SEA CHANGE: MARITIME ACTIVISM IN THE MODERN ERA

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ABSTRACT
From idealistic experimental submarines, designed by Catalan socialist and inventor Narcis Monturiol, to the regulation of steerage-class provisions aboard North Atlantic emigrant liners, the nineteenth century steamship became an instrument and a subject of reformist zeal at a time when it was also the primary vehicle of mass migration around the globe, the most fearsome tool in the expansion of empires, and the sole conduit of intercontinental trade.

Twentieth century shipping, driven by brutal economic imperatives and the politics of war, has facilitated globalisation, dramatically altered port cities, and damaged the ecologies of some of the world’s most sensitive aquatic environments ultimately attracting the attentions of a growing number of activists whose aims range from nuclear disarmament to the protection of aquatic micro-organisms. Maritime political activism encompasses a range of issues including investigative journalism, piracy conducted by guerrillas, military action by the major seafaring nations, and the design of vessels, themselves. This paper aims to explore relationships between ship design, operation, economics, politics, and the evolving consciousness that stimulates activism.

Main TEXT
[Fig.1] The sea is an ungovernable wilderness, the site of fabulous adventures and horrible catastrophes, terrible abuses and reckless behaviour. Here, in a great port like Barcelona, there’s evidence everywhere of the wealth generated over past centuries by shipping, and there’s also today’s highly organised harbour where tourists and cargo arrive and depart in spectacular fashion. Judged by the appearance of the Port of Barcelona, one might think that seafaring was a safe and well structured business, that ships were properly licensed, cargo thoroughly inspected and accounted for, and that seafaring was always conducted on calm water
under a clear Mediterranean sky. Of course, that impression would be wrong!

Looking around the waterfront here, historic innovation is celebrated in such fabulous artefacts as the two replicas of the world’s first effective submarines, one displayed in the courtyard of the Maritime Museum and the other alongside the old harbour. In my view, those two small boats provide an appropriate starting point for this brief consideration of how various types of activism have both succeeded AND failed at generating change in the design and management of ships and ports since the industrial revolution.

[Fig.2] In the 1850s the Catalan socialist inventor, Narcís Monturiol, turned his attention to the development of a submersible boat to be used for gathering coral and for scientific exploration. In 1859 he launched his first Ictineo. Built in the Nuevo Vulcano shipyard in Barceloneta, and involving the naval architects Joan Monjo i Pons and Josep Missé, the ship was demonstrated successfully here in the harbour to the delight of local coral divers, whose lives it was intended to safeguard and whose livelihoods it was designed to improve, and of hundreds of small investors, whose subscriptions had funded the boat’s construction. (Votolato 2011, pp.144-46)

Monturiol’s second Ictineo was launched in 1864 and contributed to the subsequent development of the submarine by solving two basic problems, air and power. The boat was driven by a six-cylinder steam engine, coal-fired for surface running and, most significantly, powered by a chemical mixture that generated both steam for the motor and oxygen for the crew when running submerged. This was an innovative example of hybrid power for ships, in keeping with the age of early sail-assisted steamships. But although a technical success, that vessel never attracted the government funding needed for further development, essentially because it was presented as a benign research instrument rather than as a war machine. The historian Robert Hughes (1993, pp.264-71) compared Monturiol, himself, to Jules Verne’s Captain Nemo, of Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, due to his scientific curiosity about The Deep and his commitment to social justice for working people. Despite Monturiol’s utopian effort, naval warfare was the future of submarine development, and even he finally appealed, though unsuccessfully, to the US navy for support when shortage of money was ending his project.

Throughout history, the great navies of the world, despite their typically belligerent purposes, have been the most orderly and accountable communities at sea, governed by stringent regulations and answerable to formal bodies at home. By contrast, commercial shipping is lightly governed. Nevertheless, entrepreneurs in both passenger and cargo shipping have, themselves, instigated reforms in ship design and operation.
Today, most trans-oceanic passengers go to sea for the pleasure of a holiday on a lavishly equipped cruise liner. But until the advent of the jet airliner in the late 1950s, the steamship was the primary means of intercontinental transport, and few sane people would ever book passage just for the fun of it, so dangerous and uncomfortable was ocean travel.

Yet the horror of shipping was seen at its worst in the passage of captive human cargo. And so, it would be impossible to discuss activism at sea without reference to the Atlantic slave ships, although what brought their 300-year reign of terror to an end was the international anti-slavery movement, not design reform. Nevertheless, the slave ship provided a model of callousness against which subsequent approaches to the transport of human beings can forever be measured. The hold of such a ship was typically fitted with racks on which the human ‘cargo’ was stowed in two tiers. Sanitation and cooking facilities were nil. Darkness reigned day and night, and the atmosphere was always fetid.

As a result of the Potato Famine in Ireland, annual emigration to the United States jumped from 50,000 in 1846 to 300,000 in 1875; and shipping companies answered the demand for cheap passage by outfitting the cargo holds of their sailing packets with as many as 400 closely stacked berths.

They usually provided freshwater barrels in the hold plus a cooking shack on deck. Below-deck spaces were dark, badly ventilated, lacking in hygiene and often awash. So, in conditions that nearly matched in horror those of slaving ships, such vessels carried the first generation of Irish emigrants, the steerage class, to the New World, (Fox 2003, pp.175-77) a situation exposed by mass-circulation periodicals such as Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Magazine.

[Fig.3] With the advent of steam power, the Inman Line dominated emigrant services from Ireland to the eastern ports of the United States between the 1850s and the 1880s. During those decades the Inman Line instituted the first concessions to safety and comfort for steerage passengers, largely due to the Quaker conscience of the line’s founder, John Grubb Richardson, a benevolent capitalist and pioneer of model workers’ housing at his industrial colony, Bessbrook, near Belfast. Inman steamships cut the crossing from weeks to days and accommodated steerage passengers in single-sex dormitories, housing around twenty, at either end of the ship with families in between to encourage propriety. (Butler 2001, p.59)

Yet these were the best ships, and by comparison with their first and second-class accommodations, steerage was harsh, and activists on both sides of the Atlantic lobbied their governments to control standards, rather than leaving the shipping lines to regulate themselves.
In 1909 the US Congressional Immigration Commission considered investigations on steerage conditions undertaken by agents of the Commission who, disguised as immigrants, had travelled in twelve trans-Atlantic liners representing the major companies carrying steerage passengers. One activist, Edward Steiner (1914, pp.37-38), described the features that came to identify Steerage from his personal emigrant experience in the 1880s:

When one has slid down two and sometimes three flights of iron stairs, located at the narrowest point of fore or aft, and sees a crowded space which may hold from sixty to six hundred passengers who are tucking themselves away on a series of narrow shelves – then he is in the steerage. It is his first business to find a vacant bunk, and having found it, stake it by placing his belongings there. On the way, he will have bestowed upon him various tin utensils and a thin gray cotton blanket, so that the aforementioned shelf becomes his dining-room, dressing-room, parlour and sleeping room: unless the Fates are kind and the Atlantic is quiet enough to leave a dry spot somewhere on the narrow margin of the deck. The faster the boat, the less likely he is to find this dry spot, for the prow digs itself into the sea and is almost inundated, while the stern is so taken up by machinery and hatchways that even in a moderate sea it affords no comfort.

Subsequent government regulations required that new ships were built to meet higher standards with accommodations for emigrant passengers that resembled simpler versions of the second-class, with enclosed four-berth cabins, dedicated open decks, dining rooms, decent communal bathing facilities and a convivial salon. (Votolato 2011: pp.50-53)

[Fig.4] The public rooms and four-berth cabins of ‘third class’, the new branding for steerage, in Cunard’s mighty Olympic-class vessels, launched between 1910 and 1914, demonstrated these improvements. Unfortunately, reformed steerage was enforced only for new ships operated by those lines carrying emigrants from northern Europe, while southern Europeans travelled mainly on older ships in unreformed steerage decks for many more years until their own ethnic pressure groups arose.

Safety was also a continual issue of public concern that attracted the attention of activists and muckraking journalists in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Following the most sensational maritime accident in history, the sinking of Titanic in 1912, with the loss of 1,490 people, its owners, White Star Line, ordered its identical sister ship, Olympic, to be outfitted with additional lifeboats, higher watertight bulkheads and a double hull.
Although the official Titanic enquiry is now considered a whitewash, reactions to the disaster led to significant improvements in passenger ship design and operation. An International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), was agreed by the major seafaring nations in 1914, an unprecedented incidence of international cooperation that would have been unthinkable but for intense public pressure in Europe and North America. SOLAS became the most important treaty in maritime law, requiring mandatory 24-hour radio watch, clearer standards for distress signalling and establishment of an ice patrol in the North Atlantic. (IMO a, 2011)

Shipping is a global industry carrying more than 90 per cent of the world’s cargo and, therefore, needs international regulation. Since 1948 the main guardian of safety at sea has been the International Maritime Organization (IMO b, 2011), a London-based agency of the United Nations whose primary mission is to prevent maritime accidents.

IMO ‘conventions’ are democratically agreed by 169 member nations, yet the IMO, itself, has no enforcement powers, and as a result, its gold standard regarding the design, maintenance, crewing and behaviour of ships at sea is an ideal, not always realized. Thus, the IMO is a locus of both activism and conservatism regarding all aspects of shipping.

In the mid 1950s an American entrepreneur, Malcom McLean, began developing an innovative packing and loading system that would make him the Henry Ford of the shipping world. His contribution, the container ship, was to become the key element in a system of freight transport that would revolutionize world trade and significantly alter the global community in the last decades of the twentieth century. (Donovan; Bonney, 2006; p.39)

Containerized ships, combined with high-speed shore cranes, made cargo handling quicker and more efficient, yet incurred the wrath of stevedores and longshoremen who fought containerisation for fear of losing their jobs. Reactions by union activists, infiltrated by organized crime, eventually attracted whistleblowers worldwide. The new technology also caused huge physical upheavals in port cities, initiated enormous challenges in maritime legislation and revolutionised international trade, (Votolato, 2011; pp.179-96) ultimately stimulating protests against global corporatism by pressure groups including the Global Justice Movement and World Social Forum. Such a mixed picture illustrates the complex and morally erratic nature of activism.

Meanwhile, the growth in size and value of container ships and supertankers attracted a new generation of pirates operating worldwide but concentrating in the troubled Gulf of Aden, where daring mariners play Robin Hood in opposition to
the faceless multi-nationals using nearby shipping lanes, conducting industrial fishing, or dumping waste in an area the pirates see as Somali waters. Views of that conflict are polarised between a coalition of powerful companies and navies of the developed world against the pirates, who raise large ransoms and thereby achieve heroic status in their dismally impoverished homeland. (Rice; Hassan, 2008)

Pirates employ particular tactics and equipment including mother ships that hide from their colossal prey beyond the visual and radar horizons and launch small, fast, heavily armed attack boats that can quickly overtake slow-moving, unarmed and fully laden cargo vessels riding low in the water. (Langewiesche, 2004; p.45)

They also take other easily-boarded ships such as the French luxury cruise yacht, Le Ponant, attacked via its vulnerable sports deck in 2009.

Similar confrontational tactics are also used by widely respected environmental organisations such as Greenpeace, whose three successive flagships were all named Rainbow Warrior. (Greenpeace, 2011)

While the first two were converted vessels, a new motor-assisted sailing ship, Rainbow Warrior III, has been designed specifically for Greenpeace protest activities and scientific research, employing state-of-the-art communications equipment, with green construction materials and propulsion systems following a philosophy of ethical sourcing and sustainability. 1,200 square metres of sail on two innovative 55 metre A-frame masts, designed by the Dutch naval architects Dijkstra and Partners, work with a diesel-electric motor used for extra speed. Tactical design includes a helipad on the stern deck and a ‘safe’ radio room fortified against the types of sustained attacks launched at previous Rainbow Warriors. The boat’s exotic rigging also provides an armature for the huge banners Greenpeace uses to convey its messages to the general public and opponents alike.

Even more militant than Greenpeace, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society was founded in 1977 to protect marine life through direct action, which some critics have dubbed ‘eco-terrorism’. Sea Shepherd’s boats shun the overt eco-friendliness of Greenpeace vessels, concentrating instead on strength, speed and aggressive presentation. (Sea Shepherd, 2011)

Their flagship, Steve Irwin, built in 1975 as an enforcement patrol boat for Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency, is now armed with a powerful water cannon to enhance the ship’s potency in campaigns against whaling and other so called ‘eco-crimes’. This year the ship was dramatically dazzle-painted, in keeping with the confrontational Sea Shepherd aesthetic.

[Fig.6] Sea Shepherd’s Motor Yacht, Ady Gil, a wave-piercing trimaran, was built with sustainable
materials and intelligent systems, such as bilge water filters, yet it was also designed to be fast, breaking the round-the-world speed record for powerboats in 2008. The vessel was designed by LOMOcean Design and built by Calibre Boats in New Zealand.

Its powerfully dynamic form, Darth Vader-ish livery and stark interiors reflected its no-nonsense racing heritage and suited its mission with Sea Shepherd, which ended with its loss at sea during anti-whaling operations.

*Ady Gil* was quickly replaced by the larger *Brigitte Bardot* (aka *Gojira*) to engage in Sea Shepherd’s 2011 campaign against Japanese whaling in the Antarctic. This stabilised mono-hull ship was designed by Nigel Irens to set its own round-the-world speed record in 1998, and now its aggressive lines and stealthy black finish express its formidable capabilities in ocean skirmishes.

Whereas *Ady Gil* met its end serving a righteous cause, many ships today are dismembered in ignominious circumstances on South Asian beaches, dodging watchdogs such as the IMO, which adopted The Basel Convention in 1989, conceived to control the global movement of toxic materials by requiring ships to be decontaminated in their last port of registration prior to scrapping.

Since then, however, owners of merchant ships and even the governments of some IMO member states have ignored the Basel Convention. For example, in 2004 the French Navy’s former flagship, the aircraft carrier *Clemenceau*, set sail from France laden with built-in pollutants including lead, mercury, asbestos and polychlorinated biphenyls, to be scrapped by an Indian ship-breaking company on the infamous Gujurati beach named Alang, where badly paid and unprotected workers take ships to bits by hand. En route, the ship was boarded by activists from Greenpeace in a highly publicized confrontation that embarrassed the French president, Jacques Chirac, forcing him to recall the vessel shamefully to its home port of Brest before being dismantled responsibly at the Teesside Environmental Reclamation and Recycling Centre in the English port of Hartlepool. (Wainright, 2009) The *Clemenceau* episode revealed how thoroughly capricious is the disposal of the world’s superannuated shipping tonnage, including famous ships with heroic histories owned by the governments of major naval powers.

Since the 1990s environmentalists had been watching Alang, where fiercely competitive breakers handle around half of the world’s vessels scrapped annually, many brought there illegally. (Shipping Times, 2007) In 2006 the cruise ship *Norway*, first launched in 1960 as the great Atlantic liner *SS France*, the largest luxury liner afloat between 1962 and 2004, sailed from Germany to Malaysia, where it changed owners, was re-flagged as a Liberian vessel and was finally renamed *Blue Lady* in an unsuccessful attempt to obscure its identity, before being sent for
scraping in Bangladesh. There, it prompted an outcry among militant activist groups, who had been tracking the ship. When the Bangladesh Environmental Law Association threatened legal action for breaking the Basel Convention, the owners simply sent the ship to Alang, where anything is possible. Fresh from their victory over the Clemenceau, a coalition of activists led by Gopal Krishna, an environmentalist and anti-asbestos campaigner, petitioned the Supreme Court of India to restrain the Blue Lady’s owners, but the effort failed, and Blue Lady, loaded with asbestos and other chemical pollutants, and with the France’s glamorous original furniture and art works still in place, met an ignominious end in 2008 on the beach at Alang.

Despite the heroic efforts of activists worldwide, such a port as Alang dramatically reflects the economically driven, ungovernable nature of seafaring today and the amoral condition of the ocean, itself. And I hope to have given you a quick version of how diverse are the types and uneven the results of activism on the ways we operate in the world’s oceans.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig.1

[Image: The Port of Barcelona seen from Montjuic Cemetery [photo G. Votolato]]

Fig.2

Submersible Ictineo I (reproduction) at Museu Maritim, Barcelona [photo G. Votolato]

Fig.3


Fig.4
Sister ships *Olympic* and *Titanic*, 1912 [Wikipedia]

MV *Faina*, Ukrainian arms carrier freed by Somali pirates 2008 [photo US Navy]

MY *Ady Gil*, Hobart Harbour, Tasmania 2009 [photo JJ Harrison]

Ship Breaking at Alang Beach, India [photo Greenpeace]