Ricardo Rodríguez-Martos Dauer

The merchant vessel
A sociologycal analysis

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To the memory of Alfredo Rubio,
my teacher.

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foreword

A sociological study on living conditions aboard merchant ships: that is the main object of the pages of this book.

Carrying out a study of this kind involved combining two essential elements: a capacity for sociological analysis on the one hand, and direct experience of the sea on the other. Each of these elements can certainly be found separately, but only rarely are they found together in one person. Ricardo Rodríguez-Martos, however, has both types of knowledge, theoretical and practical: as a sociologist and as a merchant-marine captain. And he has succeeded in integrating both elements in his study, blending them skilfully.

The theoretical reference framework that the author adopts emerges as novel, pertinent and fruitful. Availing himself of the notion of the "total institution", as developed by the American sociologist Erwing Goffman in a work initially published in 1961, enables him to pursue an original approach, and a very solid one from the standpoint of sociological theory. Indeed Goffman himself alluded in his study to the life of a crew out at sea as a possible example for analysing the characteristics and specific functioning of a total institution. Yet what was there little more than an insinuation becomes, in Ricardo Rodríguez-Martos' book, the starting point for a coherent analysis and an outstanding application of the theoretical concept.

After defining the problems and explaining the analytical model upon which his work rests, the author offers us an objective, detailed panoramic view of the various factors at work in shaping the distinct life-style of the men –and occasionally the women– who make the sea their profession: the crews, the roles within the crew, and the kind of relations that arise between its various members; how these relations are influenced by the smaller size and international composition of the crews; what motivates sailors; the implications of life aboard in attempting to maintain a private sphere, in leisure activities, and in the dialectic between communication and solitude, between boredom and tension and fatigue.

This central part of the analysis is rounded off with an essential chapter on the social relations of the seafarer with the world outside, relations that are difficult precisely as a result of the character of life on board from a standpoint that sees the ship as a total institution. In addition to the situation of ships in ports and the particular case of passenger ships, the author places special emphasis on the issues of family relations, the

problems sailors have in integrating into the family cell, and the problems arising from their return to family life, and to on-shore society in general.

In broad outline, these are the strictly sociological coordinates framing Ricardo Rodríguez-Martos' study. However, though without ever abandoning this scientific approach to his object of study, the author constantly goes beyond simply reporting the objective conditions of life on board and analysing its implications.

For indeed, underneath his entire approach, there is a twin concern born of his personal experience of life at sea.

First, there is his concern for the future outlook: concern over the consequences of the growing technical progress in ships, entailing a decrease in crew sizes with the crew being obliged to undertake work which is predominantly mechanical and, in many respects, dehumanising, with hardly anything to compensate for this because of the very isolation of the crew. And concern, accordingly, over how these crews should be organised, how their members should be selected, and over redefining to some extent the roles and modes of exercising authority on board.

Secondly and most importantly, concern over the human factor: the economic interests at play in the merchant marine world are considerable and legitimate. But behind and even above the necessary rationalism in work organisation, Ricardo Rodríguez-Martos sees the real protagonist of sea life when all is said and done: this protagonist is and should always be the human being, the seafarer as a person.

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preface

Right from my first sea voyages I was struck by the importance of people getting on well on board, and the various factors that played a part in this. For that reason, along with my personal concern for the human factor, I have been gathering experience, information and academic studies over the course of seven years at sea, twenty years as a lecturer in what is now called the Faculty of Nautical Studies of Barcelona and 12 years in charge of the Apostleship of the Sea there, and all this bore fruit in the form of my doctoral thesis *El buque mercante como institución total* (The Merchant Ship as a Total Institution), submitted in June 1995 to the Faculty of Nautical Studies of the Polytechnic University of Barcelona, the thesis having been directed by Dr. Joan Estruch.

Having submitted the thesis, my wish for this work to serve as a reference book for seafarers, shipping companies and others and as a textbook for nautical students prompted me to make the adaptations needed to produce this book I am now presenting.

Since I had a great deal of material on the subject, I adopted as my work scheme that of the work *Assyliums* by Erwing Goffman, in which that sociologist gives a wide-ranging analysis of the nature of total institutions.

I believe that studying maritime sociology is indispensable in designing the ships of the future and also in managing them and organising life aboard them. The former task falls to the States, to labour regulations and to shipping companies or shipowners, while the latter will be of interest to all who are to live and work on board ships, particularly those who will be in positions of command responsibility on them.

It is clear to anyone who is or has been a seafarer that the greatest problems commonly arising on ships are related not so much to technical matters as to human relations.

There is a great deal of literature on the life of the sailor from the psychological and sociological standpoint, though the greater part of it is in the form of short articles concentrating on particular aspects. There are also a few books that attempt to portray the harsh reality of the seafarer's life through recording the accounts of seamen and the experiences of the author, such books being mines of individual experience but none too systematic for analytical purposes.

The aim of this work is thus to present an analysis of the sociological reality of seafarers and their environment.

For this purpose, it is divided into these five chapters:

1. **The merchant vessel as a form of total institution**: this first chapter gives a definition of a total institution, discusses the various types of such institutions, and goes on to specify how and why we can regard the merchant ship as a total institution.
2. **The inner life of the ship institution**: here the crew is studied as a social group, analysing the various roles found and their characteristics, the relations between officers and ratings, subgroups, international crews and downsized crews.
3. **The crew member**: this chapter approaches the study from the point of view of the individual inside the ship institution, considering his reasons for going aboard, his integration in the world of the crew, the identity of the sailor and his search for his own space.
4. **The relations of crew members with the outside world**: here we turn to how being a seafarer affects relations with society in general and with the family in particular - the sailor's attitude to people on shore, the typical problems of families in which the husband and father is a seaman, and the "crisis" of returning home.
5. **Crew recruitment and organisation criteria**: this last chapter seeks to summarise a number of basic points concerning life inside the ship institution and to use them in seeking valid criteria for designing crews in the current context of the merchant marine. For this purpose, a number of studies produced in various countries are drawn on, concerning the physical and psychological characteristics that a person intending to pursue the seafaring life should possess.

Hence this work is a study of the ship institution, its members and their relations with the world around them.

Ricardo Rodríguez-Martos Dauer
Barcelona, May 1996

1

the merchant vessel as a form of total institution

1.1 The total institution: concept and elements

A total institution can be defined as a place of residence and work in which a large number of individuals, all in the same situation and isolated from society for a significant period of time, share in their confinement a formally administered daily routine.[1] We thus have an initial spatial factor, the place of residence and work, which acts as a framework for day-to-day life and the social relations of the group in question.

That place or space is not open: entry and departure are not free, the group members are in some way enclosed in it and isolated from the rest of society.

A factory or an office cannot be considered to be total institutions, despite having their own rules and although a close relationship is formed between those working in them, for all who work therein do so for only a limited number of hours, after which they resume their own private lives, in which they can engage in different activities. What is more, their members can leave their work posts if they have good reason to do so, and can in any case leave them physically even if they thereby break a rule.

As Nick Perry states[2], a basic characteristic of industrial societies is that for most of the populace it is both possible and probable for them to be associated with groups and organisations that have disparate aims, membership and behavioural expectations.

Perry further asserts that one way of differentiating totalitarian from democratic societies is (to take up a phrase of Goffman's) to analyse whether or not they are total institutions.

In a total institution, its members are set apart from outside life, they lack the chance to combine it with some other outside activity, to leave the place they are in and, anonymously or by adopting a different role, to join a much wider social setting. An inmate, on the other hand, cannot decide for himself when to leave. He comes to a place for a purpose, and the life he will lead there goes beyond his own purposes. The freedom of action and movement which characterise life outside the institution are lost here. There is a common purpose, a set of objectives standing above the

interests of the individual. Its members, or most of them at least, have no choice regarding their behaviour and this is a source of conflict (another feature of total institutions).

The number of people is also of importance. One or two people can never form a total institution, given that there is no sense of group, of sacrificing many personal traits in favour of other common traits. There has to be a hierarchical structure, with a few individuals organising the life of the many. There must be a certain number of individuals, then, and they must furthermore be in a similar situation, that is, fully sharing daily life, with limitations more or less common to all members of the group.

Their "confinement" must also have a duration, so that the members of the institution have the chance to make a place for themselves in it and feel how it exercises enormous pressure upon them. Only these two conditions, of "isolation" and "confinement" together, give rise to the leading of an internal institutional life in which, in addition to the existence of an institutionalised hierarchy, other relationships and even power subgroups arise. Inmates are then obliged to find out where they fit within a complex interlocking mechanism, and to seek compensatory systems at group and individual level if they do not wish to be marginalised and have a bad time.

This group must, finally, have a "formally administered" pace of life, a routine. That is, the group has guidelines, laws or rules to which its members must adhere and which supersede its members' individual wills.

A large group of friends who decide to take a year off to sail round the world in a yacht, notwithstanding the fact that the voyage may involve isolation and even confinement, is not in principle a total institution, given that the friends have themselves freely decided to form the group for that purpose, and they themselves decide what to do at any particular time. Furthermore, if disputes and differences arise they can detach themselves from the group, cancel or alter the trip or do whatever they decide. There are no institutionalised rules, no social implications having repercussions for members wishing to abandon the expedition. Their very hierarchy, where such exists, is the fruit of an agreement amongst peers.

The formal administration of the life of the group is thus a basic factor in defining the nature of a total institution.

To return to Goffman[3]: ...*Any institution absorbs part of the time and interest of its members and to an extent provides them with a world of its own: it has, in short, absorbing tendencies... The absorbing or totalising tendency is symbolised by the obstacles placed in the way of*

social interaction with the exterior and the exodus of its members, usually taking material form in locked doors, high walls, ditches, etc.

Although in the course of the day inmates may have time of their own, in which they are in principle free to do what they wish within a framework of limitations, the institution always takes up part of the attention of its members, since it comes to form an inseparable part of their lives while they remain in it. Do what they might, the institution is always present.

And the confinement takes specific form in physical barriers which hinder, if not render impossible, departure from the institution.

A basic element in the social ordering of modern society is that individuals tend to sleep, play and work in different places, with different companions, under different authorities and without a broad rational plan.

The central characteristic of total institution can be described as a breaking down of the barriers which normally separate these three spheres of life.[4] Firstly, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Secondly, each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Thirdly, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials whose job it is to see that they are complied with. Fourthly, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfil the institution's own aimes.

In the total institution, therefore, the variety of spheres in which individuals normally move, and which involve not only different centres or venues but also different roles, is broken. Citizens work, amuse themselves and rest in different places, with different people, and they also play different roles. A prisoner, even when playing football, remains prisoner number x, while an employee who goes to a sports centre to play football with his friends is no longer an employee but a member of that centre or of that group of friends.

In engaging in these activities in different places, the citizen referred to above also adapts to different sets of rules; where in one sphere he might be a subordinate, in the other he might be a leader. The change of sphere also involves a change of people, so that he can draw a completely clear dividing line between one group and another according to whether they are people imposed by a job or an activity, chosen individually or arising out of any other reasons of social relationships.

2

the inner life of the ship institution

2.1 Life aboard ship

2.1.1 Introduction

Aboard a ship, exercising their professional functions, and also living together, sharing The merchant ship total institution consists, as we have seen, of a group of people meal times and rest times, isolated from the world ashore for however many days or weeks the trip takes, and far from their countries and their homes for weeks or even months on end.

These people all went aboard of their own free will, and are legally bound to the ship, or rather the shipowner, by employment contracts. However, since they spend long periods away at sea or outside the jurisdiction of their countries, prerogatives that may go beyond the normal provisions of employment contracts are acquired by personnel in command.

All these people fit into a hierarchical structure in which the personnel in command have considerable authority, an authority that covers not only the work to be done but also certain aspects of the private lives of the crew.

Thus the crew is not just a working team: it is also a human group whose members must be able to satisfy their private human needs and their basic needs for relating to others in human terms in the community around them.

This human group *is subject to the highly distinctive reciprocal actions that arise quite naturally when the ship sets sail, though not in other circumstances that might also be regarded as exceptional (when the ship is in harbour, being repaired, moored at a long-term anchoring berth or awaiting orders).*[31]

Routine is an important factor in the life and work of ships, as mentioned previously. Though often, and perhaps rightly, presented as a drawback of the seafaring way of life, it is also a highly valued treasure. Hence sailors often say, when setting off on a long run after a period at harbour, "so we're off to our health farm again".

The best atmosphere aboard ship is experienced on long runs: everybody settles into it, changing gear to make the best of it, and the crew-organisation arrangements work.

Naturally, everyone looks forward to arrival at port, particularly those who are homeward bound. However, in the life of the crew, something is lost. People get restless - to get home soon in the case of those who will be near their homes, and to enjoy the time off and break the monotony of it all for the others. Something in the organisation of life aboard ship goes downhill.

This is not to deny all the positive aspects of arriving at port, so eagerly awaited by seamen, but simply to point out that anything that upsets the routine that is inherent to life aboard has an influence on internal relations among the crew and the organisation of daily life aboard ship.

2.1.2 Hierarchically ordered life

The merchant ship is a highly hierarchical institution. This feature, as Hernández Izal[32] remarks, stems not only from legal provisions but also from atavism, as a hangover from past traditions.

The hardships of life at sea, the need for organised work with concise instructions admitting no argument, and the fact that at sea no recourse to any external authority is available, are all factors that have led to this highly hierarchical organisation. And this arrangement, as Hernández Izal also points out, is found both in free-market economies and in socialist countries.

Apart from its discipline and work-organisation purpose, this hierarchic approach also provides the terms of reference that are needed in socially organised life of any kind.

Though this does not necessarily imply that such hierarchical ordering should go beyond what is strictly required to organise a human group in social and labour terms, in fact we also find deformations with clearly military connotations, and in some cases even authoritarian excesses impinging on the private affairs of people, or even, in the worst cases, constituting an assault on the basic human dignity of those concerned.

Tony Lane[33] tells us that *Hierarchy touches almost every aspect of shipboard life. It is a subject which generates a lot of heat among seafarers, reveals deep-running social divisions and, in this respect at least, seems to offer a microcosm of society at large*.

Perhaps because the deck hands historically used to belong to the lowest social strata while the officers enjoyed some social standing, particularly

when merchant fleets had close links with navies, the higher orders of the hierarchy have traditionally been at pains to maintain their status and keep tight control over their subordinates.

This mentality could have been relegated to history as the cultural level of ordinary seamen rose and as democratic models emerged in the industrially developed world, but instead it has become accentuated through the proliferation of ships with European officers and Asian or African ratings. Thus new barriers have appeared, leading to a further strengthening of the hierarchical order, at a time when ships with Spanish crews, for example, had witnessed a considerable attenuation of that order.

Another point to be taken into account here is that, as we have mentioned, a cargo vessel with a crew of 15 is very different from a passenger ship with a crew of 300.

We could wind up this section by saying that some degree of hierarchical ordering is necessary aboard ship on account of the great importance of an orderly and disciplined approach to the work for the safety of the ship and its crew.However, it is a different matter entirely when this hierarchical pattern takes over free time as well, with the crew feeling coerced 24 hours a day.

This arises when discriminatory treatment is adopted, of a kind more usually associated with master-and-servant relations than of relations of employment, or when matters that are important for the crew members as people are ignored.

Bernard Vincent, a French deacon who has spent many years aboard ships sailing under flags of convenience with international crews, records the case of a Muslim crew member: his religion prohibited eating pork, but this was disregarded, and he was faced with the choice of suffering pangs of hunger or pangs of conscience.

Even though the manner of issuing orders in the professional context, e.g. during manoeuvres, may well have some resemblance to military patterns, it should not be forgotten that the crew members are just as much employees of the shipping company as the officers, and that in fact the mission of the latter is not just to ensure that the jobs are done well but also to arrange things so that certain individual and collective human needs of the crew can be met.

3

the crew member

3.1 The crew member's world

It is a characteristic feature that inmates arrive at the establishment with a 'presentation culture' they bring with them from a 'normal world', a lifestyle and a routine of activities taken for granted, up until the moment they enter the institution … However stable the personal organisation of the recent entrant might be, it formed part of a wider sphere of reference, situated in a civil setting: a cycle of experience which confirmed a tolerable conception of the ego and permitted him a set of defensive mechanisms exercised at his discretion to face up to conflicts, discredit and failures.[86] A person embarking for the first time as crew member on a vessel undoubtedly arrives with what Goffman calls a "presentation culture". To a certain extent, each crew member arrives with a "culture of his own".

On a Spanish ship there will be crew members from the Basque Country, from Galicia, from Andalusia, from Castile, from Catalonia and so forth. There will be men from coastal towns and from inland towns. Some will come from seafaring families (especially the Basques and Galicians) and will find on board people from their own towns or cities and will be able to cultivate their own eating habits and regional peculiarities. Others will come from families which have no idea what a ship is like, and these will encounter ways of speaking and customs which are strange to them.

The problem will be more serious in the case of ships with international crews with mixtures of races, cultures, religions, languages, etc. In these cases, and especially when the crew member in question is the only one from his country on board, there will be a major contrast between his former world and the one he now finds. The distance between the two worlds may arise in various ways:
  - Language: the sense of isolation and of a being a stranger in a place largely depends on language. Being surrounded by people who speak a different language, all the more so if it is unfamiliar, gives rise to a clear feeling of marginalisation.
  - Eating habits: although the food at sea is never the same as on land, on German ships one eats in the "German style" and on Spanish ships in the "Spanish style". And this relates not only to the type of food as such, but to the atmosphere in the dining room, the drinks which accompany the meal, and so forth.
  - Religion: amongst a Christian crew, religion will not be of great importance, although a non-believer majority will make it more

difficult for a believer who wishes to practise his faith, due to lack of a congregation to back him up. More serious, however, would be the case of a Muslim amidst a crew of another religion, or simply atheist. During Ramadan, for example, Muslims have very strict rules regarding food, and at no time during the year may they eat pork. If no consideration is shown towards a Muslim crew member he will experience serious problems of conscience or will just have to go hungry. Rules about prayer, too, call for understanding to be shown.

– Attitudes: the attitudes, behavioural norms and rules for co-existence can, on ships with international crews, create barriers and differences and foster the formation of subgroups, and these would be points to be highlighted when a crew member encounters people from different worlds.

However, there are other problems of "change of world".

A citizen alternating between work and family and friends, who engages in each activity in a different place, who in his free time puts his professional role aside and is not disturbed as he sleeps (except for some professionals, such as doctors and others on call), who may be a member of a sports club, member of a group of friends, husband, father and son, etc., would were he to embark find that aboard ship he is sailor, cook, oiler, officer or captain twenty-four hours a day.

Day after day he will be dealing with the same people. If there is a heavy sea when he finishes work, the boat will continue to pitch and heave; if his services are needed, he will be woken in the middle of his sleep; his Sundays will be the same as his Fridays, and so forth.

Goffman[87] asserts that "deculturalisation" can occur in the case of long-stay inmates. Men who have spent many years at sea quite frequently become to a certain extent maladjusted in the family environment. Indeed, a seaman who while at sea dreams of his family sometimes feels disappointment[88] upon homecoming, especially after long periods at sea (six months or a year). This is the feeling of being a stranger in what a person considers to be his real world. A sailor returning home after months away is sometimes unintentionally received like a stranger; one example of this is the sad experience of reunion with the young child who hardly recognises the father and looks at him with misgiving.

It is this phenomenon which leads many sailors, after fifteen or twenty years at sea, to try to remain on land and yet to fail through inability to adapt to life on land in general.

Life at sea is tough due to the isolation, uprootedness and so forth, but it is convenient in terms of having a peaceful routine, development of habits disrupted only by emergencies, lack of the day-to-day problems

encountered in city life; a sailor can even, up to a point, forget about the education of his own children, not out of lack of interest but because, being far away, there is little he can do about it. That being the situation, sailors end up living life with a different mind-set. Finally, even if a sailor does not earn much money, on board he lacks for nothing, and when he arrives in port he always has sufficient money for anything he wants.

With reference to Sommer[89], and applying his studies to the nautical sphere, we might state that the "totality" of the ship institution leads sailors to experience deculturalisation, takes away a certain amount of ability to handle life on land. Seafarers depend on the ship to meet their daily needs, and little by little they lose certain habits necessary if they are to maintain good social relations on land. The longer sailors spend at sea, the harder they find it to adapt when they return to land.

3.1.1 Seamen's awareness of themselves

Seamen are clearly aware of "being different" and of their job being a great service which is nonetheless afforded little recognition by society. Tony Lane[90] says ... *seamen state that they are a race apart, although it is never exactly clear what they mean by it. This is partly because seafarers have inadequate knowledge of other isolated workers to make rich and well packed comparisons.*

We might think of any profession or trade on land, such as bus driver or laboratory chemist, to take two examples. They, too, will surely feel that society's regard for them is not in accordance with the service they provide, though they will not normally feel this as deeply as does the seaman.

One of the main reasons for this is the seaman's feeling of absence, of being forgotten, for he sees that his town and his house operate without him. When he reaches a port he sees a city, some lights if it is night by then, but he knows that he does not belong to that world, that he is a stranger. And when he sets out to sea again he sees a city brimming with life, but over the bows an empty horizon; when he sees that he would like to spend the weekend in dock and the vessels finishes loading up on a Friday so as not to waste time in port; when he sees all that then he thinks that he counts for nothing.

An old German captain said at the beginning of the 'seventies: *All my life I've paid taxes and so helped to finance services for the citizens. But what have I got out of all that, when I'm always away at sea?*

Unless they make an effort to keep informed and take part in events in the outside world, their families and society in general, seamen will live like people absent and will create their own world. Everybody has a

4

the relations of crew members with the outside world

4.1 The relationship of the crew member with society in general

One of the characteristics defining the concept of total institution is the isolation[126] suffered by their members over significant periods of time. This is not so much a matter of the time the isolation lasts as the very fact of belonging to a total institution, which limits the freedom of its members in the sense that they cannot leave it when they wish but are obliged to remain in it without any distinction between working hours and rest hours.

Indeed, when people enter they know that they are giving up a major portion of their freedom for such time as their stay there lasts. This factor involves compulsory separation from the outside world. At the same time, as this separation is a necessary but undesired consequence, inmates will seek out ways of maintaining the greatest possible contact with that outside world.

In the merchant ship institution, when seamen embark they renounce seeing their families for a certain period of time; not only that, they know that they will have to remain more or less distant from the daily life of their cities or towns, from their countries and, in a way, from the world in general.

Being far away not only means difficulty in receiving information but also in some way a gradual decline of interest in the day-to-day events of the far-away place. The isolation thus increases as seamen, over their years at sea, have their own experiences of a world which is by no means akin to that of land-based people. This is alleviated quite considerably in the case of seamen who enjoy frequent holidays, although due to the type of life they still undergo a certain loss of interest in those things which they experience differently.

4.1.1 Social identity of seafarers

Seafarers have a truly peculiar social view of themselves. This is demonstrated, as already mentioned, by the old adage among Spanish

seafarers: There are three classes of people in the world: the living, the dead and seamen.

Bankston[127] suggests that seamen can be grouped into two types. Firstly, we find those who live with an absent attitude. They retain an orientation towards the outside world, towards land. This type of seamen come over as enclosed in themselves: they speak little, read a lot, elude difficulties, volunteer for nothing, rarely get drunk, dress better than the others and keep tighter control over their money. As Irwin[128] says, this type of seaman makes the most of the situation, adapts himself to privation and retains stronger links with the outside world.

Such seamen are favoured by the anonymous nature of life at sea. The situation of common isolation and the need for mutual support nevertheless give rise to a second type of seamen, who try to organise a new world within the confines of the ship. This will affect the identity of the seamen, who will find their connections with land being eroded. As Hanna[129] says, as seamen build their own structure on board, they also develop rejection of it, for not doing so would mean recognising that they no longer form part of the conventional world. They then seek to criticise even things they may like. Thus, they like to point out they are providing a great service to society, yet society turns its back on them, that if they found a good job on land they wouldn't think twice about leaving the sea, that they do not want their sons to follow in their footsteps at sea.

Socially they display a mixture of attitudes ranging between professional pride and contempt for landlubbers who live peacefully and don't know how hard the sea is, and a certain inferiority complex when they realise that they are living in another world and that on land they feel they are nobody.

Moreover, as Forsyth and Bankston[130] say: *The ephemeral quality of interpersonal relations generates a problematic identity for the seaman. The seaman continually expresses a dislike for ships ... Even so, life on ship becomes more desirable than life on the outside. On the ship at least he is comfortable, sure of his position ...*

The reference here is to that frequent contradiction between what seamen proclaim and what they often really feel. This does not arise out of a wish to deceive, but rather a clash between the cliché (not without foundation) that life at sea is not fit for people and the realisation that they have become so used to that life that, deep down, they identify with it.

Interpersonal relations are initially marked by a working situation and a hierarchical structure which at the very least, as we saw when discussing the crew of a ship, from the outset very much condition those relations.

And even with those with whom there is a closer relationship there will arise the problem that they are sharing not only work time but also part of their leisure time.

If on board there are people who generally get along with each other, then it will not be difficult to extend the professional relationship into one of friendship. However, when there is no such understanding, or there is even animosity, a seaman will have to choose between shutting himself up inside himself and spending his free time alone, or involving himself in a tacit pact to overcome solitude, even if relationships are superficial.

4.1.2 Information

Seamen on the high seas are very much isolated from what goes on around them. The radiotelegraph will bring them the most important international news, but the other more minor day-to-day news does not reach them. That is why seamen are often fond of radio (television station signals can no longer be picked up once the ship is more than a few miles from the coast). It is common to see electrical wires emerging out of cabin portholes, attached as aerials to any item on deck. Sailors seek radios with short wave bands, not commonly found in cities but certainly to be found near docks and in ports such as the Canary Island ports, in which any stopover can be used to buy, amongst other things, radios, cassettes and the like.

Spanish *Radio Nacional de España*, for example, can be heard in the middle of the Atlantic using short wave radio, especially news and sports programmes, so that seamen can listen to the Sunday football match results or special broadcasts such as *Españoles en la Mar* (Spaniards at Sea).

Seamen on vessels making coastal trips around their own country can buy a newspaper each time they stop in port, and there are no problems picking up local radio stations and even television. Spanish newspapers, however, are hardly to be found in many foreign ports. The major news, as we have seen, reaches seafarers by radio, while other news will be of more local interest, quite apart from language barriers. Thus, when a seaman returns home after several months away from his country, the fact of not having kept up with day-to-day events only increases the feeling of strangeness we note in section 4.5.

The news of greatest interest, in fact, is that which comes from home and from the shipping company, since the shipping company news refers to trips to be made, relief crews, repair dates and so forth.

The postal service also comes under the heading of information. For seamen, arrival in port is synonymous with the hope of receiving letters.

Quite apart from their importance in relation with seamen's families, letters are also a major source of information, not for the major news of the radio, but the smaller, private news about family life or life in the local neighbourhood. This news, which would be meaningless for anybody else, signifies for the person receiving it a chance to continue to follow what is happening in what he considers to be his world and the place to which he directs his thoughts in order to continue feeling that he forms part of it.

4.1.3 Social and political participation: associations and trade unions

One of the main problems seamen face in their attempt to avoid a sensation of marginalisation is their difficulty in taking part in the social and political life of their town, their country. Any potential participation is frustrated from the outset by long voyages, especially to foreign countries. The lack of information referred to in the previous section and difficulty in interpreting news items when one is far from the place and situation in which they arose often prevent any such participation.

Nowadays, when news becomes old from one day to the next, it is very difficult to assimilate it once it has passed.

At political level, there are ways of taking part in elections from a distance, by sending in a postal vote. A person who spends weeks far away from his country has to be put considerable effort into making arrangements to have his vote sent in in the legally established manner and by the due date.

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But there is another type of association, the type which pursues professional objectives. In this group we find, on one hand, the trade associations such as the *Colegio de Oficiales de la Marina Mercante Española (COMME)*, Spanish Merchant Navy Officers' Association, which in order to expand had to achieve compulsory affiliation of Spanish seamen going to sea with Spanish shipping companies, and, on the other hand, the trade unions.

The leading one at international level is the International Transport Federation (ITF). In Spain there are also the merchant navy sections of the chief trade unions, *UGT* and *Comisiones Obreras*, the latter (the SLMM) being founded clandestinely in the last years of the Franco period under the auspices of Spain's Apostleship of the Sea.

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crew recruitment and organisation criteria

In approaching this last chapter, we will have to run though the more significant points we have noted in order to seek responses, and to explore what the future may hold in store for the crews of merchant ships and what fields of research are opening up before us.

With this in mind, after setting out the human problems of the maritime profession, we will turn to a number of papers and studies produced in various countries that attempt to find criteria for defining what merchant ships should be like in human terms in the immediate future and what the characteristics of their crews should be.

5.1 Merchant ships as total institutions: the implications

We began this work by looking at the characteristic traits of total institutions, and we have indeed found all the inherent features of such institutions in merchant ships.

Can we draw any valid conclusions for the ships and their crews?

The total institution inherently has such a powerful impact on the activity for which it was created that it is difficult to draw the line between the group of human beings as a social nucleus of people living together and that group as the performers of the activity concerned.

Naturally, how well the people involved get on together has an influence on any work, but when this shared life goes beyond the strict limits of the joint activity they are intended to perform, and when the person cannot get away from a given role, then the conditions of life for that person have a decisive influence on his private life, and thus on his capacity to perform that activity.

Let us take concentration camps as an example. Their purpose is to keep people confined while making it as easy as possible for their keepers to stay in control. So what do they do? On the one hand they look for threats they can use, and sometimes make an example of an inmate to instil fear in the others, and on the other they set up a busy schedule of activities

so that the inmates get tired and have little time for thinking about other things.

If the institution is a monastery, we can see that the purpose is the contemplative life, study, prayer... All the rules governing the community are aimed at creating life habits through which the monk can attain a degree of personal balance that makes him really capable of leading the life he has chosen.

On a ship, the purpose of the crew, as we have seen, is to make it possible for the ship to undertake certain shipping work. However, if this is to be done, the people who do it must be fed, be allowed to rest properly, and also be able to engage in some level of human relation in order live in a psychically balanced way.

And this is something that the authorities and the shipping companies find very hard to appreciate. They take account of certain requirements in terms of primary necessities, such as food to eat and a bed to sleep in, but when seamen ask for something to enable them to pursue their free time in a rewarding way, the request is regarded as a whim.

The importance of physical exercise, in the form of swimming (in a swimming pool) or table tennis for example, is not recognised. Neither is the importance of not having marginalised individuals aboard. In fact even the need for having a launch to take crew members ashore when the ship is at anchor by a port roadstead is often ignored. And such examples could easily be multiplied...

The problem is that if such elemental factors are frequently disregarded, how can we expect any account to be taken of the importance of creating an atmosphere of togetherness aboard, in which the seafarer can feel that he is a human being first, and then a seaman?

Everything we have said does, I believe, highlight the decisive influence of the man as a person on the man as a crew member.

Some people and bodies have already adopted this view, and so we will devote this last chapter to considering the ships and crews of the future from the sociological standpoint.

5.2 The personal and professional significance of good relations aboard ship

While good relations in the workplace are important anywhere and under any circumstances, they are much more important still when the

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postscript

If I have learned anything over my long years as a student, a seafarer, a nautical-studies lecturer and director of the Barcelona Apostleship of the Sea, it is the fundamental importance in all spheres of life of how people get on and how they deal with each other.

The great strides that science has made over the course of our century has led to the younger generations being given ever greater knowledge of physics, mathematics, computing etc. Science has come to be seen as the key to the future, and the area of choice for devoting one's life.

However, hand in hand with these great strides made by science, we are witnessing alarmingly individualistic trends, showing no respect for the planet we live on, threatening the future of humanity and bringing dehumanisation in their wake.

Environmental groups have emerged to counter this, and the terms "solidarity", "common good" and "mutual respect" have pervaded countless documents and papers.

Yet it would seem that we use these terms for the sake of appearances, while underneath we are caught up in a race in which man is increasingly at the service of technology rather than the other way round.

Studies have been made and are being made in various countries on life aboard ships, particularly from the psychological point of view. These have been prompted essentially by business interests choosing to invest in them through a realisation that human factors are involved in pursuing the economic activity - the economy is one of the major driving forces behind research. The human factor began to arouse interest when insurance companies had to foot huge compensation bills as a result of accidents. As the technology has become more sophisticated, the consequences of human error have become more serious.

The loss of human life in shipwrecks, such as the case of the Titanic, prompted a review of lifesaving systems and safety in general, but nobody gave any serious attention to the psychological burden of people feeling isolated, cloistered and so on until giant oil tankers, carrying hundreds of thousands of tons, began to ply the seas with reduced crews, endangering not just the ship itself but also the environment, with the potential for entire strips of coast being devastated by huge oil slicks from shipwrecks (as in the case of the Exxon Valdez and other ships).