

Breton fishery

Neither fisher nor fish

Modernization and the compulsions of the global market economy threaten the survival of both the fishers and fish of Lower Brittany

On the night of 22 February 1993, several hundreds of French fishers and their families stormed the Rungis wholesale fish market, just south of Paris. In the ensuing mêlée, 800 tonnes of fish valued at over US\$4 million were destroyed. Many of the demonstrators had come from the Breton ports of Le Guilvinec, Douarnenez and Concarneau where, earlier in the day, more than 9,000 people had participated in demonstrations against changes in the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Union (EU) that would cut quotas, force a reduction in the French fishing fleet by as much as 20 per cent, and liberalize regulations governing the import of non-EU fish.

The anger and strength of this protest, as well as subsequent ones, underline the extent of the crisis now rocking the French fishing industry.

Under conditions of ecological and social crisis, how have Breton fishers attempted to reproduce their fishing enterprises? And within the family, who gets pushed out, with what residual claims or contributions, and where do they go? How does differentiation within the community change? And in what way does integration within the EU shape local processes of differentiation? To analyze these questions, I would like to consider the area bounded by the *quarter maritime* of Le Guilvinec.

This administrative unit is roughly coterminous with the cantons of Pont L'Abbe and Le Guilvinec which together form the southernmost part of *le pays Bigouden*. Of the approximately 33,000 people living in the two cantons, about 2,000 are directly employed as commercial fishers. The fishing industry and its shore-based support industries

are, by far, the most important aspect of the economy today. Agriculture, once predominant in this region, has been in decline since the 1960s. The third axis of the local economy is tourism, a somewhat unreliable industry that provides few high-paying jobs while simultaneously driving up living costs for local people.

Over the course of the last century, Breton fishers have created a prosperous industrial fishery. Ironically, it is their very success in exploiting the resource that now threatens to undermine them. Overfishing and a constantly expanding catching capacity has made it increasingly difficult for fish stocks to reproduce. To counter the looming ecological disaster, the EU has cut subsidies to fishers and plans to reduce the overall EU fishing fleet by as much as 20 per cent. These new policies threaten to make bankrupt nearly half of the fishing fleet based in Le Guilvinec.

Although fishing itself occurs in an almost exclusively male environment, no adequate analysis of social reproduction is possible without coming to terms with the gender relations of production on shore and within the family. Studies of fisherfolk have almost exclusively focused on the male-centred crew. Recent literature has, however, begun to redress this problem and see women not as adjuncts to the process of fishing but as integral to it.

Class relations

There are various ways in which local-level class relations (ownership of boats, shore-support facilities, marketing and processing facilities) structure, limit and facilitate small-scale fishers' ability to survive economically. Of particular interest is how these class relations have changed since the establishment of the

industrialized sardine fishery of the 1880s and after the escalation of technological change in this region.

My research in the *pays Bigouden* is as much a product of my own experience as a commercial fisherman in Canada as it is a product of my academic training as an anthropologist. I grew up in a coastal fishing port on the west coast of Canada and, for close to 20 years now, I have made my living as a fisherman. I have also studied and written about issues of resource allocation, social conflict in fishing communities, and fishing co-operatives in the Pacific north-west fishing industry. It is a long way from the deck of a north-west Pacific coast fishing boat to Le Guilvinec. Yet, underlying this physical distance is a fundamental similarity that allows us to communicate with one another in spite of the many differences of language or culture.

My family and I have been living in the *pays Bigouden* since November of last year. During this time, I have had the opportunity to meet many people connected with the fishery not just those involved in administration, but also the men who work the boats and the members of their families.

The main focus of my work has been to describe and analyze the process of social reproduction within the Breton fishery

under conditions of crisis, i.e. how do artisanal fishers organize their economic activities to maintain and/or expand their productive capacity? Further, how are severely diminishing economic opportunities in fishing being negotiated and expressed within the family and the wider community?

My work is anthropological. By this, I mean that I am most interested in listening to, and understanding, what the people directly involved in the fishing industry and the local community have to say about their lives.

As an anthropologist, I am interested in how people solve their everyday problems of survival. While the bio-economic approach popular with fisheries managers focuses strictly on measurable quantities such as fishing effort, rates of profit or maximum sustainable yield, the anthropological approach seeks to bring real people into the picture. For an Eurocrat in Brussels or a *fonctionnaire* in Paris, manipulating statistics and adjusting regulations is just that: but in the fishing communities it could mean the loss of jobs, boats, and a way of life.

Inter-related processes

The difficulties experienced by the fishing communities during the past few years are the product of a series of inter-related processes: technological developments,



stock depletion, government attempts at regulation, and the internationalization of the market.

The post-Second World War modernization of the French fishing fleet resulted in a threefold expansion in the volume of fish landed. However, the number of active fishermen in the Breton fishing industry plummeted from 25,000 to 8,000. The catching capacity of today's capital-intensive and efficient fishing fleet greatly exceeds the reproductive capacity of the fish stocks.

In order to minimize social disruption among fishers, while simultaneously attempting to conserve fish stocks, government agencies have introduced a variety of restrictive policies that range from limiting access to fishing grounds, restricting types and sizes of fishing gear, controlling vessel size and power, to the establishment of regional and species quotas. However, these measures have only compounded the problems of those who fish. Breton fishers and their European co-workers face the likelihood of further fleet size reductions, continuously declining fish stocks, and the potential collapse of their way of life.

Since the end of the Second World War, both the value and the volume of fish landed in the Bigouden ports have increased. Overall catches levelled off during the mid-1980s and dropped

significantly in the early 1990s. Initially, the drop in production was offset by continued increases in fish prices. However, as a result of changes in the structure of the international market and currency fluctuations, the prices of fish plummeted in the early 1990s, leading to the social protests that swept across Brittany in 1993 and 1994. Faced with a crisis of this sort, artisanal fishers have two basic options: reduce consumption or increase production. However, both these options have finite limits beyond which one can do very little.

The direct impact of this crisis on the fishing fleet is reflected in the day-to-day operations of boats in three very specific fashions: reductions in crew size; reductions in expenditures on maintenance of vessels; and an increase in fishing time.

For example, since 1989, the crew size at sea on a fleet of 24-in boats belonging to one local fishing company has declined from six to five. During the same period, many of the coastal draggers have gone from four to three men at sea. While technological changes (such as the switch from side-trawling to stern-trawling) has been at the root of downsizing of crews in the past, today the explanations are more economic. Fewer men translates directly into bigger crew shares.

Many boatowners have also cut back as much as possible on maintenance expenditures. Boats are taken up on the slipway less frequently than before. Gear and equipment which need to be replaced are made to last longer than had been the practice. Some of this economizing may, in the short term, improve the productivity of the vessels and hence increase the boatowners' revenue. These practices may also, again in the short term, maintain or at least slow down declining incomes. However, studies of fisheries elsewhere demonstrate that, ultimately, such measures normally lead to a deterioration of conditions of work and a worsening of shipboard safety.

Social and economic impact

The crisis also has a social and economic impact on the fishers' family. Most obviously, declining incomes force changes in patterns of consumption. Less

obvious and ultimately more crucial are the hidden processes of economizing that occur within the family.

Due to the nature of the regional economy and high levels of unemployment, it is difficult for fishing families to supplement their losses with income generated by other family members.

The level of state involvement in the French fishing industry is amazing. The French fishing industry has been encouraged by the national government with a seemingly constant and unending supply of money since the end of the Second World War. One need only look across to England to see what a difference government policy makes. In Newlyn harbour, the average age of the fishing fleet is close to 20 years. In Le Guilvinec, the average age is about half that. In the years immediately following the War, fishing provided jobs and much-needed food. In more recent years, however, the state-led modernization of the fleet has expanded catching capacity, while simultaneously destroying jobs.

The crisis that local fishing communities are facing in France is part of a global fishing crisis. The amount of fish caught from the world's oceans peaked in the 1980s and has been declining ever since. FAO has determined that of 17 world fisheries, four are in a state of commercial depletion and nine more are in serious decline. However, under the pressure of the market economy, fishing effort has only continued to increase.

Two particular aspects of the linkage between artisanal fishing industries and the logic of the market economy are noteworthy. First, the logic of the market economy propels fishing technologies to develop to a point where catching capacity exceeds the ability of fish stocks to successfully reproduce. This is clearly demonstrated by several instances world-wide, the most recent being the complete closure of the northern cod fishery of Newfoundland that has thrown close to 50,000 people out of work.

Second, the epicentre of economic growth in fisheries is located not in the areas where fishing is based, but rather in

metropolitan centres far removed from the lives and communities of fisherfolk.

The unrelenting movement toward liberalized trade and the globalization of the market is making it increasingly difficult for communities to retain any real control over local development. In a world that is more and more becoming a global village, fishers must be careful not to ghettoize themselves. Fishing communities need to reach beyond their narrow regional or nationalist boundaries and form effective linkages that can intervene at a global level.

It is perhaps self-evident but necessary to state that fisheries management schemes of the 20th century have not been oriented toward the social well-being of the fishing communities, but rather towards profits. Conservation efforts are only rearguard actions designed to maintain reasonable profits for the medium term. In this process, neither the fisher nor the fish benefits: both die out. It is time to think ahead to our grandchildren's grandchildren and to ask ourselves if there will be any fish left for them.

This piece is based on a research proposal for a historical ethnography of the fishing community of Le Guilvinec by Charles R. Menzes of Pont L'Abbe, France

This piece is by Hilda Salazar Ramirez, an environmental activist who works with the fishermen's union in Mexico