

# Theoretical Implications of Maritime Sociology

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## ABSTRACT:

The sea is certainly not one of the favourite research topics of sociology and despite a recent and new popularity among historians and geographers, the sea remains generally a stranger to contemporary sociologists. Conversely, I think that to frame and shed light on the wider theoretical implications of maritime sociology would be beneficial to all possible approaches within sociological research. In this article I intend to give my contribution to the fulfillment of the expectation of above by discussing the ways sociology can understand the sea as a truly social space, beyond any abstract dichotomies separating “grounded” societies and offshore voids. Also, I try to suggest some concrete moves to relocate maritime sociology within the wider sociological debate and to develop the heuristic potential of the sea.

Keywords: sea, land, sociology, maritime, social space

## 1. Sociology and the sea

In spite of a recent and new popularity among historians and geographers, especially in the USA (Horden, Purcell, 2000; Gillis 2004, 2012; Steinberg 2001, 2013), the sea remains generally a stranger to contemporary sociology. Truly, important works and leading research have been carried out in the field of maritime or marine sociology, even in Europe, where a research stream on maritime sociology has been established within the European Sociological Association (ESA). In this context, the recent re-publication for the English speaking readers of some fairly unknown texts of Norbert Elias on the development of naval professions (Elias 2007) might be an important signal for a maritime turn in the short-term future.

Nonetheless, I believe that the theoretical implications of maritime sociology are far from being clarified and exploited both in speculative and empirical terms. Thus, what I am suggesting is to add some additional meanings and expectations to maritime sociology by insisting on the heuristic potential of a global and maritime inspired sociological standpoint (Woźniak 2010: 7-19). Obviously, such an endeavor would neither oppose nor contrast any view of maritime sociology as a sociological sub-discipline (with its preferred methods and research techniques) or a set of empirical fieldworks. Conversely, I think that to frame and shed light on the wider theoretical implications of maritime sociology would be beneficial to all possible approaches within sociological scholarly research. Especially if one thinks that sociologists dealing with maritime issues are rarely aware of each other works and, on top of that, their scholarly achievements seldom contribute to the advancement of the wider theoretical and epistemological debates. Such a disconnection, however, it is neither surprising nor unusual, considering that even the sea related works of the “classics” of sociology are in the majority of cases missing from manuals and curricula. For instance, the researches of Ferdinand Tönnies (1897) about the seamen in the port of Hamburg or the application of Ervin Goffman “total institution” (1961) to ships and maritime jobs, are usually known only by sociologists focusing on maritime research but not by the larger scientific community.

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As a matter of fact, the sociological ignorance of the sea is quite striking against the major role played by the maritime environment in literature, religion or philosophical thought. It is enough to think that a philosopher as eminent as Hegel celebrated the sea for its uttermost importance in the development of state, economy and European identity. In his words:

“As for the family the primary condition is the land, the stable base and the field, for the development of the industry the principal element is the sea, which moves things outside” (Hegel 1972: par. 247).

From this standpoint, the relation with the sea would have shaped significantly the destiny of Europe as well as the history of rationality and the idea of progress, in ways that made Europe a specific place in the all world. Accordingly, Italian sociologist Franco Cassano rephrases this notion with the following words: “What makes the political institution of states in Europe a truly European feature, is the sea. In the European public life, embodied by the state, the principle of the individual freedom is acquired and respected” (Cassano 1996: 271).

This orientation to the “out there” is idealistically conceived as a spiritual drift towards the outside, that is to say a tendency to transcend the ordinary life, which is supposedly lacking in the Asian world. There, according to Hegel, to travel the sea would be prohibited and against the religion. Now, leaving besides any possible ethnocentric bias, one can note how the signification of the sea for social development was quite clear to Hegel, who is one of the “father” of Modern European philosophy. However, in spite of the clear economic and political importance of the sea for social life, the French historian Michelet claims in one of his famous book (1875) that the first human emotion connected with the sea would be “fear”, which is usually followed by “surprise” and “melancholy”. Not surprisingly, for Michelet, that dark and unknown mass of water is named with synonyms of “night” and “desert” in all ancient languages, from Ireland to India. Accordingly, to him this is one of the reason why human imagination has produced throughout history a long list of stories, legend and myths related to the frightening power of the sea and based on the ignorance of such an immense portion of nature (Corbin 1994). Even today, despite the improved scientific knowledge of the oceans and the other watery masses, social science cannot properly reflect over the importance of such an element (Helmreich 2009).

This might sound senseless today, when thousands of giant-cargoes cross the oceans everyday and minerals are extracted from the depth of the high-sea bed. Nonetheless, social science keeps on experiencing a sort of terrestrial bias.

Namely, in sociology one could notice a fascination for land as though social relations would only occur on land and not on the waters. A bias and a fascination that affects other social sciences too, such as history, where such a land borne orientation often locates oceans, seas and any mass of water at the intersection of both political spaces and academic specializations. (King 2004, 3-5). Hence, social scientists usually consider whatever happens “at sea” and “on board”, as something spaced out and out of the records; or in the best of the cases as a preparatory phase for the real life that takes place on land. In the same wavelength, nation-building processes and national histories rarely ascribe to the maritime sphere the same importance of the terrestrial one and, for instance, it is quite interesting that a country like Italy, almost completely surrounded by the sea, does not reserve to the sea any special section of its 19<sup>th</sup> century national *epos* (*Risorgimento*) if not some residual ones. (Frascani 2008)

On the contrary, history and social life do have a maritime dimension and what lies beyond the shores is not only a prelude or an aftermath of the grand continental narratives. Talking about the great river Mississippi, Mark Twain beautifully phrased the abovementioned assumption, by noticing that great masses of waters do not only have a natural history but also a “historical history” (Twain 1883: 25), which is by no means less important or disconnected by the one taking place on land.

Hence, according to Gillis (2004), although history by the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been focusing on what begins and ends at the edge of the continents, previous polities and social institutions have been often centered on islands and coastlines. Consequently, to Gillis, historians shall acknowledge that what takes place on the interiors of the continental masses should be coupled with a reflection on the social life “offshore”. Thus, more scholars further elaborated along this path, like Pamela Ballinger, who investigated the maritime dimension of cultural mapping and border-making processes in a frontier area like the Balkans, thus setting the stage of a wider epistemological and theoretical debate around watery issues (Ballinger 2006, 2007, 2013). Similarly, such an expectation should be certainly extended to sociology for the latter, similarly to other social sciences, has been undergoing the influence of methodological nationalism (maybe “terrestrialism”?) and of a state centered understanding of society (Wimmer, Schiller 2002; Chernilo 2007).

In this article I intend to give my contribution to the fulfillment of the expectation of above by discussing the ways sociology can understand the sea as a truly social space, beyond any abstract dichotomies separating “grounded” societies and offshore voids. Also, I try to suggest some concrete moves to relocate maritime sociology within the wider sociological debate and to develop the heuristic potential of the sea.

## 2. The Sea as Social Space: beyond the sea-land dichotomy

In his well-know short book “Land and Sea” (Schmitt 2001: 11-14), Karl Schmitt describes the radical impact of the modern spatial revolution triggered by the social discovery of the oceanic dimension. Concretely, the socialization of the oceans enabled a revolutionary dislocation of people, societies and institutions, from the land towards the sea; a process that was initiated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Nederland and, mostly, Great Britain. Schmitt sets such an oceanic shift, namely the progressive transfer of society at sea, against an archetypical understanding of the human being as a terrestrial being, who walks and lives on solid earth. With perceptions, ideas and points of view over the world that are basically terrestrial.

Thus, for Schmitt, humans called their planet “earth”, although it is mostly made by water. They refer to their mortal life as the earthly one (as opposed to the heavenly one) and talk of “paradise on earth”. Even the first primordial gods were strongly connected with the mystic power of the earth, which was often conceived as “Mother Earth”.

Nonetheless, Karl Schmitt recognizes that in spite of deriving their notions of space and time from the terrestrial perspective, humans are deeply attracted by the sea and when they stand in front of the sea, on the shore, they tend to look out there to the horizon and not, on the contrary, to turn their heads towards the inland. Accordingly, the sea is often considered as the mysterious and primordial realm of life both by science and religions, and according to anthropological accounts from the Oceanic societies one can correctly speak of “*autochthallassic*” people besides autochthonous ones. To those people of the sea, such as the South Eastern Asian Moken or the Orang Laut

(Sopher 1977; Belwood, Fox, Tryon 2006; Ivanoff, Lejard, Gansser 2012) the land is only the border of their fundamentally marine social existence.

The abovementioned reflections can be hardly contested because, as a matter of fact, social scientists are aware that human life does not end at the land edge, so that rivers, lakes and seas cannot just be seen as borders or simply as means of communication. Conversely, a sociological maritime perspective shall also conceive watery spaces as stages of social exchanges and reciprocal influences among different people that both live on the waters and on the lands.

In other words, in a truly maritime sociological approach, the sea is not only a medium but a social space, which would not be merely 'used by society' but rather represent 'a space of society'. Thus, a social space connected to, experienced and practiced in specific ways by specific people with the potential to unlock human geography from its land bias and ask all kinds of interesting questions about the world we live in (Lambert, Martins, Ogborn 2006).

In fact, for those without a deep and personal experience of the sea, land and water can seem like binary entities, where the land is the beginning and the end, while the sea is a way to get there. From this standpoint, the land represents the rich world of human history and domestication whereas the sea is a temporary pathway. However, such a binary vision is just an unfaithful representation of the everyday life of many places with significant watery histories, such as the Mediterranean, the Pacific Islands and the Netherlands to quote some, land and water join together in configuring senses of place (Lowe 2006: 92); thus, the genuine sociological problem at stake here would be the global diachronic understanding of the changing symbolic and material relational sea-land context (Baldacchino, Vannini, Guay, Royle, Steinberg 2009) more than uncritically remaining on the neat distinction between the two separate and reified realms of land and sea.

Nonetheless, despite these sensible considerations, a truly oceanic social science was never developed up to know and even maritime sociology barely reached the level of a sub-discipline or of a special field of investigation. The reason, seemingly, is simple: because man is an earthly creature, sociology shall focus on lands. Moreover, an additional bias might come from a human-centered approach to society that tends to locate it where men are, thus nurturing somehow old fashion and controversial notions of territorially localized society (Luhmann 1997).

However, even if one wants to identify society with "persons" the terrestrial bias is still quite striking for the sea has always been filled with people, who are not just outcast or bare bodies. Although, a long and deeply rooted tradition suggests that the sea is often the place for exile, where to relegate things and people that do not belong to society anymore. In this perspective, to move offshore means to be spaced out of society and even seafarers are often pictured as creatures suspended between life and death, between this world and the other one.

Steinberg thoroughly discusses such ambivalence in his fortunate book "The Social Construction of the Ocean" (2011). Here, the author claims that the contemporary social construction of the Ocean reveals an ambivalent status because the sea is neither established like a political and juridical extension of the land nor as an extra-social space freed of state power.

Such a status would derive from a typical Mediterranean feature because Mediterranean people historically constructed the sea: "as a non possessible space, but one in which and across which state power legitimately could be asserted in the interest for stewarding its bounty" (Steinberg 2001: 61). In this perspective, the Mediterranean Sea is a kind of exception for it does not fall within two of the most typical social construc-

tions of the Ocean–sea, that is to say the Micronesian model of ocean space and the Indian Ocean model. Truly, in Steinberg’s perspective, the Micronesians view the deep sea as a territory and the ocean as a resource providing space, characterized by numerous specific places. The primary resource provided by this space would be “connection” and accordingly “places” of the ocean would be routes. Differently, the dwellers around the Indian Ocean traditionally view the sea as a source of imported goods but perceived it nonetheless as a space apart from society, an untamable mystery. Here the sea is a non-territory immune from the state power and land–based entities project themselves on the sea only to assure that it remained free for all to cross (Steinberg 2001: 52-60, 42-43, 45)

Differently, in Karl Schmitt theory (Schmitt 2001: 66-69, 88), the modern relation between land and sea is described in terms of clear-cut opposition and separation, as a result of the spatial revolution taking place in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Particularly, the modern oceanic drift, which is the result of the spatial revolution, challenges the traditional fear of the void, the *horror vacui*, which symbolized the ancient resistances toward the navigation in the high seas. Conversely, at the center of this revolution is the modern concept of “void space” as a horizon to be reached and, consequently, to be conquered through the exploration of new seas and new lands. Therefore, Schmitt believes a new legal and political order (*nomos*) emerges from the new spatial asset given by the establishment of global maritime networks.

Actually, the oceanic drift and the birth of a modern concept of space can be related to two quite relevant and almost contemporary cultural-political events. The first being the “Treaty of Westphalia” (1648), generally referred to as the point zero of the modern state territorial sovereignty; the second, is the publication of the book “*Mare Liberum*” (the freedom of the sea) by Grotius (1609), who claimed the not disposable common property of the sea as opposed to land. These two events quite clearly show the emergence in the European public life of a neat separation line between a terrestrial realm, dominated by the sovereign states and an maritime (oceanic) one, which should be without borders, freed of national sovereignties and accessible to navigation.

Consequently, the sea comes to be thought as the environment of pure exteriority that contributes dramatically to social change because the seafarers can build a distinct and more individually organized subjectivization from the state based one (Idvall 2009: 23). In this perspective, seafaring could be distinguished and opposed to shipping because the first one would refer to a way of travelling that is boundless and elusive whereas the second one implies an instrumental form of travel and a modern concept of place and transport from one demarcated point to the other.

Thus, at the time when modern state building was taking the upper hand, some countries were turning themselves into seafaring social institutions. Nederland in first place, but mostly and more successfully Great Britain, which gradually became the mobile center of an oceanic empire. For Karl Schmitt, only Great Britain managed to become a de–terrestriated country, to truly become part of the sea and not a fragment of disconnected land anymore. (Schmitt 2001: 93, 95-97) Actually, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain firstly developed a new sense of insularity that is very close to the ancient Greek notion of island (*Nesos*) as a floating land, that is to say a land that travels, that moves on the sea (a similar origin for the Slavic word *Ostrov*).

Interestingly, however, if islands progressively represented the symbols and means of communication in the process of European commercial and political expansion, they also gradually became a metaphor of exile, isolation and hygenization (Gillis, 2004). Accordingly, in a perspective of political sociology, islands have, in the early modern period, served as prototypes of idealized polities (utopias), near perfect spaces



where an equally near perfect configuration of state and nation could survive and prosper, on the basis of a binary distinction between the sea and the land. But later in the modern eve, islands have been projected as special places where the rules of the metropolitan state did not completely apply: whether as export processing zones, offshore finance centers, detention camps, or nature reserves, islands started to manifest the flexibility and creative governance of states (Baldacchino 2010).

Still, the new vantage points opened by the Oceanic experience were so radically new that in a society “made on the sea” the terrestrial dimension was not able to provide centers and orientation anymore. Consequently, from this new (and modern) oceanic point of view, the continental landmasses were gradually turned into a shore with a backland. Interestingly, from this standpoint, the maritime discovery of the land brought about new asymmetries because by then the “continent” becomes synonymous with backwardness and the inland and its “indigenous” inhabitants are represented as backward since then.

Actually, the reflections of Schmitt sometimes resonates in contemporary sociology, for instance in the work of the already mentioned Franco Cassano (1996), who challenges some traditional sociological dichotomy such as one vs. many, or individual freedom vs. collective communitarianism, through the lens of the distinction between land and sea. To Cassano, land and sea are powerful metaphors and are at the centre of different imaginaries. On one hand, the land identifies the social link, that is to say what binds us together and it reminds the idea of belonging and sharing collective identities. On the other one, the sea refers to the individual freedom and the free choice: travel, leaving, taking risks and the making of the subject. Shortly, the land imaginary pictures the notion of “us” while the sea reveals the emancipatory strength of “me”. One indicates the holistic-collective dimension and the other the individualistic and subject-centred one. On the same wavelength, the sea-land dichotomy reverberates in the opposition between free market and the state, the “European” economic liberalism and the “Asian” values of the state centred economies; the free, individualistic, self-determined “West” and the deterministic, hierarchic, fatalist “East”; mobility against roots; frontier mind-frames towards centre-oriented (family, home, the state, etc.) sentiments.

In this perspective, the Oceanic drift reveals the “ego” of the modern man, which aims to overcome all collective bonds but is eventually trapped in self-centred and mobile trajectories. Consequently, the goal of a critical sociological investigation of the sea-land relations shall be to problematize these binary codifications and adapt them to the global contemporary scenario. To achieve such a goal, one should start to recover the plurality of intellectual and historical experiences that are hidden behind a too simplified and modern contrast between the two imaginaries. To follow this path, I would encourage the critical exchange of perspectives between sea and land, and search for the emerging spatial dimensions given by the sea-land interplay, outside pre-determined terrestrial epistemologies.

However, insofar, the implications of such a research approach are only partly received by the present sociological debate. Actually, a relevant part of the contemporary sociological thought points out that present days society, sometimes labelled as the post-modern one, would maintain features of fluidity, smoothness and liquidity. Particularly, as recently Pamela Ballinger remarked<sup>2</sup>, some leading sociological approaches to “globalization” and “global society” refer to a watery semantic, which

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<sup>2</sup> Keynote lecture given at the International Conference “Sociology at Sea. Economy, Culture and Society in a Maritime Perspective”, Zadar, Croatia, 27-29 September 2013.

would constitute the backbone of a fast and turbulent theory of society without anchorage to land. To quote a few examples, Bauman's society is shapeless and takes different ones according to available containers; Castells speaks of relations in terms of flows and Urry invokes the mobility paradigm; Giddens urges to learn how to ride the beast of global turbulence and Luhmann declares that territorial perceptions of society are useless when social system's boundaries made of are sense-oriented operations in a contingent world. From this standpoint, the society of today would clearly differentiate itself from the assets of a so-called "first modernity", where the relationships between collective structures and individual agents aimed to pursue some forms of enduring stability. Accordingly, such a part of contemporary sociology is oriented to reflect more adequately on different and more "watery" issues such as the ones of identity making, global mobility, system dynamics and new types of subjectivity. This sort of problems has progressively overwhelmed traditional focuses like the balance between individual freedom and social order, or the dilemma of rationality. Nonetheless, as Ballinger noticed, this renewed theoretical corpus does not seem to critically challenge the *terracentric* frameworks of sociology because it simply postulates or assesses the de-centration, de-materialization and loss of land for contemporary society. Sometimes, such a theoretical trend may even appeal for the return to land or suggest new perspectives and strategies for a new life on and of the land, watery spaces included. However, the fundamentally terrestrial epistemology of sociology are not put into discussion for they are usually side-lined or bypassed without neither in-depth interrogations on what the liquid/watery nature society actually consist of nor reflections on how the acknowledgment of the maritime dimension of contemporary world could contribute to theoretical work. As a result, sociology is still perceived as a "terrestrial" science, made on land by land-based people, actions and institutions, although the land had progressively disappeared from sight. Accordingly, even when they speak of de-territorialization, cyber-space or global networks, sociologists tend to refer to the absence of solid "ground", assuming somehow that social relations dwell naturally on the land and not on the sea. A number of metaphors, used (and abused) in sociological theory describe the dynamic, mobile and ever changing nature of contemporary society *vis-à-vis* some traditional fixed and solid pre-modern world. The well-known dichotomies of classical sociology such as individual/collective, urban/rural, action/structure, association/community, usually do not bring about a discussion of the distinction between land and sea. Thus, maritime topics of investigations are simply brought into already existing theoretical perspectives and treated like objects of empirical work, without adding too much to theory building. Accordingly, such a theoretical flaw is reflected in the uncritical belief, somehow rooted in a good part of post-modern epistemology, that the sea and the land are both neatly separated realms though interchangeable ones in the fast and liquid contingencies of contemporary world. Namely, the features of fluidity, literal and otherwise, are commonly used as a conceptual vocabulary in order to call the established "modern" boundaries into question. In this perspective, Deleuze and Guattari represent the sea as a space both 'smooth' and 'striated' (Deleuze, Guattari 2004: 529), with special regards to the open sea, where one can move freely without a particular route or goal set. In other words, the discovery of the high sea opened up a new world where people of the sea could live and move in ways that were different from the striated and linear visions produced on lands. Thus, the sea would seemingly work as the Foucault's "heterotopia" *par excellence*, which is both outside and inside society (Theodosiou 2013) and enable a "second level" post-structural (and post-terrestrial) global connectivity. Nonetheless, multiple empirical evidences point at the idea

of a completely passable and crossable world–society and reveal it as a pure utopia more than a heterotopia, insofar. The growing number of borders and checkpoints, the sophistication of biometrics control and the harshening of visa policies are just a few examples of a progressively caged and channelled society. In other words, one could possibly assert that is the same social reality that is dismissing a de-structured sociological vision, which assumes that a global interconnected web of goods and information would create a holistic melt–down.

Accordingly, this article aims to add something to the discussion by claiming that an original way to challenge this liquid utopia comes from the sea. Particularly, it pushes for the establishment of maritime sociology standpoint to review a tricky ideology of global fluidity that breaks through sea–land distinctions and tends to make them two purely interchangeable fields. Actually, maritime sociology should point out that the dream of an ostensible liquid society crashes against a new solidity of the Ocean–sea; the latter, sets the stage for the re–emergence of new borders and original devices of social control. And it does it quite unexpectedly, at least for some accurate observers.

For instance, talking about the Mediterranean Sea and its relations with the European continent, the Italian urban planner Stefano Boeri speaks of this sea as a stage where one can see: “a growing number of networks of channels through which flow a steady stream of humanity and goods (...) the many varied and changing populations that exists on the borders or on the communal sea are forced to accept (a kind of) “masks”, schematic and preconditioned identities: the fisherman, the clandestine immigrant, the soldier, the sailor, the tourist. The fact that each of these masks leads back to a rigid and not often common use of sea paths, but on different levels or at different moments of the day, and that they are invisible to each other, lead us to conclude that the Mediterranean is undergoing a certain “solidification” (Boeri 2006: 51).

Differently, to draw the proper implications from maritime sociology would mean first of all to unveil this unspoken spatial trick and to restore a radically different status of the sea within sociology. Thus, as a result, on one hand we might even assume that present day society is turning itself into a world system based on communication flows and progressively organized as a horizontal net without a centre. However, on the other one, we shall acknowledge that such a representation leaves behind the maritime dimension because the sea is simply treated as a sort of smooth solid way for the circulation of goods and people. Actually, the ocean–sea somehow represents the contemporary ideal-type of territory mostly compatible with the ideology of globalization because it is generally portrayed as a smooth flat–field both open to circulation and undergoing rigid functional differentiation. From this standpoint, materiality and immateriality cannot be declined only in terrestrial ways and, similarly, the global economic–political processes usually addressed as de–localisation or de–territorialisation should not imply an exclusive relationship with land. In other words, the theoretical implications of maritime sociology would start from a critical revision of a popular self–portrait of contemporary society. The latter, would often appear as a world system based on the supposed distinction between sovereign, structured, socialized lands and empty, free, open seas. In fact, the two sides are neither that disentangled nor purely interchangeable; beyond a formal distinction, a different picture of the social world would emerge after a critical revision of the relational–material complex behind the sea–land connections.



### 3. So, why Maritime Sociology?

Trying to overcome the existential stagnation of maritime sociology (Bryniewicz 2004: 119-131), I shall point out that I am neither looking for a new theory of society based on the sea nor for a simple expansion of the fieldwork boundaries into some new domains.

Differently, my pledge here is to acknowledge the epistemological implications of an heuristic relation between social science and the sea, where in the notion of sea I include also other types of water masses such as oceans, rivers, lakes and so on and so forth. Particularly, I would like to cast light on the processes of reciprocity and circularity that connect the sociological study of the sea with social science theory and methodology building. Also, including the way social science can contribute to describe the sea as a socially constructed space of relations within an interdisciplinary framework of maritime studies where the relational factor is often missing.

From this standpoint, let me suggest that maritime sociology can provide an innovative vantage point to describe and interpret world society by pointing out the implications of a maritime based approach to the study of society, starting from the very cognitive and conceptual grounds.

On the contrary, maritime sociology up to now provided a huge quantity of empirical data and many research experiences but failed to create a shared vision or common paradigms. Certainly, there is a theoretical problem of persuasive description of present day society but also one related to the interpretation of available data. As a result, maritime sociological investigations too often remain residual with regards to the general issues of the sociological discipline.

Therefore, the abovementioned problems cannot be only solved with additional funding or more political support. Differently, I guess there is a need to scientifically re-establish the goals of the sub-discipline and the boundaries of the research field. Which eventually lead us to the question: why we do need maritime sociology?

Trying to answer this question, back to 1981, Michael Poole published a landmark article about themes and analytical frameworks of maritime sociology with the explicit aim to define some areas of interests within the broader field of maritime sociology and connect them with some conceptual and substantial sociological discussions. In his article, he did not draw conclusions but set the stage for future researches both at theoretical and empirical levels. (Poole 1981: 207-208). However, exploring the state of development of maritime sociology Poole could not but notice the lack of integration into the central themes of sociology of many notable contributions on maritime issues. The reasons, in his opinion were twofold: on one hand, too circumscribed analytical premises and, on the other one, too vague theoretical and methodological frames.

As a result, to Poole, the majority of the analyses produced so far: "have emerged as grounded theories bearing very little relationship to the accumulated body of knowledge within sociology itself" (Poole 1981: 219). Truly, the disconnection of the maritime sociological investigation with the wider sociological discussions has been detrimental to both sides. While maritime side of society suffered for a lack of social reflexivity and a rigorous sociological scrutiny, the discipline of sociology has been losing the opportunity to benefit from an original and strategic approach.

As a matter of fact, Poole does not add very much to the theory building process and appears more interested to apply existing theories and paradigms than to generate new ones. However, although he probably lacks of reflexive attitude towards the sea-land distinction and eventually fails to grasp the epistemological potential of a seaborne sociology, he still tries to perform some definitional exercises when he recalls

a previous definition of given by Rosengren (1973), who described maritime sociology in terms of: “identifying in specific cases, the social and cultural forces, which determine the specific definitions of the marine environment, which shape its use and exploitation” (Poole 1981: 207). However, what Poole interestingly suggests is that we need to answer two additional questions: firstly, what are the nature and the character of the considered social-cultural forces and, secondly, what types of social groups and relationships ought to be incorporated in this study field.

In the first case, I think maritime sociologists shall consider all the technological, economic, legal, governmental factors that evolve in the frame of globalizing processes and according to new patterns of capitalism. So, maritime sociology should not just reflect localized cultural processes or sectorial problems, such as marine tourism, environmental protection or specific economic activities (i.e. fisheries). On the contrary, maritime sociologists shall also catch up and contribute to the wider and more general theoretical and methodological developments of the discipline, though maintaining an interdisciplinary and open-minded outlook. For instance, by addressing the maritime problems from a world-society perspective and by reflecting on the issues of mobility, flows, circulation as well as on the global processes of social differentiation.

In the second case, the space for debate is even larger for some social groups are certainly part of many of the maritime sociological investigations, such as the seamen, the fishermen and the longshoremen (i.e. dockworkers). Nonetheless, the abovementioned social and cultural transformations have enlarged and differentiated the number of groups to be taken in consideration. Thus, today new types of people both at sea and on shore, should be mentioned as part of an agenda of investigation in the field of maritime sociology. At sea, we have people as diverse as illegal immigrants, coastguards, *passseurs*, those engaged in oil extraction and in scientific explorations or the military forces escorting cargoes. Among the shore-based, one can remember families and friends of the people at sea; the associations like trade unions and NGOs; the shipping companies and the oil corporations. From this point of view, the enlargement of the group typologies is not just a quantitative operation for it involves a deeper reflection on the changing nature of social relationships.

In other words, maritime sociology might add some original values to reframe the relational paradigm of sociology as a whole because from the maritime perspective sociologists could register important changes in social relations that would reflect the way sea-land relations have been radically transformed in the present days. For instance, the technological evolution and the expansion of the maritime industries has brought to the emergence of both mega-cargoes and mega-cruisers, which are giant and usually hyper-technological vessels where the way “to live the sea” is crucially changed with respect to previous ships.

Similarly, evolution and transformation processes bring about radical changes also in the system of values and in the cultural representations experienced by the seamen, whose social relations among themselves and with the related ones on the shore undergo deep modifications in terms of gender, family ties, professional ethic, political attitudes and so on and so forth. In other words, the traditional and somewhat stereotyped marine world made of quite structured and dichotomized social relations between the people at sea and people on land seems to have been fading away after the insurgence of new political and economic conditions (Bryniewicz, Kolodziej-Durnaś, Stasienuk 2010: 126). Probably, a quite similar reflection could be done with regards to fishermen and longshoremen.

Actually, the somehow blurred socio-professional category of the “people of the sea” should be a first strategic object of investigation for its theoretical implications in

maritime sociology. Indeed, such a topic might open up a potentially vast field of sociological investigation that ranges from the role of the oceans in global society, to the socio-ecological implications of high-sea economic activities or to the changing patterns of social relations among the crew on board.

Accordingly, an interesting connection between maritime sociology and development studies is taking shape because newly developing maritime countries progressively invest on marine strategies to secure more material and immaterial resources from the sea (from fish or minerals to tourism or access to maritime routes) or to reinforce their sovereignty in the international relations system (for instance, extending their rights with the exclusive economic zones or patrolling the high seas).

Likewise, in his review of the emerging research trends in Chinese marine Sociology, Ning'er makes an interesting point noting how these strategies are "deeply social" and therefore sociology could contribute to the understanding of the emerging social relationships between people, communities, regions, nations and the sea; as well as the relations between themselves when the sea acts as a *medium* (Ning'er 2011: 2, 9). Particularly, a strong emphasis is given to the link between marine and environmental sociology for the international and global dimension of the environmental problems of the oceans. In this perspective, complex problems ask for multi-level and cross-disciplinary interventions and governance strategies, which requires in turn for experts deeply aware of their social role. Thus, the acknowledgement of the sociological dimension of marine technology and policies shall contrast the conventional lack of sociological attention to marine topics. Particularly, an integrated and systematic sociological approach to interconnected issues like fisheries, coastal management, maritime tourism, shipping, oil extraction, piracy and the evident social dimension of practical problems connected with them, could push for an increased understanding of the ocean-sea as a social space worthy of further research.

A similar concern and an expectation of increased interconnection between theory, methodology, empirical research and policy outcome is formulated by Orbach in his overview of the relations occurring between marine social science and fisheries management and development (Orbach 1989). Talking of the interactions between humans and the environment with regard to fisheries, he mentions that "one does not manage fish, one manages people". Consequently, he refers to both a legal and a pragmatic, or common sense based necessity for the social scientists to get involved in fisheries management and in marine issues as a whole. Moreover, he spells out how often the maritime sociological investigations do not provide enough policy-oriented results to be used for the management of increasingly socially complex situations. Therefore, Orbach suggests maritime sociologists to make a critical examination of the character and direction of their own work and, in the meanwhile, warns maritime management agencies to invest more on social science and to include social scientists in their staff. (Orbach 1989: 110). This way, sociology would legitimately enter the realm of interdisciplinary maritime activities and possibly bridge the gap between integration oriented theory-making trends and the complex multiplicity of the empirical maritime fieldworks. Eventually, the enrichment of theoretical frames would go together with the inclusion of sociology into the interdisciplinary maritime strategy to solve practical and political issues.

#### 4. Conclusion

The sea is certainly not one of the favourite research topics of sociology. As a crucial part of the ecosystem, waters have been largely investigated by natural sciences

but they rarely got the attention of human and social scientists, although some new “*thalasso-centric*” trends developed in the USA at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even in International Relations and Political Science both open and closed maritime spaces have been approached mainly as part of larger processes of partitions, border disputes or defence strategies. Economic science looks at the sea as source of goods (exploitation), in terms of infrastructures or along the contemporary concerns about sustainable development. Actually, as Steinberg argues, religious, military, economic and further representations of the sea reveal a history of contradictory social constructions of the Ocean-sea that would shift from time to time and would serve a multiplicity of functions (Steinberg 2001: 4).

However, the sea has been one of the great protagonists of the historical processes that led to the development of modern society. From the period of the great explorations, to the establishment of international maritime trade routes the ocean has been the primary natural support for the social unification of the planet. Likewise, the Mediterranean has been either the stage or the background to the main developments of the ancient European civilizations.

The Mediterranean sea first and the ocean later, have set the stage for the globalization of society, providing a world encompassing system of routes, connections and networks of social relations. However, the sea is also experiencing some of the problematic impacts of the globalized society in terms of economic overexploitation, territorial partitions, developmental issues, security problems, cultural marginality.

Certainly, looking at the way sociology relates to the sea, one cannot but underline the bias brought about a so-called methodological “terrestrialism”, besides the more well-known critics to the grip of methodological nationalism. Accordingly, even recent internationally oriented description of global society cannot escape a “*terracentric*” epistemology, that is to say a implicit conflation of land and society, like if one could not conceive any social relations without thinking the land. Actually, even when land is absent it is perceived in a negative way as a void or something missing from the picture: the lost land, the promised land, the search for land and so on and so forth.

Truly, the liquid space of the seas and the oceans has also provided rich symbolic resources for the elaboration of a significant number of representations of the contemporary “turbulent” society. The sea evokes the driving forces to explore, to learn, to make new experiences, to get in touch with new views of the world and to challenge adventure for achieving greater goals. The same word „risk“, as far as we know, seems to have a maritime origin because it has been firstly reported in insurance and maritime trade documents at the time of medieval trade (Luhmann 1991). As I discussed before, many of the present metaphors to describe the globalised society have a maritime or aquatic flavour: fluxes of information, flows of capitals, surfing the web. They all refer to the supposed „liquid“ nature of the contemporary society social structures. In this article I tried to take a critical look at this watery semantic and, at the same time, to shed some light on the relation-material complex expressed by the sea-land distinction.

In conclusion, I would like to point out some prescriptions to sociologists that would like to invest in maritime sociology and take advantage of its theoretical implications for sociology as a whole.

First of all, sociologists should work on the enlargement and redefinition of the professional categories of sea workers on board and on shore; secondly, they shall focus on the complex networks of social relations connecting those workers among themselves and with other subjects both at sea and on land; third, they shall pay atten-

tion to the sociological dimension of maritime technological developments and to the social implications of marine economic, political and cultural strategies; finally, sociologists shall overcome too easy separation between the sea and the land and try to avoid the bias of implicitly land based representations of society. From this standpoint, some new reflections on the nature of globalization and world–society from a maritime perspective would add an additional value to the contemporary debates.

To do it, however, a too modern and simplistic imagination of a world divided between sovereign terrestrial states and empty free Oceans ought to be abandoned. Diversely, maritime sociology shall provide a critical understanding of sea–land relations by de–constructing the images of a neat separation between the sea and the land. Eventually, the sea might be understood as a real social and lived space, that is to say something like the “third space” theorized by Foucault, Lefebvre and Soja (Khan 2000): a set of social relations that emerges from the productive dialectic between the physical and the mental and their interaction. In other words, a living space made of a multitude of intersections and constantly changing. That is to say, neither a material object nor its image but something different that gets an intertwined social nature.

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