

Workplace cosmopolitanization and “the power and pain of class relations” at sea

Penny McCall Howard

Abstract: This article examines the “power and the pain of class relations” (Ortner 2006) through the experience of Scottish men working in the global shipping, offshore oil, and fishing industries: industries in which the nationality of workers has changed significantly since the 1980s. It combines recent anthropological literature on subjectivity and cosmopolitanism with a Marxist understanding of class as generated through differing relationships to production. The article describes how British seafarers have experienced the cosmopolitanization of their workplaces, as workers from Portugal, Eastern Europe, and the Philippines have been recruited by employers in order to reduce wages, working conditions, and trade union organization. Drawing on Therborn (1980), it concludes that the experiences gained through this process have led to the development of multiple and often contradictory subjectivities, which people draw on as they choose how to act in moments of crisis, and as they imagine possible futures.

Keywords: class, cosmopolitanism, fishing industry, Nephrops, Scotland, subjectivity

MacDonald (1997) has described the discursive production of northwest Scotland as remote, rural, and isolated—a place of “tradition” and “heritage”, of kilts, mountains, crofts, and a dying indigenous language. Yet many people living and working in the Highlands have strong international and industrial connections: they have traveled across the world for work for at least 150 years, and many now work in the global oil and gas industry, in shipping and trade, or in the global seafood market. Those working in the offshore oil and gas industry might work in Norway, Russia, Azerbaijan, Al-

geria, Angola, or Nigeria with equally international (although usually ethnically stratified) crew. The Highlands has also become a destination for people from other countries seeking work on fishing boats, in seafood processing factories, and in hotels and bars. The majority of crew hired into the Scottish fishing fleet are Filipino and most hotel and restaurant workers in the Highlands are from Eastern Europe.

This article draws on ethnographic research in northwest coastal Scotland between 2006 and 2009 with people working in a variety of maritime industries (see Figure 1). I lived on a



FIGURE 1. One of the places I conducted field research on the west coast of Scotland.

boat in harbors around Skye and Lochalsh, and I also found part-time paid work as crew on a small fishing trawler (see Figure 2). I spent a substantial amount of time on the pier and in the pub with white Scottish men who crewed, skippered, or owned small fishing boats or who worked in fish processing, in the oil and gas industry, in weapons testing, on the ferries, or in cargo shipping. I also spent time with Polish women working in local bars and hotels, Polish men working in seafood processing, and Filipino men working on local fishing boats. Skye and Lochalsh's widely dispersed population of approximately 12,374 people were not isolated from but integrated with national and global movements of labor, including the over 600,000 Poles who traveled to work in the UK between 2004 and 2008 (UK Border Agency 2008), and the hundreds of thousands of Filipinos who comprise over one-third of the seafarers in the global shipping industry (Glen 2008: 847).

Although the workplaces of most people living in Skye and Lochalsh were not urban or particularly large, they were integrated into global oil and gas, seafood, defense, transportation, and tourism industries and subject to their pressures, whether they worked for British Petroleum, Qinetiq, on board a small fishing trawler, or in a hotel. The importance of these global pressures and connections were demonstrated by Jane Nadel-Klein's historical ethnography of former fishing villages in northeast Scotland, which showed how "capitalism can create and then dismiss a way of life" (2003: 1). MacDonald (1997) and Rapport (2009: 49) have pointed out that many anthropologists of Scotland (and Europe) have overlooked the importance of these connections, instead carrying out

community studies of localized identity in marginal places, portrayed as traditional and left behind by modern society. An estimated 105 million of the world's population migrates for work (International Labour Organisation 2010), and as these people are integrated into different economies and labor markets and as employers create new divisions of labor and conditions of employment for them, the experience of these "working class cosmopolitans" (Werbner 1999) is both shared with and segmented from other workers. These opposing trends of unity and segmentation bring to the fore questions about the intersection of work and class, with nationality, race, and ethnicity, on the other. In this article I focus on people's experience of class relations as they struggle to maintain a livelihood in these global industries, and how this contributes to the formation of their subjectivities. I focus on bringing to life a few ethnographic examples that illustrate the complexity of how people respond to and cope with situations of crisis. I do not claim that what I describe here is representative of the experience of all working-class Scots, but I trace new possibilities and potentials for understanding contemporary experiences of class and capitalism in Scotland.

Class

Class is not a fashionable concept in anthropology but there have been several recent calls for a renewal of work in this area (Crehan 2002; Hart and Ortiz 2008; Kasmir and Carbonella 2008; Ortner 2006), including two 2010 European Association of Social Anthropologists



FIGURE 2. The anthropologist at work on a small trawler.

panel discussions. Several substantial obstacles to any serious class analysis exist. There is the stultifying effect of the “class maps that we have inherited” (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 6), which many have come to identify with the concept of class itself, thus foreclosing a proper analysis of how class changes over time. Instead of a critical and dynamic understanding, a discussion of class is frequently “hidden” and instead spoken about through “other languages of social difference”, which are “always already racialised and ethnicised” (Ortner 2006: 72–73). Such static understandings have tied labor and class to particular forms of work (especially factory work) and particular social groups (particularly white men), with the result that changes in the dominant forms of work and the composition of the workforce in Europe and North America have led some to react by dismissing the usefulness of a class analysis (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 5; Smith 1999: 172). The consequences are that in a great deal of

popular and in some academic literature “working class’ came to be read as by definition white, male, racist, and sexist” (Russo and Linkon 2005: 3).

In the UK, public discussion about class generally occurs only as a way of criticizing the supposed effects of multiculturalism on the “white working class”, and *not* as a discussion about class or inequality more generally (Sveinsson 2009). The recent neglect and obfuscation of class as an analytical term is perhaps symptomatic of the ideology of a generally triumphant period of neo-liberal capitalist expansion and shifts away from materialist analysis to post-modernism and post-structuralism. Things may be shifting: Hart and Ortiz argue that in the recent economic crisis “the mask of neo-liberal ideology has been ripped from the politics of world economy” and they call for a revival of economic anthropology (2008: 3). The effects of these global economic shifts on dominant forms of academic analysis remain to be seen.

Two things are certain: the number of people working in waged labor is increasing in most of the world, a large portion of these people are migrants, and anthropology's global and comparative approach could make an important contribution to understanding this experience and what it means (Mollona 2009). For example, Eric Wolf has carefully explored how "ethnic segmentation" of particular classes has occurred as "different cohorts of the working class were brought into the process of capitalist accumulation" and frequently ordered hierarchically and brought into conflict ([1982] 1997: 379–383). Ortner points to the need to deconstruct the public discourse (or lack of it) around class, but also to attend to how this discourse makes a difference in people's lives and how people's practices go beyond these "discursive constraints" (2006: 79).

The class relations I examine here often emerge sharply at particular moments of crisis. For example, Angus was a fifty-something Scottish seafarer I got to know well, who was made redundant—along with the entire crew of his ship—twice in the space of three months in the 1980s. In both cases, they were immediately replaced with Portuguese seamen who were paid lower wages and had worse terms and conditions of work. Like never before in Angus's working experience, here was a situation in which the relationship between owner and worker became jarringly clear. In this situation, Angus learned that those who owned the ships he worked on could, and did, radically dispose of him, according to logics and pressures that had nothing to do with his skill and experience, or the necessity for his job to be completed. Unlike the managers ashore, Angus was the one who actually handled the cargo, stowed it for sea, navigated between ports, kept the ship running and maintained in good shape, and worked with dockers to unload it in its port of destination. But even if he had worked on the ship for years, if he felt at home on it, knew every quirk of its operation and had labored over its maintenance, there existed a radical separation between his skills, knowledge, and experience, and the ultimate and effective control of the ship, and thus

his ability to be employed to work on it and actually exercise his skills. That control was firmly in the hands of the ship owners and managers, who made decisions in response to the economic pressures on them and their aspirations in the global economy, and for whom the actual daily operation of the ship was a mere detail.

Harvey (2005) describes the creation of the global working class as a process of "accumulation by dispossession", with the effects being "cultural displacement and political disorganization" that is "compounded by structural violence" so that working-class people like Angus constantly live in the "shadow of starvation" or unemployment (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 13, 16). This is an ongoing process, and Polyani points to "the tendency of capital to episodically strip working people of the means of their own social reproduction" (quoted in Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 14). No matter someone's particular skills, hopes, and aspirations, these social and economic relations affect those who actually have the ability to exercise their skills and earn a livelihood, something that the considerable anthropological literature on skill does not usually recognize.

Decisions made by boat owners and managers also had catastrophic consequences for Angus's family: him sent home, twice, humiliated and frustrated, the family income suddenly cut, radically. It was a vivid and awful memory. This ultimate lack of control was also embodied in Angus's understanding of seamanship skills as a form of "self-defense", as a struggle that could easily kill you if you were not properly prepared. What Angus's experience demonstrates, and what is frequently not present in the popular discussion of the "white working-class" in the UK (see the Introduction to this theme section), is the structural element of class. People do not just experience class relations as part of their culture, identity, and tradition (although these may be very important). Capitalist class relations are most concussively experienced through the involuntary and precarious experience of having to sell one's own labor to survive, or, conversely, being in the position to buy (or manage) the labor of others (Fine and Saad-

Filho 2010: 148–150). These dynamics have the potential to throw people together in unanticipated situations, and either bring them together or pull them apart as they struggle to maintain a livelihood and cope with and gain some control over their lives. These relations are very often constitutive of people’s life courses, family histories, subjectivities, and their own analysis of how the world works. This kind of class analysis is “relational, processual, and specific” (Sider 2003: 64). As anthropologist Gavin Smith emphasizes, “classes *are* relationships before they are groups to be identified through sociological statistics” (1999: 92).

A class analysis is not concerned with describing “social gradations” but in understanding “social change” because such patterns or structures are not simply “inert limits, restricting the alternatives to agents. They are also enabling and are present in the actions actually pursued by individuals and groups” (Callinicos [1987] 2004: 53, 95). Thus workers whose labor process may be under strict managerial control are able to develop new capacities and powers, classically, the ability to collectively withdraw that labor or otherwise organize among themselves to undermine a production process that relies entirely on their participation in it. This does not mean that groups or classes of people with similar relations to production processes have singular identities or experiences—there is considerable segmentation and the experience of individuals is frequently multiple and contradictory. In addition, most anthropological research has taken place not in classic factory waged labor situations, but in what Sider has described as “merchant capital” systems (such as fisheries) that are characterized by “the purchase of commodities from communities that generate these products through forms of work organization that they themselves control and supervise” (2003: 98). The tension between the autonomy of production and the constraints of producing for a market in such circumstances can produce a uniquely varied and dynamic set of class relations (Bernstein 2010).

Class relations are social relations as they relate to the experience of producing a livelihood,

and they are the subject of struggle: struggle to achieve one’s hopes, dreams and aspirations; struggle to control one’s body at work and to protect it from violence, injury (or worse); struggle to control one’s conditions of work and the skills needed to carry it out, and a struggle to maintain one’s own livelihood. Such an understanding connects people’s daily existence to global processes but does not see these as determinant relations. A class analysis is particularly relevant in maritime settings. Maritime historian Marcus Rediker shows that the experience of eighteenth century seafarers “foreshadowed” that of the factory worker as they were “one of the first generations of free waged laborers”, which also meant their work experience was international and collective in a historically new and significant way (1989: 206, 290). Ships’ crews have always been called “hands” or “deckhands” because their hands were all they were expected to contribute to the labor process. But at the same time these hands could collectively put massive, technologically cutting-edge machines (in the form of ships) to work in ways that were crucial to the development of capitalism itself in the north Atlantic and beyond. The term “strike” also has a maritime origin, as crew on the huge ships realized that when they struck, or lowered, the sails, the captain was powerless to move the ship (*ibid.*: 205). Thus capitalist class relations have had a longer influence on the work of commercial seafarers in the North Atlantic than in almost any other form of work. In the present day, over 90 percent of global trade occurs by sea, putting the seafarers and dockers who make this happen into a particularly intimate relationship with the workings of global capitalism.

Class and subjectivity

Here, I define the “working class” as those people who have no choice but to sell their own labor to survive, and who therefore must struggle to retain some control over their own labor and the essential processes of maintaining a livelihood. Sherry Ortner (2006: 24) has called for a

renewed anthropological attention to the subjective “power and ... pain of class relations” and a growing anthropological literature on “subjectivity” (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007; Das et al. 2000; Pine 2008) traces the connections between peoples’ dispositions and the shifting economic and social relations that shape their life-experience. “Our affect is always both internal and external to us—located as much within the contours of our bodies as within the shifting parameters of our socio-political worlds” (Kleinman and Fitz-Henry 2007: 64).

Angus’s typically working-class experience of being laid off was reflected in his subjectivity, and in those of other men with whom he shared the shock of being told that their particular skills, abilities, and means of earning a livelihood were literally redundant and from now on, would be performed by others. Those who were able to find a new job and carry on found that their relationship with the ship owners had been re-defined to their own disadvantage: “ruined for everyone”. Wages decreased, time off in port was greatly reduced, crew numbers were reduced, and pensions were eliminated. “As I told my mother” said Angus, “I’m not likely to live long enough to need a pension. They don’t expect us to live long enough to need a pension.”

The experience of workplace cosmopolitanization

Angus was able to find steady work again (although without a pension, sick leave, or a permanent contract) working out of Aberdeen on a supply boat for the oil platforms in the North Sea. But his double redundancy in the 1980s continued to resonate into his everyday present in the form of his immediate supervisor, the ship’s bosun, who was one of those Portuguese men his employer had replaced him with many years previously. There was always tension between them. As Angus explained:

“This Portuguese man who replaced me, who made me redundant, who I work with everyday now, he had the cheek one day to say to me:

‘You British, you can’t work! You can’t do this job properly! That is why they had to bring us in!’ ... I was so angry, I was fizzing! I said ‘Listen, they didn’t take you because you were better workers. They took you because we had wages that we had fought for, and you were willing to work for half of that, and we had work rotas that we had fought for, so that we weren’t always at sea, and you took that and binned it too. You helped ruin this for everyone.’ I was so angry!”

There could be a predictable conclusion to this story, and indeed, the creation of such conflicts is part of the ongoing process of “disorganization” of the working class (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 12; see also Wolf [1982] 1997: 379–383). Angus could have decided that the Portuguese, the Polish, or the Filipinos were responsible for his humiliation and for undermining his livelihood and very existence. Yet Angus’s position was precisely the opposite.

The solicitude and open recognition of difference that Rapport (2009) describes among hospital porters was clearly exhibited by Angus, who told me that “I don’t have any tolerance for people making jokes, racist jokes about other people, and I tell them that. It has gotten me a sore face more than a few times.” He explained that he had developed this perspective from his work experience in cargo shipping. When the ship arrived in a port, the local dockers would come on board, and work together with the ship’s crew for up to two weeks to unload it. After the day’s work was finished, the dockers would often take the ship’s crew to the local pub. “We didn’t go to the tourist places!” he chuckled. He had vivid memories of working with dockers in various African and Asian ports, including one particularly memorable event in Mumbai:

“I’ve seen beautiful things too. I was in Mumbai and I was working with this man my age who was from there, hardly spoke any English. I worked with this man 12 hours a day in the steaming hot, down in the hold, sweating, side by side. And at the end of the week he said to

me in his broken English ‘You come my house eat’. Why did he do that? ... He took me way up, up these alleyways, way far away from the port. And they killed a chicken! I met his wife, his little kids, they lit candles so you could see and all on a mud floor! And before long the kids were all over me, playing, kids are kids. ... It makes me so angry when people think badly of others, just because they look different or are from a different country, because we are all just people you know. I worked with this guy side by side, and to see his house with the mud floor and the chicken they killed for me and the wee children I could barely see in the candlelight. ... That has stayed with me for a long time. I thank him for that, for asking me, and I can’t even remember his name.”

Angus had developed a sympathy that transcended difference through his experience of working alongside people from very different backgrounds. His work also brought him face-to-face with shocking and racist brutality meted out to the black dockers he worked with in apartheid South Africa by their white overseers. In hushed tones, he explained that in neighboring Mozambique, before independence, “they would actually bullwhip the guys while they worked unloading the ship”.

Angus identified the origins of his open attitude to others as originating in his work experience at sea, but he also saw it as part of a family tradition of opposing unjust authority and identifying with others who did the same, despite the considerable differences that might exist between them. Angus’s father and uncle had also worked “deep sea” in the merchant navy. He described them as socialists. He was proud of his grandfather and great-grandmother’s participation in the now-famous 1882 Battle of the Braes,¹ and regularly retold his grandfather’s story about being “a Mau Mau² when I was wee. Me and my mother fought the policemen in Braes!” The family’s fondly remembered identification with the Kenyan Mau Mau rebels was all the more remarkable because of the vilification of the Mau Mau in the sensational media coverage of their attacks on British settlers.

The Battle of the Braes remains one of the most important events in local history, and it illustrates another important role of workplace cosmopolitanism: the “circulation of resistance” (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 14). The initial act of defiance that led to the successful reclamation of grazing land occurred shortly after men from Braes returned from working as crew on fishing boats in southern Ireland, at the height of the battles of the Irish Land League in the 1880s (Douglas 1976: 63). Working in Ireland, alongside men facing similar pressures, the men of Braes would have heard about the successful actions of the Land League and perhaps even spoken to people who had been involved in them. Such direct links, developed through work experience, added another dimension to campaigning visits to Skye by Irish Land League leaders, which are memorialized in the central square of Skye’s main harbor of Portree.

Women also traveled to work in hotels and as herring gutters, and the resulting marriages and re-settlements were reflected in the family history of many people I met. Many people also traveled to work in Glasgow, the industrial center of Scotland. “To live away is part of the experience of being from here”, I wrote in my notes after watching the play *Àcuimhneachadh Màiri Mhòr* (Remembering Màiri Mhòr), performed in Portree to commemorate the life of nineteenth century song writer and land rights campaigner Mairi Mhor, a woman celebrated as being from Skye, although she spent most of her adult life working in Glasgow and Inverness. Many houses are decorated with artifacts and trinkets sent home by family members working deep sea. Bodach was an electrician who also owned a sailboat but his grandfather had worked deep sea as a ship’s carpenter in the late nineteenth-century and had brought home a Japanese chest that was still displayed proudly in Bodach’s front hall. Angus’ mother’s living room was decorated with international flags sent home by her sons in the merchant navy, and she told me how she used to bring their left-over international coins into the school-house she taught in.

The necessity to travel for work is very much alive today. Rob was a forty-something skilled pipeline worker who lived in a village further north on Skye, and whose love for cooking curries had been fostered by the housewives he met while working cleaning sandstone buildings in Pollokshields (a largely Pakistani neighborhood of Glasgow), and cultivated during further work placements in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Nigeria, and Malaysia. Ali, a man in his fifties, lived in the same village as Rob. He drove buses between Skye and Glasgow, but before that he had been a cook on a cargo ship. “I loved it”, he told me. “Sometimes I wish I was still doing it. I’ve been all over the world ... What I liked the best was the travelling, visiting foreign countries, speaking to the people there. I still keep in touch with some people!” Angus told me that he had “sailed with enough Indian crews that I learned quite a bit of Punjabi”. His present ship “was like the United Nations. We’ve got three Portuguese guys, a Goanese cook, he makes nice food, a lot of guys from England, and Polish guys too”.

Pnina Werbner and Jonathan Parry have described a working-class cosmopolitanism—described by Parry as “a significant freedom from local or national prejudices; an openness to, and tolerance of, other ways of life” (2008: 327)—among Pakistani oil workers and Indian steel workers. Werbner argues for “the need to recognize the class dimensions of labour migration”, and the differences between elite and working-class cosmopolitanism (1999: 33). Parry shows that cosmopolitanism is not simply an “ideological orientation”, but is generated through the concrete experience of cosmopolitanization that results from “structural compulsions of which individuals may only be dimly aware”, such as the assembly of “a culturally diverse workforce which must cooperate on often dangerous tasks and live as neighbours” (2008: 330). Like the cosmopolitan connections made by those working at sea, this was not a relativist idea that “all differences are equally valid” (ibid.: 329). What the working-class cosmopolitanism I observed and that Parry and Werbner document seems to recognize are common interests and empathy, such as the common inter-

ests of steel workers and boat crew to get the job done and come home safely; the remembered common interests of nineteenth-century Irish and Scottish tenant farmers who did seasonal work on fishing boats to be treated justly by their landlords; the common interests of the Kenyan Mau Mau and the residents of Braes who were both fighting the British government, and the empathy of ship’s crew with dockers they worked alongside in South Africa, Mozambique, and India. This common interest and empathy could be forged in the process of working together as “collective labourers” (Rediker 1989: 78–79), but it could also be formed in proudly identifying a common struggle against injustice, or in exceptional moments of collective political action.

In the summer of 2009, Angus started wearing a Rail Maritime and Transport Union badge on his jacket for the first time in the three years I had known him. I asked him about it. “Yes, I am a member now” he explained, “most of the guys are, well, the Scottish and English guys. You should always be a member of the union, the skippers are frightened of them, and that is a good thing.” “What about the guys from other countries?” I asked “Are they in the union?” Angus replied:

“Well, yes, you are right about that. I hadn’t really thought about it like that. And let me tell you why that is important. ... When I was in the National Union of Seamen, there was a strike on the supply boats in Aberdeen. We got a good raise. But we had a hard time of it. We had to sit ashore with no pay, while some guys just kept working. ... But then afterwards, we all got the same raise! Even the guys who kept working! When we got back on the boat afterwards, ohhh, there was some tension there. ... You need everyone in the same union.”

In the process of remembering collective political action taken in the late 1980s, Angus was trying to work through how such activity could happen again in a workforce which had subsequently been deliberately fractured along national lines, and which desperately needed the

improvements that strike action might bring. Whatever his antipathies toward his Portuguese bosun, he recognized that any improvement in their mutual situation would only come if they worked together. Class was important: in the present, in re-tellings of the past, and in aspirations for the future.

Cosmopolitanization and class in fishing

Many men in Skye and Lochalsh combined work in offshore oil with work on local langoustine³ fishing boats. Shellfish fisheries (mainly langoustine) account for about 38 percent of the value of Scottish fisheries and include 1,842 boats, mostly under fifty feet long and spread all around the coast. This is unlike the pelagic and whitefish fisheries, which are mostly undertaken on a few hundred larger boats based mainly in the Peterhead and Fraserburgh in the northeast of Scotland (Scottish Government Statistician Group 2010). Boats typically have two or three persons working on board and many are owner-operated. There is a history of relatively egalitarian forms of shared and frequently kin-based boat ownership related to surplus shared among the crew. Yet virtually all boats now rely on hired crew: at first casually hired Scottish crew who were paid a “share” in relation to the value of the catch, but since 2006, increasing numbers of fully waged laborers hired through labor agencies for six to twelve-month contracts (Howard 2012b). Rapid cosmopolitanization of crew has taken place even on owner-operated inshore trawlers with only two or three crew, with the majority of crew now being experienced seafarers hired from the Philippines through labor agencies that supply low-waged crew to large portions of the world’s fishing and cargo shipping fleet. Many of these Filipino men worked alongside Scottish crew who were still paid on a share basis (as I was). It was casual work but I could make £100 a day (in 2007, about \$200 USD) with good catches (see Figure 3), approximately ten times more pay for the same (or less) work than some of the Filipino crew I spoke to.

The employment of Filipino crew is contentious, but fishing boat owners and the associations that represent them argue that it is necessary for the survival of the industry because they claim that young Scottish men are “unreliable” and just not interested. In early 2009 the UK government announced that non-EU fishing crew had been hired illegally and would be deported within the next few months; fishing industry leaders then convinced the UK government to create a special visa for non-EU “contract seamen employed on fishing vessels operating in UK territorial waters” conditional on improvements in wages and working conditions for these men. Boat owners stand to benefit from a reliable and low-cost pool of crew, and one owners’ association, the Scottish Fishermen’s Organisation, has even set up its own Filipino crewing agency (Scottish Fishermen’s Organisation 2011).

Scottish crew’s reactions to these changes vary. Gavin lived in Skye and Lochalsh and had worked as crew on Scottish fishing vessels all around the coast. In his mid-twenties he had almost ten years of fishing experience, including working alongside Romanian crew a few years earlier:

“When I arrived at the boat, the first thing the skipper told me was not to tell the two other crew what I was making [earning]. It was two Romanian guys I was working with. So the first thing I did when I met them was to tell them. ... They were not very happy. One guy had spent three years up there, he was a qualified engineer. They were getting £200 a week, which maybe is good for them, but for the job it is pathetic! With those two foreign staff, the skipper was raking it in! ... There are a few rich skippers in [that port]. It is pretty unfair. They get two men for half the price of one.”

Gavin’s personal empathy with the Romanian men he worked with was clear from his re-telling of the story. He did not want them removed from the coast, he just saw no reason they should be treated “unfairly”. I asked Gavin why he had defied his Scottish skipper in favor



FIGURE 3. The majority of work of the crew of prawn trawlers is sorting and “tailing” prawns, as in this photo.

of the Romanians. Unlike Angus, he had no history of candlelit dinners with Mumbai dockers, or shocking confrontations with apartheid. He and his girlfriend were eager to move out of the town that he grew up in and were trying to earn enough money to make that happen. The skippers he defied were men he knew, who spoke and dressed similarly to him, who might have gone to the same school or known his family. Gavin explained his defiance by telling me about his experience of working as casual labor on twenty-two different fishing boats, most of which he felt had owners that “were ripping you off on wages”. Although he and the Romanians hardly knew each other, spoke different languages, and ate different food, as crew, they had similar experiences with owners and skippers due to their similar relations to production. They were all frustrated and deeply disturbed that

owners and skippers could get “two men for half the price of one” and pocket the difference.

Through his work, Gavin had come to the conclusion that his anger with the skippers and common interests with other crew, class interests as I have defined them, were more important to him than the ties of nationality or local loyalty. What Angus, Gavin, the Romanians, and the Filipinos had in common was a reliance on some form of waged employment to survive, a recognition of their common interests in that precarious situation, and a respect and empathy for each other. Through their work, these Romanian and Filipino men also became (at least temporarily) part of the working class of Scotland, and their future and Gavin’s future were bound together in ways that neither of them had chosen, but which they could choose how to react to.

A few weeks later, I spoke to the Filipino crew of another local fishing boat. Still reeling, I called Gavin to tell him that these Filipino men had told me they were paid even less than the Romanians he had worked alongside of, about £10 per day (\$20 USD). “That’s slave labor,” Gavin said, genuinely stunned, “That’s shocking!” The exploitation and vulnerability of these crew is amply indicated by two statistics: in 2008 75 percent of deaths on UK fishing boats were of people from Southeast Asia or Eastern Europe,⁵ and between 2007 and 2008, average total crew wages per vessel declined between 16 and 32 per cent,⁵ decreases which skippers identified as being caused by higher fuel costs (Metz and Curtis 2008).

Angus and Gavin’s acts of solidarity were unexpected to those who might consider working-class people to be “by definition” racist. Yet it would be misleading of me to claim that Scots were always this sympathetic to people from other countries. I regularly heard Scottish skippers refer to Spanish seafood truck drivers as “dagos”, or even “suicide bombers”, and to Filipino crew as “flip-flops” who arrived in Scotland “fresh out of the package” and ready for work. Sometimes it seemed that the substantially lower pay that the Filipino men received was used as part of an argument that they actually had fewer human needs; for example, for decent accommodation or food. Owners (and to a lesser extent skippers) were in a position to materially benefit from the low pay that the Filipinos and Romanians received, or from being a reliable ally in implementing a system that exploited these men. Yet there were many inconsistencies. Iain was a (non-owner) skipper I worked with who took great pleasure in “winding me up” by making anti-Arab and anti-Muslim comments, and he also put considerable effort into romancing one of the Polish women working at the local bar, told me affectionate stories about a former crewman from Papua New Guinea, and made a point of taking the local Filipino crew out for a beer on the rare occasion they had an evening off. Iain’s practice of relating to others often overflowed his discourse about them. As Jackson (2002: 343) ob-

served, “lived reality cannot be reliably inferred from the way reality is discursively constructed” (see also Ortner 2006). Fishermen resented the dominant Spanish role in international fish markets and in the competition for EU quota and fishing grounds, they were influenced by anti-Islamic sentiment in sensational press coverage, and, depending on whether they were an owner or crew, they were in a position to either benefit or lose from the greater exploitation of fishers from other nations. People’s subjectivities were formed through their work experience and through wider social influences, but individuals’ subsequent relations to others in specific situations could not be reliably predicted from any one of these experiences, and could also shift over time.

Multiple subjectivities and choosing how to act

Therborn (1980) argues that people’s experience of the world is uneven and filled with contradictions, which contributes to the formation of multiple subjectivities that are mobilized in different combinations in different circumstances. Therborn draws on Althusser’s theory of “interpellation” to argue that “in the course of a single human life a large number of subjectivities are in fact acted out” (1980: 78). Therborn revises Althusser’s understanding in less idealist and more active terms so that “a particular ideology invites us to accept a particular kind of social identity” (see Callinicos 2004: 178). For example, in a strike, a worker may be addressed in many different ways by the people s/he encounters, as:

“a member of the working class, as a union member, as a mate of his fellow workers, as the long-faithful employee of a good employer, as a father or mother, as an honest worker, as a good citizen, as a Communist or anti-Communist, as a Catholic and so on. The kind of address accepted—‘Yes, that’s how I am, that’s me!’—has important implications for how one acts in response to the strike call” (Therborn 1980: 78).

Angus, for example, experienced his work as a tangle of contradictions. For Angus, seaman-ship was a personally rewarding skill collectively exercised with other experienced hands *and* it involved defending himself in a world over which he had very little control. Angus enjoyed the reward, mutual respect, and mutual aid of working with a good crew, and the experience of work in an international setting with international crew left a strong and lasting impression on him. At the same time, he was constantly and unrelentingly aware that the company could decide to sack him at any moment and that his work could kill him. Frustrated and alienated crew, like Gavin, often described the boats they worked on as “shit buckets,” even if the boats themselves were in good condition (Howard 2012a). A sense of their own exploitation and of not being tied to particular boats has meant that these young crew are beginning to identify themselves more generically as crew, rather than as part of a *particular* boat’s crew. In the process, young men like Gavin have had to decide whether they would respond to calls for solidarity, loyalty and empathy from their Scottish owners and skippers or the Romanian and Filipino men they worked alongside. Finnish seafarers have described their work as both slavery and freedom (Karjalainen 2007: 152), another example of the multiple and conflicting subjectivities generated through the experience of selling one’s own labor to gain a livelihood at sea.

Conclusion

I have defined class in terms of a person’s relative control over their own labor and the conditions for producing their own livelihood. I also have described how the necessity to sell their labor means that people can have contradictory experiences of their workplaces, their tools, and the people they work with. The subjectivities produced through contradictory experiences are called on in different circumstances as people struggle to exert some control over their labor and livelihood and decide how to act. In the case of crew like Angus and Gavin, at least some

of these uneven subjective tensions pull toward a common empathy and identification of interests, and at least the possibility for collective action to solve common grievances. The case of skippers and owners is more complex. Beneath a superficial fondness some owners professed for their Filipino crew, simmered the reality that the ultra-low wages they paid the Filipinos might give the owner the opportunity to pay off a loan, or do some maintenance on the boat, or to buy a new car.

The international migration of workers means that global inequality is made local, massively increasing exploitation, class divisions, and the potential profits of owners. The production and maintenance of these vast gulfs on a small boat or in a small village is jarring, and I could see people struggling to create new ideological justifications for this state of affairs. This did not translate, however, into support for far-right extremism as it has in some parts of Britain. Neither the far-right British National Party (BNP) or the English Defence League (EDL) were a topic of much discussion when I did my research: the BNP has not been able to get much electoral support in the Highlands and the EDL (or its offshoot the Scottish Defence League) has not had any success in mobilizing support on the streets of Scotland.⁶ My analysis adds, therefore, to Rhodes’s (2011) criticism of the idea that the rise of support for the BNP is attributed to an undefined “white working class”. It is worth emphasizing that the traditional organizations of the working class—trade unions—have been at the core of campaigning against the BNP (Unite Against Fascism 2010),⁷ and trade unionists are the group most likely to “never” vote BNP (John et al. 2006: 8).

Fishing boat owners now find themselves squeezed between declining prices for their prawns and high fuel costs, with one skipper-owner describing a deliberate government policy of reducing the size of the fleet through bankruptcy (Howard 2012a). One way of coping with this squeeze is to build larger and more efficient boats with more fishing gear, and to hire Filipino men to carry out the labor-inten-

sive task of “going for bulk”, or catching and “tailing” massive numbers of tiny prawns. Some skippers and owners have not chosen, or cannot afford, to take this route. But as these smaller skipper-owners are outcompeted on price and volume and face the devastation of losing their boats and livelihood, it would not be surprising if a few crew started to blame the Filipino men and other “foreigners” for driving seafood prices down due to the low cost of their labor, and driving them, the honest and “traditional” fishermen, out of business. The reality is that the competitive global seafood market and the desire by some fishing industry employers to reduce labor costs and retain a labor force that is both more flexible and more reliable has driven these changes.

Anthropologists can contribute to the present debate about cosmopolitanization or multiculturalism and the “white working class” by examining, as Ortner (2006) and Therborn (1980) have suggested, how this discourse is constructed (see Evans this volume); the explanatory power it has in people’s lives (see Smith this volume); how it calls on people to act in particular ways, and how people respond to these calls or contradict them either overtly or in practice. Anthropologists are also in a position to contribute a critical and ethnographically informed analysis of what class is and how it is experienced in the twenty-first century. As global crisis turns to depression, we see that the potential for dispossession that capitalist class relations have produced can result either in acts of solidarity produced by a combination of empathy and common interest, or the scapegoating and racism of the far right. In this situation, understanding how people choose what subjectivities to enact and what calls to respond to really matters.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Gillian Evans, Jeanette Edwards, and Katherine Smith for resolutely encouraging me to present and publish this piece, and for their thoughtful comments. This re-

search would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of Arnar Árnason, Andrew Whitehouse, and Tim Ingold, and the financial support of the Commonwealth Scholarship, the Wenner Gren Foundation, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the University of Aberdeen, and the Inverness Field Club.

Penny McCall Howard has a PhD in anthropology from the University of Aberdeen. She previously worked as crew and a skipper on passenger vessels in the United States and is presently employed as a trade union researcher. Her academic research develops a labor-centered approach to human-environment and human-machine relations and shows how the ecology of places, the techniques people practice, and the subjectivities they enact are significantly affected by market pressures and class relations. E-mail: suilven2@yahoo.com.

Notes

1. At the Battle of the Braes crofters fought a police force sent by the local landlord and eventually regained grazing rights that had been taken away by that landlord seventeen years previously.
2. The Mau Mau fought an anti-colonial struggle against the British rule of Kenya in the 1950s.
3. Langoustine are referred to as prawns by fishermen, as Nephrops or Norway Lobster by government and scientists and are also sold as scampi.
4. Based on figures supplied to me by the Marine Accident Investigation Board. There were a total of eight deaths on UK fishing boats in 2008.
5. Calculated from data available in Curtis et al. (2009: 30-33, 61-64) and Curtis et al. (2010: 41-46, 92-97).
6. In the Scottish Parliament elections of 2007, the BNP stood for the first time for the Regional List seat of the Highlands and Islands. They received 2,152 votes out of 185,773 ballots cast, or 1.2% of the vote.

7. Unite Against Fascism is a prominent UK organization that has campaigned against the BNP and the EDL through leafleting and demonstrations. Nineteen of its twenty-two affiliated organizations are trade unions.

References

- Bernstein, Henry. 2010. *Class dynamics of agrarian change*. Halifax: Fernwood.
- Biehl, João, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman, eds. 2007. *Subjectivity: Ethnographic investigations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Callinicos, Alex. [1987] 2004. *Making history: Agency, structure and change in social theory*. Leiden: Brill.
- Crehan, Kate. 2002. *Gramsci, culture and anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.
- Curtis, Hazel, Sébastien Metz and Colin Brodie, 2009. *2007 Economic survey of the UK fishing fleet*. Edinburgh: Seafish.
- Curtis, Hazel, Colin Brodie and Enrico Longoni, 2010. *2008 Economic survey of the UK fishing fleet*. Edinburgh: Seafish.
- Das, Veena, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds. 2000. *Violence and subjectivity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Douglas, Roy. 1976. *Land, people, politics: A history of the land question in the United Kingdom, 1878–1952*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Fine, Ben, and Alfredo Saad-Filho. 2010. *Marx's Capital*. 5th edition. London: Pluto Press.
- Glen, David. 2008. What do we know about the global labour market for seafarers? A view from the UK. *Marine Policy* 32(6): 845–855.
- Hart, Keith, and Horatio Ortiz. 2008. Anthropology in the financial crisis. *Anthropology Today* 24(6): 1–3.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A brief history of neo-liberalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Howard, Penny M. 2012a. "Working the ground": *Labour, environment and techniques at sea in Scotland*. PhD diss., University of Aberdeen.
- . 2012b. Sharing or appropriation? Analysing share systems, class and commodity relations in Scottish fisheries. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 12 (2–3): 177–203.
- International Labour Organisation. 2010. *International labour migration: a rights-based approach*. Geneva.
- Jackson, Michael. 2002. Familiar and foreign bodies: A phenomenological exploration of the human-technology interface. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8(2): 333–346.
- John, Peter, Helen Margetts, David Rowland, and Start Weir. 2006. *The BNP: The roots of its appeal*. Democratic Audit, Human Rights Centre, University of Essex. <http://www.democraticaudit.com/download/breaking-news/BNP-Full-Report.pdf> (accessed 15 January 2011).
- Karjalainen, Mira. 2007. *In the shadow of freedom: Life on board the oil tanker*. Helsinki: Commentationes Scientiarum Socialium/The Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters.
- Kasmir, Sharryn, and August Carbonella. 2008. Dispossession and the anthropology of labor. *Critique of Anthropology* 28(1): 5–25.
- Kleinman, Arthur, and Erin Fitz-Henry. 2007. The experiential basis of subjectivity: How individuals change in the context of societal transformation. In João Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman, eds., *Subjectivity: Ethnographic investigations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 52–65.
- MacDonald, Sharon. 1997. *Reimagining culture: Histories, identities, and the Gaelic Renaissance*. Oxford: Berg.
- Metz, Sébastien, and Hazel Curtis. 2008. *Scottish fleet financial performance 2008 mid-year review*. Edinburgh: Seafish. <http://www.seafish.org/resources/publications.asp?c=Economics%20and%20Busines> (accessed 5 May 2010).
- Mollona, Massimiliano. 2009. General introduction. In Massimiliano Mollona, Geert de Neve, and Jonathan Parry, eds., *Industrial work and life: An anthropological reader*. Oxford: Berg, pp. xi–xxviii.
- Nadel-Klein, Jane. 2003. *Fishing for heritage: Modernity and loss along the Scottish coast*. Oxford: Berg.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 2006. *Anthropology and social theory: Culture, power and the acting subject*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Parry, Jonathan. 2008. Cosmopolitan values in a central Indian steel town. In Pnina Werbner, ed., *Anthropology and the new cosmopolitanism: Rooted, feminist and vernacular perspectives*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 325–344.
- Pine, Adrienne. 2008. *Working hard, drinking hard: On violence and survival in Honduras*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Rapport, Nigel. 2009. *Of orderlies and men: Hospital porters achieving wellness at work*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Rediker, Marcus. 1989. *Between the devil and the deep blue sea: merchant seaman, pirates, and the Anglo-American maritime world, 1700–1750*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rhodes, James. 2011. “It’s not just them, it’s whites as well”: Whiteness, class, and BNP Support. *Sociology* 45(1): 102–117.
- Russo, John, and Sherry L. Linkon. 2005. Introduction: What’s new about new working-class studies? In John Russo and Sherry L. Linkon, eds., *New working-class studies*. Ithaca: ILR Press and Cornell University Press, pp. 1–15.
- Scottish Fishermen’s Organisation. 2011. Crewing—available to vessels fishing outside the 12 mile limit. Available at: www.scottishfishermen.co.uk (accessed 10 September 2011).
- Scottish Government Statistician Group. 2010. *Scottish sea fisheries statistics 2009*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/09/15155811/51> (accessed 20 June 2011).
- Sider, Gerald. 2003. *Between history and tomorrow: Making and breaking everyday life in rural Newfoundland*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.
- Smith, Gavin. 1999. *Confronting the present: Towards a politically engaged anthropology*. Oxford: Berg.
- Sveinsson, Kjartan Páll. 2009. Introduction: The white working class and multiculturalism: Is there space for a progressive agenda? In Kjartan Páll Sveinsson, ed., *Who cares about the white working class?* London: Runnymede Trust, pp. 3–6.
- Therborn, Goran. 1980. *The ideology of power and the power of ideology*. London: Verso.
- UK Border Agency. 2008. *Accession monitoring report May 2004–September 2008 A8 countries*. http://www.nesmp.org.uk/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=6&Itemid=73 (accessed 5 June 2011).
- Unite Against Fascism. 2011. *Our supporting organisations*. <http://uaf.org.uk/about/our-supporting-organisations/> (accessed 10 February 2011).
- Werbner, Pnina. 1999. Global pathways: Working class cosmopolitans and the creation of transnational ethnic worlds. *Social Anthropology* 7(1): 17–35.
- ed. 2008. *Anthropology and the new cosmopolitanism: Rooted, feminist and vernacular perspectives*. Oxford: Berg.
- Wolf, Eric R. [1982] 1997. *Europe and the people without history*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.