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Claire Flécher

Translated by Ethan Rundell

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Merchant Seamen: International Trade Professionals Firmly Rooted in the National

by Claire Flécher

*t*hanks to growing transport capacity and such innovations as the container and remote monitoring of ships, the maritime transport sector has gradually been reorganized since the 1970s in keeping with a just-in-time model for the treatment of goods. Once national and sometimes nationalized companies, shipping lines became global actors organized into complex networks overseeing long subcontracting chains. By using the open registry (or flag of convenience) procedure, shipowners have granted themselves new derogatory rights over national law that often present difficulties for international regulation. These developments have permitted long-term reductions in the cost of operating ships and remunerating seamen,¹ whose pay is indexed under this regime to the standard of living of their country of residence.

In this context, seamen appear to be international workers par excellence. For whether they are officers or crew members, their occupation directly contributes to the construction of global trade flows: they travel back and forth across the

1. In the present article, the terms “seamen” and “seafarers” will be used interchangeably. In keeping with the Maritime Labor Convention, they refer to “any person employed in any capacity on board” and here include those responsible for seeing to the ship’s operation on or beneath deck as well as kitchen workers.

seas, cross multiple borders to reach their place of work and rub shoulders with workers from all countries in their ports of call. They set sail for several months at a time as part of multinational work teams in which a mastery of English is important to guaranteeing a minimum of security and understanding aboard ship. The manner in which they are employed also reflects this international dimension: they are recruited by manning agencies—locally-based intermediaries operating on behalf of global clients—to serve on ships registered in various countries. The seamen are thus players in an international labor market where the conditions of employment come under the jurisdiction of international law in the form of agreements negotiated within the specialized agencies of the United Nations Organization: the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

As soon as one sets foot on a ship's deck, however, the formally international character of this environment seems counter-balanced by the omnipresence of national references. Evidence of this may be found in a markedly ethnicized division of labor as it is reflected in the composition of the crew. On the four ships on which I conducted my study, the commanding officers (captain, chief engineer, chief mate, second engineer) were all French while the junior officers (navigating lieutenant, third and fourth engineers) came from the countries of Eastern Europe (Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine). The able (AB) and ordinary (OS) seamen, engine ratings, cooks and messman were for the most part Filipino, Indian or Malagasy.² Seamen of all nationalities regularly comment upon this manifestly ethnic recruitment to illustrate the internationalized character of their occupation and express preferences by nationality in this context. The French and Filipinos thus state that they are pleased to work with one another due to cultural characteristics favoring good relations. Aboard ship, nationality and national references thus seem to occupy a central place: these categories result from an order that forces the assignment of ethno-racial identity in the sense that each position is reserved for certain nationalities or individuals characterized in those terms.³ This organization varies depending on the nationalities present and, more generally, the local context as it is defined by the flag under which the ship sails and the client's nationality. In the case of the present study, French companies were more accessible to me because I am French. I conducted my fieldwork aboard RIF-registered⁴ ships belonging to French shipowners and on which the senior officers were French. Even though the non-French seamen fell under international conventions, the zone of navigation was international and English was the

2. On these ships measuring more than 100 meters long, the crew generally consists of around twenty seafarers.

3. Amélie Le Renard, "Ici, il y a les Français français et les Français avec origines" : reconfigurations raciales autour d'expériences de Dubaï", *Tracés. Revue de sciences humaines*, 30, 2016, p. 55-78.

4. The *Registre international français*, or International French Register, which is for reasons explained below considered as a flag of convenience by the International Transport Federation (ITF).

official language, the French legal, historical and cultural framework provided a reference standard that strongly influenced social relations.

This context doubtless had an effect on the investigative relationship: although not commissioned by the shipowner, as a white French woman I was formally associated with the officers' group, most of whom were white Frenchmen.⁵ In my observations, it was more difficult for me to access and thus observe some areas of the ship, such as the cabins and the crew members' cabin. Since I do not speak Filipino, Romanian or Russian, I was similarly unable to understand spontaneous discussions between seafarers conducted in their native tongue. For this reason, I thus had to rely on information supplied in the formal framework of the semi-directive interview. That said, my immersion in daily life aboard ship partly compensated for this shortcoming, allowing me to supplement my interviews, understand what was left unsaid and ask those I interviewed to revisit certain situations we had gone through together.

On-Board Ethnography

The data presented here are the product of an ethnographic study carried out between 2010 and 2014 aboard four ships on which I set sail for a period ranging from 10 days to one month. On these occasions, I carried out 40 interviews in French and English with French, Filipino, Romanian and Lithuanian seafarers. I also conducted eight interviews ashore with managers and employees working for a shipowner, charterer or the French maritime administration. I supplemented these observations by participating in professional meetings and an examination of the specialized press, working documents and labor contracts.

The ships I boarded were engaged in the tramp trade, a type of operation mainly used for products subject to speculation (oil, grain, minerals) and in which the charterer (the owner of the goods) changes with each voyage and sometimes mid-route. In these cases, the ship pursues a wandering course, its destinations varied and never known in advance. It was in this uncertain context that I carried out my observations: I was told at the last moment of the date and place of embarkation and was informed neither of the voyage's duration nor of the composition of the crew. Each time, I thus had to adapt to these unpredictable contexts and the variable temporality associated with them in order to make a place for myself on board and set aside time to observe and interview the seamen.

In order to obtain authorization to board ship, I approached French shipowners through the intermediary of former seamen and labor unionists. The seafarers were thus informed of my status as a doctoral student. I nevertheless occupied various roles from one ship to the next and depending on the local context: by turns, I was a sort of officer cadet, spare laborer and trainee to whom the organization of work was to be explained. Whatever the case, my role was to in no way disturb the

5. On this type of navigation (tramping and international cabotage), there are very few women and nearly all of them are officers. On my tours on ship, however, only one ship had no women. This rather rare situation probably reflected the desire of the two shipowners I met to show me, a sociologist, that they were making efforts to feminize the profession. On this aspect of the maritime profession and gender norms on board ship, see Angèle Grövel, "Les officiers de la marine marchande: un groupe professionnel dans la tempête ? Accès au métier, socialisations et carrières des élèves des écoles supérieures maritimes au début du XXI^e siècle", doctoral thesis in sociology, Université Paris-Nanterre, 2013, and Jasmina Stevanovic, "La longue traversée des officières de la marine marchande. Ethnographie d'un monde professionnel au prisme du genre", doctoral thesis in sociology, Université Paris Descartes, 2014.

existing order. These various configurations allowed multiple vantage points and techniques of ethnographic observation: working alongside the seamen, following a person as he carried out his work or the events that punctuated daily life, taking up position in a strategic space such as the bridge and so on.⁶

Participating in life aboard ship was invaluable in studying this type of total organization.⁷ The confined space of the ship made it risky to speak: many things were expressed via gestures or passed over in silence in the interest of social peace while others were carefully kept on board.⁸ To get beyond platitudes and what was left unsaid, it was necessary to be on board ship as much as possible.⁹

Drawing upon this ethnographic data, I examine the ways in which international, national and ethno-racial categories alternately operate in this globalized sector. The issue here is not to examine these questions from the point of view of the day-to-day activity of maritime trade.¹⁰ Rather, I shall draw upon the French case to consider how the international dimension of this global trade industry is constantly reduced to or linked with national frameworks. I thus seek to clarify the specific manner in which the seamen construct their relationship to the international domain in this context.

To do so, I will first emphasize the fact that the international maritime labor market, though spread across the world, remains very closely linked to national labor markets. This imbrication of the national and international levels encourages the ethnicization of recruitment practices among employers, who attempt to develop reference points in a space over which they have partly lost control. I will then show how the processes by which job and nationality are identified and made equivalent are reinforced by manning agencies. As the local representatives of this international organization of labor, these agencies play an important role in constructing a labor recruitment pool that closely links skill with nationality. Finally, I will consider the manner in which these phenomena find concrete expression in social relations on board ship—that is, how the situations to which these developments give rise partly revive ethno-racial identifications, albeit in a way that varies from one situation to the next.

6. Reminiscent of the methodology adopted by Nicolas Dodier in the Palard factory. Nicolas Dodier, *Les hommes et les machines: la conscience collective dans les sociétés techniciées*, Paris, Éditions Métailié, 1995.

7. Erving Goffman, *Asiles. Étude sur la condition sociale des malades mentaux et autres reclus*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968.

8. Maurice Duval, “Paroles de marins: gestion de la parole à bord d’un cargo long-courrier”, *Ethnologie française*, new series, 22 (3), 1992, p. 368-380 ; Catherine Berger, “Espaces privés/espaces publics. Gestion de l’espace, du temps et de la parole sur un long-courrier”, in Albane Cain, *Espace(s) public(s), espace(s) privé(s). Enjeux et partages*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2004.

9. Pierre Fournier, “Attention dangers!”, *Ethnologie française*, 31 (1), 2001, p. 69-80 ; Fanny Girin, “La ‘sécurité’ en fuite. La construction du contrôle à partir des relations entre groupes dans une raffinerie”, doctoral thesis in sociology, Université d’Aix-Marseille, 2017.

10. For an analysis of this type, see Claire Flécher, “Écrire l’incertitude. Le travail à bord des navires de commerce entre stabilisations, prises de risques et responsabilisations”, *Sociologie du travail*, 56 (1), 2014, p. 40-63.

An International Labor Market?

The specificity of working at sea, its strategic aspect and many risks encourage shipowners to adopt recruitment strategies that sit poorly with the supposedly global character of the international maritime labor market and that, in the case studied, tend to maintain the French in a position of domination.

From the Corporation to the International Market

Given the strict oversight exercised over seamen's entry into and advancement within the profession, the merchant marine was long regarded in France as the ideal type of the corporatist labor market.¹¹ The maritime labor market was seen as "closed": it was reserved to seamen who had received specific training and the number of those entering the profession closely corresponded to the sector's labor needs. In this framework, the criterion of nationality served to delimit the professional group: the sector's strategic nature and military heritage justified a monopoly of national employment,¹² the foundation of the corporatist compromise between the French state, shipowners (employers) and seamen. In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, the role of this sector was to ensure the links between metropolitan France and its colonies, with shipowners holding exclusive rights over these shipping lines in the form of state concessions.¹³ Starting in the 1960s, several factors contributed to destabilizing this mode of labor market regulation. The generalization of flags of convenience, the appearance of new shipowners practicing particularly low cargo rates and technological innovation—in particular, the advent of the container—stoked competition between maritime countries.¹⁴ These developments came on top of a specific national context: the end of the military status of seamen in 1965, the process of decolonization and the ongoing internationalization of shipowners all called into question the sector's national framework. Originally conceived as a tool to protect against international competition, corporatist regulation thus came under intense criticism from French shipowners, a growing number of whom claimed a right to be exempted from the monopoly on employment in order to reduce the cost of paying salaries. In 1987, these demands resulted in the creation of the Kerguelen

11. Catherine Paradeise, "La Vie des marchés fermés. L'exemple de la marine marchande française", doctoral thesis in sociology, Université Paris-Nanterre, 1985.

12. This employment monopoly is also gendered: the first woman was admitted to the *École nationale de la marine marchande* in September 1972. This was moreover resulted from an interpretive "mistake": the candidate in question was named Dominique, which in France is a name given boys and girls alike.

13. Marie-Françoise Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les messageries maritimes : l'essor d'une grande compagnie de navigation française, 1851-1894*, Presses universitaires Paris Sorbonne, 2007.

14. Bernard Cassagnou, *Les grandes mutations de la Marine marchande française (1945-1995)*, volume 1, Paris, Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière, 2003 ; Antoine Frémont, *Le monde en boîtes. Conteneurisation et mondialisation*, Arcueil, Synthèse INRETS, 53, 2007.

flag, a “subset” of the French flag register, which conferred the right to employ non-nationals and pay them in accordance with the standard of living of their country of origin. Under this regime, shipowners were also exempted from taxes while remaining eligible for state subsidies. Seen as ineffective, it was replaced in 2005 by the RIF flag (French International Register), which is today mainly used by ships operated in deep sea trade or for international cabotage. In terms of employment, the RIF no longer refers in any way to the national framework: it limits the employment of European Community seafarers to 25 or 35 percent of the crew, allowing the remainder to consist of seamen of extra-European nationality. This register authorizes use of labor management intermediaries known as manning agencies, which are responsible for recruiting sailors and making them available to employers (the shipowners). The fact that the crew may be composed of sailors of various nationalities even though these ships have French owners thus marks the end of the close relationship that had existed between the ship’s nationality (its flag), that of the seamen and that of the shipowner.¹⁵ Taking note of the diminishing role of the national scale as well as the excessive deregulation brought about by these developments,¹⁶ the actors gradually mobilized to adopt international regulations. Presently, the sector is regulated by four major conventions relating to emissions pollution (MARPOL, 1973), safety and security (SOLAS, 1974), sailor training (STCW, 1978) and on-board living and labor conditions (Maritime Labor Convention, 2006).

The Globalization of Ships and Segmentation of Labor Collectives

The authorization to employ seafarers outside of the national framework was accompanied by the generalization of a discourse according to which everything had become international. Ships and seamen were alike said to circulate in keeping with commercial needs and budgetary constraints: “The boat is our factory. It can’t be delocalized just like that. But we have the same problems as globalization. [...] For a time, we tried the Vietnamese because the Filipinos started being expensive, too expensive. The problem with the Vietnamese is that they don’t speak English, so we had to go back to the Filipinos. Filipinos are good sailors. They know how to navigate and they speak English or Spanish.”¹⁷

As in other sectors that do not lend themselves to delocalization (BTP public buildings and works sector, cleaning, personal services), it is claimed that

15. Severing this link is the ITF’s principal criterion for defining flags of convenience.

16. Raphaël Baumler, “La sécurité de marché et son modèle maritime : entre dynamiques du risque et complexité des parades : les difficultés pour construire la sécurité”, doctoral thesis underway, Université Évry-Val d’Essonne, 2009.

17. Interview with a shipowner, France, 2010.

employers are obliged to engage in a type of “on-site delocalization”.¹⁸ In the present case, this is reflected in the employment of international seamen who are less well-paid and have fewer protections than their national counterparts. Thus, while the weight of the maritime transportation sector has continuously grown since the 1970s, the number of French sailors is in freefall: according to a 2010 BIMCO study, there were 13,696 of them (officers and crew members combined), as compared with 43,200 in 1971 according to the seamen’s social security office. In 2015, by contrast, there were around 200,000 Filipino sailors employed abroad, or 30 percent of the global labor force, with most of them holding jobs as crew members.¹⁹ This finding is important and is implicitly acknowledged by the shipowner, for whom international recruitment would seem to only concern some jobs on ship: if he can take on Vietnamese or Filipinos on a trial basis, it is because he believes—though does not say so explicitly—that they occupy the least skilled positions on board. The French, by contrast, seem exempted from such negotiation since, even if he is not obliged to do so, he continues to employ them in higher-ranking officer posts.²⁰ The highly ethnicized division of labor characteristic of this sector is here on full display: “Vietnamese” and “Filipino” function as categories excluded from certain jobs (those of officers) and allotted others (those of crew members).

The remarks of this shipowner nevertheless indicate that the issue of remuneration plays a central role in the recruitment of the least skilled seamen. For there are indeed very large income disparities from one nationality to the next: in 2013, the monthly pay of a Filipino seaman or worker ranged from 900 to 2000 dollars while a Dane occupying the same job received between 3000 and 4000 dollars for every month he was on ship (including salary, bonuses, paid and additional leave).²¹ Moreover, the terms and conditions of employment are very unequal. The most visible difference concerns the duration of their respective tours: the French set sail for two months, Eastern Europeans for four and Filipinos for at least six. Since the French are salaried employees (with fixed or open-ended contracts), their status guarantees them an equal number of days at work and on leave. Seafarers recruited through manning agencies, by contrast, are employed as free-lancers and are thus only paid once they have set sail. Although organized at the international level, this labor market is thus very segmented: it includes

18. Emmanuel Terray, “Le travail des étrangers en situation irrégulière ou la délocalisation sur place”, in Étienne Balibar, Monique Chemillier-Gendreau, Jacqueline Costa-Lascoux, Emmanuel Terray, *Sans-papiers : L'archaïsme fatal*, Paris, La Découverte, 1999.

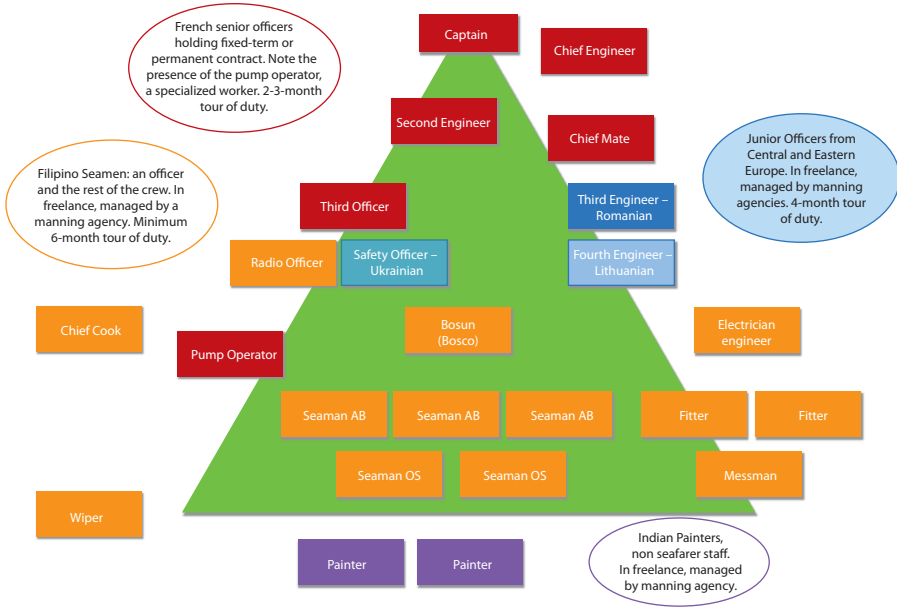
19. BIMCO and ISF, “Manpower 2010 Update: The Worldwide Demand for and Supply of Seafarers: Main Study”, Warwick, Institute for Employment, 2010; José Abueva, “Filipino Seafarers Most in Demand in the World”, *The Bohol Chronicle: Latest News from Tagbilaran City and around Bohol, Philippines* (blog), 28 June 2015 (<http://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2015/06/28/filipino-seafarers-most-in-demand-in-the-world/>).

20. In French maritime law, the captain is at once the shipowner’s employee representative and a state official representing France abroad.

21. In keeping with the pay schedule ratified by the ITF.

“two or more groups of workers whose labor-price varies for the same work or would vary if they did the same work”,²² a distinction that directly results from the seaman’s place of residence—in other words, his nationality.

**Types of Contract, Distribution by Rank and by Origin.
Example of One Ship**



Thus, on these ships of convenience, “the law of the flag does not disappear but is rather diversified”;²³ it fully applies to all seamen residing in France and the European Union but only partly to the others, for whom the regulatory framework is supplemented by France’s international and communitarian commitments as well as, at the individual level, the seaman’s employment contract with the manning agency. National, regional (EU) and international legal considerations thus overlap within a single crew, a fact that makes the employment relationship more complex, segments work teams and increases the number of legal gray areas that lend themselves to illegal practices.

22. Edna Bonacich, “A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labor Market”, *American Sociological Review*, 37 (5), 1972, p. 547.

23. Patrick Chaumette, “De l’évolution du droit social des gens de mer. Les marins sont-ils des salariés comme les autres ? Spécificités, banalisation et imbrication des sources”, *Annuaire de droit maritime et océanique*, XXVII, 2009, p. 471-499.

The Issue of Seafarer Training and Mobility

Despite the importance accorded budgetary considerations, the recruitment of seamen cannot entirely be reduced to a question of accounting. The excerpts quoted above from my interview with the shipowner show that the cost of the manning the vessel is weighed against the seafarer's training, which seems to vary from one nation to the next. From a formal point of view, recruitment must take place in conformity with the STCW convention (International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers), which sets minimum standards and harmonizes diplomas. However, the ship's specificity as a workplace encourages the shipowner to go beyond regulations: he proceeds by trial and error, carries out "tests" to find the best combination of skill level and remuneration. While the STCW limits international wage-based competition and tempers the effect of substituting one nationality for another, it thus does not entirely eliminate it. Due to the long duration of maritime training, the countries that have most recently entered the maritime economy thus lag somewhat behind those possessing historic maritime schools. For, given the importance placed on on-the-job training and the experience acquired at sea in becoming a "good sailor", it is generally acknowledged that it takes around fifteen years to train a captain. The demand for training thus contributes to the segmentation of the labor market by nationality, resulting in distinct markets for officers (still partly occupied by Europeans) and crew members (mostly drawn from countries with low standards of living). These two markets are characterized by unequal supplies: whereas there is an abundant supply of skilled and unskilled seamen, the pool of available officers remains inferior to the demand.²⁴

Nor should the spread of international conventions be allowed to obscure the continued existence of regional and local regulations that also have an impact on crew composition. I thus witnessed the sudden re-composition of a crew following signature of a new commercial contract that for several months chartered the ship in the "Europe zone". In this zone of navigation, ships engaged in international cabotage are required to exclusively employ European crew members. All of the Filipino sailors (seamen, workers, head cook) were thus placed on other ships or sent home. The shipowner then replaced them with Lithuanians, who, as citizens of a European Union member state, met the regulatory requirements. The overlap of national, European and international regulations and the just-in-time use of ships thus requires a greater freedom of movement. This, in turn, varies considerably from one nationality to the next.

24. Priscilla Leong, "Understanding the Seafarer Global Labour Market in the Context of a Seafarer 'Shortage'", doctoral thesis in philosophy, Cardiff University, 2012.

In winter 2014, seamen on a ship registered in Panama took advantage of a call to a French port to alert the international ITF labor union of the fact that they had not been paid for several months. After some unsuccessful attempts to discuss the matter with the shipowner, the seafarers went on strike, immobilizing the ship at dock for several hours. The shipowner immediately reacted, agreeing to pay their wages but in exchange demanding that the striking seamen leave the vessel. An agreement was reached and arrangements made to bring on European seafarers (Romanians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians) who, as Schengen area nationals, did not require a visa or residency permit to travel to the ship.

The shipowner here chose to employ European seamen. Though it is true that they were more “expensive” than their Asian counterparts, they could be more rapidly mobilized and so allow the ship to depart as quickly as possible. The more or less limited nature of this mobility thus informs the manner in which shipowners reach their decisions, particularly given that the least well-paid seamen are also those whose movement is most closely supervised.

The shipowner’s remarks offer a good example of the manner in which employers represent and make use of this labor market. While it is true that the latter is international in scale, it is also highly segmented and cut across by multiple regulations concerning individuals or relating to the transportation business. As the interview also makes clear, the relationship between seaman and shipowner was ultimately undone by the sheer scale of the market, the practice of subcontracting out recruitment and the instability of employment. Shipowners no longer know the seamen they employ and struggle to win their loyalty. In this global and uncertain framework, employers talk, not of individuals, but of groups above all defined by their nationality—a reference point and indicator allowing their remuneration, training and relative freedom of movement to be evaluated. This categorization has the effect of ethnicizing recruitment (as in the identification of “Filipino” with “seaman”) and thus of assigning jobs by nationality. Yet these assignments are likely to change as levels of training and standards of living evolve in the seamen’s countries of origin. The construction of an available and highly sought-after labor force thus depends on local contexts as well as on the action of on-site actors (manning agencies).

Turning towards the International: A Lucrative but Constrained Choice

Mostly from countries in crisis, the seamen see joining this profession as an opportunity to improve their daily lives. This nevertheless sometimes requires great sacrifices, particularly for the crew members who, despite the oversight exercised by recruitment agencies, try to construct an international career for themselves before subsequently returning home to take up residence on land.

Access to the International Market: A Tool of Social Advancement?

In contrast to the national maritime labor market,²⁵ the wages offered at the international level render the profession attractive. Although Filipino seamen are actually paid four times less than their Danish counterparts, their wages nevertheless well exceed average pay in the Philippines (200 Euros / month).

Employed as an Able Seaman (AB), Christian²⁶ comes from a modest background (his one-income family is supported by his father, a government employee) and has eleven brothers and sisters. Originally a customs officer on Filipino ships, he was forced to quit his job after getting into what he describes as a religiously-motivated conflict with his Muslim employer. He then asked one of his brothers, who is also a seaman, to help pay for his BSMT (Bachelor of Science and Marine Transportation).

For Filipino seafarers, joining the profession is a long-term strategy opening the doors to social advancement for themselves and their family. Despite the daunting conditions—training lasts between three and four years, each of which costs roughly 3000 dollars—there are thus many candidates. The decision to make this investment is a matter that concerns the entire family, with some members contributing their own income in the belief that it will subsequently benefit all.²⁷ The high level of freelance pay must thus not obscure the fact that, for the crew members, the decision to join the profession is made under constraint. Most of the Lithuanian seamen had thus practiced another trade on land before joining the profession in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Similarly, public policies intended to encourage nationals to seek work abroad are not incidental to the massive involvement of Filipinos in this profession. After several decades of economic crisis, the Filipino state saw the migration of its citizens as a way of reducing unemployment and bringing currency into the national territory.²⁸ In 2016, money transfers to the Philippines were estimated at 5.5 billion dollars.²⁹ The feeling of constraint is reinforced when the seamen first set sail, which is often a time of major disappointment. While maritime schools sign the praises of the profession as an opportunity “to see the world for free”,³⁰ once on board

25. Before joining international ships, the Filipino seafarers I met all had experience in national navigation. Having proven themselves in this internal market turned out to be a prerequisite for accessing the international market.

26. All names have been changed.

27. Marine Dumeurger, “Kalaw Street, le ‘Pôle emploi’ des marins philippins”, *Journal de la Marine marchande*, 4 October 2013.

28. C. Berger, “Les marins philippins, nouveaux héros de la mondialisation”, *Interculturel Francophonie*, 5 July 2004; Barbara Ehrenreich, Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2002.

29. William Depasupil, “Filipino Seafarers Top Choice”, *The Manila Times Online*, 30 April 2016 (<http://www.manilatimes.net/filipino-seafarers-top-choice/259323>).

30. This is among the marketing arguments that some training centers use to attract students—for example, the Philippine Merchant Marine Academy (<http://www.pmma.edu.ph/>) and the MOL Magaysay Academy (<http://mhma.edu.ph/>).

the seafarers discover that there are very few opportunities for leaving the ship. The close quarters and intense work schedule often render life on board dreary and exhausting and the reality of the profession falls well short of the newcomers' expectations. Over the middle-term, what's more, involvement in the profession forces the entire family to adopt a restrictive way of life. Due to the seamen's frequent, prolonged absences, their wives have to reorganize home life and look after any children they might have on their own. Their absence, which they present as a necessary sacrifice, is also a source of suffering for the seafarers:³¹ "Before signing up, I knew that I was going to be far from my family. But I weighed the pro and con: having money and working abroad or being here without money and suffering. Suffering with your family. So I said ok, I'll work there, suffer alone and feed my daughters. The education [of my daughters] is something I don't want to mess up."³² Similarly, while Christian seems to truly suffer from being separated from his family for work, he wants to continue in the profession until his children (aged 5, 14 and 15) are no longer financially dependent: "These are sacrifices. You have to sacrifice yourself. Your family needs you."³³ However long it may last, this professional activity is thought of as a stage in the seaman's life and that of his family. The relationship to employment is above all utilitarian: the money that has been set aside will serve to open a retail store located near their place of residence, finance the children's higher education or fill the time until a job become available on land.

Controlling Job Mobility and the Construction of Ethnicized "Labor Pools"

The seafarers nevertheless have little control over this temporality, which is often transformed into an ostensibly "temporary" arrangement that has no end in sight.³⁴ The manning agencies that employ seamen, check their diplomas and find them jobs exercise broad control over their professional mobility. Despite the large number of existing agencies,³⁵ being recruited does not always go without saying, particularly when the candidate is merely an ordinary seaman. It is sometimes necessary to be recommended by an acquaintance or family member, preferably an officer: "In this agency, they want a referee. You can come here but you must come with a captain if you want them to find a boat for you. A captain or officer, you take one with you so they'll find you a ship. That's what happened

31. C. Berger, "Partir sans arriver, la migration paradoxale des marins philippins", *Projet*, 308 (1), 2009, p. 12-19.

32. Interview with a 40-year-old Filipino engineering worker, 2012.

33. Interview with a 40-year-old Filipino AB seamen, 2013.

34. Abdelmalek Sayad speaks of a « provisoire qui dure ». Abdelmalek Sayad, *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité*, Paris, Raisons d'agir, 2006.

35. The Philippines alone counts 400 training centers. See Sylvain Mercoli, "Les fournisseurs de main-d'oeuvre maritime et le droit de l'Union européenne", in Patrick Chaumette (ed.), *Gens de mer : un marché international du travail en perspectives*, Nantes, Editorial Gomylex, 2016, p. 377-392.

in my case, they wanted my father. My father had left so I had to do something. They don't even look at your certificates. They just wanted my father because he's an officer."³⁶

This form of recruitment by cooptation, which does not seem to require that diplomas be checked, makes the seafarers highly dependent on agencies. The latter, in turn, seek to endow themselves with a labor pool capable of responding to the impromptu demands of shipowners. This subordination to the agencies subsequently continues when the time comes for seamen to be assigned to ships: "The agency decides which ship you have to go to. If the company says: 'You will go on the AI', the lads can't say 'no, I don't want to go because the contract is just for six months.' If you say no to the agency, they'll tell you ok but they'll never call you again. Because you refused their offer to get on a ship. That's why the lads always say ok. Because they need the money."³⁷

Ratings are particularly dependent on the agencies. This prevents them from refusing any offers from the agency and creates great uncertainty while they are still on dry land: the seaman never knows when the telephone will ring but, when it does, he has to leave no matter the conditions of employment. This form of subjection is further reinforced by the practice of using the prospect of career advancement as blackmail, with the seaman's loyalty presented as a necessary condition for advancing to the next rank. It follows from this that changing one's agency eliminates the benefits of seniority and results in a return to square one. Placed in a situation of dependence, the seamen can be called up and dismissed at will,³⁸ over and above the supposed freedom of movement involved in freelance work. As the seaman accumulates diplomas, however, he becomes less dependent on his agency: the highly sought-after population of officers enjoy a type of freedom to which other groups of skilled workers laid claim in the past.³⁹ As officers, they do not hesitate to change agencies or refuse offers when the conditions for boarding ship do not suit them.

The construction of the maritime labor supply and the existing inequalities among nationalities thus directly depend on inequalities between countries as well as the role played by intermediaries. Under these circumstances, ethno-racial considerations no longer suffice to explain the various ways in which the work is done, particularly given that not every aspect of social relations can be reduced to the ethnic dimension.

36. Interview with a 26-year-old Filipino deck officer, 2012.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Sébastien Chauvin, "Tester, reformer et punir. Usages et fonctions du temps dans les agences de travail journalier de Chicago", in Béatrice Appay, Steve Jefferys (eds.), *Restructurations productives, précarisation, valeurs*, Toulouse, Octarès, 2009.

39. The Sublimes, for example, a group of nineteenth-century skilled textile workers whose skills allowed them to leave an employer at will and offer their services to the highest bidder. Denis Poulot, *Le Sublime ou le travailleur comme il est en 1870 et ce qu'il peut être. Introduction d'Alain Cottureau*, Paris, Maspero, 1980.

Social Recompositions Aboard Ship

The omnipresence of culturalist discourses and the assertion of national affinities tend to demonstrate the performative role of ethnicized recruitment. In the work teams, everyone is ethnicized and defines themselves by nationality, a fact that in some cases recasts social relations along lines of nationality.

Interethnic Relations in the Service of the Hierarchy

On ship, one may speak of an ethnicization of the social relations of labor in the sense that ethnic categories “become the main axis in terms of which situations are defined and interpreted”.⁴⁰ Nationality is associated with a way of working and specific know-how that are systematically explained by cultural predispositions: – “As for the organization of work, I prefer Filipinos or others because it’s hard with the French. It’s hard because French people are stubborn [...]. With the Filipinos, you straightaway see the difference. They’re people who work a lot, they’re helpful and never make a fuss about anything. If I had to choose, I prefer the Filipinos. [...] It’s too bad but...

– *Do you find it more reassuring to be with Filipinos?*

– No. As for the officers, I prefer to be with a French officer. And if I had to choose in terms of performance, the Lithuanians are the best. They’re very good. They’re laid back on the job. But by contrast [to the Filipinos], they [understand what they’re doing]. When [a Lithuanian] goes on deck to do something, he knows what he’s doing. The Filipino has no idea. Later, at the shipyard, the Filipinos really get into it. They don’t know why they really get into it but they do. On deck, I prefer to sail with the Filipinos, despite the fact that they are very poor in operational terms. But they have more drive and are better in human terms. They’re always smiling, you ask them to do something and they do it. The hierarchy is really important to them.”⁴¹

This officer’s remarks show that the expressed preferences are not merely based on matters of skill. Due to the many risks on board, this chief mate has trouble adapting to the sudden arrival of Lithuanians who are unfamiliar with both the ship and the company to which they were assigned. Freelancer status has the effect of increasing seamen turnover. Sent here or there as the need requires, they go from ship to ship and rarely embark with the same people, a fact that complicates the transmission and accumulation of know-how. In addition to matters of skill, however, the propensity to respect the ship’s hierarchy also appears to be a distinct criterion. The various nationalities are distinguished in terms of this criterion of

40. Nicolas Jounin, Élise Palomares, Aude Rabaud, “Ethnicisations ordinaires, voix minoritaires”, *Sociétés contemporaines*, 70 (2), 2008, p. 7-23.

41. Interview with a 33-year-old French chief mate, 2012.

obedience, which is in turn reduced to cultural terms as indicated by the use of the plural, encompassing all individuals of the same nationality. This observation confirms other research that has been conducted on activities taking place in an international context:⁴² nationality indeed acts as a principle in the hierarchization of the work team and is just as vital, if not more so, as the possession of skill in guaranteeing the maintenance of order—and thus security—on board.

That said, national preferences are clearly associated with the positions occupied in the hierarchy. Filipinos are appreciated but only as ratings whereas there continues to be a preference that officers be French. At the same time, French seamen seem much less valued than their Lithuanian or Filipino colleagues. Assuming the same job and diploma, then, this officer expresses a national preference that only holds for the market segments in which he himself is located. In this framework, in other words, the ethnicization of social relations is used to reiterate and preserve a national division of labor, the last holdout of a corporation that has hitherto favored them and that appears to guarantee safe navigation.

The Specialization of Social Hierarchies

As a manifestation of social relations, the manner in which the ship's dining spaces are occupied illustrates this principle of hierarchization. For meals are important social moments that reveal the norms governing collective life. Ships traditionally possess two mess rooms, one for officers and another for the crew. Each of these rooms adjoins its own "wardroom", a space of sociability for off-duty relaxation that contains benches, a television, DVDs, a library and games. On the ships with a lively social life, this place is regularly frequented. It is the crew's wardroom, however, that generally sees the most activity, with regular karaoke events and card games. Among the officers, the wardroom is a meeting place where the seafarers gather a few minutes before the official start of each meal, taking their seats only once the captain has given the green light. Though it is sometimes considered "old fashioned", this ritual, which reaffirms the captain's place on the team, is generally well liked. It punctuates the day with temporal landmarks where everyone comes together and helps preserve some unity within these fragmented teams. This codification of the collective is reiterated by the mess room itself. That of the officers is generally equipped with two tables, one for senior officers (captain, chief engineer, chief mate, second engineer), the other for novices and junior staff (cadets, recently commissioned officers, third engineer). When there is only one table, the various officers are seated in accordance with the captain's position: in general, the chief engineer and chief mate sit next to him, followed by, in hierarchical order, the second engineer, deck officers and cadets.

42. A. Le Renard, " 'Ici, il y a les Français et les Français avec origines' : reconfigurations raciales autour d'expériences de Dubaï", *op. cit.*

This spatial division thus results from intense social differentiation between the crew members and officers as well as within the group of officers. Yet this hierarchical segmentation is not always so clear-cut and is sometimes overtaken by ethno-racial considerations.

– *Since he’s an officer, Jonathan can eat at table with you, can’t he?*

– Yes, but I don’t think he wants to. Because there’s an issue of language, of culture... There was a chief mate on the oil tanker, a Bulgarian. The captain tried to get him to come to his table. But then comes the first meal, you try to get in 4-5 sentences. The second meal you get in 2 or 3. And in the end, it’s just: “Do you want some water? Yes, please”. So after a while he went back to eating with the Bulgarians because we’re not up to speaking English all the time.⁴³

The linguistic barrier requires an extra effort despite the generalized fatigue and the fact that not everyone has a good command of English. In one specific example, however, the recomposition was not purely cultural: due to his nationality, Jonathan, a Filipino officer, was also responsible for tasks not falling under his role as lieutenant. The composition of the crew was binational: while the senior officers were French, the navigating lieutenant and crew members were all Filipino. The Filipino lieutenant played a pivotal role between the French officers and the Filipino crew members. Issues that needed to be brought to the captain’s attention (conflicts, the transmission of everyday information) all went through him, even though this normally would have been the responsibility of the boatswain, or bosco. The lieutenant was moreover responsible for distributing the portion of salaries paid in cash on ship, a ritual usually seen to by the captain. For the lieutenant, this division of labor entailed a set of tasks exceeding those usually entailed by his rank as well as a more important symbolic role and stood as a permanent reminder of his proximity to the group of seamen. Jonathan thus occupied a specific place, at once the hierarchical superior of the Filipino seafarers and an officer isolated within his statutory group of affiliation—an interstitial space in which status and ethno-racial considerations overlapped. Yet because the lieutenant shared no moment of ship life with the other officers, nationality constituted the principal criterion in this configuration. It redefined the division of labor and determined the place occupied by this officer in ambivalent off-duty situations.

The reorganization of the manner in which the ship spaces’ were occupied by nationality also affected the manner in which the sailors represented their professional group.

– Among the officers, there used to be a lot of lads who were CE [workers’ representatives]. It was after that quite a few joined unions, even the captains. Before then, you would never have seen a chief or captain [join a union]...

– *So they were union representatives for officers and not for the crew?*

43. Interview with a 27-year-old French second engineer, 2011.

– Yes, but ultimately, as you know now, there’s no difference. For [the captains] either. They’re great lads, they don’t make any distinctions. Since it’s gone Filipino, we [the French] are together whereas before you had the crew [on one side, the officers on the other] and, at that level, the fact of being in the same wardroom hugely increased the difference between a worker and an engineering officer. The relations really changed.⁴⁴

Competition between seafarers of various nationalities makes it difficult to defend an employment status and this leads to rapprochement between seamen and officers of the same nationality. In fact, one sees a shift in labor union representation. Although affiliated with the CGT managers’ federation (UGICT), the CGT merchant marine officers’ union now positions itself in favor of defending the employment of all French seafarers, whatever their category. Reconfigurations are thus underway: according to the seamen I encountered on this “binational” ship, this is reflected in a shift away from hierarchical segmentations and towards ethno-racial segmentation. However, in the course of the two other periods I spent aboard ships featuring more than two nationalities, I observed somewhat more complex and less rigid situations.

Ethnicity Does Not Tell All

On a ship counting six nationalities, I had an opportunity to meet a French seaman worker, a rarity at the international level. Although he was a pump operator on the oil tanker and thus a member of the crew, he lunched in the officers’ mess room alongside officers of four other nationalities (Bulgarian, French, Lithuanian and Ukrainian), the most senior of whom were French. In the mess hall, this grouping by shared or proximate nationality closely coincided with one’s position in the ship’s hierarchy. The Lithuanian and Ukrainian officers thus sat at the captain’s table but some distance from him. Nor did they take part in the discussions, preferring to instead communicate with one another in Russian. By contrast, the French worker and the Bulgarian lieutenant lunched at the officer cadets’ table—that is, with the novices. Neither participated in the ritual premeal meeting: they arrived alone at mealtime and quickly ate before leaving table to return to their cabins. In this framework, their subordinate hierarchical position and membership of a minority nationality jointly contributed to isolating them from the rest of the crew. For one of them, language was a real obstacle; for the other, his hierarchical position prevented him from being fully included in the group of the same nationality.⁴⁵

44. Interview with a 48-year-old French second engineer with an open-ended contract, 2013.

45. The pump operator’s isolation vis-à-vis the rest of the crew was also glaringly obvious when a conflict arose regarding norms of security. See C. Flécher, “Change your mind, be safe! Mutismes, murmures et prises de parole autour de la gestion de la sécurité des navires de commerce”, *Variations. Revue internationale de théorie critique*, 18, 2013 (online at <http://journals.openedition.org/variations/636>).

This data reflects a slow transformation of social relations: though he dines with the officers, the white, French pump operator is not their equal while the foreign Bulgarian officer shares neither their status (as a freelancer, he is paid three times less than his French counterpart) nor their culture. The officers' wardroom was long a place for asserting the profession's strong communal feelings. The entry of non-national workers and officers into this space shows how the intersection of hierarchical and ethno-racial criteria are reshaping the identitarian framework of the officers' professional group. In addition to revealing the transformations that this professional group has undergone since the 1970s, these spatial arrangements reflect the manner in which relations of power manifest themselves within these multinational collectives.

The construction of the international maritime labor market has durably reconfigured on-board social relations. Observing the differentiated manner in which space is occupied in this context reveals the various strategies adopted by each collective as well as its fluctuating desire to give visibility to the existence of new social segmentations, erase them in the interests of nevertheless forming a collective and reiterate a traditional order essentially regulated by the hierarchy of duties. This analysis moreover confirms the fluid nature of ethno-racial identifications. The latter function in a situated manner: they change from one configuration to another and are alternately redefined by national and ethno-racial denominations that here tend to stabilize an organization in which the issue of risk is omnipresent and labor collectives segmented. They are thus neither durable nor sufficient for characterizing the density of social life and social relationships, even if these processes produce ethnicized identities that are re-appropriated in their turn and extended to the social relations of work.

Though the seamen are highly oriented towards the international domain, these reconfigurations reveal the degree to which national considerations continue to inform their work, whether it be in the definition of their employment conditions or their decision to join this profession. From this point of view, the fact of working at the international level is in many respects akin to the decision to migrate abroad for work, with this notable difference resulting from the specificity of work at sea: the seafarers do not have the option of recreating a life for themselves outside of their place of residence. The impossibility of establishing themselves that is associated with their often difficult working conditions only makes life on ship seem more claustrophobic. Many seafarers thus compare their tour of duty to the experience of prison.

The example of maritime transport allows one to see that the internationalization of economic activity is closely associated with the national and regional scales and that it is sometimes reflected in a reaffirmation of the national framework, particularly when the international domain gives rise to new sources of uncertainty and instability. In these cases, the international domain is the formal

framework regulating economic activity and plays a very significant symbolic and discursive role. Within it, however, national considerations reveal the day-to-day arrangements that the actors have settled upon, ultimately in order to continue operating in and sustain the international domain. ■

Claire Flécher is a sociologist and Research Associate at Clersé (Centre lillois d'études et de recherches sociologiques et économiques, Université de Lille) and IDHES (Institutions et dynamiques historiques de l'économie et de la société, Université Paris Nanterre). She works on the transformations in employment status, labor conditions and social relations brought about by processes of globalization. She has published "Écrire l'incertitude. L'activité des marins de commerce après l'introduction du code ISM", *Sociologie du travail* (56, 2014, p. 40-63), and "'Change your mind, be safe !' Mutismes, murmures et prises de parole autour de la gestion de la sécurité à bord des navires de commerce", *Variations* (18, 2013).
claire.flecher@gmail.com