

## THE MERCHANT SEAMAN AS A SOCIAL TYPE: A MARGINAL LIFE-STYLE

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### INTRODUCTION

Like Park's marginal man and Simmel's stranger, the merchant seaman typically is not a fully integrated member in any social world in which he participates (Park 1950, 345; Simmel 1971, 143). His associations, as a rule, are conditional, transitory and superficial. Though he begins his occupational career as a member of a community in which he has social recognition and routine contact, in time it becomes increasingly difficult to define himself in relation to the social world of others. Ultimately, the high monetary return of the job tends to become his sole justification of self.

### METHODOLOGY

The methodology used here is primarily reflective participation. Much like the basis of Nels Anderson's classic *The Hobo* (Anderson, 1923), we have participated in the lives of merchant seamen, though at the time we were not sociological observers. Both authors have close family members who were/are seamen. One author was employed as a merchant seaman for seven years. We have interviewed in-depth 14 retired and currently employed seamen to obtain more detailed and generalizable social biographical knowledge of the life-style of seamen. The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours in length. We present the merchant seaman as a social type, which may appear as a false sense of the generality of our knowledge. However, we feel the conscious exaggeration of crucial aspects is a valuable heuristic method for grounding further research.

### GETTING IN

There are four predominant pathways to becoming a merchant seaman. 1) many enter because they have relatives which are seamen. This seems to be the mode. 2) "Foreigners," who may or may not be U.S. citizens often become seaman because it offers a situation in which they may associate with many of their own and can be paid well for minimal job skills. 3) Many are retired or former Navy or Coast Guard personnel. They typically have skills and experience that allow them higher starting positions. 4) The last group is best described

as "drifters." They drift in and ship out only when their circumstances force them to it. Often they are semi-transients, and sometimes are pairs of men who "hang together" shipping out, and living and traveling together when on the beach.

Regardless of origins, the first step in the entrance process is obtaining a seamen's passport ("Z card") from the Coast Guard (a formality), and then joining a union in order to secure employment. Ostensibly, seamen's unions have an open admittance policy, but this is misleading. The new seaman is put in one of several strata, with jobs passing down from one to another if no one accepts them. Through this structure, "book members" the highest group, which have been full-time seamen for several years are protected from job loss to lower members. While having the appearance of a brotherhood of equals with an "open-door" policy, there is very little "brotherhood." The structure of the unions, as well as the occupation generally, functions more to produce competition, suspicion, and isolation in its members.

### GETTING ON

All jobs begin with a competitive bidding process in the union hall. Upon entering a union crew hall in a large city, the seaman is confronted by probably the most ethnically diverse occupation in the country. Although dominated by white and black Americans, the seaman must be cognizant of the differences between himself and many of the others. There has been tremendous influx of spanish-speaking and oriental people (particularly Filipinos), although officer unions are still dominated by native whites. Nevertheless, it is the nature of the occupational structure which alienates the seaman from his companion workers, not the cultural diversity.

The merchant seaman does not start his trip on board ship, but within the confines of the union hall. "Catching" a ship, working on one, getting off, and spending time on the beach are all part of a cycle he will complete many times in his career. It is a process which brings him and his co-workers together spatially, and simultaneously separates them socially.

Formally, jobs are obtained by "bidding" on them at the union hall. The bid is made with a registration card that bears a date, job title, and group status. Members of lower status groups successfully bid only on jobs passed by those in higher groups. Seamen are, then, inherently competitors for work. But this is not the only method used to catch a ship. The insider may use less than fully legitimate schemes. When ships with unionized crews reach port, a union "patrolman" comes aboard to determine what job will be open. Available jobs are then to be returned to the union hall for full-members to bid upon. Jobs on a particular ship, however, can be put on the board in the hall at different times. Thus, the number appearing may be deceiving. A job or jobs may be held back to the last job call when most people have left, or at least those wanting that particular ship have left. In this way, the patrolman is able to aid in obtaining jobs for some, while "playing it safe." A not so safe alternative is simply not to allow the job to return to the hall at all. Nevertheless, even if a member were to discover a job was gained with bid, to protest he must report it to another union official who is also a member of the official political union "family." Needless to say, the practice goes unchallenged since most seamen understand the system and realize that they may manipulate it at some future time.

Another manipulative strategy of getting on is "throwing a job back in." If a seaman wants a job but does not have a registration card that is "old enough" to get, he may work a deal with someone with an old card. When and if the seaman with the older card gets the job, he holds it until a few minutes before the last job calls are made, then returns the job ticket to the dispatcher. The fellow with the newer card then has a better chance since the job is unexpected and some who might have taken it have left for the day.

Between jobs, depending on the availability of jobs and his ability to manipulate the system, the seaman may spend from hours to months in a union hall. When he is there, he will for the most part be among strangers and mere acquaintances. Seamen have few, long term friendships with other seamen. He experiences social isolation and seclusion for much the same reason that applies to the systematic check forger. His seclusiveness:

"... is reinforced by high mobility, which necessarily makes his contacts and interactions of a short-lived variety, he simply does not have the time to build up close relationships with the people he meets." (Lemert 1967: 123)

The seaman waiting between hourly job calls generally sits around the hall engaging in what seems to be meaningless conversation. However, he may pick up valuable information regarding ships, available jobs, and overtime. The real purpose of those extended conversations is to extract information. In the union hall the seaman experiences the loss of social identity. He cannot depend on these personal associations for social and psychological support. His ability to get good jobs depends on having information and "connections" and on manipulating the system. Each "stranger" in the Union Hall probes the other for information, hoping he will reveal such information as who may be planning to get off a ship at the last minute, or which ships will pay a lot of overtime. Neither participant is committed to the other, but are only concerned with knowledge to be obtained from such interaction. Each gives a cynical performance in that he is deluding his audience for purposes of self-interest (Goffman, 1973: 18). Aside from extended information probes and meaningless small talk, the seaman is withdrawn. He has become a loner in a group of loners who will soon be cast together for an extended time.

#### **PRE-ENTRANCE BINGE**

Once the seaman knows he has a ship, he typically engages in a "celebration" of self-indulgence. Such a pre-entrance binge is likely common to persons who foresee prolonged deprivation which for the seaman is a life-long, cyclical, experience (Hulme 1957 7). It is a recurring personal rite of passage through which the seaman accepts his occupationally imposed exile from the routine life-styles of those permanently on land.

Virtually all seamen resort to varying degrees some sort of self-indulgent ritual before returning to sea. Perhaps the most hedonistic are the young and single with alcohol, sex, and perhaps drugs of dominating interest in the days before shipping out. If the seaman has no dependents, he can spend all of his money be-

cause the ship, as a total institution, will soon take care of all his needs. This cyclical pattern of intensified and destructive consumption for many seems to be a major obstacle to long term accumulation of wealth. Whatever surplus remains after a prolonged stay on the beach is rapidly used with little thought of its conservation for future needs. The pre-entrance binge of the married seaman may be more conservative, but both he and his family come to expect it. As time progresses, these seem to become a routine family crisis period, with both the seaman and his family experiencing a sense of relief when he is finally extricated from the home scene.

The definition of the situation which seems universally to motivate the pre-entrance binge is regarding time at sea as an imminent prison sentence. Many of those we interviewed volunteered this analogy, and practically all agreed this was a valid comparison. As one remarked: "It's just like going to jail, at least that's the way you see it. I even cross off the days at sea on the calendar just like a convict does."

A ship-board observer would quickly agree to the general nature of the binge. It is not unusual to find a number of drunks aboard ship at sailing and several men missing their first sea watches. There appears to be a positive correlation between the length of the expected trip and the number of drunken crew and the severity of the intoxication.

### THE SHIP AS A TOTAL INSTITUTION

While at sea, the seaman is a member of a "24 hour" society. Around the clock, the routine watch and work system governs not only the schedule of work, but also meals, relaxation, leisure activities and social contacts. There is little chance to escape the monotony of the system (Nolan, 1973). The ship at sea is a total institution where a large number of like-situated individuals are cut off from wider society for an appreciable time. Together they lead an enclosed and formally administered life (Goffman, 1961: 13). Such "batch living" is a sharp contrast to life on the beach, especially family life.

Like other total institutions there is a division between the supervisory staff (mates, engineers, and radio operators) and low status participants (crew). This is very much a caste-like structure, staff members do not eat or in-

formally associate with the crew. However, unlike other such organizations, this seems to be particularly severe on the supervisors. They are as controlled by the institution as the crew. There are few of them and they are separated by department. Consequently, staff members experience even greater social isolation.

The "totality" of the ship causes the seaman to experience disculturation an "untraining" which renders him to a degree incapable of managing certain features of daily life on the beach (Sommer, 1959). Ship-life creates and sustains a strain between the seaman and life ashore. He becomes dependent on the ship to satisfy daily needs. Even minor things, such as cleaning or making his bed, are taken care of for him. He experiences a sense of uneasiness and difficulty in communication when he leaves the confines of the ship. Those he will interact with on the beach, especially his family, complain that all he talks about is the "damn ship." On board the ship, he loses habits required for successful interpersonal relations in wider society. The longer the disculturation process continues, the more inadequate he becomes in regulating his daily life on the beach when he gets back to it (Goffman, 1961: 13). An obvious difference is present in young versus old seamen. A prolonged experience with the total institution of the ship leads to deprivation of alternative roles, opportunities and interactions resulting in the seaman being ill at ease in the complex social world ashore.

To cope with the deprivation of life at sea, the seaman goes into a recital of what he will do on the beach. This may be termed a "release binge fantasy." They may think about drugs, alcohol, women, and combinations thereof. These are realized on the beach, usually immediately upon docking. This fantasy and its satisfaction seems to be a consequence of "forced saving" which postpones contact with the world which money can buy. Wages are paid when the trip is over. The sudden supply of a lot of money coupled with the "shut-in" time contribute to this release binge fantasy and its consummation (Goffman, 1961: 10).

### ON THE BEACH

There is a feeling of the need to adjust to unfamiliar routines and uncertain expectations on the beach (Hahman, 1952: 201). These unfamiliar routines soon drive him back to the

union hall where the cycle of his occupation has now come full circle. He is indeed a paradox. He does not like being on the ship and he does not like being off of it. An old seaman waiting for a job call in a union hall expressed this feeling well:

I come back and I am glad to be back; then I see all these same people who work on the beach doing the same things. They don't have any time off and no money to spend. Always the same story. You think after you went away and seen the world and come back something would have changed. I get bored with the beach, and I don't know how they can stand their lives . . . but I know as soon as I get at sea I'll want to come back."

Bored with the strange environment, he returns to the ship where his marginality is mediated by the security of the total institution. Regardless of place, he appears permanently in the role of the stranger.

#### **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY TIES**

The seaman suffers from the absence of routine family relationships and community ties. He becomes a visitor in his family. Arrivals become events rather than daily occurrences. He becomes a stranger to the children he did not watch grow up. He loses contact with whatever circle of relatives or friends he may have had (Hohman, 1952: 17). When he finally decides to retire, or is forced to do so, he will have more difficulty coping than is typically true of persons in "normal" occupations. His family's problems and ways of life will be new to him. As a rule, the seaman looks forward with much chagrin to the day when he will not be able to return to his familiar world of the ship. We think his family usually shares this feeling of apprehension.

Even married seamen typically have few close friendships on the beach. The next door neighbor of many years may only be an acquaintance. Friends made at sea are almost never invited into the seaman's home, nor does he go out with them when at home. Many seamen say they do not want to be friendly with other seamen because they may "visit" their families when they are not there. Several

factors contribute to this feeling: a lonely wife, the shallowness of friendships, and the seaman's general notions about the vulnerability of women, probably stemming from the fact he associates with a lot of "loose" women.

Men go to sea because of the monetary rewards they receive for doing so. They don't stay at sea when equal rewards are available in shore-based work, but they rarely are. Most try several times to quit. His high earnings are a source of personal validity with which he cannot part—it is his major measure of self-worth. In sociological terms, there is an inherent difficulty in establishing and maintaining identity by reference to purely extrinsic rewards. When he admits this, he is in effect admitting that his way of life makes impossible a stable relationship with family or friends.

#### **SOCIAL IDENTITY**

Seamen seem to fall into one of two types. First, there are those who situationally withdraw (Bankston, 1981). These men retain an orientation to the "outside world" on the beach. This is a small minority of ships' crews. This type of seaman mostly keeps to himself, talks little, reads much, keeps out of trouble, volunteers for nothing, seldom gets drunk, dresses better and has more luxuries than other seamen by managing his money somewhat better. He bears a remarkable similarity to prisoners who are "doing time." He makes the best of the situation, while adapt to the deprivations, but retains a more desirable commitment to a life outside (Irwin, 1970: 67-75).

At first, it would seem that this type should be the majority given the "anonymous" nature of ship life. But the ship does have an organizing influence through which socially distant persons find themselves developing mutual support in opposition to the depersonalizing system that has forced them together; a community of common fates is produced. A second type, then, emerges. This type may be termed a "colonizer." A colonizer is a person who must relocate in a distant place, but retains some connection to his parent society (Goffman, 1961). The colonizer must, in a sense, make a new world in new context, and most seamen fit this type. The seaman's identity becomes progressively inconsistent with shore life and his commitments to that life style are eroded.

The seaman experiences much the same as

he colonizes the ship, and interestingly he cannot cease to reject the structural source of his identity. Not to do so is to admit he is no longer integrated with a conventional world. Thus, the ideological gathering post is in the form of the complaint. The seaman appears to complain about small matters, or even about things with which he is probably satisfied (The brand of soap is not right, the bed isn't made right, the second steak wasn't cooked the way I wanted it, or the bread wasn't hot enough). It seems they must deny their commitments to the convenience of ship life. The denial of satisfaction becomes functional because it sustains an elementary solidarity among a group of strangers who are otherwise bound only by their technical interdependencies (Hanna, 1981).

### CONCLUSIONS

The occupational sources of marginality in the life-style and identity of the merchant seaman may be different in degree rather than kind from many other types of careers. Nevertheless, in the world of the merchant seaman it is most difficult to validate the self. Our observations underscore the interactionist position that the content of identity is largely dependent on the content and context of the person's social bonds. The ephemeral quality of interpersonal relations generates a problematic identity for the seaman. The seaman continually expresses a dislike for ships for there are limits to which a society of strangers may be significant to the self. Even so, life on the ship becomes more desirable than life on the outside. On the ship he is at least comfortable, sure of his position and skills and the expectations of others.

Ashore he may be seen as immature, care-free, and lacking social skillfulness. It is on the shore that a sense of difference becomes acutely noticable to self and others. The only source of favorable comparison is his apparent material success. Such reflection futhers his identification as a seaman, and gives rise to a permanent sense of marginality and social deprivation. As a social type, the seaman is of considerable sociological interest. Principles of adult socialization, organizational structure and personality, work and alienation, the effect of total institutions and the like may find heuristic application and validation in the study of seamen.

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