

1-1-1994

Trouble on Board: The Plight of the International Seafarers

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Recommended Citation

Green, Charles S. III (1994) "Trouble on Board: The Plight of the International Seafarers," *Clinical Sociology Review*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 24.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr/vol12/iss1/24>

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in greater detail, within the same number of pages. As it was, even given the clearly introductory nature of the book, this reviewer was left feeling vaguely dissatisfied. What might have been more satisfying would have been the same attention given to all subjects as that given to, in the opinion of this reviewer, the excellent chapters "The Deconstruction of the Self" and "The Ecology of Being."

Trouble on Board: The Plight of the International Seafarers, by Paul K. Chapman, with an introduction by Clifford B. Donn. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1992. 176 pp. NPI. \$32.00 cloth. ISBN 0-87546-180-8. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 0-87546-181-6.

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The book documents rather thoroughly the scandalous treatment of international seafarers and by so doing should provoke much further research. Much of the book consists of case material drawn from over 1600 report forms sent by seafarers to chaplains who apparently then forwarded the forms to the Center for Seafarers Rights. The latter organization was established by the Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey. A lawyer was hired by the Center to research laws and regulations pertinent to seafarers so that the Center's staff could be of better assistance to seafarers. As part of this effort, the author of the book under review began to publish a column on "Know Your Rights" in a newspaper for seafarers distributed free by the Missions to Seamen in London.

The book consists of an Introduction and seven chapters. The Introduction, by economist Clifford B. Donn, serves to place the issues raised in subsequent chapters in the context of the international organization of the commercial cargo maritime industry. Donn distinguishes between liners and bulk carriers. Liners are organized like common carriers in railroading and trucking, carrying almost any cargo at rates established by cartel-like liner conferences. Bulk carriers, by contrast, transport single cargoes for single shippers, so there is a constant turnover of crews. Price competition is high and therefore there is considerable pressure to reduce wage costs. Not surprisingly, most of the mistreatment of seafarers documented in the rest of the book occurs on bulk carriers. One way for the latter to reduce costs is to operate under the flag, i.e., the jurisdiction, of a nation which has few regulations and/or little interest in enforcing regulations. As Donn points out, many Third World nations have found that registering ships is a low cost way to raise revenue. In addition, it is from the very poorest of Third World nations that most international seafarers are now recruited. Furthermore, technology has affected life on board: very large cargo ships now require

smaller crews than in the past and spend less time in ports loading and unloading. Thus there now exists a set of structural conditions that virtually guarantees that seafarers will be ill-treated.

Chapters One through Six address particular sorts of abuses. Chapter One, "The Sea as a Workplace," documents conditions on ocean-going vessels—cruise ships as well as cargo ships—that echo the conditions reported over a century and a half ago in Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*.

Chapter Two, "Getting a Job," may be a revelation to those unfamiliar with maritime recruiting practices. The chapter shows that poor nations can earn significant amounts of scarce foreign exchange money by systematically marketing sailors to shippers. For example, Chapman reports that in 1988 twelve percent of the Philippines' total earnings from exports came from overseas workers who have now overtaken semi-conductors as that nation's top export! To be sure, not all overseas workers are seafarers; but a significant proportion are. Moreover, there isn't much incentive for the "exporting" countries to make sure their workers are well treated. Indeed, Chapman shows that poor nations compete with one another to make their seafarers "attractive" to cost conscious shippers.

Chapter Three is titled "Employment Abuses." The chapter examines a variety of ways in which carriers exploit seafarers: blank contracts of employment, dual sets of payroll accounts (one to show regulators, the other the real accounts), abandonment of ships, failure to pay repatriation costs, underpaid overtime work, foul and dangerous working and living conditions, etc.

Chapter Four is concerned with "Unions—East and West." As noted earlier, seafarers today increasingly come from the Third World. In fact, this book suggests that possibly three-fourths of all seafarers come from poor countries. To such people, seafaring is a comparatively attractive occupation, a fact that makes organizing them into effective unions virtually impossible. Moreover, the scattering of seafarers around the world, the small number who work on any given ship, their transiency, and the ability of shippers to relocate to the friendliest of registering nations compounds the problems of organization. National unions are virtually powerless in the face of such conditions. Finally, the effectiveness of the International Transport Workers' Federation is, according to Chapman, compromised by the conflicting interests of its Western and Asian affiliate unions. "Maritime Law and the Protection of Seafarers" is the topic of Chapter Five. This chapter shows that although there are a number of international laws designed to protect seafarers, there are few means of enforcing them effectively.

Chapter Six deals with "The Stresses of Seafaring." Chapman notes that since ships are "total institutions," careful screening would be desirable to assure an effective match between seafarer and shipboard conditions. But virtually no such screening exists except in a few economically advanced nations. Moreover, little

sensitivity is shown by ship owners or captains to the cultures of their employees, to the complexities of managing culturally diverse crews, or to the impact of long absences on family and community life.

Chapter Seven is devoted to "What Can Be Done?" Chapman reviews a number of the structural sources of seafarer mistreatment including individual ship owners who are undercapitalized, owners who avoid liability by hiding behind an often multi-layered veil of corporate identities, the proliferation of ship registries and the freedom of owners to shift from one flag to another, etc. He also provides a critical review of the reform efforts of unions as well as those of church-sponsored agencies. He notes with respect to the latter that the boards of directors of seamen's centers are often made up of "respectable" members of their host communities who are unable to empathize with the seafarers' plight, and that "the tendency of the church to avoid conflict or deny conflicts that already exist further reduces effectiveness." Chapman goes on to recommend that all human institutions be judged "by their effect on the people who participate in them" and proposes seven specific reforms for the shipping industry. These reforms include: worker associations; permanent contracts; reduction in the length of time at sea; outlawing policies which make it possible for shippers to demand virtually unlimited overtime; more worker participation in decision making both on board ships and within corporations; and preventing registering countries from hiding owners' identities. Chapman recognizes that achieving these reforms would require a significant shift in power. But he then goes on to claim that "it is only as seafarers realize their own strength that they will be able to claim authority over their own lives." Given that Donn and Chapman himself have documented the massive structural obstacles to organization that even outside parties such as churches and unions have failed to overcome, it struck this reviewer as ludicrous that Chapman should place the burden on workers for solving their own plight.

This book is a good read for anyone totally unfamiliar with the plight of seafarers: it succinctly analyzes the causes of their plight and provides heart-rending examples of that plight in seafarers' own voices. Thus it might be considered as a supplement for courses in occupations and organizations, though a true ethnography of seafaring would be much preferable. Even though the book clearly establishes the case that much more research on the maritime industry is required, this book is not itself a contribution to that research. The reliability and validity of the data base (report forms to chaplains) are suspect and the interpretation of that data relies heavily on secondary sources without making any new contribution to theory. Is the book of any value to clinical and applied sociologists? Not really—except as a casebook of failed attempts at social change.