sober breath," says Bill. "Can't have some guy bugging you up like that," offered another skipper. "Guess I'm looking for a beachman now," Bill concluded.*

Skippers are normally reluctant to fire a crewmember. However, a skipper will not hesitate to fire the crewmember if a situation erupts in which the skipper's authority is threatened. In the above passage Red moves outside the neutral discourse, challenges the skipper's authority, and subsequently loses his job. His act of subversion is individual and the other crewmembers stand silently by, tending to their own work. In his open and direct challenge to the skipper's domain of control, Red bares the actual relations between crew and skipper; the relation of capital to labour.

Disputes between skipper and crew are rarely expressed in as open a manner as in the above passage. There is a constant attempt to prevent out-right hostilities. In the fragment 'Last String', Luke, speaking for the crew, confronts the skipper directly, while maintaining the necessary neutrality of the discourse so he does not appear to challenge the skipper's domain of power. Thus, Luke is able to manipulate the discourse so our challenge of the skipper's authority is buried within a more general concern with catching fish. The implicit threat of sanction -- usually unacknowledged -- drives the meaning of the action into the shadows. The real relations of production are obscured within the ideology of bourgeois society:

an ideology composed of half truths which result from an exclusive emphasis on appearances. They become distortions of the whole truth and particularly of the dynamic factors in the situation whenever their limitations go unrecognized (Ollman 1971:228-229).

The incidental conversations and actions of daily life aboard the vessel are weighted with inexpressible, but tacitly understood intentions obscured by this hegemonic ideology.

In a discussion of Whalsay Fishers, A.P. Cohen introduces this dilemma as seen through the eyes of the skipper. The situation, as Cohen presents it, is quite different with respect to ownership and control of Whalsay fishing vessels. According to Cohen, the skipper is constrained by a "communal pragmatic ethic of equalitarianism, which proscribes the



public assertion of superior virtue or knowledge. Thus the skipper has no special privilege on board" (1977:187). Unlike Robert (the skipper of the boat I fished on), Whalsay skippers cannot claim authority based on ownership; "he merely has one share [of the boat] exactly equal to those held by between four and eight co-owners, all of whom are members of his crew" (Cohen 1977:86). Thus the Whalsay skipper is bound to manipulate the common discourse, much as did Luke, and "develop 'management' practices by which he successfully propagates to the crew a selective view of their collective situation and of his place within it" (Cohen 1977:187). Within the context of a capitalist form of production, however, the significant contradictions within the fishing process are not within a single class, but between two classes.

Avoiding, or modifying, the explicit wishes of the skipper are important expressions of the struggle between skipper and crew. This is the point at which the contradiction of class manifests itself. Crew members attempt to influence and control the work process by manipulating the skipper's plans to their own ends and by adopting tactics that allow them to avoid following the skipper's orders. The degree to which the crew avoids an unsavoury order, while also maintaining the appearance of compliance, is an indication of how efficiently a particular boat functions. The most common tactic of avoidance is to inform the skipper that a request has been carried out when it has not. This tactic requires a high level of solidarity among the crew.

Crews use a different tactic of avoidance when the skipper instructs them to do a job in a manner they dislike. Unless the skipper plans to observe the crew while they are working there is no way to ensure that the crew completes the job as instructed. The crew listens politely to the skipper. As soon as the skipper leaves, the crew completes the job as they see fit.

*Finally in town. The week's fishing is over and everyone is eager to get off the boat and head 'up town'. Our skipper, however, is intent on completing the end of the week's work before we 'disappear' in the town's bars. He tells us to overhaul the net while he goes up town to pick up some needed parts for the automatic pilot. We, however, are intent on overhauling the net as quickly as possible. The skipper tells us, as he leaves, "Go over it [the net] slowly so that you get all the holes." We do as we're told as long as he hangs around. But as soon as he leaves we speed up. We'll be done long before the skipper gets back at this rate.*

As long as the crew is able to maintain shipboard solidarity we are able to exert a certain degree of control over our working environment.

We are careful not to provoke the skipper; he still controls hiring and firing. My experience suggests that skippers, by informing other skippers, can make it difficult for a troublesome or incompetent (in the skipper's eyes) crewmember to fish again. Only in cases where the crew are in total agreement do they directly confront the skipper. The skipper is confronted. The crew present their grievances and threaten to quit unless their demands are met.

A previous shipmate told me of an occasion that occurred while he was fishing halibut in Dixon Entrance, a body of water in B.C. west of Prince Rupert and north of Masset:

*The wind was coming up quickly and was making it difficult to work on deck. The skipper, protected in the wheelhouse, wanted to haul back all the gear before the wind came up and forced them to leave the fishing grounds. The conditions continued to worsen but the skipper insisted on hauling back all the gear. He was worried that the gear would be lost if left out during the storm; an expensive proposal. Finally the weather conditions made it impossible for the crew to work. They talked the matter out amongst themselves and decided to confront the skipper. They quit working and went into the galley.*

*It only took the skipper a few minutes to realize that the crew had left the deck. He rushed to the galley and asked the crew "What the hell do you think you are doing?" The crew informed him that they were not going to fish "in such lousy weather, not for any money!" The skipper's first reaction was to threaten to fire the entire crew. When he realized that no matter what he said the crew wasn't going back to work, he stormed into the wheelhouse and took the boat into harbour to sit out the storm. Nobody was fired. After a while the skipper agreed that it had been a "dirty Storm. It was a good thing I brought the boat into harbour when I did," he told them.*

Despite the belief that crewmembers are easily replaced, few skippers are willing to run the risk of not being able to replace a full crew on short notice. It is difficult to find enough skilled fishers to quickly form a crew. Generally, the skipper tries to convince the crew to stay on. The skipper bides his time; later he may try to fire individual crewmembers when the crew's solidarity is weak. This is a constant and implicit sanction -- the loss of one's job -- is an omnipresent, but unsaid quality of our communication on the fishboat.

A crew can skirt the dangers of firing but still increase their domain of control by carefully negotiating a discursive battle between themselves

and the skipper. This form of resistance to control is limited. An increase in the crew's domain of control is still subject to the unspoken and final sanction; loss of employment. During the fishing season of 1988 the crew of the boat I fished on, with Luke as our spokesman, usurped more and more of Robert's authority. This season marked the nadir of Robert's domain of control. His authority was totally subverted. This created a vacuum into which Luke now attempted to step.

Initially we tried, in an unconscious way, to adopt a collective sense of control, to fill the vacuum of authority that our challenges to Robert's authority created. For the younger three members of the crew, myself included, this was our preferred way of operation. Luke, however, had other plans. Having first participated with us in subverting the discourse of control, he now seemed embarked on a path in which he attempted to assert his own individual authority in place of Robert's.

*During the first set this morning we had a minor backlash which caused a roll-up in the net.<sup>4</sup> We all went back to the stern after the rings were up to untangle the roll-up.*

*During these situations Luke is increasingly attempting to assert his will over the rest of us. This at times appears to cause Robert a certain amount of frustration. Several times Luke has 'corrected' Robert or given a 'counter' order to Tommy and I. Undoing the roll-up was another example of this.*

*After the roll-up was cleared Robert began to pile the cleared leadline on the stern so that it would go onto the drum properly. Luke promptly said "Don't pile it there".*

*Why not?" said Robert. Without waiting for a reply Robert threw the leads down with a shrug and backed off. Luke was left to pile the leads himself.*

The earlier solidarity between the crewmembers deteriorated under Luke's increasingly authoritarian tone. Tommy and I were particularly aggrieved. We had initially given Luke complete support. As Luke changed his focus from destabilizing Robert's domain of control to asserting his own individual authority, fractures began to develop amongst the crew.

*A fisheries department boat came alongside us after we finished the last set. The officer asked the usual questions: how many sets, what is the breakdown of the catch by species, etc. When they came alongside they looked for the skipper; that's who they talked with.*

*After the fisheries left Robert seemed indecisive. He seemed to be asking himself: "Is it worth it to make another set?" Luke,*

*dressing a sockeye, looked up at Robert and asked, actually stated: "We're going to make another set here?"*

*Robert hesitated, then he replied; "Lots of hake [a junk fish that causes problems when fishing for salmon] there I guess?"*

*"We've got to make one more set; the boys, they're not tired enough to quit yet," says Luke.*

*"Yes, we might as well" says Robert. We'll make another set."*

*Soon after this we [Tommy and I] are hurtling toward the beach to begin the cycle anew.*

*As we are tying up the net, the beachline [a line used to tie the end of the net to the beach] is pulled out of my hands before I have it secured. In fact it came tight quicker than normal.*

*"What's going on here!" I said.*

*"Somebody messed up," says Tommy.*

*"Oh, it wasn't us. We're not on the boat."*

*"Yeah, we'll blame it on Luke; can't be us." Tommy spoke with a laugh, but then added an aside: "Luke's slipping, he didn't pull off enough slack. Next time we might miss the set because of him."*

*"Don't let Luke hear that, he might put you on report," I say. We both laugh. Then Tommy says, as he is tossing the slack beachline out of the skiff, "You won't catch me admitting to a mistake, we've got Luke to blame."*

The final conflict between Robert and Luke occurred as we were getting the boat ready for the second halibut trip. Unlike prior years, this season's second trip was scheduled for the last week in August, in the middle of the hectic salmon season. As a result, we had barely a day to remove the salmon gear from the boat and re-rig it for halibut. Last week's catch of salmon was unloaded in record time. Now we were removing the heavy machinery (pursing winch and seine drum) from the deck of the boat. The drum is a particularly difficult piece of equipment to remove. It is a spool-like object bolted on the stern of the boat from which the seine is set. It stands about eight feet high and fifteen feet wide. The bolts that hold it to the deck are often difficult to remove.

*Forty thousand pounds unloaded this morning. This afternoon we're down at McLean's shipyards to take the drum, skiff, and winch off the boat. Tommy is cleaning up the hydraulic oil that Luke spilled on the deck earlier. Robert laughed at this little vignette. Luke had told Robert that he wasn't disconnecting the hydraulic hoses correctly: "The oil'll just pour out if you continue it that way," Luke said. "Go ahead and do it yourself Luke, I've*

*got better things to do then waste my time here." Luke quickly took over from Robert. No sooner had he put wrench to pipe then oil poured out over the deck. Without batting an eye Luke told Tommy, "Clean up the mess young fellah, quick, quick, before it spreads!"*

*I've been unbolting the drum, quietly watching what is going on. I can see that Robert and Tommy are getting pissed off. Jack, the new guy hired for the halibut trip looks positively puzzled by these little scenes. Luke, having messed up the winch, leaves the mess for Tommy and comes towards me and the drum. "Haven't you got that finished yet Charlie?" I mumble a reply. I'm not interested in being ordered about by Luke or made to clean up after him. At this point in the game I just want to get the job done quickly so that there will be a little time left over to go up town.*

*Luke picks up a wrench and goes over to one end of the drum. He tries the wrench on the bolt -- it doesn't fit. I see him glancing around. I look the other way. He sees Robert coming over to the stern. "Toss me that wrench there Bob. Not that, the one beside it." He sounds annoyed that Robert doesn't immediately pick up the right wrench. "Get a move on skipper, old boy, we've got a job to do." Robert picks up the wrench and tosses it to Luke. The wrench hits the deck a foot in front of Luke and slides into his knee. "Shit!" Luke jumps up. He stands face to face with Robert.*

*"You threw that fucken wrench at me! God Damn it Bob, you gotta watch what you do."*

*"Is that what you think?"*

*"You fucking well know what happened."*

*"Maybe you should take a walk, -- walk right off the boat", said Robert. He laughed, looked around at the rest of us and said: "That goes for the rest of you, too, if you think you know how to run a boat. You want to be a skipper, go buy your own boat. Otherwise we've got a job to do." Turning back to Luke, Robert told him to pack his bag. "I'll settle up when I come in after the [halibut] trip. Right now I got work to do."*

The final conflict between Robert and Luke came quickly and unexpectedly. Our earlier collective resistance against Robert's domain of control as skipper evaporated into an individualistic challenge of authority as Luke tried to supplant Robert's control with his own. Luke destroyed the earlier solidarity amongst the crew when he tried to control the actions of the younger crewmembers without including them in the decision-making process. Ultimately Luke's actions were no different from Red's. Once Luke undermined his support from the crew the skipper was able to

act freely and fire him. Without Luke onboard Robert regained his lost control.

Robert had finally regained control of his ship. Unlike Conrad's captain in the *Secret Sharer*, Robert missed the opportunity to speak first. Luke's first challenge to his authority took Robert off guard. Luke came into the wheelhouse during the first halibut trip with the knowledge of the crew's support and with me as his witness. Robert gave ground. As the summer progressed we took more and more of Robert's control away from him. Robert's loss of authority began as the first halibut trip ended. He regained his control as the second trip began. In taking Luke down "a peg or two", Robert re-established his command of the ship. He speaks and we answer with our silence. There is no more resistance; there is no one to question his authority.

"Can't a man ask a question here without being flogged?"

"No," shouted the captain; "nobody shall open his mouth aboard this vessel, but myself"; and he began laying the blows upon his back, swinging half round between each blow, to give it full effect. As he went on, his passion increased, and he danced about the deck, calling out as he swung the rope, -- "If you want to know what I flog you for, I'll tell you. It's because I like to do it! -- because I like to do it! -- It suits me. That's what I do it for!"

Richard Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast*

The cycle which began in collective resistance ended in an idiosyncratic and individual act of futility. Luke lost his job. Robert regained control. The crew lost the ability to speak. Robert challenged us to reply; we answered the challenge with silence. As he stood on the stern of the boat, faced flushed and angry, I recalled the flogging scene in Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*. No one dared to step forward and confront this man who owned the boat and our labour. We could walk away behind Luke or stay silently with Robert. We stayed.

## NOTES

I owe a debt of gratitude to Peter Knutson for providing the inspiration to write this paper. Knutson, like myself, is both a fisherman and anthropologist. His dissertation, with its emphasis on shipboard interactions and the use of language by fishers, presents an evocative image of the fishing way of life. Unlike many works of Maritime

Anthropology Knutson's dissertation speaks with a sincerity and understanding that can only come from of *being* a fisher. I gratefully acknowledge the helpful and critical interest of Dr. Margaret Rodman, my thesis advisor, whose questions, comments and editorial advice sharpened my argument considerably.

1. For a more detailed discussion of the relation between language and power on a commercial fishing vessel see Peter Knutson's *You Take Serious What's Said in Play!*" *Systematic Distortion of Communication on a Fishing Boat*, especially chapter 4, pp. 90-158. In his dissertation Knutson applies Habermas' notions of 'strategic' and 'communicative' actions to a situation on a commercial salmon seiner in Alaska.
2. This paper draws upon research conducted for my B.A. and M.A. theses during 1987, 1988, and 1989, and my journals and notes kept since 1982. I have also drawn upon my experience of growing up in a 'fishing family' in northern British Columbia and from fishing for a living since 1976. The early journals were simply the private reflections of a commercial fisher interested in the fishing way of life. It is a well known fact, among the fishing 'community', that "Charlie's a student and he's writing some kind of book." My early journals contain the sort of information an 'insider' has the right to possess and use. The recent journals are more focused. I now ask questions informed by research problems determined before I enter the 'field'. I am sensitive to my ambiguous status as 'insider' -- Charlie the fisherman -- and 'outsider' -- Charles the anthropologist. With this newly-developed dictomy comes a responsibility to ensure those I fish with are aware of my intention to record the events, stories and dialogue which occurs around me.
3. "Shacking the gear" is a process in which the bait is removed from the hooks as the gear comes on board in preparation for leaving the fishing rounds.
4. Backlash: an event occurring during the setting of a drum seine which can rip the net and prevent it from setting properly.  
Roll-up: a condition in which the seine's body web rolls around the lead-line. Roll-ups can be caused by backlashes, small sticks, or skipper error.

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