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The Share System in the Fisheries:

Co-venturing on the Dutch Island of Texel

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Across the world, labour in the fisheries is usually remunerated not with a fixed or flat wage, but via a share system. It implies the following. The catch is sold to the market, for example at an auction. It fetches a certain amount of money (the gross revenues). Variable operational costs, for instance for fuel, lubricants, insurances and commissariat, are subtracted from this sum of money. This results in a net revenue, which is divided between the boat (meaning the owner or owners) and the crew, according to some predetermined ratio, the ‘shares’. The ‘boat share’ should cover for instalments, depreciation, maintenance, repairs, future investments and an income and possibly a profit for the owner(s). As a rule, the ‘crew share’ is subdivided into either equal parts for each crewmember or varying parts according to position, specific skills and/or seniority. A skipper often has certain privileges and may receive a higher share than the ‘ordinary’ crewmembers. If an owner or co-owner is on a crew, he is also entitled to a part of the crew share. Share systems vary according to type of fishery and type of vessel. There may be a fixed minimum wage for the crew combined with a share or the share may be all that crewmembers receive.

The share system makes fishing a typical example of co-adventuring: owners and non-owners share costs, risks and rewards and they have overlapping interests in keeping operating costs low and net proceeds high. Anthropologists and historians who have studied fishing economies often point out that the share system has several benefits. It elicits the crew’s commitment and labour motivation, stimulates economic productivity, alleviates social tensions, minimizes conflict, promotes cooperative behaviour and fosters a spirit of egalitarianism (Norr and Norr 1978; Acheson 1981:143; Lummis 1985:42; McGoodwin 1990:33; Pascual Fernández 1999). As has been remarked about British fishermen, the share convention ‘undercut class attitudes in two ways, for it fostered both individualism, and interdependence across the normal boundaries of class’ (Thompson et al. 1983:244). The share system of remuneration brings together capital and labour in their interest to minimize costs and maximize production and revenues. According to St Martin (2007:528), share systems in the fisheries are an obstacle to the concentration of wealth among boat owners and to capital accumulation more generally. This, St Martin argues, makes share fisheries a non-capitalist venture (for a critique, see Howard 2012). The system is also said to potentially stimulate social mobility since crewmembers may aspire to become (part)-owners themselves.

However, given the current capital requirements of not only a boat and gear but also a licence and in many cases quota entitlements, it has become increasingly difficult to fulfil aspirations of ‘moving up’ in the modern capitalist world. The question is also who benefits most from the share system: the non-propertied crewmembers or the owner(s)? By emphasizing the benefits of the share system of remuneration, the anthropologists’ and historians’ view would seem to be rather unbalanced (see, however, Pascual Fernández 1999). In this article, I argue that in addition to obvious advantages, there may be serious disadvantages to the share system, particularly for non-propertied crewmembers (for whom I will use the term ‘deckhands’ as a synonym). The negative sides are particularly strong in conditions where fisheries are rights-based through individual transferable quotas (ITQs) or another type of entitlement that is tied to the boat owner(s).

I will show this by focusing on the Dutch fishery industry, in particular on the fishing community of the island of Texel where I conducted long-term anthropological and historical research (see van Ginkel 2007). I argue that when fisheries become rights-based, this may have serious consequences for co-venturing and the legitimacy of the share system. The egalitarian façade may prove to be thin veneer when the owners’ power position becomes stronger if they ‘own’ not only the means of production, but also the rights of exploitation. Nonetheless they also benefit from what some scholars perceive to be a non-capitalist mode of production (St Martin 2007). This fact ensures that the owners will have to strike a balance between their self-interest and what non-propertied crewmen deem acceptable. Moreover, on Texel fishing is to some extent embedded in a moral economy: ‘a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community’ (Thompson 1971:79). Relationships in fishing

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1 I will not deal with the economists’ view here.
villages are multi-stranded, with consanguineous or in-law ties often playing an important role in quotidian life, particularly in the occupational community of fisher folk. This usually mitigates what could otherwise develop into an exploitative mode of production. The power balance is fragile though, and very much skewed to the owners’ advantage. As we shall see, living up to an ‘ethic of fairness’ has not been easy in recent times.

**Texel and its Fishing Industry**

The island of Texel is the southern-and westernmost of the Dutch Wadden Islands. It is a municipality, about 160 square kilometres in size, and situated some ninety kilometres due north of Amsterdam. The narrow Marsdiep sound separates the island from the mainland. To the island’s east extends the Wadden Sea, and to the west stretches the North Sea, which is rich in resources and an important fishing area. Currently, the island boasts approximately 13,600 inhabitants, most of whom live in one of the seven villages. Texel is distinctly rural. Historically, agriculture and fisheries have been important sectors of the local economy, but following the Second World War, tourism began dominating the island economy. Nowadays, over a million holidaymakers visit the island each year. Oosterend and Oudeschild are the island’s fishing communities. The harbour is situated in the latter village and some owner-operators and many crewmembers live there. Oosterend is home to members of some longstanding fishing lineages that operate offshore vessels.

In 2007, Texel’s fishing fleet boasted twenty cutters. They are owned and operated by family firms consisting of a core of agnatic kin (father-son(s), brothers) or—rarely—in-laws. Two additional vessels are foreign-registered but owned and operated by local firms that also have a Texel-registered boat. Most vessels fish in the southern and south-eastern North Sea. Twelve are capital-intensive big beam trawlers of over forty metres in length and equipped with 2,000 hp engines. Such vessels are manned by a legally required crew of six. The five-day trips start on Sunday midnight or early Monday morning. Ten boats have 300 hp engines and a length of twenty-four metres or just under. They are crewed by four men and are suited for beam trawling and twin rigging. The
latter category is allowed to fish within the Dutch section of the North Sea’s twelve nautical mile zone. Whilst fishing, the former should remain beyond this limit. A recent innovation is that the heavy beams and tickler chains are substituted by a lighter ‘wing’ and drag wires through which electric pulses are sent to shake up the flatfish such as sole and plaice, which are the main target species. Although the Texel-registered fleet is rather small, in terms of landing rights it accounts for approximately ten per cent of the Dutch plaice quota and twelve per cent of the national sole quota. Currently, approximately 125 fishermen – including owners – crew the local fishing fleet. They are remunerated on the basis of a share system. In addition, there are a dozen or so co-owners who have retired from their active fishing careers. The local Fishery Coop employs another dozen people, while most firms hire at least one man to attend to the nets. The fishing industry provides work for many more islanders in ship’s maintenance and repair, provisioning, administration, bookkeeping and so on.

During my first stint of anthropological fieldwork, from December 1989 to March 1991, the Dutch offshore fishing industry was in great turmoil. Fishermen often made headline news for overshooting individual quotas and conflicting with law enforcement officers. A co-management scheme was introduced two years after I had left the island. When I returned to conduct follow-up research in August 2005, the local fishing fleet was considerably smaller than fifteen years earlier. Fifteen Texel boats had been taken off the Fishery Register, while only four new ones had been added to it. This implies that many local fishermen had to leave the fleet. Most of them found employment in the offshore industry, with the island’s ferry company, an oceanographic research institute or as bargemen. Working as a share crewman implies that one is not entitled to any of the social benefits under collective labour agreements. Legally, share fishermen are considered to be independent, self-employed entrepreneurs.

How the Share System Evolved

It is unclear when exactly the share system of remuneration was introduced in the Texel fisheries. However, by the First World War, nearly all fishermen worked on the basis of shares. The share division varied according to the type of fishery. For example, in shrimpfishing a deckhand would get a third of the net proceeds and in North Sea fishing twenty-five to thirty percent. An apprentice ‘third man’ received a fixed amount of money. The weekly incomes were usually modest, but if catches and prices were good, the remuneration was much better than for onshore manual labour. Nevertheless, high catches commonly meant low prices and high prices rarely made up for poor catches. If such an unfavourable situation persisted for a prolonged period of time, many non-propertied crewmembers attempted to get an onshore job and few men desired to join a fishing crew. Given the share-system of remuneration, it was financially unattractive for crew to join a skipper-owner who did not earn much. Such was the economic situation in the small-scale fisheries in the 1930s. Due to the economic crisis many crewmembers left the fishery. It became ever more difficult for petty skipper-owners to recruit crewmembers, especially if they could not count on their own male kin. This forced some to temporarily find a land-based job themselves. Others sold their boat and acquired a smaller one that they could operate alone or with one deckhand instead of two crewmembers. Consequently, the number of Texel fishermen and the number of vessels steadily decreased.

The crisis hit the small-scale inshore sector in particular, but in contradistinction, the offshore sector was thriving. Propertied fishermen who sailed the North Sea continually invested in new boats. In the late 1920s, they began operating the first steel-hulled and motor-powered vessels (‘cutters’). Since investment in steel-hulled cutters required large sums of money, the share division between vessel and crew was fixed at fifty-fifty. With a crew of five, this implied that the skipper and full-blown deckhands would obtain a ten per cent share each. An important element in the success of skipper-owners was the fact that their crews were usually composed of agnatic kin. Family firms were able to continue fishing in adverse times because skipper-owners working with close kinsmen did not have to pay full shares, but a smaller amount of ‘week money’ (weekgeld). The remainder was re-invested in the firm. Sons accepted the deferred gratification because at some point in future they would
become (co-)owners themselves.² Texel skipper-owners and deckhands working in the offshore segment obtained good annual incomes. The latter often earned considerably more than skilled labourers during the years of economic crisis. With low operating costs and good fish prices, gross revenues amounting to 700 guilders per week were no exception in the late 1930s. When variable costs and the boat share were covered for, each of the crewmembers would then earn sixty guilders, which was extremely good money. Of course, there were weeks in which the boats could not sail due to inclement weather, but in general, the North Sea fishermen were rather well off.

This system worked particularly well for the owner-operators, but non-propertied crewmen also benefitted. With a five-year interim when fishing vessels were impounded by the German occupiers during World War Two, this continued to be the case in the second half of the 1940s and the 1950s. North Sea fishermen were relatively wealthy. Fishing contributed 700,000 guilders to the local economy in 1950, and this amount had more than tripled by the end of the decade. Part of this rise is explained by an expansion of the fleet, but per boat, the gross revenues rose from a mean of just over 100,000 guilders to around 150,000 guilders in the same period. With such gross proceeds, rapid expansion and modernization were feasible. Due to specific tax measures, continual reinvestment prevented the owner-operators from having to hand over a considerable part of their profits to the tax inspector. They preferred to keep the money in the firm. Revenues and incomes soared. The most powerful vessels – using the beam-trawl technique from the early 1960s onwards – obtained the highest proceeds. This was a huge incentive to invest in new equipment. By 1972, mean gross incomes of Texel share fishermen amounted to 47,500 guilders. Corrected for inflation, this implied a doubling of income in fifteen years, making fishing an attractive occupation. Beam trawling brought prosperity to the island’s fishing communities. Many local young men desired to be on a crew, so there was no shortage of hands. The easy recruitment of locals was inextricably connected with the attractive share remuneration. In several cases, their earnings provided crewmembers with the capital to sooner or later buy a boat of their own and become independent. On Texel, the occupational community boasted 200 to 220 fishermen in the 1980s. In addition, there was a large pool of substitute crewmembers.

It would seem, then, that the share system of remuneration had many or all of the advantages that anthropologists point out. It has already become clear, however, that for non-propertied crewmembers it is particularly attractive in times of a boom in the fisheries and at the same time very unattractive if fisheries or markets fail. For owners, it is the other way around: in good times, paying a flat wage would be more profitable, while in times when catches and/or prices are low, the share system works best for them because non-propertied deckhands share many of the entrepreneurial risks. So let us take a closer look at some of the share system’s details and learn about the owners’ and crewmembers’ opinions.

### The Partnership Contract: Sharing Risks and Revenues

Texel fishermen operate under a legal partnership contract (maatschapscontract).³ This contract states that all crewmembers receive a certain percentage of the net revenues and that owner(s) and crew have a joint responsibility and a stake in the result. Accordingly, in theory, the parties ought to consult each other on such matters as fishing positions, fishing strategies and times of departure and return. The owner will provide for the vessel and the nets (the means of production), while the non-propertied crewmembers will deliver ‘labour, knowledge and assiduity’. The contract is valid for a year and automatically renewed, unless one of the signatories terminates it within a set term, usually four weeks in advance. The law considers share fishermen to be self-employed entrepreneurs, even if they do not own any assets in the firm.

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² This strategy of capital accumulation was also common in the fisheries of the Canary Islands. It sometimes gave rise to tensions between father and sons (see Pascual Fernández 1999).

³ I use the ‘ethnographic present’, since most of what I write in this section still applies today.
Owners benefit because crewmembers: share the fishing operation’s risks; are dedicated and work hard to maximize the gross revenues; are motivated to limit costs and avoid damages that would diminish effective fishing time, and are conscientious in keeping the vessel and equipment in tip-top condition. If feasible, the crew conducts maintenance and minor repairs. When a vessel cannot sail due to repairs and if catches or prices are bad, owners do not face the problem of having to pay fixed weekly or monthly wages. Deckhands are better off because they share in the proceeds of capital. If catches and prices are good, they earn well, creating an incentive to put in extra effort because they will share in the rewards. Hence, under the share system labour productivity is high, but the deckhands’ weekly incomes fluctuate considerably. They may reap a windfall or earn nothing at all. ‘There have been months when I earned what Mr Average had in a year,’ related a crewmember born in 1938. For what is pejoratively dubbed ‘unskilled labour’, deckhands indeed made extremely good money. Incomes could fluctuate heavily, though. ‘One week you would gross so much, the next week three times that amount of money and the third week you would earn nothing,’ said a retired deckhand, born in 1929. ‘You always had to calculate what you earned across the entire year.’ The fishermen were generally well aware of the vicissitudes of fishing and adapted to the ups and downs. The share convention ties them directly to ecological and market contingencies. If deckhands fall ill, are on holiday or cannot work for other reasons, they do not earn a penny. The same is true during regular maintenance or when vessels are docked to be repaired or overhauled, which may take weeks or even months.

For a long time, the vessel and crew share in the offshore cutter fisheries used to be fifty–fifty, and with equal shares. With a crew of five, each crewmember would then receive ten per cent of the net proceeds. Deckhands sometimes find it unfair that less experienced, less qualified or less dexterous deckhands should receive equal shares while forcing them to compensate for their inabilities. There is much peer pressure and social control to perform well. Shirking is not tolerated. Share fishing implies that each crewmember has
to literally ‘earn his share’, meaning that he has to work hard and keep up with his colleagues aboard ship. Crewmembers are meticulous about their jobs. They have a stake in keeping everything in good repair. Many handle the boat and the equipment as if they owned it. Their work practice is conscientious, which is not imposed, but elicited through the share system of payment. The system stimulates a penchant for independence and self-reliance.

Because of the partnership model, the micro-social relationships aboard are rather egalitarian. Apart from some specialist tasks, there is no clear division of labour. Even ‘specialists’ (the engineer, the cook, the ‘fish hold man’, the helmsman), take part in all other work. Having his own responsibilities, the skipper stands out to some extent. However, in many cases, a skipper is also a father or an elder brother and this can make his authority seem ‘natural’. Moreover, the usually long-standing and multi-stranded relationships between crewmembers – in many cases they are consanguineous relatives, in-laws, neighbours or fellow villagers – foster a relaxed shipboard atmosphere and enhance a team spirit. It is important that one can trust and depend on the other deckhands, especially in inclement weather. Being interdependent also necessitates a great measure of tolerance. Ideally, there is an ethic of cooperation, relations are congenial and egalitarian, and a skipper downplays his power. Nevertheless, there is hierarchy. Despite egalitarianism being the principle, in practice the skipper always decides. Ideal or rhetoric on the one hand and practice on the other are often at odds and even though in theory the share system appears to be to the advantage of crewmembers – who benefit from the owner’s capital input – not all of them are particularly enthusiastic about it.

I learned about the deckhands’ dissatisfaction when I had joined a crew for a week in 1990. I was rather surprised, after having learned about the share system’s benefits in the anthropological literature. Their discontent had much to do with a breach of the moral economy and the ethic of fairness that were a vital part of the share system. Let me explain.

Because of the rapid capital-intensive fishing fleet’s modernization, skipper-owners had begun discussing a change of the share arrangement in the early 1970s. For decades, it had been based on a fifty–fifty division between vessel and crew, but with the greater capital outlay newer vessels required, the skipper-owners deemed it reasonable that the vessel share should be increased. The issue was discussed at firm level and also in the local fishermen’s association. It led to heated debates. Nearly all firms initially chose to maintain the fifty–fifty division. The matter would stay on the agenda, however, and in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis deliberations intensified at local as well as national levels. The national Fishermen’s Union proposed a scheme of different proportions for four categories of vessels. The Texel fishermen opposed such uniformity, however, arguing that the shares should be fixed in agreement between skipper-owner and crew. Nearly a hundred fishermen showed up at the local fishermen’s association’s meeting in which the subject was down for consideration. The association decided that the fifty–fifty share agreement would be maintained in the category of boats with up to 1,000 horsepower (h.p.) engines, while on beamers over 1,000 h.p. the shares would be 55 per cent for the boat and 45 per cent for the crew. This change of the share convention reflected the fact that powerful boats tended to be more capital-intensive and had greater exploitation costs than smaller ones. The owners firmly believed that they would be able to explain the need to change the share convention and that the crew
would understand and accept it if they did. Even in hindsight, they legitimized changing the share convention: ‘For the crewmembers, the fifty–fifty arrangement was sacred, but as skipper-owners we were confronted with ever higher exploitation costs. Initially, the deckhands protested and it gave rise to tension. When they discovered they were earning more because boats were bigger and better, all was serene again,’ claimed a skipper-owner, born in 1946.

However, changing the shares did lead to crew dissatisfaction aboard several boats. The deckhands continued their attempts to redress the share convention to the fifty–fifty arrangement. Their efforts stood little chance. There was more to be disgruntled about. A retired deckhand, born in 1928, recalled: ‘During the oil crisis, the owners received state subsidies on fuel, but we never got anything at all. That was improper, for we also paid for the fuel because the costs were subtracted from the gross revenues.’ He sighed and continued: ‘You would not tell that you were dissatisfied, because there were many people looking for a position aboard a fishing boat. Particularly if you crewed with a top skipper, you shut your mouth and said Amen. Money alleviates labour.’ Another thorn in the crewmembers’ side was that some skipper-owners chose to maintain the traditional share convention so that some crews fared better than others. Generally, skipper-owners who were not heavily indebted had more leeway to do so. This gave rise to envy. The deckhands who received lower shares deemed heterogeneity with respect to the share system unfair.

Skipper-owners justified altering the shares by pointing out that investments were up and hence capital risks had increased. They needed a larger share to remain solid with the bank and to cover for their boat’s depreciation. Moreover, in the mid-1970s they did not only own a vessel, but also quotas. These had been ‘grandfathered’, but soon a trade in such entitlements began and this added another cost item to the bill as buying or renting quotas became increasingly expensive. The deckhands’ say was minimal and they did not comprehend why the share arrangement should be changed. Owner-operators felt that the crewmen were selfish and not very emphatic. They argued that the increasing costs of a vessel, equipment and quotas had altered the balance of risks and necessitated a greater boat share. One of them remarked: ‘If the firm goes to hell, the deckhands will also become jobless.’ However, an older colleague was able to empathize with the crewmembers:

The crew may rise up against the owner if he changes the shares. It all depends, however. If you still earn al lot, you won’t grumble. But well, if it gets less, they’ll protest. They’ll discuss it in the fishermen’s association, although they will first attempt to strike a deal with the skipper-owner. You should not forget that you’re on a boat with five or six crew for the entire week, so the relationships ought to be harmonious. If you have a knife between your teeth, that won’t work, and it wouldn’t be fair anyway. You have to try to work it out together

Be this as it may, the mounting tensions between owners and crew revealed that the share system and the partnership contract were not so perfect after all.

Footloose Labour or the Deckhands’ Agency

It became increasingly difficult to recruit crew in the course of the 1990s. As long as revenues were good and non-propertied fishermen benefited, the partnership contract and the share system of remuneration worked well. But when the owners changed the share convention, the egalitarian veneer began to crack. The unilateral decision went against the grain for the deckhands, who felt the old convention to be a moral duty. Although they opposed the change, they seemed powerless. Compared with onshore jobs, the remuneration was still good although work hours were long. As there was no shortage of hands, boat owners could pick other crewmembers from among a pool of stand-in deckhands who were willing to work for lower shares and still earn good money. These events affected the mutual relationships between owners and non-propertied deckhands and the social distance between them increased. Although many crewmembers deemed a temporary change of the share division acceptable to enable owners to weather the depression, what aggravated them was the fact that the latter did not redress it when in the late 1970s things had started to improve again. On the contrary, renewed
discussions pertaining to a revised partnership contract came about, with skipper-owners arguing that their capital input had increased following the introduction of individual quotas. Deckhands distrusted it and many initially refused to sign the contract. One-sidedly changing the share convention was indicative of asymmetric relationships. The egalitarian rhetoric notwithstanding, the power balance was clearly lopsided in the owner-operators’ favour.

The acquisition of more powerful vessels and additional quota entitlements in the 1980s required considerable sums of money. Therefore, most owners demanded a 58 per cent vessel share. Officially, the partnership contract gave joint responsibility to skipper-owners and deckhands when it came to fishing, but in practice the former usually decided on when, where and how to fish. Moreover, deckhands had no influence whatsoever in the running of the business such as decisions on investments and quota transactions. The skipper-owners argued that with the altered share division the net incomes of crewmembers would still be high since increased landing entitlements would imply greater revenues. Even though elsewhere in the Netherlands an even worse sixty–forty per cent arrangement became common, the Texel deckhands were not amused.4 For them, it felt like déjà vu, leading to a further deterioration of their trust in and respect for the skipper-owners. A conflict was smouldering. The deckhands perceived it as a grave injustice that they were ‘partners’, yet had no say whatsoever when an owner changed the share convention. Many deemed it unfair that owners and not vessels had received quotas. This way, owner-operators had become ‘quota millionaires’ while deckhands – who contributed their labour, knowledge and assiduity and thus were co-responsible for the results on which individual quota allocations were based – stood empty-handed. Part of the crewmembers’ dissatisfaction was also linked with the partnership contract’s terms that specified that the rent of additional quotas and fines for rule beating would be subtracted from the revenues and hence partly from the crew share. Fines were tax deductible for owners, but the deckhands paid their relative share without having the tax-deduction opportunity.

There were also instances of abuse by skipper-owners. Some of them first rented out a part of their entitlements — cashing the money without any redistribution to the crew — and then later had to lease additional quotas for which crewmembers had to pay part of the bill. One of the owners transferred part of his quotas to a small boat and then rented it back to his beam trawler. He deducted the rent from the crew share, in fact making the deckhands pay for quotas he already owned. Two other skipper-owners sought to subtract the purchase of quota entitlements

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4 There is evidence that in other countries where ITQs have been introduced it is a common practice that the crew’s share is reduced (see Brandt and Ding 2008).
from the crew share. It must be emphasized, however, that the vast majority of skipper-owners and the local fishermen’s association’s board unequivocally condemned such practices and did not indulge in them. Deckhands still had enough to complain about, though. On the weekly account, the item ‘operational costs’, which were subtracted from the gross revenues, often tended to be rather diffuse. Some owners put bills on the table so that the crew could check them. Others, however, were less clear and subtracted standard sums of money. This gave rise to ‘quay talk’ (gossip). The deckhands demanded more clarity and more uniformity. In order to subdue the deckhands’ mounting discontent, in 1995 the fishermen’s association’s board began working on a new partnership contract that would be supported by owners and crew alike. The revised contract stipulated that owners should use up their entitlements before leasing additional landing allowances and could not subtract costs for the acquisition of additional quotas. In addition, the association provided for an arbitration by-law and an arbitration committee with representatives from both parties. The committee almost immediately had to address some moot points following complaints by a few deckhands. The association also commissioned an investigation into the issue of cost subtractions on the settlement. Accountants compared the ways in which owners handled the settlements, but did not discover any irregularities.

The events had driven a wedge in the ranks of Texel’s occupational community of fishermen. Owner-operators and deckhands began drifting more and more apart, while discussion on the share divisions continued. Contractual certainty for non-propertied crewmen was lacking. Skippers could sack them without much ado. It only took a four-week’s term of notice to fire a deckhand, who then became unemployed without any kind of benefits. The state of affairs had a negative effect on the outlook of crewmembers on their occupation. Their pride in being a fisherman began withering away and they mentally dissociated from the occupation. Whereas in the past they identified with the boat they worked on and the skipper-owner they crewed with, they subsequently considered themselves to be working for a skipper-owner.

Job satisfaction diminished when the deckhands saw their incomes declining and their labour hours increasing. They began voting with their feet and fewer and fewer newcomers joined fishing crews. The partnership contract stipulated that crew could leave a boat after a four-week’s notice. Many did. The fact that deckhands could leave a vessel at short notice mitigated the owners’ power. Several of them began facing the problem of finding sufficient deckhands. The difficulties pertaining to recruiting crew were evidence that the owners’ power was limited. They depended on the labour provided by non-related share fishermen – at least more so than in the past, when nuclear families were much larger and crews composed largely of agnatic kin and in-laws were more common. Some Texel owner-operators regarded deckhands who left their boat as ‘defectors’, considering it a personal affront when one of ‘their’ crewmembers opted for another career or – worse yet – another fishing boat. They also resented the deckhands’ criticism about the share division and the personal incomes of owners and quickly dismissed it as ‘quay talk’. Other owner-operators seemed indifferent. For example, a skipper who saw five experienced crewmembers leave in the span of half a year just shrugged his shoulders when I asked him whether he was not concerned about this phenomenon. ‘I cannot force them to stay,’ he replied, ‘they are free to go.’

The Texel deckhands continued to air their grievances concerning the share division’s
alteration among themselves. Some skippers still allocated smaller shares to the crew than others. The issue of cost subtractions would also stay on the agenda. With revenues declining, the crewmembers’ incomes fell, while social security, health and additional insurance fees continued to rise sharply. Despite declining incomes, they had to pay off mortgages and meet the costs of living. This proved to be increasingly difficult after the millennium. With operating costs rocketing due to high fuel prices, the deckhands sometimes returned home after a week’s hard work with extremely low remunerations. In many cases, spouses had to find a job to meet financial commitments. During the summer of 2005, scores of crewmembers earned a gross income of less than €150 per week. Later that year, results improved considerably, but in many nuclear families wives put pressure on their husbands to find other employment, if they had not themselves already decided to do just that. By the end of that same year, twenty-five young deckhands had switched careers and left the fisheries. Owners faced profound difficulties to staff their boats. Apparently, the share system of remuneration is not so perfect after all. So let me draw a few conclusions.

Conclusions

For a long time, the partnership contract and the share system tied non-propertied fishermen to the family firm, and they benefitted directly from the proceeds of the owner-operators’ capital assets. Skipper-owners, in turn, had highly motivated and dedicated crewmen in whose self-interest it was to work relentlessly and put in long hours, to maximize the gross proceeds and minimize the costs, and to keep the boat and the equipment in good repair. This rendered the owner’s supervision largely superfluous. An additional advantage for owners was that they did not have to pay fixed wages and could distribute risks to the crew as a whole, which provided the firm with considerable flexibility in times of meagre revenues. Economist Sutinen (1979) considers this to be a crucial positive feature of the share system. However, these advantages only benefit the owners of fishing assets. In fact, conflict is part and parcel of the share system (Pascual Fernández 1999:65), particularly so in times of crisis. As we have seen, under prolonged duress non-propertied share fishermen tend to exit the fishing industry for more secure jobs. This is the share system’s fundamental weakness: it only loosely ties co-venturing labour to a firm. Ever since the share system turned into common practice on Texel, skipper-owners have faced problems in keeping or recruiting crewmembers in times of depression, regardless of the share division’s exact details. Even though share fishermen are considered independent petty entrepreneurs before the law, their ‘independence’ is in fact limited to their supply of labour. Through the share system, they are directly linked with and vulnerable to ecological shifts, economic cycles and political interventions. There may be windfalls, but also hardships. During crises, non-propertied share fishermen feel they carry the brunt of the fishing venture’s risks. This is particularly true if fishermen are operating under a rights-based regime, with the owners holding the entitlements.

The rights-based system in the fisheries brought about a shift in the power balance between the rights-holding owner-operator or company and non-propertied crewmembers. The initial allocation of entitlements privileged the generation of fishermen who received allowances to a certain percentage of quotas free of charge over future generations who will have to pay for them. Moreover, this benefit accrued to boat owners while co-venturing crewmen did not share. This widened the social distance between them. The system virtually blocked social mobility in that crewmen and newcomers had few opportunities to acquire rights and as capital was substituted for labour, the system led to diminishing employment in conditions in which crewmembers were not liable to receive redundancy payments. Crew loyalty declined, since investments in quotas meant lower percentages in the share system of remuneration. This in turn led to declining interest in becoming a fisherman, while at the same time it became more difficult to maintain family firms. Thus, the introduction of individual transferable quotas has been socially divisive. The balance of power between skipper-owners and deckhands has become more skewed towards the former, as they are the rights holders. Non-propertied crewmembers face the new regime’s consequences; owner-operators have altered the division between the vessel share and the crew share, lowering the percentages given to deckhands. In addition, owner-operators subtract
new costs from the gross revenues: the rent of quotas and fines.

Although there are no capitalist relations of production in the share-based fisheries – wage labour not being part of the deal – the deckhands currently do feel exploited. They are simultaneously workers and self-employed entrepreneurs, but under the extant conditions, they believe the weight of the partnership contract and the share convention rests on their shoulders. Non-propertied crewmembers feel that with fluctuating quotas and soaring expenses they bear the brunt of entrepreneurial risks. They are of the opinion that as rights holders, the owner-operators sit in a comparatively comfortable position. Selling the firm with its quotas will yield them a considerable sum of money, none of which will accrue to the crewmembers. The social and mental distance between skipper-owners and non-propertied deckhands has increased tremendously. The shift in the balance of power between skipper-owners and deckhands has made recruiting crew increasingly difficult. Having little bargaining power, crew can only vote with their feet. This is profoundly evident at present. There is a reluctance to join fishing crews and even owners allegedly encourage their sons ‘to learn a trade’. With the turning of the economic tide, many have done so.

Eventually this may result in capitalist relations of production if the share system of remuneration is replaced by wage labour. Over the past two decades, many Poles have already been recruited as crewmembers on Dutch fishing boats. They do not work as share fishermen, but they receive a fixed wage with perhaps a bonus. In west-coast Scotland, there has also been a transition towards

Figure 5. Texel crew checking nets and chains upon return from a fishing trip (photo collection author).
waged migrant labour (Filipinos and Eastern Europeans) in recent years (Howard 2012). They work on temporary visas and contracts. According to St Martin, the introduction of Individual Fishing Quotas might give rise to a ‘class transformation’ in that fishermen become wage labourers (2007:542). In the occupational community of fishermen on Texel, waged (migrant) labour is still rare. But deckhands are quick to volunteer their disappointment in and dissatisfaction with the share system. They indubitably experience the drawbacks of co-venturing. They are well aware that many an owner-operator is up to his neck in debt, but this offers no comfort. Nor does it lead to pity. The solidarity and the mutual empathy – once important aspects of the share system of remuneration – seem to have evanesced over the past three or four decades.
References


