Class and Identity on the Margins of Industrial Society: A Breton Illustration

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Abstract: In this article the author draws upon his field work in Le Guilvinec, France during a period of crisis in the local fishery to explore the creation and reproduction of a local Bigouden identity. This identity emerged, replete with costume, rituals and festivals, out of an encounter between a metropolitan-driven industrial capitalism and a local, essentially non-capitalist, social formation. Here two aspects of how the "local" is integrated into and/or articulated with the "larger" are important: (1) the historical positioning of the Bigoudennie within Brittany, an internal hinterland of France supplying labour and raw resources; (2) the ways in which the emerging neoliberal processes of globalization structures, shapes and hinders the ability of local communities to wield any real control over local processes.

Résumé: Dans cet article, l'auteur s'est inspiré de ses recherches sur le terrain, à Le Guilvinec (France), lors d'une période de crise dans les pêcheries, afin d'explorer la création et la reproduction d'une identité bigoudenne. Cette identité, avec ses costumes, ses rituels et ses festivals, est née de la rencontre d'un capitalisme industriel venu de la métropole et d'une structure sociale locale fondamentalement non capitaliste. On dénote deux points importants : comment l'aspect «local» est intégré dans le plus grand et/ou comment il est articulé par rapport à celui là. Le premier traite de la situation historique de la Bigoudennie au sein de la Bretagne, un arrière-pays français qui procure main-d'oeuvre et matières premières à la France. Le deuxième point traite la façon dont le processus néolibéral de globalisation structure, façonne et empêche les communautés locales d'exercer un véritable contrôle sur les processus locaux.

To write about class and identity is simultaneously to come to terms with both the structures of power and appropriation and the manner by which such structures are interpreted and translated into daily life (Sider, 1986: 7). Class is here used in its most fundamental and basic sense, defined as an objective relationship to the means of production. Identity, while a profoundly more ephemeral and elusive quality, is rarely constructed so as to entirely repudiate its material moorings in class. As expressed in racial or ethnic terms, identity is often essentialized as being immutable and, once created, is always there until the homogenizing force of state power erases its uniqueness. In practice, the expansion and consolidation of state power and the processes of capital accumulation both destroy and create variation (Sider, 1993).

The constant restructuring of the social and political landscape reminds us that "capitalism does not so much come to the countryside. The backcountry is itself a site of historical transformations, generating social [race/gender/class] relations,... market forces pivotal in the transition to capitalism" (Palmer, 1994: 15). In this illustration of one particular transition to capitalism, drawn from the Bigouden region of France, I focus on: (1) the historical set of social relations out of which emerged a local identity; and (2) how this identity is intimately linked to the formation of social class in coastal Brittany. My underlying point of concern is with the mundane daily necessity to feed, clothe and shelter one's family, and how this is connected to, shaped by and is often in opposition to an economic formation driven by profit and greed.

The People and the Place

I first visited the Bigoudennie in the fall of 1992. As I toured the coast, rumblings of the coming crisis could be heard on every dock. Fishers complained of poor fish prices, declining catches and non-European Union fish

imports. A major fishing co-operative was forced to reorganize and consolidate its operation (in the process nearly 100 workers lost their jobs). Fishing skippers were beginning to have difficulty in making their boat loan payments. Though the problems were widespread, it was in the fishing ports of the Bigoudennie (the primary artisanal fishing district in France, fourth in rank in overall production after the industrial ports of Boulogne, Lorient and Concarneau) that the situation seemed the most acute.

Upon my return to the Bigoudennie in 1994, local fishers were in the midst of the second year of free-falling fish prices. Overall landed value had fallen by more than 20 percent (Chatain, 1994) and the prices continued to fall well into 1995. The brutal realities of fishing for a living drove fishers to fish longer, travel farther and spend less on essential maintenance just to remain "on an even keel." Despite their increased effort, more than one quarter of the Bigouden fleet had difficulty meeting their debt service requirements.

The Bigouden region is located at the extreme western tip of Brittany, in the department of Finistère—"land's end"—on a box-like peninsula that juts out into the open Atlantic. The coast consists of open sand beaches broken occasionally by rocky outcroppings. The land is not particularly well suited to large-scale agriculture nor to the new farming techniques which rolled over north Finistère with such remarkable results in the 1960s and 1970s. Before the advent of the sardine fishery, generation upon generation had eked out a living on the coastal strip, alternating between land and sea. The birth of the fishing industry in the Bigoudennie was accompanied by a profound social transformation whose corollary was the near-total disappearance of agriculture in the southern coastal zone.

The four Bigouden fishports, Le Guilvinec, St. Guénole, Loctudy and Lesconil are incorporated in one maritime administrative district, "Le Guilvinec" which includes the southern half of the Bigouden region. This is a region characterized by intense cultural particularities (cf. Burguière, 1975; Hélias, 1978; Segalen, 1991) that became important political markers in the Bigouden fishers' mid-1990s fight against the new fishing regulations and in their struggle to survive the ecological and economic crisis in their fishery. The fishing industry and its shore-based support industries are one of the most important aspects of the economy in the Bigoudennie today. Of the approximately 33 000 people living in the south Bigouden, about 2 000 are directly employed as commercial fishers.

Agriculture, once predominant in this region, has been in decline for most of the century, but the period from 1960 to 1980 witnessed its virtual death. Between the years 1970 and 1980 almost one third of the farms in the south Bigoudennie disappeared, while the average age of those working them rose (Segalen, 1991: 250). From the late 1800s up to the early 1970s fishing had been able to absorb some of the region's surplus labour. By the 1990s this was no longer the case.

The third axis of the local economy is tourism. The local tourist industry is based on a short summer that does very little in terms of providing for long-term stability. Most of the summer tourist trade consists of summer cottagers who come down from Paris, Germany or across the channel from Britain. Though a boon to some of the local merchants, the tourist trade adds little in the way of a stable economic base for the local economy.

From Peasant to Worker

Though it is convenient (and not uncommon) to separate and privilege either the social relations or the forces of production from one another, both must be taken together and understood as being intimately intertwined processes. The dialectical entanglement of technological innovation with customary practices and social relations does not always necessarily lead to a transition to new forms of social relations. Additionally, the development of new technologies and techniques of work sometimes emerges out of social relations of production in an attempt to sway the balance of class forces (Albury and Schwartz, 1982). The transition in the Bigoudennie from peasant agriculture to industrial capitalist fishing demonstrates the complexities, interconnectedness and, ultimately, the necessity of considering social relations of production and the development of the forces of production not in causal terms, but rather as interconnected elements in the transition to capitalism.

The pre-1880s peasant agriculture in the Bigoudennie had stagnated under the pressure of social relations tied to a peasant system of production, which was locked into "tenant farming and an egalitarian system of transmitting goods" at the point of generational succession (Segalen, 1984: 130; see also Segalen, 1991). By the late 1800s, growing population increased the pressure on the local peasant economy to such an extent that out-migration was, for many their only alternative. However, the development of a commercial fishing industry completely transformed the social and economic structure of the Bigoudennie. According to Segalen: "The crisis in agriculture ought to have resulted in a mass exodus from the countryside at the end of the nineteenth and the

beginning of the twentieth centuries. However, this was deferred for thirty years by the growth of the fishing and related activities" (Segalen, 1991: 234; see also, Vauclare, 1985: 15).

Surplus labour, as Jose Nun reminds us, "is necessarily a 'relative' concept, and a surplus only exists in relation to a given type of production system" (Worsley, 1984: 188). Prior to the arrival of the sardine canneries one cannot truly talk of a reserve army of labour in the Bigoudennie waiting to be called into service. We can note that the form of agricultural production relied on human (not machine) labour and that little progress was made toward agricultural intensification. According to Segalen, "demographic pressure militated against any kind of technological innovation" (1991: 224). The introduction of machinery at the end of the 19th century occurred in the context of the development of the sardine industry. The possibility of replacing agricultural workers with machinery and thereby creating "surplus labour" emerged out of the transition to industrial capitalism within the *locality*.

The primary limiting factor for the development of the fishing industry was the lack of adequate and accessible rail linkages between the Bigoudennie and Paris. Investment in transportation infrastructure by the state and private enterprise and in sardine factories by private capital rapidly transformed the local economy.[1] In the space of less than 10 years Le Guilvinec jumped in population from a small hamlet to over 6 000 people working in the canneries and on the fish-boats.

During the "episode" of industrialization (1880-1950) the face of coastal Bigoudennie was fundamentally altered. Involvement in the industrial waged-economy was crucial for the more than half of the 30 000 people living within the southern portion of the Bigoudennie. In a report to the Prefecture dated 1913 a "typical" household of six (husband, wife and four children) is documented as having earnings as follows:

Category of Worker	Income
2 fishers	1 000 FF
3 women (needlepoint)	750 FF
1 cannery worker	100 FF
Total	1 850 FF

While one may speculate that some forms of subsistence practice were used to supplement the household budget the report unambiguously argues that the people living in the newly urbanized coastal strip no longer engaged in any form of agriculture.

The primary impetus toward economic development came in the form of the investment of industrial capital based in metropolitan France. Railroads created an opportunity for capital investment to gain access to the resident labour pool and, in the process, remade the local population into a Bigouden working class. The first step was the extension of joint state-private funded rail links into the Bigoudennie. Quimper, the regional capital was linked with the markets of Paris by rail in 1863. A regional spur line linked the Bigoudennie with Quimper (and thus with Paris) in 1884. While it is tempting to see the railway as being the causal factor in the phenomenal growth of the sardine fishery in the Bigoudennie (within two years of the establishment of a railhead in Quimper five sardine canneries were established, and by 1901 20 canneries were operating), the development of the railway should not be seen in isolation from the metropolitan-based food industry nor from the local level political leadership's economic aspirations. The expansion of the rail links into the region was prosecuted as a development strategy and, as such, is a product of the wider processes of industrial development in France at that time.

The expansion of the sardine fishery in the south Bigoudennie was part of a larger expansion of the sardine fishery that followed the introduction of the canning process in 1840 in Nantes, several hundred kilometres to the south of the Bigoudennie. This new technique for preserving fish revolutionized the fishing industry and, when combined with assembly style production procedures swept the coast, and also spread around the world. Regions like the Bigoudennie in which there were high levels of surplus labour and rural poverty were targeted by the canning firms.

The rapid transformation of the economy gave birth to a working class unfamiliar with the disciplined form of control capital expected of its workers. The resulting militancy severely hindered capital's desire to unfettered accumulation. While labour power may exist in the raw form it must be made into a labour force. This requires coercing workers as well as workers' own accommodation and desire to adapt.

The canners encountered two basic obstacles to their seemingly unstoppable expansion: (1) an irregular supply of fish due to the seasonal nature of the fishery; and (2) a militant and politically radicalized workforce (Adam, 1987; Chatain, 1994: 40-43; Lachèvre, 1994; Lebel, 1981; Le Coz, 1985; Martin, 1994; Vauclare, 1985, 1987). The supply of fish alternated between oversupply and scarcity. Because of the supply problem and the power of the organized workforce ongoing profitability proved difficult to achieve. The canners responded to the militant labour movement by: (1) requesting government mandated control of supply; (2) introducing labour-saving

technology to take over control of the work process; and (3) investing in Portugal, Spain, Algeria and Morocco.

Attempts were made to diversify into other fisheries (trap, longline and tuna). However, the development of these fisheries was limited. Their targeted species were not sufficiently profitable for the fish processors to encourage more than an occasionally foray in new directions (though the tuna fishery did, to a certain extent, supply the canneries in times of undersupply or strike). Overall, however, the artisanal fishery was unable to supply the processing sector on a regular enough basis. Some canneries attempted to counteract the problem of irregular supply by switching to vegetables in the off-season, which in turn led to the development of back-breaking pea farming in the Penmarc'h peninsula. The canneries that survived into the 1960s were those which had turned away from fish processing and focussed more generally on processing agricultural products.

In the 1950s the dominance of the sardine fishery began to wane under the pressure of competition from lower wage areas in the French colonial possessions (notably Algeria and Morocco) and Spain and Portugal. Without strong protective tariffs and/or greater rationalization the local food-canning industry was not competitive. Rationalization was not an option due to the strength of organized labour. Thus, by the early 1960s, most of the canneries had been shut down. In 1997, the two canneries remaining in the region primarily process imported fish.

The Rise of the Trawl Fishery

During the period between 1906 and 1945 the Bigouden fleet was completely transformed. The primary transformation was the change from sail to motor power and a gradual enlargement of the vessels themselves (partly to accommodate the added weight of the motors, partly to take advantage of their newly extended fishing range and catching capacity). The first five motorized vessels were put into service in 1924. By 1934 the number of motorized vessels had jumped to 634. The financing of the fleet's motorization was underwritten by the state-funded Crédit Maritime.

The Crédit Maritime was established by the French state in 1906, in part as a reaction to a crisis of undersupply in the sardine fishery and partly to assist artisanal fishers in purchasing and outfitting their own fishing vessels. Initially this worked to the interests of both canners and fishers. The canneries did not have to finance or own the fishing vessels, thus shifting the burden of economic risk. For the fishers, access to capital allowed them a modicum of independence from the canners which was consistent with a peasant mode of subsistence. It is important to point out that while the state assisted fishers in becoming "little capitalists" it was significantly less supportive of other avenues of economic improvement, such as the formation of trade unions.

The state-funded program of motorization figured prominently in the collapse of the sardine canners. The switch from sail to motor opened up the door to the successful prosecution of fisheries other than sardines and mackerel (the dominant fish species caught prior to World War II). In the postwar period ground fish quickly became the most important commercial species. This change in primary target species was linked to the adoption of trawl gear that had been made possible with the introduction of motorized vessels and hydraulics. By 1950 trawling was incontestably the primary focus of activity in the fishery. Whereas sardines were linked with industrial canning plants in the region, the newly developed trawl fishery was oriented toward a fresh fish market, based first on a regional network of small retailers and secondly on the large corporate distribution system which extended from dockside fish auctions to supermarkets.

Thus, the introduction of trawl technology and the motorization of the fishing fleet cleared the way for a relatively independent artisanal fishery to develop in the Bigoudennie. In the post-World War II period, trawling made it possible for the fishers to circumvent price and market controls by the canneries and to enter the rapidly growing fresh fish market. The fresh fish market was better suited toward maintaining higher ex-vessel fish prices. Initially, fishers and fish buyers used the existing rail links to transport fish to market. Very quickly after the end of World War II, road and highway modernization programs made truck transport more attractive due to its lower costs and greater flexibility.

The infrastructural support for the development of the sardine fishery was laid down by the railroad and the canning process. The postwar fishery developed in conjunction with the techniques of refrigeration and an expanding highway system that made it possible to ship fish by truck. The new reliance on truck transport (the major local trucking firm was established in Le Guilvinec in 1954) allowed a greater flexibility in marketing for fish-boat owners. In the place of the departing canneries a system of government-run fish auctions emerged.

The shift away from an industrial cannery fishery to a fresh market artisanal fishery had a major impact on the structure of employment in the region. While the employment of men on the fish-boats remained relatively

stable into the 1960s, employment prospects for women disappeared as the canneries and subsidiary factories closed their doors and moved away. Thus, the Bigoudennie entered a period of de-industrialization at the very moment when the rest of rural Brittany was "modernizing."

In hindsight, the introduction of motors and trawl gear foreshadowed the death of the local canning industry and made possible the survival of a family-based artisanal fishing industry that has lasted well into the 20th century and (one hopes) beyond.

On to Crisis

The contemporary malaise faced by Breton fisherfolk has been growing sporadically since the end of World War II. The threefold increase in the volume of fish landed by the French fishing fleet under postwar modernization plans (Chaussade and Corlay, 1988: 31, 51) led to a reduction of employment and, potentially, to ecological collapse. With increases in catching capacity and improved fishing technology, job opportunities disappeared. In Brittany alone, the number of jobs plummeted from 25 000 in 1950 to 8 000 in 1992. In the 1990s, Brittany's highly capitalized and efficient fishing fleet's catching capacity greatly exceeds the reproductive capacity of the fish stocks (Gwiazda, 1993; Salz, 1991).

French government attempts to control the fisheries in the immediate postwar period focussed on access to fishing grounds and the development of catching and processing capacity (Meuriot, 1986). The first Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) of the European Union (EU), adopted on October 20, 1970, encompassed two fundamental points: (1) equal access to the basic resource by all member states; and (2) a common market organization for fish similar to the common market for key agricultural products (Leigh, 1983). This agreement still left much of the actual control of fisheries in the hands of individual member states and emphasized economic development, fleet modernization and rationalization ahead of issues of conservation. The EU was not able to come to an agreement on a CFP that effectively dealt with both economic and conservation factors until January 1983 (Farnell and Elles, 1984; Leigh, 1983; Wise, 1984). The 1983 CFP gave the European Commission powers to set fishing quotas for member states, to limit access to fishing grounds and to restrict fishing effort.

French fishers have been strong supporters of EU and national policies that have expanded and/or guaranteed their access to fishing grounds, funded modernization of new vessels and/or ensured strong minimum prices for key species. The triumph of neo-conservative economics and the advancing globalization of the economy has had a direct impact on EU fishery policy. Under the guise of conservation (undeniably needed, but in no way effectively implemented)[2] EU fishers have been confronted by mandated fleet reductions and declining quotas. Simultaneously, new EU trade regulations opened the door to cheaper American and Third World fish imports, prompting EU officials to lower the guaranteed minimum prices for key species. In addition, the devaluation of the Spanish and Italian currencies resulted in a concurrent devaluation of fish prices owing to the important role of these two Mediterranean nations in buying French fish. Working in concert these various factors were at the root of the crisis that shook the French artisanal fishery in the early 1990s.

During the heyday of the fishing boom the retail sector in the regional commercial centre, Pont-l'Abbé, grew at a remarkable rate during a time in which many other rural communities in France were losing their small commercial centres. At the peak of the boom, this small town of 8 000 (servicing an area population of between 30 000 and 35 000 residents) supported more than 200 commercial businesses. A local building boom propelled by rising fishing incomes swept the region as fishers replaced old housing stock with larger, modern homes in the interior of the region. The new homes were more reminiscent of the cannery owners' homes of an earlier era than of the small, cramped homes of their parents.

The 1980s had been exceptionally good to artisanal fishers. Fish prices climbed, newer, better boats had been built, and the years of hard times appeared to be moving into the haze of memory. Constantly rising fish prices masked an acute drop in catch per unit effort (typically measured in terms of how much fish is caught by a finite unit of gear in a specified unit of time). This decrease manifested itself in sporadic, but significant, drops in overall production, beginning in the early 1980s, which should have signalled the impending crash in the local fishing economy.

Following four to five generations of hard times it seemed to the fishers like the good times had finally arrived. Little luxuries that had been denied their parents and grandparents became a normal aspect of everyday life. Growth and expansion seemed unending. The drop in overall production that had begun in the mid-1980s was more than offset by steadily rising prices. When the crisis arrived, it hit many as a complete shock.

Fish prices in the south Bigouden fluctuate depending upon the time of year. Toussaint (November 1) heralds the beginning of the lucrative holiday season. Fish

prices climb to the annual high point as French consumers flock to their local fish counters in preparation for the expansive meals which mark the Christmas and New Year holiday season. The relative scarcity of fish at this time of year works in concert with heightened demand to drive up prices. Consumer demand falls off dramatically in January and the fish move back onto the fishing grounds, driving prices down to what is normally the annual low in the cycle. The situation is made more difficult for fishers as the weather in January and February is the worst of the year. The bad weather keeps most of the under-24-metre vessels tied up to the dock. In the 12-18-metre class of vessels, ships' logs indicate that an average of 50 percent of the available fishing days are lost during January and February due to poor weather. With the milder spring weather fish prices start to slowly climb back. Prices peak during the summer langoustine fishery. Prices drop off a bit in early fall just until the holiday season rush begins again, propelling prices skyward.

In the south Bigouden the crisis of the early 1990s brought the boom of the preceding decade to an abrupt halt. Early warnings of crisis were clearly apparent during 1992. Falling catches combined with declining prices to make 1992 a poor year for the majority of the ports in south Finistère. Overall production fell 7.2 percent (72 123 metric tonnes versus 77 728 in 1991). The registered value of the catch dropped by 5.7 percent (1.3 million French Francs against 1.4 million in 1991). In the Bigoudennie 1992 had a variable effect. Declines in overall production ranged between a loss of 8 percent and 11 percent. The aggregate price per kilo of fish dropped by 23 percent in January of 1993. While the magnitude of the drop was unusual it was not unexpected to experience a drop in prices during the first few sales of the new year. However, prices continued dropping throughout 1993. Prices continued their free fall until spring/summer 1995 when they stabilized at a rate still more than 15 percent less than the 1991 pre-crisis price. The impact on the local economy was devastating.

The Impact of Crisis in the Everyday

Under capitalism, conservation and resource management practices are almost always aimed at maintaining the best rate of profit over the medium to short term. These plans are designed from outside the community of fishers and are oriented toward fulfilling needs and objectives that have very little to do with the local community (Rogers, 1995; Stump and Batker, 1996). For their part, the local community is pulled inexorably into a vortex of increasing capacity and diminishing returns until the fishery collapses completely. Local people are then forced to switch to a new fishery or else they are pushed irrevocably out of fishing altogether.

In the Bigoudennie the direct impact of the crisis on the fishing fleet was reflected in the day to day operations of the fishing boat in three very specific fashions: (1) reductions in crew size; (2) reductions in expenditures on maintenance of vessels; and (3) increasing fishing time. In combination these responses to crisis resulted in a worsening of shipboard safety.

For example, since 1989 the crew size on a fleet of 24-metre boats belonging to one local fishing company declined from six to five at sea. During the same period many of the coastal draggers went from four to three men at sea. Whereas technological changes (such as the switch from side trawling to stern trawling) were at the root of downsizing of crews in the past, in the mid-1990s the explanations are directly economic. Fewer men in the crew translates directly into bigger crew shares.

Many boat owners also cut back as much as possible on maintenance expenditures. Boats were taken up on the slipway less frequently than was previously the practice. Gear was made to last longer than usual and the replacement of old equipment was deferred, often beyond the point of safety. In the short run this may improve the productivity of the vessels and thus increase the boat owners' revenue and (perhaps) maintain or at least slow down declining incomes. However, over the long term these measures led to a deterioration of conditions of work and a worsening of shipboard safety.

The crisis also had a social and economic impact on the fishers' families. Most obviously, declining incomes forced changes in the management of the household budget. In confronting "the perennial problem of the peasantry" (Wolf, 1966), fishing families in the Bigoudennie had little recourse but to increase production (that is to fish longer and harder) and to restrict their consumption on the fish-boat and in the household. Changes in patterns of household spending had a serious impact on the economy. However, it was the hidden ways of economizing and their impact on the fishers families that underlay much of the widespread anger and spurred the Bigoudennie to protest.

Danielle[3] is a mother of two (ages five and two) who had, until the crisis in 1993, concentrated on working in the home raising her children, managing the family accounts and maintaining her house. "My husband," she remarked, "is away from home 15 days at a time on a dragger in the Irish Sea. His feet barely touch the ground before he's back out fishing. . . ." Since the crisis he has brought home a salary of between 800 and 2 500 Francs

(200-625 $Can.), typically about 1 000 Francs. Until the debut of the crisis Danielle had worked at home. When the crisis hit she unsuccessfully tried to find employment in the region's service economy, and when the crisis deepened she joined the local Fishermen's Wives Association.

"You think about it," continued Nicole, a mother of three children, "with a sum like that one can't make the house payments or pay the various bills that arrive. I can't properly care for my children anymore, in particular the youngest who is 18 months and has severe bronchitis."

"What's more, our men love their *métier* and, it's not a question of doing something else," said Françoise. "They are worried and on edge because of these financial difficulties and the crisis about which one can see very little to do. Their anxiety affects us and our children. We are worried when we watch them head out to sea, but not as much as when they leave to join the demonstrations. It is a desperate time and we worry when we hear news of men being arrested and beaten by the police," said Françoise.

"On what do we live?" asked Nicole. "That's the real question. You can ask us—why don't you get a job?— But there is no work in this region. Each time we get a bill we have to go to the bank and negotiate. You know, that is not normal. Our husbands spend 18 hours working each day at sea and make next to nothing. Do you think they'll go begging, cap in hand?"

Due to the nature of the regional economy and high levels of unemployment it was difficult for fishing families to supplement their losses from fishing with income generated by other family members not already working. The distribution and allocation of paid employment in the Bigoudennie reflects a common Western pattern of gendered employment opportunities with women disproportionately represented in the service (retail/clerical) sector and men employed in managerial occupations, trades and fisheries.

A careful consideration of the structure of employment reveals that, while fishing is by far the most important sector of the productive economy (in the sense of the creation of value) and employs more than 2 000 people directly and nearly half again as many in support services, it is in the service sector (both private and public) that most jobs are found. Irrespective of the very clear linkage between the fishery and the region's overall economic health, without government employment the region would be less economically stable than it currently is.

For example, the single largest employer is the hospital in Pont-l'Abbé, followed closely by the educational system, municipal services and the postal service. These government agencies together employ as many (if not more) individuals than are working in the fishery. In addition, fully 65 percent of those employed in the service sector are women. Understandably the national government's attacks on the structure of the welfare state will create greater uncertainty and potentially more damage to the local economy than change in the fishery. This is not to deny the crucial role played by the fishery in generating wealth, but merely to illuminate the extent to which the focal point of both wealth creation and political struggle have been displaced from the local through the rise (and decline?) of the welfare state.

Night of Fire

On the night of February 22, 1993, between 800 and 1 000 Breton fishers and their supporters stormed the Rungis wholesale fish auction, just south of Paris. In the ensuing mêlée 800 tonnes of fish valued at more than $4 million dollars was destroyed. The fishers and their supporters engaged in a running battle with the CRS, the specially trained and armed French riot police. Armed only with sticks and the brute determination of a people fighting for their livelihood, they held off the police until well into the early hours of the morning. Many of the demonstrators came from the Breton fishing ports of Le Guilvinec, Douarnenez and Concarneau where earlier in the day more than 9 000 people had participated in demonstrations against changes in the European Union's common fisheries policy. The new policies cut quotas, forced a reduction in the size of the French fishing fleet and liberalized regulations governing the importation of non-EU fish products. The anger and strength of this and subsequent demonstrations underlines the extent of the crisis which shook the French artisanal fisheries in the early 1990s. The crisis that local fishing communities are facing in France is part of a global fishing crisis (McGoodwin, 1990). The amount of fish taken from the world's oceans peaked in the 1980s and has been declining ever since. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organizations have determined that of 17 world fisheries four are in a state of commercial depletion and nine more are in serious decline. Under the pressure of the market economy fishing effort continues to increase in search of ever increasing profits. Local coastal communities struggle to make sense of the rapid changes and to find effective ways to resist and persist.

In a desire to minimize social disruption among fisherfolk while simultaneously attempting to conserve fish stocks, government agencies have introduced a variety

of restrictive policies that range from limiting access to fishing grounds, restricting types and sizes of fishing gear, limiting vessel size and power to the establishment of regional and species quotas. These measures, however, have only compounded the problems of those who fish. Breton fishers face the likelihood of further fleet size reductions, rapidly declining fish stocks and ultimately the collapse of their way of life.

During the holiday season of 1992 prices did not climb nearly as high as was expected, and when the January price drop arrived it hit with the force of the famed French high-speed train. Gentle pre-Christmas warnings by the president of the local fishers' committee in the committee's bulletin were quickly transformed into a general protest movement of fishers that at its peak stretched along most of the France's Atlantic coastline. The movement had its roots in the government mandated local committees of fishers,[4] but as the nature of the protest changed from lobbying to direct actions informal "survival" committees sprung up and soon displaced the official committee structure as the effective political voice.[5] Unhampered by the government bureaucracy and arising out of local networks of co-operation and kinship, the survival committees were able to mobilize large numbers of fishers, family, and community members in a relatively short period of time.

Four thousand demonstrators marched through the streets of Le Guilvinec, February 22, 1993, the day before Breton fishers stormed the Rungis fish market. The newspaper *Ouest-France* (hereafter referred to as O-F) declared: "De mémoire de Bigouden, on n'avait pas vu tant de monde manifester au Guilvinec depuis mai 68." Survival Committee organizers declared the demonstration to be: "Un bel élan de solidarité. Ici, tout le monde a compris que si la pêche crève, tout le monde crève avec elle" (O-F, February 23, 1993). The exasperation and anger of the demonstrators was reflected in the slogans on their placards: *Briezh*[6] fish d'abord; American fish dehors; Bruxelles garde les choux et laisse nous le poisson; Poissons invendus, marins foutus; US Go Home."

The speakers stood upon a makeshift platform draped in the black and white of the Breton flag and the orange and yellow of the Bigouden flag. In a manner evocative of an English-Canadian unity rally or a St. Jean Baptiste Day celebration in Québec these visible signs of the Bigouden and the Breton swayed through the demonstration and in the words of the speakers. While simultaneously recognizing, even supporting the need for an effective pan-European fishing policy, speaker after speaker referred to the community base of the fishery and the importance of the fishing industry in economic and cultural terms.

Demonstration followed demonstration emanating outward from the Bigoudennie, the epicentre of protest. A careful plotting of direct actions and demonstrations against the landscape of France's Atlantic coast dramatically illustrates the central role of the Bigoudennie in the groundswell of social protest that swept through the French fishing industry (Couliou, 1994: 11-12). Roving bands of fishers entered grocery stores and cold storage facilities and destroyed thousands of kilos of imported fish. Trucks loaded with imported fish were held-up on local highways and their contents dumped out. The national government tried to put out the flames of protest with the promise of a 225 million French Franc "emergency plan" and an offer to review government fisheries policy (*Le Télégramme*, February 24, 1993). The protests continued unabated.

As spring weather gradually replaced the meanness of winter storms the daily necessity of earning a living slowly displaced social protest. Sporadic direct actions occurred well into June but modest price increases over the summer and during the 1993 holiday season kept fishers at sea. Government largesse also allayed the concerns of some boat owners, especially those most in difficulty who had been promised financial assistance. The basic problem, however, remained in place and in January 1994 social protest erupted again.

In 1993, the skippers had been at the forefront of the struggle. In 1994, crew members were at the vanguard of the movement and they pushed their demands on working conditions and pay into the limelight. A general strike was called and most of France's Atlantic fishery shut down for the better part of February. As in 1993, the fishers organized roving bands of "commandos" whose task it was to destroy imported fish wherever it was found. Other units went into the local markets to hand out copies of the prices fishers received at the dock. Local town councils worked with the survival committees to organize "dead city" days in which all the merchants of the town closed their shutters in support of the fishers (and incidentally thus avoided attacks by units of "commandos").

The national government acted quickly in an attempt to forestall an escalation of the protest. A meeting was called by the government between then prime minister Édouard Balladur and representatives of the striking fishers in Rennes, the capital of Brittany. On the day of the meeting several thousand fishers, their families and supporters demonstrated in the streets. While the minister talked, the riot police chased demonstrators through

the streets of the city using tear gas, rubber bullets and clubs. The fishers fought back with distress flares, one of which landed on the roof of the historic former parliament building of Brittany.

Early the next morning demonstrators returned home to pictures of the burning building and bloody-faced fishers on the local newspapers. The burning of the parliament building in Rennes seemed to dampen community support a little. Yet, despite this momentary setback and the beginnings of vocal criticism at home in the Bigoudennie, fishers continued their protests until the government promised more subsidies to help boat owners in difficulty. Crew members, however, received little attention. Social cleavages at the local level between skipper and crew started to widen and made subsequent solidarity more difficult.

The Local—Within and Against the Global

The unrelenting movement toward liberalized trade and the globalization of the market is making it increasingly difficult for local communities to have any real control over local development. In the Bigoudennie a "traditional" peasant culture arose out of the encounter between a metropolitan-driven industrial capitalism and a local, essentially non-capitalist social formation. Prior to the extension of capitalist relations of production into the local fishery, the Bigoudennie existed on the fringes of the Breton hinterland which supplied metropolitan France with labour and raw resources. The arrival of rail and the establishment of an industrial sardine fishery in the late 19th century pushed the region out of its socio-economic isolation[7] and, in so doing, created the *Bigoudennie* and the *Bigouden*. In point of fact, the label Bigouden did not come to be generally applied to either the people or the geographic space until well into the early 20th century. Contemporary Bigoudennie roughly corresponds to the boundaries of the pre-revolutionary Barony of Pont-l'Abbé.

Mapped onto the topography of the material conditions of daily life, a culture emerged which was rooted in the local, yet angled against the continuous incursions from "outside." In the early period the outside was represented physically by French-speaking cannery managers and owners who brought their money and machinery into the Bigoudennie. Even though they lived among the Bigouden their lifestyle, dress and language were ever present indicators of both their social and ethnic differences. The early social movement that emerged in opposition to this new class of owner was articulated within the language of class and class struggle. It was symbolized by the red flag and the singing of the Internationale. Though its struggles were rooted in the local, in that the arena of protest was local (the physical sites of struggle were the canneries and the streets of the local towns), it was universal in terms of its use of the language of the international working class.

In the aftermath of de-industrialization the contemporary movements of social protest have turned to a localized idiom while simultaneously operating in a delocalized arena of struggle. The social movement that arose in the context of the current fisheries crisis in the Bigoudennie employs a different set of symbolic markers than its predecessors in the early part of this century. In the 1990s the rhetoric and symbolism of struggle was local even though the arena of struggle was delocalized. The symbols of the 1990s included the traditional peasant costume and flag, though today's flag is no longer the red flag, but a flag created by the tourist authority to represent the Bigoudennie for marketing purposes. The new sites of conflict are the provincial, national and European capitals. The new targets are multinational corporations and foreign fish importers.

In both contexts local markers of identity have been important (for example, the use of the Breton language or the traditional costume worn by the women). However, the creation of a clearly defined local identity followed the imposition of the industrial fishery and has taken on a greater importance than ever before in the context of the globalization of the market for fish. What is for me most intriguing in this illustration is how, at the point of engagement between an imposed industrialization and the struggle by a local population to maintain some sense of dignity in their loss, a local neo-ethnic identity emerged.

Conclusion

One of capitalism's defining features is its inherent capacity for change, destruction and reconstruction. This constant process of pulling down and building back up has important consequences for racial, ethnic and local identities. In the borderlands of Europe's internal colonies and along the margins of our settler society, capitalism has been engaged in a spatial and cultural restructuring that has critical consequences in terms of racial, ethnic and local identities. During the period of capitalist transformation in the Bigoudennie, local resistance was expressed as class struggle, represented symbolically in the red flag and the singing of the Internationale. Following the collapse of the sardine fishery, a local identity, *Bigouden*, took precedence over that of being a *worker*.

The particular and local manifestations of the new sets of identities which emerged out of the encounter between the larger (that is to say the world capitalist system) and the local (be it "tribal or peasant") is dependent on the nature of the overarching state formation and that of the pre-existing social formation. At its moment of encapsulation the Bigoudennie was an economically stagnant agricultural region in which the rural peasantry were barely eking out a living.

Capitalism arrived in the back country of Brittany in much the same manner as it was implanted in Europe's overseas colonies, carried by "foreign" capitalists who expropriated local labour and resources and undermined local forms of production. The particular form of struggle which emerged in the Bigoudennie reflects this almost colonial context. This is not to say that local struggles which emerged were explicitly or necessarily nationalist in nature. In truth, nationalist sentiment seems to have never moved far beyond the simple resentments expressed by most hinterland peoples toward the urban centre. Rather, local expressions of class solidarity were more easily cultivated when the cannery owners and managers were French-speaking and the working class were Breton-speaking. This, in combination with the transition from peasant to industrial conditions of work, created the conditions for strong collective action and militant trade unionism.

As opposed to more clearly nationalist "Breton" movements described by McDonald (1989), contemporary Bigouden militants see their struggle as one based in maintaining the viability of their "community," not as part of a struggle for autonomy or independence. Here, idioms of locality and "community" are used as a medium to articulate specific class demands and viewpoints within a context in which physical representations of class formations have become despatialized.

Gavin Smith, in examining the twinned issues of livelihood and resistance, describes how cultures of opposition, based in the local or in expressions of "community," can be seen to sow "the seeds for a more broadly based oppositional class consciousness" (Smith, 1989: 236). Smith follows Sabean who defines community "not [as a set of] shared values or common understanding, so much as the fact that members of a community are engaged in the same argument, the same *raisonnement*, the same *rede*, the same discourse, in which alternative strategies, misunderstandings, conflicting goals and values are threshed out.... What makes community is the discourse" (Sabean, 1984: 29-30). In the Breton case, it is most interesting to note that identities based in the local or the "community" have (re)emerged as the primary expression of class interests, whereas Smith was documenting a case in which he saw the local culture of opposition as forming a basis upon which a more generalized class consciousness might emerge.

The more abstract notion of being "Breton" appeals to a cultural "quest for authentic identity" (Badone, 1992: 808) in which pan-Celtic celebrations of traditional costumes, dance and music play an important part. Yet on the national plain, the majority of the Bigouden fishers support "French" political parties, as opposed to regional-based groupings advocating autonomy or independence. At the very least, this points to the complexity and divergence of social identities in which a fisher may well be "Bigouden" at the demonstration, "Breton" at the *Kermesse* and "French" on election day.

The early struggles united, in an industrial setting, people who had primarily thought of themselves as villagers, as opposed to assuming a rather more abstract identity as either French or Breton. In their struggles against the "bosses," their own collective identity emerged, and in the late 1800s and early 20th century manifested itself in a class idiom. Though not evident at the time, this early proletarian identity contained within it the potential of transmutation into an ethnic or "local" identity. Subsequent changes in the local political economy—primarily the collapse of the industrial canning industry—stripped away the unambiguous class basis of their collective identity and opened the path for the emergence of a *bigoudenne* identity.

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Notes

1 For an interesting discussion of railways and (1) their importance in the development of "second phase" industrial capitalism see Hobsbawm (1969: 109-33); (2) their role in turning "peasants into Frenchmen" see Weber (1976: 195-220); and (3) a comparison of British, American and French approaches to the construction of railways, see Dobbin, 1994.
2 See Coffey, 1995.
3 All names are pseudonyms with the exception of those of prominent members of the fishing community, government officials, or elected politicians, quoted by name from published sources. I met Danielle, Nicole and Françoise at a local food bank run by one of the local Fishermen's Wives Associations. During my stay in the Bigoudennie I spent a great many hours listening to the women talk about the difficulties of running a household and, for the skippers wives, the boat budget during the period of crisis.
4 The local committees, established in 1945, are part of a well-integrated and centralized management system that brings together all sectors of the French fishing industry under one umbrella organization, the Comité Central des Pêches Maritimes (CCPM). Although they have a certain degree of autonomy, they are ultimately responsible for the "execution of decisions taken at a higher level" (Salz, 1991: 137; see LiPuma and Meltzoff, 1994, for a discussion of an analogous management system in Spain).
5 It is important to point out that in spite of the new structure and separate organization many of the CLPM personal were also involved in the organization and leadership of the survival committees. In many instances the survival committees were run out of the CLPM offices and were funded by the official organization.
6 *Briezh* is the Breton word for Brittany.
7 A word of caution is in order here: isolation is intimately intertwined with integration. We might more precisely remark that, at the moment of the arrival of rail transport, the Bigoudennie was poorly articulated in terms of physical communication links with central France. However, it should be pointed out that the "isolation" of this region has fluctuated over the centuries and for a period of nearly two centuries it was firmly incorporated into the coastal trading network which linked Bordeaux with England (see Duigou, 1991; 1994).

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