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COOPERATING COMPETITORS: TEXEL FISHERMEN AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS (c.1870-1930)

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Fishermen are usually described as rugged individualists, fierce independent competitors wary of cooperation and ill-positioned to participate in political bargaining. These characteristics are used to explain the oft-noted failure of institutionalized forms of collective action, such as voluntary associations, cooperatives, and unions. From the 1870s fishermen on the Dutch island of Texel established a variety of such institutions. However, cooperation was usually limited to the local level. This particularism was due to sociocultural heterogeneity and divergent or even opposed interests. Moreover, many voluntary associations were short-lived and others were frequently established. In the six decades following 1870, over twenty associations were founded. There was clearly a willingness to cooperate, as is illustrated by data on trade cooperatives and attempts to create mutual insurance and widows' and orphans' funds. For various reasons, it proved hard to maintain sustained institutionalized solidarity. [Dutch fishermen, Isle of Texel, cooperation, associations, independence and individualism]

Introduction

"It is hard to make all noses point in one direction. Fishermen are like frogs in a wheelbarrow: they usually jump in all directions." A fisherman from the Dutch island of Texel used this metaphor to refer to the problem of sustained cooperation among his colleagues in the Netherlands. Their interests often diverged; so much so, that it proved difficult to unite and confront state institutions, fish traders, and other groups in the fishing industry. These divisions and difficulties of creating a federation of fishermen's associations are not of recent origin. They go back to the very first hesitant attempts to form organizations. Even at the local level it was not easy "to make all noses point in one direction."

The problems surrounding fishermen's cooperation are not unique to the Dutch or Texel situation. Although there are examples of marked successes (cf. Orbach 1980; Clement 1984; Magnússon 1990; Valdés-Pizzini 1990; Dyer and Moberg 1992), ethnographic evidence suggests that in many parts of the world various types of organization are confronted with major difficulties and even break-downs. In part, this characterization is due to the emphasis on failures in the literature. Even so, there is no denying that the sustained and institutionalized cooperation of fishermen is often fraught with problems and dilemmas. Andersen (1979: 3), for instance, maintains that fishermen are often too inexperienced and under-organized to express their interests and demands, especially

when they have to do so via formal political channels. Thompson *et al.* (1983: 5) allude to British fishermen's suspicion of almost every form of collective action (ranging from cooperatives to unions) in the early twentieth century. These are just two examples, but scores of others could be presented.

Anthropologists and other scholars have pointed to a number of factors which can explain this phenomenon. Some argue that there are practical hindrances: It is partly because of their frequent absence from shore that fishermen have difficulties organizing. For example, Smith (1977: 5) states that for this reason fishermen are unable to promote their interests and hardly ever participate in decision-making within their communities. Other authors attribute a lack of sustained collective action to an interrelated cluster of structural economic, social, cultural and psychological characteristics of the occupation of marine fishing. It is this set of factors which is of most concern here. Let me elucidate them.

First, there are scholars who maintain that uncooperative behavior is generally inherent in the (petty) capitalist mode of production. Competition is a key element in this pattern of production, impeding cooperation (Scotte 1981). Second, and related to the first factor, is the point of view that problems of cooperation—whether institutionalized or not—are connected with the common property nature of marine fisheries. Fishermen are often perceived as competitors for open access resources, pitted against one another in a zero-sum game in

which one fisherman's or crew's success is achieved at the expense of all others. Under common property conditions they can neither own fish nor fishing locations. As a consequence, capture fishermen are in constant competition: "fishing pits vessel against vessel as independent, economically autonomous, firms" (Thomas *et al.* 1995: 143). First and foremost, individual fishermen or crews direct their own economic interests. The differences between them and their independence make concerted actions unlikely, even when it is in the best interest of fishermen to act as a group (Jentoft 1986: 199; Libecap 1989: 74). Third, this independent economic behavior of working alone or in crews and making individual decisions where and when to fish is sometimes backed by cultural models of fishermen who share and value the belief that they are independent or autonomous personas (Thomas *et al.* 1995: 150-151). Fourth, according to a number of authors competition and economic and socio-cultural autonomy lead to the psychological character trait of a "need for independence" (Poggie 1980: 21; Pollnac 1991: 284; Valdés-Pizzini 1990: 165; Pollnac and Poggie 1991: 44; Thomas *et al.* 1995: 150-151). This independence in their behavior and thinking, which is supposed to help marine fishermen adapt to their occupation, turns them into prototypical individualists. For example, McGoodwin (1990: 127) summarizes the view of many scholars when he writes that "because of their rugged individualism, small-scale fishers are not particularly inclined toward cooperative action." Smith also contends that the nature of the fishing industry "creates individualized, competitive structural factors which inhibit the creation of associations and cooperatives" (1977: 5).

This specific individualistic mental disposition is also frequently mentioned by Dutch authors in their explanations of the failure of fishermen's organizations in the Netherlands. For instance, some authors refer to the fishermen's "deep-seated individualism and local chauvinism" (Schaper 1962: 148), their "weak organization" and "individualistic attitude" (Bossars 1987: 63) or their "[f]ragmentation, and not organization" (Kerkhoven 1986: 55). Kranenburg (1980: 12) suggests that all Dutch small-scale fishermen behaved and thought individualistically.

Though due to their petty entrepreneurship, competition for common property resources, independence, and individualistic mentality fishermen may often be unlikely, or at best reluctant, cooper-

ators, institutionalized collective action did and does occur and this raises the question of whether fishermen were (and are) indeed competitive and independent individualists. McGoodwin—who portrays the predecessors of contemporary small-scale fishermen as individualistic, apolitical, and non-cooperative—contends that recently these characteristics have changed in many places. As a consequence of communication and transportation improvements, fishermen the world over have become less isolated and more politically aware and active (1990: 128). It is important, then, to understand under what conditions fishermen seek to organize themselves; what they try to achieve through organization; which type and degree of organization they deem necessary; and what causes success or failure.

Texel fishermen institutionalized cooperation as early as the 1870s. When they perceived common interests, they often took collective action. This cooperation was achieved for various reasons, in various ways, and in various institutions. Often, temporary coalitions developed into more durable interest groupings. The former usually were single-purpose groupings with short-term goals, while the latter had long-term objectives and a multi-purpose character. These voluntary associations were not a goal in themselves, but were a means of adaptation to changing circumstances (Orbach 1980: 55). In a progressively complex world, with shifting power and dependency relationships and growing state intervention, organization and political participation offered fishermen a counterbalance to developments that threatened to push them into a position of increasing powerlessness.

By establishing associations, Texel fishermen were able to wield power and defend their interests vis-à-vis local, provincial and national governments; to gain leverage in their dealings with traders and processors, on whom they depended for the marketing of their catch; and more generally to prevent marginalization and improve their socioeconomic situation. In the second half of the nineteenth century, cooperation was usually limited to the local level. Though there were attempts to develop supra-local organizations with the aim of defending the common interests of all Dutch coastal fishermen, these associations were often short-lived. Even within the island society, the fishermen clung to local organizations and their activities waxed and waned.

The aim of this article is to shed light on the

nature, extent, and problems of cooperation between local (and extra-local) fishermen on the isle of Texel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the associations' goals and activities, and the factors promoting or hindering sustained solidarity. In addition, attention will be devoted to the question of whether and to what extent the cluster of four factors mentioned above can explain a lack of cooperation. In other words, I ask what is the validity in the Texel situation of the following proposition:

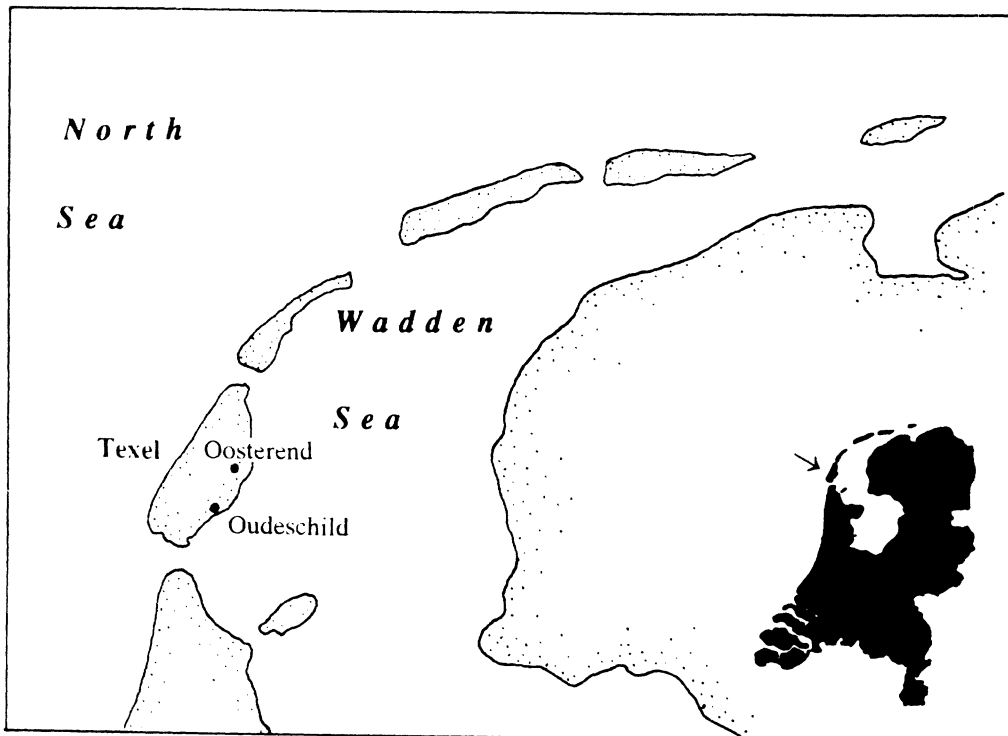
the mode of production associated with commercial exploitation of a resource held in common engenders an atomistic organization of labor, which results in a culture and psychology of independence. This independence, in turn, constrains the ability of fishermen to act collectively (Thomas *et al.* 1995: 144).

If these structural conditions apply, of course, the question remains of when and how collective action comes about. I will argue that this reductionist pro-

position is of limited use and that in explaining the reluctant cooperation of marine fishermen we must pay close attention to their industry's socioeconomic structure.

The Setting

Texel (the Netherlands) is the largest and southwesternmost of the Frisian Islands, a chain of islands extending along the Dutch, German, and Danish Wadden Sea coasts. Of the island's 163 km², nearly one third was reclaimed during the nineteenth century. Texel is approximately thirty-five kilometers long and ten kilometers wide and it is separated from the mainland by the Marsdiep strait. Today, Texel inhabitants number approximately 13,000. There are seven villages: Den Burg, Oosterend, Oudeschild, Den Hoorn, De Koog, De Waal, and De Cocksdorp. From the middle of the eighteenth century until 1930 the island population



The Isle of Texel and its Environs

fluctuated from 4,500 to a little over 7,600. The population of the main fishing village, Oosterend, declined from 768 in 1830 to 698 in 1930. During the same period the number of inhabitants of the other important fishing village, Oudeschild, decreased from 1,275 to 670.

Fishing has always been a pillar of the island economy. In 1870 some 350 fishermen manned 120 boats. The coming of rail and regular steamboat connections in nearby places brought about a growing demand for fish and fish products and Texel fishermen benefitted from this development. In addition to oysters, eelgrass, and shells, they began catching periwinkles, cockles, whelks and mussels, starfish, shrimps, flounder, sole and plaice, rays, anchovy, garfish, eels, and several other species of fish. In 1895, at the peak of the fishing fleet's growth, some 500 crewmen sailed with approximately 175 sail-powered vessels. From then on a prolonged crisis assailed the fishing industry and the fleet declined to some 80 boats in 1930, crewed by 180 fishermen.

The Oudeschilders predominantly sailed the Wadden and Zuyder Seas, while the Oosterenders, in addition to sailing these waters, also ventured into the North Sea. The fishermen from both villages were independent owner-operators, though during the season several Oudeschilders heavily depended on eelgrass traders who leased certain locations from the state and set quotas. Locally there were several fish, shellfish, and eelgrass merchants and shrimp processors. But most marine products were landed at Den Helder, a mainland town just across the Marsdiep.

The Rise of Fishermen's Associations

Prior to the establishment of official fishermen's associations, Texel fishermen cooperated informally in various ways. In addition to supporting each other in emergencies, they banded together when they collectively faced a problem. They would determine a strategy of action, which usually consisted of addressing the appropriate authorities. Such interest coalitions had a single short-term purpose and did not formalize; they dissolved once the problem had been dealt with, successfully or otherwise.

It was only in the third quarter of the nineteenth century that more durable committees and organizations promoted their economic, political, and social interests, emancipation, and betterment.

These associations, unions, and cooperatives commonly were multi-purpose, and besides short-term objectives they developed long-term strategies. The fact that these corporations were established at this time was linked to several factors.

First, they sought to obtain infrastructural improvements. The Oosterend fishermen joined forces in an attempt to maintain their harbor, which had silted up in the 1850s. They owned a large proportion of the island's fishing fleet and demanded the right to have their own harbor, arguing that the distance of ten kilometers to Oudeschild's harbor was too far to keep an eye on their vessels. The Oudeschild fishermen, however, wanted their harbor to be deepened and enlarged. This clash of interests had an impact on the social relationships between the two communities. However, fishermen from both villages joined forces when requesting harbor lights, beacons and buoys, and a fish auction building. They also tried unsuccessfully to obtain state support for a fishery school on the island.

Second, the state increasingly intervened in the fisheries, and through the establishment of organizations fishermen tried to achieve political participation and to gain some leverage. For example, they claimed tight supervision of legal mesh, fish sizes, and seasons. They frequently resorted to informal contracting and institutionalized solidarity to mitigate open access conditions. However, their attitude toward state intervention was ambivalent. Sometimes they asked for shorter seasons to protect immature fish and shellfish, but when the fisheries were struck by malaise, they often opted for an extension of the season. They also protested against the part-enclosure of the marine commons when the state leased privatized oyster beds and eelgrass plots to the highest bidders at public auctions. This has been a reason for collective action and anti-enclosure movements in many maritime communities. The Texelians rhetorically maintained that the seas around their island had always been "free." But the fact that they had claimed and gained communal territorial use rights in oyster fishing and eelgrass harvesting in an earlier stage contradicts this viewpoint.

Third, fishermen organized themselves in order to restore the balance of power vis-à-vis fish traders and to obtain higher incomes. For instance, dealers in the nearby port of Den Helder, where many Texelians landed their catches, had developed usurious practices. By collectively protesting this state of affairs, the fishermen succeeded in

countering the dealers' behavior. They also sought to reduce taxes on salt which they needed to conserve fish. Moreover, they established trade cooperatives to circumvent the mediation of small traders. Again, this was not unique to Texel fishermen:

Through the ages, relative powerlessness and difficulties in coping with the dominance of middlemen has been a dilemma for North Atlantic fishermen. . . . The foundation of different types of cooperative fishing associations has been a common step in solving this problem (Magnússon 1990: 73).

Fourth, an increasing number of accidents and deaths led to the foundation of mutual insurance companies and widows' and orphans' funds. This was an attempt to cope with the high degree of risk and uncertainty in the fishing economy. In the Netherlands most of the earliest fishermen's organizations were often established for this reason (Bossars 1987: 11). (I will return to this type of collective action and to fishermen's trade cooperatives in more detail below.)

The initiatives to establish corporations came both from fishermen themselves and from outsiders as well. At the national level some people pressed the fishers to found a federation of associations with local branches, and sometimes Texelians responded by establishing a local department that joined the national federation. Usually, however, they clung to their own organizations, as we will see shortly. An association's (or union's) board of directors was elected democratically and was usually composed of some fishermen, while its secretary was often recruited among local school teachers, because they were respected, well-educated, and knowledgeable of bureaucratic procedures and could thus adequately represent the fishermen in various arenas. Often, they also held similar positions in corporate community life. However, like a chairman, a secretary was usually a *primus inter pares*, not a "big man." In general, the membership of a local fishermen's association was large. Few stood aloof, as there was strong social pressure to join and it was vital to have access to information. Moreover, the board kept membership fees low in order to enlarge its following. Nonetheless, during economic crises many could not even afford the small fees and withdrew their membership. During recessions these associations often faced a free-rider problem. An association's general meetings took place on Saturday evenings to enable all fishermen to attend. Nonetheless, these meetings were usually only well attended when important is-

ues were on the agenda.

Cooperation and Particularism

Within the short span of time between 1870 and 1930, there have been twenty-odd fishermen's organizations on the island, roughly equally divided between both fishing communities. I will refrain from stating all their names and specific purposes. Their rapid rise and equally rapid decline may lead to the impression that cooperation came about speedily and, spontaneously, dissolved quickly, and was rekindled easily. To a certain extent, this impression is accurate. However, in many cases an existing association, union, or cooperation was continued under a new name, but with the same board, the same members, and more or less the same goals as its predecessor. Often little changed in practice. Nonetheless, there were exceptions to this rule. Before dealing with these exceptions, it is important to point out that Oudeschild and Oosterend fishermen predominantly clung to their own organizations. This particularism needs explanation. Why did not Oosterend and Oudeschild fishermen establish a joint voluntary association? Why were corporations discontinued and new ones founded? Why were national federations of local associations short-lived?

The answer to the first question is rather complex. Given the fact that Texel fishermen to a large extent had common interests and faced similar problems, one would expect them to cooperate supra-locally. Often the local organizations discussed similar issues and pursued similar goals, and in general the boards of these voluntary associations met frequently and developed joint plans of action. As a rule of thumb they also addressed authorities together. Nonetheless, they did not want to give up their own organizations and hence autonomy. This was partly a consequence of differentiation within the occupational community. The majority of Oudeschild fishermen specialized as shrimpers and shellfishermen, and sailed the Zuyder and Wadden Seas. Most Oosterenders were North Sea fishermen, catching flatfish (sole and plaice) and in the harsh winter season they often fished shrimp in the Wadden Sea. Besides common interests, both categories also had their own special interests. This divergence was deepened following the Oosterend community's battle to obtain their own harbor and the Oudeschilders' struggle to have their harbor improved. The tug of war over the

necessary funding hindered the development of fully-fledged cooperation between the two villages and fanned a slumbering antagonism, since a number of sociocultural boundaries divided both communities. Oudeschilders were petty commodity producers who were integrated in a capitalist mode of production. They perceived themselves as laborers rather than independent entrepreneurs. The social democratic movement rapidly gained influence in the community. They were latitudinarian Protestants with nominal ties to the local church. Oosterend fishermen, on the other hand, considered themselves capitalist entrepreneurs. They were orthodox Protestants, deeply religious and regular churchgoers. Thus, the Oudeschild and Oosterend fishermen's different world-views and economic attitudes also hampered inter-village cooperation.

But at the same time the fishermen were opportunists when they deemed it necessary to act collectively. The same applies to cooperation with fishermen from outside the island. Every now and then their associations joined a federative fishermen's organization. Usually this happened when a spokesman from such a regional or national corporation visited the island and expounded the view that "union is strength." More than once this kindled the enthusiasm of Texelians. However, their enthusiasm often vanished equally quickly because they were not really interested in the wider, long-term objectives of a federation, which of course could not simultaneously deal with the specific problems of all categories and communities of fishermen. The Texelians were preoccupied with their own immediate interests, for which a local association was best suited.

Thus, solidarity with colleagues from outside was short-lived. This was not only the case with Texel fishermen, but also with Dutch fishermen in general. Shortly after the turn of the century the fishery biologist P.P.C. Hoek pointed out "how much the social position of fishermen differs internally and how difficult it is to bring about cooperation in such diverging social units" (1902: 115). A wide gap existed between small-scale fishermen and capitalist ship-owners, lessees of fishing grounds and adherents of *mare liberum*, and between producers and dealers, because each of these categories cherished its own wishes and posed its own demands. These remarks regarding the diverging interests in the Dutch fishing industry are apt and also apply to the Texel situation.¹ At the local level these organizations contributed to reinforcing the

fishermen's bargaining position and as a corollary to improving their socioeconomic position. But on a higher level of integration, "the fishermen's organizations have hardly attained something, as a consequence of the lack of concerted action" (Bossiers 1987: 210). In a period in which the Dutch state took various measures affecting the fishing industry, a united viewpoint of all fishermen was needed to put effective weight in the balance. But the fact that they were divided among themselves prevented them from successfully opposing the growing state intervention.

Moreover, it was much easier to identify with community members than with outsiders. Sometimes, rumors about financial mismanagement or even fraud also undermined national federations. For all these reasons, the life of local branches of a national fishermen's association was short and generally followed by the establishment of a new local association. This switching of allegiance in part explains the frequent rise and fall of voluntary associations on Texel, but there were other reasons as well. In some cases, factional strife disrupted a local association, often leading to a fission.² Even at the local level, dissension arose easily, sometimes over minor details concerning policy or personnel. Two organizations in one village then competed for resources and members, but since the occupational communities were but small, sooner or later one of them would perish or they would reunite. In addition, two associations sometimes existed within one community because one of them had a specific and limited goal. This was the case for example with Oosterend's successive "harbor associations," which existed alongside an "ordinary" fishermen's association. Their respective memberships greatly overlapped.

In what follows, I discuss in more detail two forms of organization uniting the local fishermen: trade cooperatives and mutual aid-funds. My questions are: What brought the Texel fishermen together, and with which divisive forces did they have to cope? Next, I analyze patterns of cooperation and non-cooperation in a more general sense, using comparative literature and returning to the issues raised in the introduction.

Fishermen versus Fish Merchants and Processors

In the entire North Atlantic region and elsewhere, fishermen have been dominated and sometimes exploited by fish merchants and processors (Smith

1977: 4; Andersen 1979: 21; Acheson 1981: 282). The former depended on the latter for the marketing of their catch and their relationships were usually asymmetrical. Given the rapid deterioration of fish and shellfish, the fishermen did not have much "withholding power" (Löfgren 1977: 228). This implied that they could not control prices: they were price-takers, and not price-makers. Thus, they not only faced sharply fluctuating catches, but also had to cope with fluctuating prices. Throughout the world fishermen responded by establishing cooperatives to further their position in trade networks, gain leverage vis-à-vis fish merchants and processors, and to circumvent as many middlemen as possible (cf. Durrenberger 1992a: 77ff.; Orbach 1980; Pollnac 1982, 1991: 284ff.; Jentoft 1986: 199-200; Prattis 1987). Deas views cooperatives as "an attempt by the owner fishers to remain independent of ties with large scale capital" (1981: 69). Better returns, lower costs, and improved marketing are the most important goals (Orbach 1980: 48; Davis and Jentoft 1989: 195). Prattis states that

cooperatives have adaptive and transformative functions that (a) relieve potential social unrest while (b) adjustments take place in the size and activities of producing units. In this manner (c) cooperative organization becomes one means whereby communities actively participate in social and economic changes that directly affect them (1987: 568).

On the isle of Texel the fishermen responded in this manner to their integration in long-distance markets and the concomitant extension of the chains between original producers and final consumers. This development relegated them to a position at the farthest end of the production-market chain, making them vulnerable in times of recession and sharp price fluctuations. They tried to cope with these uncertainties by seeking out new markets and by striking mutual agreements regarding production and minimum prices. Besides these trade-cooperatives, the fishermen struck similar deals with some individual traders and processors. These agreements aimed at keeping production low and, concomitantly, prices high.

Though in general buyers or processors have "an interest in maintaining an attitude of competition among fishermen and hindering organized collective action" (Sinclair 1985: 126), the Texel fish traders and processors were not in a position to prevent the fishermen from organizing themselves. In addition, they were themselves petty entrepreneurs and depended on the fishermen for the supply of

fish and shellfish. Both categories were involved 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). However, this moral economy often proved little more than a rhetorical ideology. The fishermen and the traders were ambivalent with respect to price and production restrictions. Sooner or later, informal agreements were broken, turning cooperating individuals into individualist competitors. It proved hard to maintain these arrangements because Texelians were of course not the only ones supplying the market. With many petty producers for a given market it is hard to adjust aggregate production (Sinclair 1985: 20).

The first initiative to establish a trade cooperative came from outside. In 1899 a man by the name of Zwier Visser toured Dutch fishing communities in an attempt to make them cooperate in a national federation of fishermen's associations. He also visited Oudeschild and Oosterend, and among many other things emphasized the importance of circumventing as many middlemen as possible in the marketing of catches. These intermediaries not only skimmed off their proceeds, they also tried to maintain a monopsony on the island. When outside traders visited the island to buy fish and shellfish, the indigenous traders outbid them. Thus, fair competition was impossible and once the outsiders had left, the Texel traders returned to offering low prices. The small coastal fishermen depended on the local dealers, so that they had few alternatives to land their catches. Besides, the price-fixing that was practiced elsewhere also left much to be desired.

Zwier Visser criticized these practices and told the Texel fishermen that it was possible to bypass the middlemen by marketing the catch directly to large dealers through trade cooperatives, which would have the advantage of higher returns and the expansion of markets. Trade cooperatives were then established in both Oudeschild and Oosterend, and immediately joined by thirty and twenty-one members, respectively. Following a difficult start, the cooperatives became successful. However, Zwier Visser's aim of founding a national federation was undercut by rumors of mismanagement and fraud.

Notwithstanding this fact, both local trade cooperatives continued their work under new names. The son of an Oudeschild teacher, W.A. Muller,

was appointed as a manager of both organizations. Thus, he could coordinate their activities, and though *de jure* they remained separate institutions, *de facto* they cooperated. Under Muller's leadership the cooperatives succeeded in obtaining higher prices for their members. They even expanded their activities, found new markets, and purchased fishery equipment, baskets, salt, and other goods at considerable discounts. They also bought storage facilities and leased oyster plots from the state on favorable conditions. To ensure high prices, the cooperatives sometimes introduced quotas (especially for shrimp). The fishermen who were members praised Muller's management skills and the excellent relations between him, the board of directors and the rank and file members.

Until the outbreak of the Great War the cooperatives worked quite well and the fishermen clearly benefitted from their activities. However, as of 1914 fish and shellfish prices rose phenomenally. In Western Europe Dutch fishermen faced less foreign competition. The Netherlands remained neutral, whereas fishermen in neighboring countries could not fish as a consequence of the hostilities. With an almost unlimited outlet potential and skyrocketing prices, the fishermen wanted to be rid of the cooperatives' restrictions. Most members withdrew and the cooperatives dissolved. Thus, in an economic boom period most fishermen preferred sailing an individualistic course. They were ambivalent opportunists, but this opportunism also was the basis for their return to cooperation when they deemed this necessary. However, there is one domain in which solidarity was more durable and in which Oudeschilders and Oosterenders arrived at mutual cooperation.

The Dangerous Sea and Solidarity

It is almost a truism that sea fishing is and has always been a perilous occupation anywhere in the world. Many anthropologists and historians point out that fishermen face a high degree of risk and danger to life and equipment (for example, Smith 1977; Acheson 1981; Thompson *et al.* 1983; Poggie and Pollnac 1988). Usually, however, the subject of description is how fishers adapt *psychologically* to these uncertainties and risks, and not how they have tried to cope with them *socially*. Here, special attention is devoted to the Texel fisher folk's social coping mechanisms in disasters, focusing in particular on attempts to form mutual insurance compa-

nies and widows' and orphans' funds. Again, informal collective action came about easily and rapidly.

Between 1813 and 1932 at least 70 Texel fishermen lost their lives at sea, nearly half of them between 1894 and 1904. A much larger number encountered accidents in which their vessels were shipwrecked without loss of life, often leaving the fishermen and their family at the mercy of charitable institutions and poor-relief committees. It was a well-established custom of the islanders to help the unfortunate by collecting money. In many cases this meant that the stricken avoided poverty, and often fishermen were even able to buy another vessel with the aid of their fellow islanders. Nonetheless, in a culture in which self-reliance and independence were valued, gifts of grace were only accepted with mixed feelings. Thus, there was a mounting awareness that structural solutions in case of mishaps had to be found.

To this end, in 1889 the fishermen established a mutual insurance company which indemnified damages to boats. Though its membership increased from 37 in its founding year to 77 in 1898, some 100 vessels remained uninsured. Their owners could not afford the weekly contributions, doubted the organization's effectiveness, or stood aside either for religious reasons (orthodox Protestants) or because their boat was of little value. Many withdrew their membership in the following years, in part because in 1903 the Dutch government instituted an insurance duty for inshore fishermen at the State Insurance Bank. However, North Sea fishermen were barred from this insurance. But due to this state intervention and the concomitant withdrawal of many members, the voluntary association's viability was undermined and it was abolished in 1907. There were attempts to revitalize it, but to no avail. From 1907 onwards Texel's North Sea fishermen were once more at the mercy of charity in the case of shipwreck.

In the meantime Oudeschild fishermen had also founded another association in 1894, which aimed at helping out fishermen's widows and orphans and retired fishers. But as a local institution, its financial base proved too small. Moreover, the decades after 1895 were characterized by a prolonged economic crisis, and many withdrew their contributions. This led to the association's dissolution in 1903. Several people realized that a fishermen's widows' and orphans' fund could only survive with a large membership and had to operate

on a national level. There was an attempt in this direction, but as a consequence of mistrust and rumors of financial malversation, this national fund and its local departments (among them a branch at Oosterend) existed for only one year between 1901 and 1902. Yet the indispensability of a widows' and orphans' fund continued to be felt on the island.

In 1904 the Oosterend fishermen's association investigated the possibility of establishing a new fund, in part because of several accidents in the same year which took six fishermen's lives. Its necessity had become obvious once more. The Oosterend fishers consulted their Oudeschild counterparts, and it was decided to establish a fund by the name of "Texel's Interest" (Texel's *Belang*). It would not only serve the fisher folk's interests, but those of the entire island population. It became operative in December 1904. In the island's seven villages local departments of the organization were founded. Some 200 members and supporters joined the association and this membership increased rapidly in the following years; by 1907 it had tripled to more than 600. The majority of the members and donors hailed from Texel's fishing communities. In addition to the membership fees, the association's board raised money by organizing a range of activities, including fairs, lotteries, exhibitions, theatrical performances, and the publication of brochures and booklets.

Initially, Texel's *Belang* functioned well and it supported several widows and orphans with weekly contributions. But after a number of years it became obvious to its board that the fund's financial strength would be undermined if this mode of support continued. Either the fees had to be raised or those in need had to be paid a lump sum. In 1909 members of the board discussed this topic. They were hopelessly divided, leading to dissensions and the retreat of some board members. The discord had a negative impact on the organization's success. Membership dwindled and by 1920 fewer than 250 people gave their financial support. New problems assailed the organization in 1925 when national and local newspapers reported malversations and the board was accused of not having rendered its accounts for years. In the wake of these accusations it appeared that the association's financial resources were almost exhausted. The zest to continue the efforts of Texel's *Belang* fell to nothing and it was officially dissolved in July 1932.

This course of affairs was not solely due to the

rumors and the doubtful dealings of the board. In part, it had to do with the declining number of fishermen on the island. In the year of the association's establishment (1904) there were approximately 230 fishermen, whereas in 1930 there were only 140. This drop implied that Texel's *Belang*'s main support and interest group had become too small to maintain its viability. In addition, the number of accidents at sea had decreased because fewer and fewer Texel fishermen sailed the dangerous North Sea, while those who did so worked with safer steel-hulled vessels equipped with 100 h.p. engines. Moreover, these North Sea fishermen joined nationwide general insurance companies in the 1930s.

Though it appears that even in this case firmly institutionalized solidarity was hard to achieve, it is clear that the fishermen were well-aware of their mutual interests. They understood that charity—based upon a generalized and deferred reciprocity in which people expected help when misfortune struck them personally—offered little security. They preferred sustained collective action in self-help organizations and even gave up their particularism which had time and again hindered the formation of an organization of all Texel fishermen. But these mutual relief-funds were small, internally weak, and vulnerable because of their homogeneous membership and accumulation of risks (de Swaan 1988: 145-146). These problems of scale and social composition undermined their financial carrying capacity, a situation exacerbated when many withdrew their membership in times of economic crisis. Local organizations had the advantage that cooperation came about quickly because people knew and trusted one another. But trust could easily turn into distrust and social familiarity did not guarantee solid management of funds. On the contrary, proponents of a national fishermen's widows' and orphans' fund warned of favoritism and fraud by administrators of local funds (Dirkzwager 1899: 67).³ However, federative organizations were no solution either because nationwide fishermen's solidarity was weak, and they also faced problems of risk concentration, diverging interests, and fluctuating membership. Moreover, fishermen could hardly identify with national organizations and, as we have seen, suspicion of financial mismanagement and corruption led to their rapid downfall.

De Swaan succinctly summarizes the dilemma of these funds:

The social homogeneity which made for mutual solidarity

among members also caused a concentration of risks and sooner or later an accumulation of claims which might doom the fund to bankruptcy. Only the dispersion of risks could prevent such a failure, but this required a heterogeneous membership. Diversity, however, tended to weaken mutual identification and solidarity (1988: 146).

Despite their problems, in many places local mutual-aid funds have for a long time functioned as safeguards in fishing economies characterized by strong elements of uncertainty and risk (Löfgren 1977: 234). They forged entrepreneurially inclined individualists into a close moral community (Taylor 1983: xv).

Comparative Notes and Discussion

To return to the questions raised in the introduction: Are fishermen uncooperative because of their petty capitalist mode of production? Does the exploitation of common property resources turn fishermen into fierce competitors who behave and think independently? And does this mean that they have a "need for independence" and that this psychological independence generates individualism? More generally, what are the factors explaining patterns of cooperation and non-cooperation of fishermen and other small capitalist entrepreneurs?

The very fact that Texel fishermen did organize in a variety of forms flies in the face of explanations attributing non-cooperation to the capitalist pattern of production. One proponent of this point of view, the Swedish ethnologist Lasse Scotte (1981) remarks that the inability of fishermen in a Swedish community to cooperate is inextricably linked to the internal logic of capitalism: each unit of production attempts to expand its own profit and seeks its own reproduction, dooming in advance any attempt to cooperate. He contends that there is simply no room for cooperation in a capitalist mode of production:

this inability to cooperate on a larger scale, lies in the structure of production itself. [...] The development of the productive forces was . . . aimed at enlarging the profit of each production unit individually. The specific production units were also occupied with their own reproduction according to the logic of petty commodity production (1981, quoted in Magnússon 1990: 74).

This economic reductionist analysis is too generalizing and too mechanistic. Scotte's propositions cannot explain why it is that in the maritime communities of Texel cooperation at the local level came about quite frequently and why some fisher-

men tried to achieve supra-local organization at all. They did so because they were aware that their collective (albeit mutually contradictory individual) interests could be achieved only through the collective action of all or a substantial section of their competitors. As Bowman remarks:

Collective action generally begins with a group of actors whose subjective beliefs and/or objective social relations place them in some sort of common circumstances. These common circumstances, in turn, generate a shared interest either in improving their common situation or in preventing a deterioration of it (1982: 573).

For Texelians, such a sense of common circumstances provided a strong motive to cooperate, though amongst other things sectional interests frequently crosscut this tendency.

The patterns and problems of cooperation were not unique to Texel or Dutch fishermen. Other Dutch small-scale entrepreneurs faced similar difficulties. In his analysis of the instability of solidarity among Dutch bargemen, Jouda Verrips (1989, 1991) emphasizes the differentiation of their occupational community in various categories, each having its own interests and problems, a characteristic which also applies to fishermen. Verrips deems the ambivalent attitude of bargees to be of even greater importance. This ambivalence has increased along with the growing functional specialization within the wider society. It is intertwined with economic cycles and becomes manifest in times of boom or recession. During recessions bargemen usually opted for a "horizontal" strategy and tightened their socioeconomic and organizational ties with one another. During a boom they choose to cooperate more closely with freighters, middlemen on whom they depended for contracts. But as a consequence of the occupational community's heterogeneity, these strategies were not applied simultaneously, so that the bargees remained divided among themselves.

However, fishermen occupied a different structural position in the economic arena than that of bargemen. They did not offer services (transportation), but were themselves primary producers. Moreover, their existence was less nomadic in that they lived in local communities. For this reason, it was much easier to arrive at cooperation (albeit locally) than bargees. The fact that it proved much harder to bring about supra-local cooperation must be understood against the background of their experience of having to compromise too often in regional or national organizations, which were of

course unable to take into account all the specific local interests of its members. It was in this respect that Texel and other fishermen were ambivalent: they were willing to cooperate with outsiders, but at the same time they wanted to stick to their own stand-point. This even applied at the local level when the interests of factions conflicted.

In this regard, fishermen had a lot in common with another category of small-scale entrepreneurs, namely farmers. The sociologist and historian Pieter Bouman points out that in the early decades of the twentieth century Dutch farmers' umbrella organizations were also hard to maintain. The reasons why this was so bear a striking family resemblance to the reasons why the organizational life of fishermen at the national level was weak. The farmers were a heterogeneous grouping; they differed with regard to their social positions and also in other respects. The "lack of centralization and coordination" was in part caused by "their penchant for particularism" and internal political and religious differences (Bouman 1943: 261, 264). But, as in fishing communities, local organizations usually functioned well.

Unlike marine fishermen, farmers usually own their production locations. Pollnac and Poggie (1991) point out that in this respect there are also differences between marine capture fishermen and mariculturists. Fishermen exploit resources held in common, whereas mariculturists often own or lease the plots where they plant and harvest shellfish. These different patterns of production influence their modes of social and psychocultural adaptation and these in turn influence factors associated with cooperative success. The common property nature of fisheries makes for constant competition on fishing locations, leading to economic and psychological independence. This competitive spirit and independence potentially conflict with cooperative formation. These problems do not apply to mariculturists; they are likely to be psychologically less independent and behaviorally less competitive than capture fishermen (Pollnac and Poggie 1991: 44). Thomas *et al.* subscribe to this view and state that the independence of commercial fishermen will inhibit collective action even when it is in their best interest to act as a group (1995: 144).

In regard to Texel, this distinction between fishermen and mariculturists is not very helpful. First, few specialized as mariculturists. The Texelians usually harvested various species over the annual cycle, including shellfish such as mussels and

oysters which they could sometimes plant on plots leased from the state. But generally this was a seasonal affair and in addition they caught fish in other seasons. Besides, the organizational level of these part-time mariculturists did not differ from that of fishermen. As a rule of thumb, they joined the local associations. Second, the argument that capture fishermen are more competitive and independent than mariculturists because they exploit common property resources is based on the flawed argument that commons are free for all. However, such resources are often *communal* property, especially in the inshore fisheries (cf. McCay and Acheson 1987). This was also the case in the Texel situation, where local fishermen claimed the access and use rights of certain fishing locations (van Ginkel 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996). Thus, competition did not necessarily involve *individual* fishermen, but *groups* of fishermen who tried to prevent that outside fishermen would intrude on "their" territory.

The observation of Pollnac and Poggie (1991) and Thomas *et al.* (1995) that mariculturists are more willing to cooperate than marine fishermen is perhaps related to the fact that there is greater product homogeneity among the former than among the latter. There is a strong impetus to organize if the interests of all participants in the industry overlap. As a collective, they face the same difficulties regarding production and marketing. In spite of their common interests, they compete over scarce resources: "Yet the subjective *independence* implied by the concept of competition is coupled with an objective *interdependence*" (Bowman 1982: 575, italics in original). On the other hand, if fishermen pursue different species—as in the case of the Texel fisheries—this can easily lead to divisiveness, not because they are independent and individualist competitors *per se*, but because their group interests do not converge. On Texel this difference has had disruptive effects time and again, especially when organization superseded the local level.

But at the same time a number of shared interests would bring the local fishermen together again and the collective action of these petty capitalists continued to wax and wane. In this regard the plight of Texel fishermen's organizations resembled that of those on the Chesapeake Bay, where cooperation in a variety of organizational forms has been paramount in the 1950s and 1960s. As Mike Orbach points out:

To accomplish specific purposes—higher prices, cheaper

transportation, effective political lobbying, and others—the watermen have turned to unions, associations, cooperatives, and other organizational forms which have in most cases borne a remarkable similarity to one another in the context in which they were employed (1980: 51).

Though the existence of these organizations was sometimes short-lived, new ones were often established shortly.

Perhaps the most tenacious stereotype concerning fishermen is that they do not act collectively because they have individualism as a psychological trait (Smith 1977: 5; Poggie 1980: 21; Pollnac 1991: 284; Valdés-Pizzini 1990: 165; Pollnac and Poggie 1991: 44; Thomas *et al.* 1995: 150-151). More generally Bechhofer and Elliott maintain that within the class of small independent entrepreneurs, institutionalized collective action is hampered by “the disparateness of the various elements and the intense individualism that pervades it” (1981: 190). Leaving aside the generalizing purport and static connotations of this viewpoint, the reference to an individualistic behavioral disposition explains little, if anything. As Durkheim stated: “every time a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may rest assured that the explanation is false” (1982: 129). In an article on the low level of organization of Texan shrimp fishermen Paul Durrenberger (1992b: 153) rejects explanations which point to their supposed individualistic and independent mentality for the very same reasons.⁴ In these cases a static and tautological line of reasoning is used, boiling down to the assertion that fishermen do not cooperate because they are individualists and they are individualists because they do not cooperate. Though Texelians adhered to the subjective belief of independence and individualism, their actual behavior showed that this “folk model” had little to do with praxis, since they organized time and again. Above all, it was the economic and socio-cultural heterogeneous membership with its concomitant divergence of interests which seriously hampered cooperation.

Conclusions

Contrary to what many anthropologists, sociologists, and historians have generally remarked concerning fishermen, Texelians had a penchant for cooperation and their associations and other corporations were the vehicles by which they defended

their interests in economic and political arenas. However, this cooperation was usually limited to the local level as a consequence of social differentiation within the occupational community, the concomitant specific interests and problems of its component parts, and sociocultural differences within the island society. Splits in local associations, free-riding, dwindling membership during recessions, and dissolving trade cooperatives during booms undermined institutionalized collective action. Though sustained solidarity of a large number of Texel fishermen did occur in mutual-aid funds, these eventually faced problems of scale and social composition, burdening their financial resources beyond viability. However, the fact that fishermen have cooperated and still cooperate in organizations belies their image of being independent, individualistic, non-cooperative, and politically inert.

This is not to say that sustained solidarity comes about automatically and that it is entirely unproblematic. Collective action problems do occur. But to understand (the lack of) cooperation, especially at the national level, the wider socioeconomic and political contexts and dynamics must be taken into consideration. It is not sufficient to reduce organizational problems to the structural characteristics of an economic system or to some collective behavioral disposition leading to social atomism. In addition, the supposed independence and individualism of fishermen—even if it is characteristic of their behavior and mentality—does not stand in the way of cooperation: “however individualist their thinking, there are always interests which bring fishermen together” (Kranenburg 1980: 12). As Lawrence Taylor shows in his interesting ethnohistory of fishermen of Dutch descent working on the Great South Bay between 1850 and 1910, individualism and cooperation do not exclude each other. In this connection he uses the concept of “contractual community” (1983: 9ff.), a configuration of individuals who freely choose to establish and maintain social ties. Voluntary associations are especially well-suited to accomplish this and play an important role in the integration of a community or society (Knoke 1986: 2).

However, this perception of people as independent actors in the domain of social forces harbors the danger of idealizing communities like Oudeschild and Oosterend, which may be perceived as harmonious social entities. This is a false image: “community” does not necessarily imply solidarity, homogeneity and collective action (cf. McCay and

Creed 1989: 19). Cooperation—whether formalized or not—can imply conflict, and conflict often gives rise to cooperation. Underlying this dynamic in the Texel case are, as we have seen, diverging interests of *groups* of fishermen. To put this in the more general terms of the sociologist Norbert Elias:

Co-operation and conflict . . . are ways of handling problems that arise when people become interdependent or more interdependent or in different ways than before. Seen as stationary conditions, conflict and co-operation appear as antagonistic and incompatible. Seen as episodes in a process of changing reciprocal dependencies, they emerge as different ways of handling problems, particularly of power problems, inherent in that process (1974: xix).

These dependencies can, for example, change where new technologies are introduced or where state interventions lead to alterations in resource access and management. If fishermen perceive these changes as threats to their subsistence rights or standards of living, in many cases they have joined together in “formidable movements of self-defense” and they “have repeatedly organized collective defense against outside intrusion on traditional fishing practices” (Dyer and Moberg 1992: 27).⁵ Throughout the world there are many instances of such anti-enclosure movements. At the same time, as on Texel, fishermen have frequently resorted to informal contracting and various organizational forms to mitigate open access conditions. However, differences between various categories of fishermen

limit the informal agreements that might be reached among fishermen to reduce fishing and diminish the effectiveness of fishermen as cohesive lobbyists for influencing more formal regulatory controls on access and harvest in open access fisheries (Libecap 1989: 73; see also Johnson and Libecap 1982: 1007).

Again, we see that the socioeconomic structure of the fishing industry with its sectional or group interests (and not the fishermen’s independence or individualism) may inhibit sustained solidarity.

But under certain conditions, enduring institutionalized cooperation of fishermen is likely. In general, this is the case if (1) an organization receives the support of most fishermen in an area and the membership is relatively homogeneous in a sociocultural sense (though in the case of mutual-aid funds this harbors the danger of a concentration of risks); (2) mutual trust, confidence, social solidarity, and loyalty are high; (3) the members share the same economic interests (for example, product homogeneity) and have common goals; (4) corporate results or operating and managerial success are sufficient to satisfy the expectations of the organization’s members (dissatisfaction will lead to reduced loyalty, intolerance and increasing detachment); (5) there is no fierce competition from outsiders, entry into the industry is difficult, and there are few product alternatives; and (6) uncooperative behavior can be sanctioned to avoid free-rider problems. If all or most of these conditions apply, independent fishermen and other petty capitalists will often be cooperating competitors.

NOTES

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¹Hoek went a step further and attributed the half-hearted cooperation partly to the mentality of the fishermen. According to him, their cooperation was hindered by their conservatism with respect to their manners, customs and catching methods, their mutual distrust and solitariness, modesty, timidity, and lack of self-confidence (1902: 116, 122). However, these stereotypes are dubious and cannot explain failing supra-local cooperation because these same attitudes and dispositions would also constitute an obstacle to cooperation in and organization of smaller local-level social configurations. As we have seen, this was not the case, either in the Texel or in other Zuyder Sea fishing communities.

²This was certainly not unique to the situation on Texel. For an example concerning another Dutch fishing community, see van Ginkel (1991). See also LiPuma and Meltzoff (1994) with respect to Spanish fishermen’s associations.

³Corruption, fraud, favoritism, suspicion, and conflicts

have often been noted by social scientists in local mutual-aid funds (de Swaan 1988: 146).

⁴Durrenberger explains that the American legal system prevented organization:

The reason there is no union now is not due to any peculiar psychology of fishermen but because it is against the law. To suggest that shrimper individualism stands in the way of organization is “blaming the victim.” The folk model of shrimpers as psychologically too independent to co-operate with one another serves processors, policy makers, and fisheries bureaucrats by providing an ideological bulwark to the legal prohibition on collective economic action (1992b: 153).

However, in my opinion Durrenberger exaggerates this ideological “conspiracy model.” As we have seen, in many places the dominant image of fishermen views them as individualists, even in locales where state agencies do not obstruct or even encourage organization.

⁵According to Thomas *et al.* (1995), who describe (non)cooperation in the Gulf of Mexico shrimp fishery, this is one of the few occasions when independent owner-operators overcome their independence. More specifically, they argue that collective actions are taken only if all firms are threatened

with collapse:

collective action is possible among independent capitalist firms, although the situations that give rise to such actions are desperate ones. Where the economic forces are such that the players have room to maneuver and where the success or failure of a firm can be controlled by the

individual entrepreneur, then collective action is unlikely. But, where this is not the case and all firms are equally threatened with collapse, then the impetus for collective action of one form or another is present (1995: 150).

However, there are scores of examples where there was no such threat, and fishermen still organized.

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