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Christiaan De Beukelaer

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## COVID-19 at sea: ‘the world as you know it no longer exists’

Christiaan De Beukelaer 

School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

### ABSTRACT

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has impacted virtually everyone on the planet. But the impacts have been diverse and uneven. In this article, I reflect on the plight of seafarers during the pandemic. I suggest that being ‘locked in’ is intrinsic to life at sea, as one can’t simply leave a ship. What makes the experience of the pandemic so challenging at sea is being ‘locked out’ of land. With border closures prohibiting ‘crew change’, many seafarers have been forced to extend their contracts, stay aboard, and postpone going home for long and often undefined periods of time. My article combines a reflexive personal narrative of being confined to a ship at sea for five months, while being excluded from land, with the question of how spending the pandemic at sea could be understood in relation to maritime labour.

**KEYWORDS** Shipping; sailing; cargo; lockdown; pandemic; labour

The sound was deafening. At noon, on May 2020, all ships’ horns blasted. The horn of our ship, the *Avontuur*, did too. But we couldn’t even hear it on our own deck. It is not the most confident of horns at the best of times. But that day it felt like it was failing us.

Our horn wasn’t audible above those of much larger vessels such as the *Great Intelligence* and the *Ithaca Riga* that shared the dock with us in the port of Veracruz, Mexico. We were moored in the sleepless and dirty commercial port, opposite the colonial fortress of San Juan de Ulúa, to load green coffee destined for Germany (Figure 1).

I was not supposed to have been aboard any longer. I was supposed to have disembarked on Marie Galante, a tiny island just south of Guadeloupe in the French Antilles, by the end of March. But I was not allowed to. And neither were the captain and several other crew who were scheduled to leave the ship. This caused me to experience the first half of 2020 in a unique way: While people ashore were confined to their houses, we were confined to our ship, as many seafarers were – and remain – to theirs (De Beukelaer 2020c).

**CONTACT** Christiaan De Beukelaer  [christiaan.debeukelaer@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:christiaan.debeukelaer@unimelb.edu.au)

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**Figure 1.** Loading a cargo of green coffee in Veracruz, Mexico (CC BY-NC-ND Christiaan De Beukelaer <https://ocean-archive.org/collection/45>).

The government of the Australian state of Victoria, where I live, argues that ‘staying apart keeps us together’ and many countries have urged their inhabitants to strictly observe ‘contact bubbles’ to reduce ‘community transmission’ of COVID-19. Our ship, like other cargo vessels, was a very closely-knit bubble of fifteen. Staying at sea was safe for us, and others. But it was also owing to the strict confinement of seafarers to their vessels, that countries have been able to maintain essential supplies since lockdowns started.

Here, I reflect on my personal experience of being confined to the sea – or rather our exclusion from land – for five months. To advance this inquiry, I build on Foucault’s distinction between *exclusion* and *containment* as biopolitical responses to infectious disease, respectively leprosy and the plague (Foucault 1995), by questioning how they are both used to suppress (or in some cases eliminate) COVID-19. In linking these interconnected biopolitical regimes to the political economy of cargo shipping, I suggest that the current response to the pandemic exacerbates inequalities in the political economy of the global shipping industry.

## Sea blind

Few people have documented the social, economic, and environmental impact of the maritime industry with greater analytical precision than the

late American photographer Allan Sekula (1995, 2017). In *The Forgotten Space*, a 'film essay' he created with Noël Burch shortly before his death, Sekula interrogates life in twenty-first century maritime logistics. He argues that shipping has become as predictable and monotonous as industrial production, while factories are now traversing the world in search of cheaper labour. In this reversal of functions, and through the uniform box that is the shipping container, the sea of 'exploit and adventure' has turned into a 'lake of invisible drudgery' (Sekula and Burch 2010). Labour at sea is challenging at the best of times. A pandemic merely exacerbates this. While this can be said of labour in general, there is no possibility to walk away from the job when at sea, making the position of seafarers structurally precarious.

Seafarers tend to spend a long time aboard the vessels on which they work. Depending on rank and country of origin, contracts commonly range from four to seven months. The maximum that is allowed under the *ILO Maritime Labour Convention* of 2006 is eleven months (Baumler 2020). *Force majeure* like the COVID-19 pandemic trumps such regulations (ILO 2020), leaving hundreds of thousands of seafarers stranded at sea – or unable to return to work from their place of residence – every month. As crew change is now possible in many – but not all – ports, criticism has mounted. The initial *force majeure* is no longer at play, as crew change is possible, though often complex and expensive (De Beukelaer 2020d). In response to these difficulties, charterers aim to secure the scheduled delivery of their cargo by including 'no crew change' clauses in their contracts with shipping companies; a move that faces strong criticism from IMO Secretary-General Kitack Lim (IMO 2020e).

Over one and a half million seafarers work on cargo ships on any given day of the year, commonly labouring ten to twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week. The scheduled time of rest in between stints at sea punctuates contracts and lives, making contact with family and friends much anticipated and necessary breaks from shipboard life. During the COVID-19 pandemic, seafarers are not only stuck at sea beyond their contracts – resulting in sea time in excess of 18 months (Cotton 2020, ITF 2020b) – they are also unsure how long these extensions will be. This insecurity means they do not know when they might return home. This makes the unexpectedly long time at sea even more difficult for many (Ha *et al.* 2020), because the lives of their families on land have changed in their absence.

This uncertainty also affected us, aboard the *Avontuur*, though our situation differed from seafarers employed on 'conventional' shipping vessels.

## **The *Avontuur***

We, fifteen people aboard the *Avontuur*, play but a modest part in the global seaborne trade. But we are neither a large bulk carrier (like the *Ithaca Riga* and

the *Great Intelligence*) nor a massive containership. We are a hundred-year old, 43.5-meter long, two-masted schooner that transports coffee and cacao from Honduras, Belize, and Mexico to Hamburg, Germany (De Beukelaer 2018, 2020a).

Six of us are professional seafarers (master, chief mate, second mate, bo'sun, and two deckhands) to comply with manning regulations of its German flag. The only other paid crew aboard is the cook. The remaining eight crew (including myself) have joined as paying trainees ('shipmates'). This means that we have paid for the privilege of working to sail the vessel across the ocean. This arrangement is common on 'sail training' vessels (that rarely carry cargo), as it helps novice or amateur sailors gain experience on traditional sailing vessels, while travelling to see the world – or the sea at least (Figures 2 & 3). Unlike large containerships, we live in really close quarters: ten of us share the fo'c's'le, before the mast. No matter how cramped our shipborne living conditions may seem, on shore we live far more privileged lives than most 'ordinary seamen' ever will.

The *Avontuur* completed its fifth Atlantic round-trip for Timbercoast, upon arriving in Hamburg on July 23rd 2020. She sailed from her home port of Elsfleth, on the Weser estuary in northern Germany, on 17th January. The first officer and I joined the vessel on 24th February, in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, while carnival was in full swing there. The rest of the crew have been on board



**Figure 2.** Anchor watch in Puerto Cortés, Honduras (CC BY-NC-ND Christiaan De Beukelaer <https://ocean-archive.org/collection/45>).



**Figure 3.** While anchored off the Belize coast over Easter, we spent our time mending sails and maintaining the ship (CC BY-NC-ND Christiaan De Beukelaer <https://ocean-archive.org/collection/45>).

since early January, as they lived on the ship while finalizing preparations for the voyage.

Few people on the planet will have lived through the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic as disconnected from news and restrictions as we have. We have been in perpetual motion at sea, living in a group, not having to practice social distancing, and not being bombarded with a never-ending stream of news and pandemic speculation (De Beukelaer and Corcoran 2020). My experience was, at face value, comparable to that of other seafarers. But beyond the extended time at sea lies a long history of exploitation of maritime labour I was not confronted with.

### Labour day

At face value, the sounding of our ships' horns was a sign of worker solidarity. In that sense, there was little unusual about sounding horns on Labour Day. It could have happened in any port, on any Labour Day – in any port with strong union labour, at least. But May 1st 2020 was different.

The day prior, on 30th of April, the captains of all vessels in port received a message from Gabriel Ángel Carréon Pérez, the harbourmaster of the *Puerto Regional de Veracruz*. In this letter, on the official *Secretaria de Marina*

letterhead, he asked all vessels to sound their *silbatos* (horns) for thirty to sixty seconds at 12:00 local time.

The horns were meant as a sign of solidarity with the 1.6 million seafarers in the merchant marine. At that point in time, very few countries classified seafarers as 'key' or 'essential' workers, which would allow them to fly internationally to and from work, instead they had been confined to their places of work. Ironically, the confinement of seafarers to their ships is necessary because shipping is a key industry; their work is crucial to global supply chains and, as a result, security of food, fuel, and medical supplies (Cowen 2014). A year on, the crew change crisis that resulted from border closures continues to impact hundreds of thousands of seafarers, despite repeated calls from the United Nations to resolve the issue (IMO 2020d).

Ships must keep running, for shipping is the handmaiden of trade. Seafarers are, Pérez states, the forgotten heroes that support global trade, which secure countries' supplies of food, fuel, and other important goods such as life-saving medical equipment. They do so not only during the COVID-19 pandemic, but as a matter of course.

Labour Day, and the fight for good working conditions is vital to improving the livelihoods of seafarers. While, since 1919, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has sanctioned an 8-hour working day and a 48-hour working week, seafarers work well in excess of such hours. Days of 14 working hours and weeks of up to 98 working hours are sanctioned by the ILO Maritime Labour Convention and the IMO International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW), respectively: 'While undeniable success has been achieved onshore, the 8-hour norm has not been implemented at sea,' Raphael Baumler (2020, 11) argues, because 'the nineteenth century construction of a 'special nature' of shipping and fishing detached sea workers from other sectors and facilitated their isolation. Consequently, the sea workers' standards of work attached to the nature of the sector more than to their human nature.' The COVID-19 pandemic has thus exacerbated – rather than created – seafarers' challenging working conditions, which have always been regulated and understood as existing in a world entirely disconnected from shore-based life.

While entire populations are confined to their houses, cities, and countries, seafarers are excluded from returning to land. This is, ostensibly, to both stop ships turning into vectors of viral spread from port to port and to limit risk of entire crews contracting the virus while at sea. However, the logistics infrastructure maintained by seafarers is critical to the security and economic activity of countries, while the workers that make this happen are forgotten. Or, conveniently ignored.

Seafarers, one could argue with Foucault (1995), pose a biopolitical 'risk to society', as the mobility of ships maintains connection between places and bodies at a time when human contact is deemed risky. While they are at

sea, it is possible to exclude seafarers by keeping them out of sight and out of contact, like lepers, while maintaining a regime of confinement on land. An invisible fast-spreading virus cannot be halted, after all, by excluding solely those with symptoms. But seafarers are also among the most vulnerable, as cruise liners have shown that ships are environments, like plague villages, in which viral spread is difficult to contain. There are, after all, no knock-on effects from the cruise-line industry coming to a halt. Surely, jobs were lost, and companies ended up in difficulties, but unlike cargo ships, cruise-liners are not a precondition for keeping global trade flows to remain intact. Though the greater visibility of cruise ships – they have rich people on board, after all – means that ships in general were quickly identified as viral vectors early in the pandemic. This grounded such ships, as cruise passengers wanted to avoid the risk of infection, initially leaving many crew stranded aboard (McCormic and Greenfield 2020). Eventually the industry suspended operations (McMahon 2020) which meant that many cruise ships ended up sold for scrap (Saunders 2021).

The risk, inherent in maritime crew mobility, is not only to shore-based communities, but also to those aboard. Despite seafarers' invisibility, and unlike their counterparts working aboard cruise ships, they are indispensable to maintaining 'good mobility' (of cargo, and therefore capital). But in order to continue trade while halting the virus, seafarers become collateral victims of ad-hoc biopolitical regimes erected in response to the sudden COVID-19 pandemic: their work facilitates good mobility that keeps economies and populations on land alive, but their bodies need to be kept safely at sea in order to maintain the integrity of supply chains. This reduction to the economic role, more than their being potential vectors of transmission, is what keeps seafarers at sea well beyond their labour contracts.

When confined to one's ship, making noise is the only thing seafarers can do to make their presence known, especially when moored in a securitized port that is inaccessible for anyone who does not work there. Most commercial ports around the world now operate in compliance with the *International Ship and Port Facility Security* (ISPS) code administered by the *International Maritime Organization*, which came into force – after pressure from the USA – in 2004 as a post-9/11 measure to increase security in 'critical' logistics infrastructure (see Cowen 2014).

Ashore, pandemic response measures are put in place to save lives. At sea, measures are put in place in function of the purpose bodies aboard ships serve: the circulation of goods that gives life to the economy – and thereby lives on land. The primary aim of COVID-19 regulations is the integrity of global supply chains. Seafarer well-being is a secondary concern.

Harbormaster Pérez echoes the messages conveyed by the *International Maritime Organization*, the *International Chamber of Shipping*, and the *International Labor Organization*. They stress that seafarers are 'key workers' that should be

exempt from travel restrictions, so they can travel between work and home, and thus ship and shore without limitation (ICS 2020, ILO 2020, IMO 2020c, 2020a). The *International Maritime Organization* has worked with member states to facilitate crew change and repatriation throughout lockdowns, but as of July 2020, more than 200,000 crew 'are still waiting to be repatriated, many having stayed on long beyond the end of their original contracts' (IMO 2020b). As 2020 progressed, the number of seafarers stuck at sea steadily grew, up to some 400,000 people by September (De Beukelaer 2020c, IMO 2020c).

### Lockdown or lock-out?

Making sense of a double lockdown, being excluded from land while confined to our ship, comes with a major challenge: While at sea we did not live through the lockdown experience that nearly everyone on land went through. As a result, my framework of reference is the world as we knew it, not the world as it has become.

At times, when trying to understand the predicament I was in, I felt like the inverse of Kimmy Schmidt, the protagonist of the Netflix series *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. In this show (2015–2019), created by Tina Fey and Robert Carlock, Kimmy Schmidt finds freedom after having been held in captivity by doomsday cult leader Reverend Richard Wayne Gary Wayne for fifteen years. He had kidnapped Kimmy when she was a teenager and convinced her and three other women that they are the sole survivors of a nuclear apocalypse. Upon being set free from her time locked away in the (fictitious) town of Durnsville, Indiana, she settles in New York to enjoy the freedom she has never known.

The eighteenth century English author Samuel Johnson once likened being at sea to being in jail, but 'with the chance of being drowned'. While it may not be possible to leave the ship, the open ocean hardly feels like confinement.

To me, the penitentiary analogy only makes sense now, after having been not simply confined to the ship when at sea but also excluded from shore leave when in port. In the 1962 film *Mutiny on the Bounty*, master's mate Fletcher Christian retorts to the claim of one of his fellow mutineers that their choice was between prison or mutiny, by saying that: 'You're in prison now, Mills. With one difference. We are not locked in; we are locked out.'

We are of course no mutineers, and we will not forever be locked out. But we have been locked out, along with other seafarers. Fortunately, I have reason to disagree with Samuel Johnson when he says that 'a man in a jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company'.

Our ship, for all its superficial discomforts, would reach Germany where we would be allowed ashore. So, any comparison between our lives and those of

a racialized class of under-paid seafarers is difficult to uphold: our discomfort and uncertainty is temporary and exceptional, theirs is permanent and normal. More worryingly, we were free to speak up about the difficulties we faced without fear for repercussion, while many professional seafarers risk being blacklisted when doing so.

Upon disembarking at Hamburg, we were no longer be locked out. But unlike Kimmy Schmidt, we didn't find a world that promises freedom and nigh-endless possibility. We found a world of restrictions, facemasks, virus-swabs, and social distancing. Most importantly, we found a world in which social mores had changed in our absence. Kimmy struggled to find ways to adapt to her newly found freedoms, but we now have to deal with restrictions that everyone else has gradually socialized into. But much like Kimmy, we have a hard time behaving according to the 'new normal' of social – and often legal – norms. Even so, in Hamburg, we returned from a temporary suspension of some freedoms and privileges to a world in which we became invisible, yet welcome.

We were no longer confined, nor excluded. The conditions of the pandemic had not changed; the context had. We were no longer sailors in foreign ports. We were home. But the globalized shipping industry, with its international labour force, knows no 'home' ports where neither ship nor crew are strangers.

Much like Kimmy during her confinement, our understanding of the outside world relied largely on information we obtained through a single person. While we were on the high seas, the ship's owner kept our captain updated on changes to shore life. Despite their genuine efforts, we received precious little information, in large part because ship's emails are sent through a – prohibitively expensive – *Inmarsat-C* satellite connection. This meant that, whenever at sea, the only information we obtained from the outside world was through the correspondence between captain and shipowner. We did not have personal access to phone or internet networks, except when in port.

## **Sailing to a new world**

One of the messages we received from the shipowner while at sea suggested that the world had changed to the extent that 'the world as you know it no longer exists'. We were sailing to a New World. Not a colonial fantasy of unknown shores – even though we sailed a colonial trans-Atlantic trade route, and carried goods from tropical former colonies, but a world that had changed in our absence. Much like the world had changed during Julian West's century-long sleep, as described in Edward Bellamy's 1888 novel *Looking Backward*. In this story, Bellamy describes the techno-socialist America of the year 2000, told from the perspective of a nineteenth

century Bostonian, who had spent the preceding 113 years in a hypnosis-induced sleep. It takes the entire book for West to properly understand how his world has changed in his absence.

When we embarked the *Avontuur*, the strict quarantine of millions in Wuhan by Chinese authorities was still deemed an unprecedented measure that was possible only because China is an authoritarian state. Democracies, the argument went, would never be able to impose similar limitations on people. Until they did.

While at sea, it remained near impossible to know or imagine whether and how things might have changed on land. We knew of lockdowns but could not quite imagine what they were like. At times it felt like a surreal, or rather hyperreal, theatre that had been put on show to fool us. Unlike Julian West or Kimmy Schmidt, we were able to anticipate and speculate the change that awaited us.

Much like a ship sounding its horn in the fog, unable to see beyond a few shiplengths, we were steering blind. We relied on short and imprecise contacts with the world to make sense of how the pandemic had changed our surroundings.

I had hoped that by the time we finally stepped off in Hamburg, nothing would feel much different. Mostly because the situation in Germany seemed to be returning to 'normal' while we were on our way there. My hope, which now seems utterly naïve, was that we'd only know the 2020 pandemic lockdown through stories and accounts of others.

Within days from disembarking the *Avontuur*, I flew from Frankfurt to Sydney via Singapore. As if by miracle, I was able to get on the first flight out to Australia. During the voyage, I realized that the world had really changed. Changi was deserted, planes nearly empty.

As I spent fourteen days in a designated quarantine hotel in Sydney, Melbourne – where I live – faced ever-tightening restrictions in a bid to curb the 'second wave', resulting in one of the world's strictest lockdowns that would last 112 days.

I have returned home – and to my position at the university. But for over a million seafarers, extended time at sea will remain the norm. Global passenger travel has slowed down, but demand for cargo transport has remained comparatively strong (UNCTAD 2020). While being *confined* is integral to life at sea, being *excluded* from land for undefined periods creates makes lockdowns at sea particularly challenging (De Beukelaer 2020b).

What had changed most, it seemed, was the 'security pact' between citizens and their governments (Hannah, Hutta, and Schemann 2020). People accepted severe limits on their liberties, in exchange for the protection of the common good. Whether people accepted this wilfully, begrudgingly, or forcefully, a new power balance between state and citizen had emerged.

Initially, this new 'security pact' included firmly closed borders, including to key workers like seafarers, which they and their unions duly accepted as 'force majeure' (ITF 2020a). But as the International Labour Organization stressed that crew changes could only be held off until borders would open again (ILO 2020), the number of seafarers stranded at sea has continued to grow even though most countries now allow crew change – though often under strict rules. Crew change is now possible, but at greater effort and cost than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Without a clear view of society ashore, and out of sight of those on land, seafarers sounded their ship's horn on May 1st to give them a voice in a world that relies on shipping. As the pandemic continues, unequal and evolving regimes of biopolitical regulation continue to impact seafarers more severely than most people. Meanwhile, their proverbial horns continue to sound. But the 'sea blind' world would rather, conveniently, forget that the 'life' of the economy, and the consumer habits of people on land, relies on the many people stuck at sea.

Seafarers may be invisible; they are also indispensable. But rather than recognize their importance, the COVID-19 pandemic has further eroded the rights of these precariously employed workers. Despite the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is thanks to seafarers that the life as we know it still mostly exists.

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## Further information

This Special Issue article has been comprehensively reviewed by the Special Issue editors, Associate Professor Ted Striphas and Professor John Nguyet Erni.

## Notes on contributor

*Christiaan De Beukelaer* is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Melbourne. His research explores two distinct topics: the revival or sailing vessels as a means of

zero-emission cargo transport and the role of UNESCO in global cultural policy-making processes. In 2020, he spent five months aboard the sailing ship *Avontuur*, which he was not allowed to disembark due to COVID-19 border restrictions. His books include *Global Cultural Economy* and *Cultural Policies for Sustainable Development*.

## ORCID

Christiaan De Beukelaer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9045-9979>

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