16 Remaking a Form of Life

Jakob Meløe

A friend of mine, Ottar Brox, wrote a book a few years ago: *Ta vare på Norge* – that is: *Take care of Norway.* What he asks us to take care of are the laws and the political and economic institutions that were built during the forty-year period ranging from the mid-thirties to the mid-seventies. Brox names that period 'the period of social democracy' and, trying to formulate the guiding motive behind several of those laws and institutions, he comes up with: *make it difficult for people to live off other people's labour.* In this paper I shall introduce you to one law, *Råfiskloven* of 1938, that does just that. That is, I shall tell you about the situation of our coastal fishermen before 1938, and enough about it for you to see how the fish merchants were able to make themselves rich off the fishermen's hardships, how the fishermen worked to better their lot, and how that law of 1938 did alter it, radically. ('Råfiskloven' may perhaps be translated as 'The Raw Fish Act', if 'raw fish' is taken to mean not just not cooked fish, but fish that has not been processed in any way – that is, salted, dried, smoked, etc. When the fisherman sells the day's catch to the fish merchant, that catch consists of so much 'råfisk'. Whether the best English word for that is 'raw fish', 'fresh fish', or 'wetfish', I do not know.)

Two other laws from that same period are the laws about ownership of farms and about ownership of fishing boats, the one laying it down that you cannot own a farm unless you live on it and work on it yourself, as a farmer, the other that you cannot own a fishing boat unless you work on it yourself, as a fisherman. In both cases, the requirement of 'working on it yourself' is a substantial one. By ruling out absentee ownership, both laws can be said to make it difficult to live off other people's labour. In that same period three state banks were founded, The Farmers' Bank, The Fishermen's Bank and The

House Bank, each giving low-interest loans to low-income people. The Fishermen's Bank, for example, made it possible for a fisherman, even before 1938, to turn his 24-foot rowing and sailing boat into an engine-driven boat, with a wheelhouse and a small cabin, thus making his work at sea both more safe and less of a hardship, and also making it possible to reach fishing grounds he could not have reached rowing.

The very title of Brox's book, *Take care of Norway*, implies that those laws and institutions are worth taking care of, that they are now being threatened, and that the Norwegian people are in a position to secure them, viz. through electing members of the Storting that will secure them, in letter or in spirit.

The threat comes from two quarters. One, if we join the European Union, it is not for the Norwegian Storting to legislate in matters of economy, and several of those laws and institutions Brox has named 'social democratic' are incompatible with the basic principles of the European Union. Two, if we do not join, as we probably shall not, the alliance of the Labour Party (it still calls itself that) and the Conservative Party (another misnomer) will persevere in its attempt to dismantle those very laws and institutions, and precisely because they are incompatible with the basic principles of the European Union.

What I find threatening about abstract economic principles, such as the free flow of capital, of labour forces, etc., is precisely their very abstract character, that is, their lack of sensitivity towards local traditions, local terrains, etc. They certainly do not fit coastal Norway. My own warning, then, addressed to the coastal people of Norway, is: Take care of the coast.

Most of Ottar Brox's good points about Norway can be worked into as good points about Finland, Sweden or Iceland. Each of the three countries could do well with such a book now: *Take care of Finland. Take care of Sweden. Take care of Iceland.* With Denmark it may well be too late.

But the only law that I shall present you with, *Råfiskloven*, has no counterpart in any of the other Nordic countries, or in any country that I know of. Within the Nordic countries, that otherwise have so many of their laws and institutions in common, that one difference is due to the different character of our coasts and coastal waters, if not to that only.

The main point about *Råfiskloven* can be stated in a few lines, if we already have a description, in some detail, of the form of life of coastal fishing off the Norwegian coast. But such a description will make little sense if we do not also describe the coastal waters that that form of life is in answer to.

WITTGENSTEIN, HEIDEGGER, AND MARX

My concept of a *form of life* is, I believe, the same as Wittgenstein's. Or it is close to it. In Wittgenstein, that concept replaces the concept of *the given* of the Vienna Circle, where the concept of what is given, be it sense data or things, is a concept of the ultimate building blocks, whether of our concepts or of our perceptions. The Vienna Circle thought of what is given as always and everywhere the same, whereas Wittgenstein thought of forms of life as forms of activities or practices, each with a history of its own. As practices are brought into being, altered, or left to disappear, so the concepts and perceptions proper to those practices are brought into being, altered, or left to disappear, as live concepts or perceptions.

When Wittgenstein's errand boy enters the shop to give that piece of paper to the shopkeeper, that piece with FIVE RED APPLES written on it, he steps into a situation which is that situation only within a form of life where there are shops, buying and selling, division of labour between villages or districts, coins, writing, etc. We do not know what that errand boy understands of what he is doing, but here is one possible story: he has not as yet learnt to read, but he understands that he has been sent to buy something and that what is written on that piece of paper is what Mr Wittgenstein has sent him to buy and to bring back. Entering the shop, he understands that he is not to give that piece of paper to anyone on his own side of the counter, but to the person on the other side of it, as that will be the shopkeeper. And if that is all he understands, it is already a great deal. If Mr Wittgenstein asks that same boy to go other errands for him, the boy will come to learn more about that shop and about buying and selling. He will, for example, learn to distinguish between those things in the shop that are there to be sold and those things that are not for

sale, such as for example the yardstick that the shopkeeper uses to measure lengths of cloth with, or the pair of scissors that he uses to cut a length of cloth from the roll, etc. He will also discover – e.g. observing the shopkeeper serving other customers – that four yards of a cloth costs twice as much as two yards of the same cloth, if he has already learnt to count and to add. And should he happen to be there when a farmer or a fisherman comes to buy twenty fathoms of rope, from a particular coil of rope, he will observe that the length of a rope is measured in a very different way from the length of a cloth, and, it seems, in a much less accurate way, etc. Through his own errands in the shop and through his observations of how the shopkeeper serves other customers, the boy will be working his way into this particular practice and its various arrangements. Should he talk to Mr Wittgenstein about what he has learnt and about his questions about it, I am sure Mr Wittgenstein would recognize both his observations and his questions. And should the boy, stimulated by his conversations with Mr Wittgenstein, begin to speculate about how the shopkeeper determines the prices of the different goods that he sells, and what the shopkeeper had to pay for those same goods to whoever sold them to him, etc., then that errand boy is already on his way to become a philosopher of this particular practice.

To cut the story short: Wittgenstein replaces the concept of a building block, a corner stone, a basis, etc., with the concept of an activity, a practice, a form of life, etc., and he replaces the concept of *resting on* with the concept of *being situated within*.

To cut it short again: A *concept* is situated within a particular practice, while a *remark* is situated within a particular situation. For example, the concepts of *cash* or *credit* are situated within a particular practice of buying and selling, while the remark 'Five red apples', that § 1 remark, is situated within a particular situation within that particular practice, which situation is brought into being by that errand boy approaching the counter, handing that piece of paper to that shopkeeper, etc., within a practice, and an arrangement, where that is a move, and where it is that move.

And few moves are as thickly situated as the making of a law, such as *Råfiskloven*.

As with Wittgenstein's concept of a *form of life*, Heidegger's concept of a *world*, which is always to be taken as a not independent part of the concept of *being-in-the-world*, replaces the concept of the given, be that construed as sense data or as things. In contrast to Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Remarks*, Heidegger makes short shrift with the language of sense data, but, also in contrast to Wittgenstein, he discusses the physicalist thing language at some length. The upshot of that discussion is that the physicalists' concept of a thing, to be described in the strict terms of geometry and mechanics, is a derived concept, construed to meet the equally derived requirements of theoretical mechanics. The original concept of a thing is that of a *Zeug*, a stone to throw, a stick to dig with, a cave to seek shelter in, a spade to dig with, a plough to plough with, etc.

We who work with that plough, ploughing, are already situated in a world, in that very world where the plough, the harnessed horse, the field, the seeds to be sown, the rain clouds or the burning sun, etc., are also situated. Begin to describe a Black Forest plough of the twenties, begin to describe it as that *Zeug*, and when you have completed that description, yes, there is such a thing as completing it, you will have described a great deal of the form of life, or the world, of a Black Forest farmer of the twenties. When we of the world of ploughs point at a plough, we point from within that world at something in that world. There is an implication from that to what is the proper language in which to speak about that world – it is the language that is spoken within that world. In that language, there is no description of a man or a woman at work which is not ripe with implications about the world within which that man or woman is working. To understand such a description is to understand that world.

I also believe that the life of work, the working life of men and women, is at the kernel of any form of life. There is where a description of a form of life should begin. That is, I believe that Marx's concept of a *mode of production* should be brought into Wittgenstein's concept of a *form of life* or Heidegger's concept of a *world*. Each of the three concepts will become richer by being understood in the light of the other two. I shall not try to argue that point here, though I shall try to practice it.

In what follows, there will be a great deal of description and very little argumentation. And the few arguments there are will only be sketched, or even only hinted at, and never worked out. In arguing, we rely on a common understanding of the concepts involved. That is, we rely on a common understanding of the world to which those concepts belong. So, if we do not restrict our thoughts to that world which is already well known to university teachers and students alike, we shall have to do a great deal of descriptive work before we can even begin to present an argument. With all my descriptive work, I have just done enough to *place* a few problems that invite arguments, but I have not done enough to accommodate any worked out argument. And that will come as a disappointment when you read the few lines about *Råfiskloven*, towards the end of this study. Because you will then want to argue. I ask you not to, because you still don't know the world of coastal fishing off the Norwegian coast, its concepts, traditions, and sensibilities, well enough to move argumentatively within it.

EXPLORING THE INVISIBLE TERRAIN

My country has been given its name by seafarers and from the sea. *Norway* means *the northern way* or *the way to the north.* In either case, the way is the *fairway* along the coast from the south to the north. Norge, or Noreg, derives from 'Norveg', where nor, or nord, means *north*, and veg means *way*. So Norway is the name of a fairway before it attaches to the long stretch of coastal land bordering on to that fairway and facing it.

Norway is first of all a long stretch of coast. The coast borders on to the sea in the same way as the sea borders on the coast. But the coast *faces* the sea in the sense that the people of the coast look to the sea for their life and their livelihood (both in the old and the new sense of that term, the old sense of 'livelihood' being *liveliness*).

The classical *Zeuge* of Norway are the plough and the boat, and the boat before the plough. The households along the coast, on the thousands of large or small islands, on the outer peninsulas and in the fjords, have earned their income from the sea and secured their naturalia from the sea and from the

soil. Roughly, the menfolk have been the fishermen and the womenfolk the farmers.

So it is from the boat and the fishing gear – that is from their learning to handle it and from their handling of it – that the fishermen learn about the sea and the fish. The history of this knowledge, from the Stone Age on, say, follows the history of their crafts and their fishing gear.

The dugout does not tell you the same story about the sea, or about your boat and yourself, as the rowing boat. A paddle is quite a helpless thing compared to a pair of oars. And the open rowing boat, that you row or sail, does not tell you the same story as the decked and engine-driven 40-, 50- or 60-foot fishing boat.

Rowing, you will learn about the wind and the waves and the currents as they affect your boat and your rowing it. The same wind that teaches you about its force also teaches you about your own strength, in rowing against the wind. And so on. What you learn about the world at sea will be the world as you experience it. But that will be short for 'the world as you experience it from a rowing boat, rowing it and fishing from it'.

Fishing with a handline, which is the oldest way of trying to catch salt-water fish, teaches you that there aren't fish everywhere in the sea, and that they aren't spread out evenly. A few years of daily fishing will teach you a great deal about the whereabouts when of what sort of fish in your homewaters. And learning that, you will also learn about the underwater terrain of those same waters. Fishing for bottom fish, you learn about the whereabouts of the cod, the haddock, the redfish, the plaice, etc. Learning about the whereabouts of the haddock, you also learn about the underwater plains where it grazes. Learning about the whereabouts of the redfish, you learn about the deep hollows where it is most at home. Learning about the movements of the cod, you learn about the valleys and the hillsides along which it moves. And so on. You don't learn about the underwater terrain without learning about the movements of the fish, and vice versa.

The experienced fisherman will have a detailed map of the underwater terrain of those fishing grounds within his homewaters where he does his own fishing. And he will know a great deal about how the cod, the redfish, etc., move within that

terrain. Those fishing grounds will be inherited from father to son. You don't just learn to fish, you learn to fish on those fishing grounds and not on others. Where you don't know the underwater terrain well, you don't fish well either. Apart from his own fishing grounds, the three or four of them, the fisherman will not have a detailed knowledge of the underwater terrain, except where it affects his rowing or sailing.

But coastal fishermen talk to each other daily about their fishing experiences, and so most fishermen will have a rough knowledge, together with a few scattered details, of most other fishing grounds within their own homewaters. And they will learn that, although there are valleys and hillsides, plains and hollows, the rough topography of the seabottom is that of a highland plateau sloping slowly from the coast outwards until it reaches the depth of about 200 metres, where it breaks into a steep slope, soon reaching depths of 800 to 1000 metres. The line that marks that break winds inwards and outwards. At some places it is only nine to ten nautical miles from the nearest fishing village. At most places it is 30 to 40 miles away. The fishermen call the line 'the edge' (*egga*). (The oceanographers and the marine geologists speak of 'the shelf break', where 'the shelf' is the continental shelf. And the cartographers speak of 'the 200-metre contour'.)

The discovery of the edge, whether 500 years ago or 1000 years ago, is among the greatest discoveries of our fishermen.[1]

They knew already, joining the experience of several fishing villages between Western Finnmark and Lofoten, that the mature cod approach the coast of Western Finnmark in December, from somewhere in the Barents Sea, to move south, and against the current, to the main spawning grounds in Lofoten. And for as long as they have known that, they have called the mature cod by the name of *skrei*, from the Old Norse *skrida*, which means to move in a procession-like manner. For the same number of centuries the fishermen themselves have moved in a procession-like manner, rowing or sailing for from one to seven days, to the different fishing villages of Lofoten, to catch the skrei before it spawned.

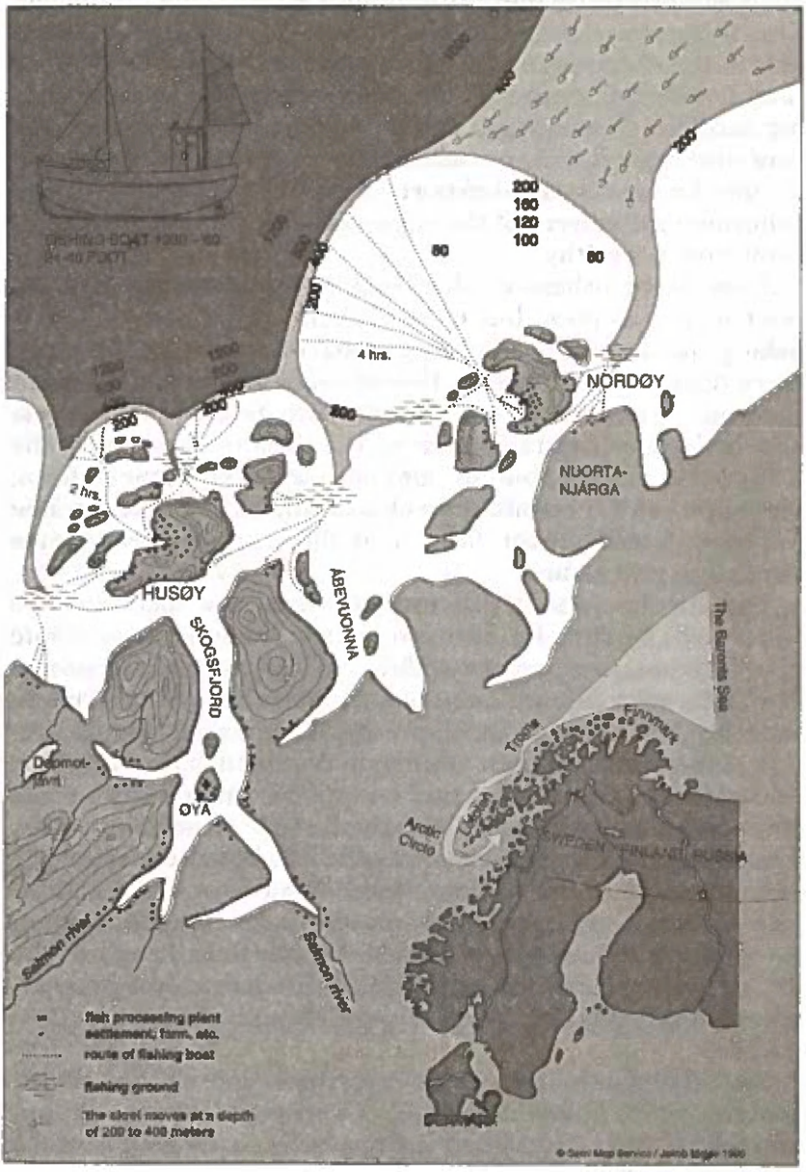
In the climax years more than 30 000 fishermen have come, from north and south of Lofoten, to join the 5000 or so fishermen of the Lofoten fishing villages, in their fishing for skrei, from mid-January to early April.

From a few of the fishing villages on the outer islands of Troms, there has almost always been quite good fishing for skrei in the homewaters, so that there is little need to embark on a strenuous four or five days' rowing to Lofoten, to fish there for two or three months away from the womenfolk and the children.

The reach of the homewaters depends on the terrain and on the boat. A 16-foot rowing boat, rowed by two men, cannot without great risk venture as far out as a 24-foot boat rowed by four men. And a 24-foot rowing boat cannot venture as far out as, say, a 40-foot decked and engine-driven boat. And if there are holms and islets in the outer waters, and large enough to provide shelter, then you can venture a few miles outside the outermost islets, on a fine day, even with a 24-foot rowing boat. With boats between 16 and 24 feet, the homewaters of Husøy have a much larger reach than those of Nordøy. (See the map. There is no landscape or seascape on the coast looking just like that. But the map takes care of some basic features of the outer coast of Troms county.)

One fine winter day, 200 years ago, say, two or three 24-foot Husøy comrade boats, boats that always keep within good sight of each other, ventured further out than any boat before them on a winter day, and they hit a place thick with skrei. Fishing with a handline they also found that the skrei at that place moved along a steep slope that began at the depth of about 110 fathoms, that is 200 metres. Moving seven oarstrokes further out, to about 160 fathoms, the place was still thick with skrei. But moving further out to 240 fathoms, they found nothing. It was as if they had hit a trail that the skrei was following on its way to Lofoten. And so they had. They had hit the one and only trail. But trying to trace that trail, they discovered that what they had hit was an inward bend of a trail that wound sharply outwards in both directions, soon to be out of reach for a 24-foot rowing boat. But whenever the days were fine that winter, and the signs told them that the fine day would stay a fine day, the three comrade boats and a few other boats sailed to the edge to fish there.

In the autumn that same year, when the menfolk had completed their share of the farmwork, two groups of kins hired a master boatbuilder to guide each of them in the building of a 40-foot boat, to be rowed by eight men, so that they could fish


200
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NORDØY
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2 hrs.
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ÁBEVUONNA
SKOGSFJORD
The Barents Sea
Finnmark
Troms
Arctic
Circle
OYA
Salmon river
Salmon river
fish processing plant
settlement, farm, etc.
route of fishing boat
fishing ground
the skrei moves at a depth
of 200 to 400 meters

more safely on the edge and load more skrei, and perhaps also venture further out along the edge, on either side.

With the new boats, the inward bend of the edge was brought within the realm of the homewaters, and the quite good winter fishing there turned into a very rich one indeed. The fishermen landed four or five times as much skrei as before the discovery of the edge. And the fish merchant more than doubled the number of men splitting, salting and stacking the fish, or hanging it on the drying racks, or boiling the liver for making oil, or salting the row, etc. The stockfish would be ready for export during the summer. The fishermen's discovery of the edge caused the merchant to pass from rich to wealthy.

A few of the fishermen that fished on the edge passed from poor to not so poor, but most of them stayed poor, whether fishing on the edge, in 40-foot boats, or fishing inside it, on the old fishing grounds, in 16-foot or 24-foot boats. But even the poorest of them would seldom starve, since most of them also had a small farm of their own. So there wasn't only the fish, always the fish, but also potatoes, eggs, milk, meat, wool, hides, etc. And the seals, the eitherdown, the berries, etc. The womenfolk worked the farm, and the children were always needed to give a hand.

The fish merchant did not only buy the fish that the fishermen landed; he also owned the fishing village's one general store, stocking also a variety of fishing equipment and simple farming equipment – or such parts of such equipment that the fishermen or their wives could not make themselves out of material that their own farm provided. The fishermen bound their own nets, but they bought the thread. They made their own axehandles, but bought the axe head, and so on. The womenfolk spun their own yarn, but bought the knitting pins, etc. To be a skilful fisherman, only two or three generations ago, was to be skilled in what is now counted as nine or twelve different crafts. And likewise for the skilled farmer, who in addition to her nine or twelve different crafts also had to master the crafts of being a good housewife and a good mother.

For all that, the fishermen and their households, or the farmers and their households, were dependent on the merchant house for a great many articles. And the merchant

kept a ledger for each household, where the worth of each day's landing of fish by that household would be entered in the credit column and the worth of the articles that the household received from the store in the debit column. And it was the merchant himself who determined the prices, both of what he bought and of what he sold. Many, perhaps most, of the fishermen's households would be in debt to the merchant most of the time. So the lot of the fishermen and their households would depend, in no small way, on the morals of the merchant, though even the hardest merchant would see to it that most of the fishermen were able to fish also next year.

CHEATING ON THE WEIGHT

Each office, and perhaps each form of activity, has its own virtues and vices. With the buying and selling of such goods as are bought and sold in smaller or greater quantities, there are the virtues and vices of counting, measuring or weighing.

When a fisherman delivers the day's catch, there is a point where the fish passes from being the fisherman's to being the merchant's, and that is when the fish is being weighed, whether in one weighing or several. The balance is a steelyard. It is the merchant's and is operated by one of his foremen. When the fisherman places his catch, or a portion of it, in the steelyard pan, it is still his. When its weight has been determined and taken down, by the foreman, it is the merchant's. If the fishing has been good, it will take several weighings to weigh the whole catch. And the same sequence is repeated for each weighing: the fisherman places a proper portion of his catch in the pan, and then stands back to observe the rest. The foreman moves the weight until the steelyard is in balance and then speaks out the number of kilos registered while taking it down. The results of the several weighings are added and written down in some book or just on a slip of paper. At the next station, in one of the inner offices, that fisherman's delivery that day is entered into his ledger, together with its worth in kroner.

This simple situation describes a moral terrain of its own, with its various crossing paths of vice and virtue. If the fisherman has reason to suspect that the number of kilos the

foreman takes down is less than the number he speaks out, there are several courses of action at his disposal, but perhaps none that will not demonstrate a lack of trust that the foreman, and the merchant, will find offending – and perhaps more so if the merchant has instructed the foreman to detract a few kilos from each weighing. ('There is no great harm if you write 70 kilos for 75, or 280 for 300'. There is an answer to that, and an answer to that answer, etc.)

There is a simpler way for the merchant to get a few kilos extra for each weighing, and that is to skew the balance a bit. If the fishermen should suspect that the balance has been skewed, there are ways of finding out. But again, if it has been skewed, there are no ready courses of action, and they may well prefer to let the matter rest, at least at Husøy or Nordøy or Øya, at least before 1938. And should the merchant discover that he has been found out, he might well keep up appearances and do nothing about it. At least at Husøy, Nordøy, or Øya, at least before 1938. It is a trifling matter after all, isn't it?

WHAT IS A FAIR PRICE?

There is no question that skewing the balance is to deceive, and that the honest merchant knows how to be honest. But there is one question that confronts the merchant who is both honest and thoughtful. It goes beyond the simple question of day-to-day honesty in being very real as a question. And that is the question of what to count as a fair price.

It is the winter fishing after skrei we are talking about, at a time when the fishermen make most of their year's income in the course of those three months, and in a world where it is the merchant that determines the price per kilo of what the fishermen land. The merchant is buying from early January to late March, say, hanging some to dry and salting some, and selling it, as stockfish or klipfish, in the summer. If it is in the late twenties or early thirties he will pay the fisherman fourteen øre per kilo, say, where four øre per kilo will pay the fisherman's expenses, such as maintenance of boat and gear. Say the fishing is good and the fisherman lands some 300 kilo each day over close to 70 days. (A fisherman friend of mine

commented: 'The weather must also have been very good that winter. It is more common to be able to fish 50 days out of 90.') With ten øre per kilo at his own disposal, he will have, say, 2000 kroner at his own disposal when the winter fishing is over. (Or he will have 2800 kroner in the credit column of his ledger, of which 2000 kroner can be taken out in household articles.) Let us say that the merchant, selling his stockfish to Italy and his klipfish to Portugal, gets 50 øre per kilo, on the average (or what corresponds to 50 øre per kilo, since I have not calculated the loss of weight from wetfish to stockfish or klipfish). Of the 50 øre, fourteen goes to pay the fisherman, and 26 to pay his workers and keep his plant in order. The merchant, then, has ten øre per kilo at his own disposal. That is, the same catches that give the fisherman 2000 kroner at his disposal, at the end of the fisheries, give the merchant 2000 kroner at his disposal, when he has sold his stockfish and klipfish.

But there are 20 fishermen, or perhaps 30, delivering their catches to this one merchant. So there will be 40 000 kroner, or perhaps 60 000, at his disposal when he has sold it all. He will not always be able to sell it all, at that price. But he will keep himself well informed about prices in Italy and Portugal, and if his early January estimate is that they will pay him less, in June or July, he will lower the price per kilo to the fisherman correspondingly. So that it will not disturb the proportion of 20 to 1.

The question that confronts the honest and thoughtful fish merchant is this: *Do I give the fishermen a fair share of what Italy and Portugal pay me, when I give them 2000 each for the same stock of fish that gives me 40 000?* Working on this problem, the merchant comes out with thoughts such as these:

> I have nothing to sell if the fishermen do not fish, and it would be hard for them to sell if I did not buy. My earnings depend on their work, and their earnings depend on my work. When there is no storm or gale to give them a rest, they work for twelve hours or more a day, for three months. It takes six or seven months from the time I buy the first catch till I have sold the last stockfish. This is only one of my several affairs, but if I compress my work with this one into two months, I may well come out with twelve-hour working

days. Roughly, let me say, the buying, processing and selling of the winter's total catch require the same amount of work from me as the catching and delivering require of any one fisherman.

Would it not be fair, then, if I earned the same amount of money from my work with the fish as any one fisherman from his? So that this part of my business should bring me a net income of 2000 kroner?

But I do feel entitled to more. Why is that? Is one hour of my working time worth more than one hour of a fisherman's working time? It is not God who has judged so, and given me twenty kroner each time he gives a fisherman one krone. It is I who, each time Italy or Portugal pays me the net sum of 40 kroner, pay the twenty fisherman one krone each and keep twenty for myself. And if I have given as much work of my own to the production as any one fisherman, I have not given as much work to it as the twenty taken together. I do not feel entitled to twenty times as much, or even ten times as much. Twice as much, yes, and perhaps even three, four or five times as much. But on what grounds?

I do not think that any of the fishermen of this village, or any other that I know, would be able to do my work. Some of them would be able to do the processing part of it, but none of them would be able to do the business part of it. And the few with a talent for that would require several years of apprenticeship before they could manage as well. But then I could not do their work either, not without several years of apprenticeship.

One hour of a master carpenter's working time is worth more than one hour of the carpenter's apprentice's working time, but that is because the master accomplishes more in one hour than his apprentice. How do I compare what I accomplish with what a fisherman accomplishes over the same time? And yet, have I not already made that comparison and found that I accomplish twenty times as much? I have not.

I have just been brought up in this form of life, and my station was that of the merchant's eldest son and the heir to this merchant house. So why do I question it now?

I know why he questions it now, and so does he. One of the very best of the fishermen, Isak, had been his classmate at the village school. Isak was the best of that class and he had often helped him with his homework. Four days ago Isak had slipped on the deck and hit the hatchway very hard with his back. He could not walk after that, and the doctor had told him that if he did not have an operation, he would not be able to fish any more. He had not seen Isak after the accident, but two days ago he met Judith, Isak's wife, on the road. She had spoken to him: 'Isak is as good a man as you are and as hard-working. Why is it that he cannot afford an operation that would be nothing to you?' That shattered him.

This merchant does not skew any steelyards. He is honest and he is thoughtful. But if he wants to better the conditions for the fishermen of his village, there is no simple course of action at his disposal. He can let the fishermen have free use of his wharf. He can cut down on a fisherman's debt if he is in real trouble, lend him some interest-free money if he needs an operation, help a fisherman's particularly gifted son or daughter to get some more education than the village school can offer, etc. He can give a silver font or a new organ to the chapel, etc. Quite a few fish merchants were quite generous in that way, even some of the dishonest ones. ('His soul was both black and white,' Hamsun wrote about one of them.) But of course, earning only ten times as much as a fisherman, there would still be room for generosity, when the situation called for it.

Our honest and thoughtful merchant was also generous, and he did give Isak that interest-free loan with no other security than Isak's skill and honesty, and the likelihood of a successful operation. But Judith's question, which was now also his own, remained unanswered.

He himself would have been willing to add to the price that he gave the fishermen – five øre more per kilo, say. With 19 øre per kilo instead of 14, and subtracting four øre for expenses, the fishermen would receive 15 øre net per kilo instead of ten øre net. And a season that gave him 2000 kroner net, with 14 øre, would give him 3000 kroner net, with 19 øre, that is, 50% more in net income. But with 19 øre per kilo, his own earnings would be reduced from 40 000 kroner

to 20 000 kroner. That is a big cut, though it would still make him earn six times as much as any fisherman. He might be willing to go through with it, but of course he couldn't do it. It would bring him into serious trouble with the other fish merchants, and he did need their friendly cooperation from time to time. But one day a simple truth struck him:

> We are not only fish merchants, we are also general store merchants, almost all of us. If we add five øre to the price we give the fishermen, our income as fish merchants will be halved. But with 50% more money to buy for, most fishermen will buy 50% more, and they will buy almost all of it from us. So half of what we lose as fish merchants we get back as general store merchants. We shall pass from wealthy to rich, but the fishermen will pass from poor to well off.

He spoke to a few of the other fish merchants about it. They said that they did not trust the second half of his argument, that half of what they lost in the fish trade would come back to the general store. 'It is a good and pious piece of thinking', they said, not without irony, 'but we recommend that you keep it to yourself'. Which he did, for a few more years.

For several centuries the existing order of things seems to have been accepted as the natural order of things, among merchants and fishermen alike. In the twenties several fishermen, and a few fish merchants as well, began to question that order. The idea of a fair price, or of a more fair price, came up from time to time, and often enough to make the fish merchants, most of them, say that there is no such thing as a fair price. There is the price that the market will pay, and that's it.

HUSØY, NORDØY AND ØYA

There are three merchant houses on my map, one on each of three islands, Husøy, Nordøy and Øya. *Husøy* means the island with the houses, *Øya* means the (one and only) island and *Nordøy* means the island to the north.

I ask the logicians to look at the map and reflect on those names. Øya, for example, is not the one and only island, not even in that fjord. So the question is: Under what description is that island the one and only? How must the world, or the

form of life, of that fjord be understood to give a good point to that description?

There is no competition between the three merchant houses, nor could there be, with the fishing boats making seven to nine knots, in the late twenties and early thirties. The fishermen landing their catches in Husøy are those who live there, or on a close neighbouring island. And the same goes for Nordøy, which had no merchant house of its own before the advent, in the fifties, say, of the larger, engine-driven fishing boats, of 60 foot or more. A look at the map explains why (if you remember that in the winter a storm may rise quite suddenly, and if you know that a boat of less than 60 foot cannot safely ride it off).

Øya offers a strange sight, at least to present-day townspeople. There is a church there and a well-assorted general store, but no people beyond the few needed to tend to the church and the merchant house. Why place a church and a merchant house on an otherwise uninhabited island? A look at the map explains why (together with the knowledge that all travelling is by boat).

The people of Husøy, all of them, will buy almost all of what they buy from the Husøy general store, which is owned by its fish merchant. Since all the fishermen of Husøy also deliver all their catches to him, his clients will be the people of Husøy, and of a few close neighbouring islands, and no other. A look at the map will again explain why.

With fishing boats making 40 knots, the ties between the fishermen and the local merchant would be broken. But no such fishing boats exist, and had they existed, there might not have been such settlements in the first place. Don't say that boats or engines do not shape a form of life. Or that roads and cars don't.

Most of the fishermen living more than one hour away from Husøy, or from Øya, will process the fish themselves, drying it on their own drying racks. It will then be collected by the merchant in the summer.

There are some twenty boats landing their catches at *Øya*, and the typical Skogsfjord fishing boat is 24 foot and run by one man. There are twentyfive boats delivering at *Husøy*; twelve boats fishing at the edge and thirteen in the inner waters, inside the outermost holms. The typical edge fishing

boat, at Husøy, is a 40-foot netboat manned by four fishermen, for example the skipper, two sons of his and nephew. The inner water boat is again a 24-foot boat, run by one man, or by two if the fishing is very good. It is at *Nordøy* that we find the large coastal fishing boats, ten 60-foot boats, manned by six or seven men, and two 70-foot boats, manned likewise. All six or seven of them are fishermen, but in addition to one being the skipper, there is also one responsible for the good working of the engine, and one cook. Then there are eight or nine boats between 24 foot and 32 foot, fishing close to the Nordøy group of islands.

In the twenties and thirties, and also in the forties and fifties, most fishermen at Husøy, and all from Skogsfjord, spoke of themselves as fishermen and farmers. The scale of their farms would make 'crofter' a better word, except that they owned the land they farmed.

The real farmers were the womenfolk, but it was for the men to provide most of the winter fodder for the cows and the sheep, to take their boats into Skogsfjord for a few summer days to cut firewood, in the commons, and enough to last till next autumn, and to keep the different sheds and houses of the farm in good order, together with the fences and the boathouse. All this was summer work, most of it for July and August, and they did not fish much during that time.

From the late fifties, most of the Nordøy fishermen, those fishing from 60- or 70-foot boats, made a point of being fishermen, that only, and not also farmers.

A couple of sociologists who visited both Husøy and Nordøy in the late fifties reported that the Nordøy fishermen were more modern in their thinking than the Husøy fishermen, and also more thrifty. They were more modern because they saw the necessity, for economic progress, of a stronger division of labour than what was traditional along the coast, and also the necessity of shedding most of their dependence on their own farm work in order to give more scope to money economy. And the Nordøy fishermen were more thrifty than the Husøy fishermen because they had much larger boats, which also enabled them to venture much further out at sea.

That is what Heidegger would have called 'weltloses Denken': the sociologists have tried, and try, to understand people without trying to understand the world in which they

do whatever they do. (I am not sure that the concept of the world within which we act, and with respect to which we act, is a concept within sociology – or within psychology or within analytical philosophy of action, for that matter.) To the Husøy and Nordøy fishermen, the location of the edge is fundamental to that world. A Husøy fisherman does not need a 60-foot boat to fish safely at the Husøy edge, whereas a Nordøy fisherman cannot fish safely at the Nordøy edge with a boat of less than 60 feet. It is the distance to the edge, and the character of the waters between harbour and edge, that determine what size of boat you need. But a 60-foot boat costs more than twice as much as a 40-foot boat. So the Nordøy skipper has a heavy loan to pay back. He cannot afford to let his boat be moored up for the greater part of the summer, when there is halibut to be caught at the great banks, and his boat is large enough for bank fishing, in the summer. There is no money in farming and a great deal of money in halibut. So the 60-foot boat fishes all year round, at least until it has been paid down. There can be no more farming than what the wife and children can cope with without his help. And so his household is already deeply involved in money economy.

It all follows from the distance to the edge and the character of the waters.

FISHING FROM HUSØY, 1932

Skarven (The Cormorant) is a 40-foot netboat, manned by four men: the skipper, who is also the owner, one younger brother of his, one of the skipper's sons, and one of the skipper's uncles. The skipper's brother and his uncle both own their own 24-foot boat, but they always join *Skarven* for the winter fishing after skrei. It is a Husøy boat and, making eight knots, it takes two hours for *Skarven* to reach the edge.

Working on a 40-foot netboat in the early thirties is not very different from working on a 40-foot netboat in the sixties, except that the hampen nets of the thirties are a great deal heavier than the nylon nets of the sixties. But with a strong winch to haul the net, that difference does not make all that difference to hauling it. The difference that makes a difference is that in the thirties, and at all times before that, it

is the merchant that sets the price of the skrei that the boats land. And since the Husøy fishermen also have their houses and their farms there, and selling fish to the Husøy merchant is the only way of making money, he may set a low price without much risk. What the fishermen could do, would be to build their own drying racks, hang their own fish themselves, and then sell the stockfish to someone else. But it would be difficult for them to find someone else to sell to, if he had a word with his colleagues in the neighbouring fishing villages. Besides, most fishermen were in debt to him, through the general store, and should they be impudent enough not to sell their catches to him, he would just ask them to settle their debts immediately. He was safe.

Let us say that fourteen øre per kilo skrei is, not a fair price, but a price that the Husøy fishermen have learnt to accept. For three weeks, since the beginning of January, *Skarven* and the other boats fishing on the edge have landed an average of 1200 kilo skrei each day, and that is good fishing. The price has been fourteen øre per kilo. Both the fishermen and the merchant expect the fishing to stay good, and the fishermen discuss between them when the price will be lowered and by how much. At the first delivery on the first day in the fourth week, the skipper is told that the price has been lowered to twelve øre per kilo. The skipper goes on with his work, hoisting boxes of wetfish on to the quay deck, saying nothing. The merchant explains (and the skipper knows what he will be saying, word for word):

> With all the fish coming in, I shall not be able to sell it all if I do not lower the price. If I must lower the price that I ask of Italy or Portugal, I must lower the price that I give you. Even twelve øre may be too high. Don't forget that I have already bought a great deal from you at fourteen øre.

The skipper nods lightly to say that he has heard, and the merchant vanishes into the inner regions of his plant. He will say the same to the skipper of *Skarven*, and then leave it to the two of them to let the word go round. Which there is no need to. It is an age-old ritual that every Husøy fisherman has known since he was six or seven.

And what is there to say? The reasoning looks right, though, as the skipper of *Skarven* once remarked, it would be as right

had the merchant started off with 28 øre, and then lowered it to 26 or 24 øre. Why did he always start off with fourteen øre, or thereabouts? They did not know the answer to that, and none of them knew who it was in Portugal or Italy that bought their fish, or what prices they paid.

What they all knew was that in a couple of weeks, if the fishing stayed good, the merchant would lower the price again, and probably to ten øre.

But for the time being, it was twelve øre. One day, when there was a storm to make them stay ashore, the skippers met to discuss whether they should add a few nets to each of their chains of nets. Their reasoning was simple: 1200 kilos at 14 øre per kilo makes 168 kroner, but so does 1400 kilos at 12 øre per kilo. If each boat added two nets to each of its three chains, that might well give them 1400 kilos, and perhaps more. 'What can we do when the price is lowered, but to work harder?' But the skipper of *Skarven* warned against that:

> In two weeks' time the merchant will tell us that he cannot afford to pay more than ten øre. If we now begin to land more, he will switch to ten øre in a few days and we shall only have worked harder to no avail.

The skippers agreed to go on with the same number of nets. And they did not want to gamble on reducing the number of nets, 'to scare the merchant back to fourteen øre', as one of them had suggested.

One week later the merchant lowered the price to ten øre, and one week after that to eight øre. Most of the fishermen saw no point in saying anything, but the skipper of *Skarven* protested at eight øre. To which the merchant just remarked: 'You are of course free to sell to the highest bidder'.

That remark angered the skipper and he called it an insult. Why? If the answer is not already clear, a close look at the terrain and at *Skarven*'s working day will make it so.

SKARVEN'S WORKING DAY, WINTER 1932

Because of the strong and shifting currents along the Husøy edge, the netboats fishing there want to keep an eye on the nets between setting and hauling. So they don't set their nets

in the evening, leaving them to fish during the night, as most other fishing villages do. When a Husøy netboat has reached the edge, early in the morning, its working day therefore begins with the setting of its three chains of nets.

Remember that the winter fishing for skrei, from Husøy, lasts from early January to late March. Remember also that, in Troms, the time of darkness, when the sun does not rise above the horizon, lasts from early December til late January.

When *Skarven* leaves harbour at around five o'clock in the morning of an early January day, it is pitch dark, and so it is when it reaches the edge about seven o'clock, and around eight when it has set its three chains of nets. *Skarven* then lies in waiting for two hours, say, which gives its men time to have breakfast and a short nap. At around ten, it is still dark, *Skarven* begins to haul the first chain of nets, which has been fishing since around seven o'clock. When hauling, there is one man at the winch, one in the wheelhouse, and two to work the skrei loose from the net, and bleed it. When you have hauled the first chain, that takes about an hour, you prepare it for setting again, and set it, and that takes another half hour. So it is around 11.30 and a bleak twilight when you move to repeat that operation for the second chain, which has been fishing since around 7.30, and close to 15.00 and black darkness when you have completed that operation for all three chains. After a short meal, you begin to haul the second setting of your first chain, say around 15.30. That chain has now been fishing since 11.30, that is for four hours. And the same for the other two, when you come to them, when you have found them, in the darkness. Each hauling takes about an hour, and this time there is no setting.

At about 18.30 *Skarven* heads for harbour, to deliver its catch at the fish plant there. On the way in, there is time for a meal and for preparing the nets for setting next day. The first boxes of wetfish are hoisted on to the quay deck at around 20.30. What is called 'the delivery' has begun. And that may take two hours.

Just inside the wide and open door facing the quay deck there is a gutting table, so oriented that one of its short ends points to the door opening, and the other pointing inwards. Close to its inner short end there is a balance, which, in the early thirties, certainly is a steelyard, and, at the end of the

row, a wash basin. When the first boxes of wetfish are being hauled on to the quay deck, by the skipper, say, operating the quay winch, two of *Skarven*'s fishermen climb up on the deck, place themselves along the gutting table, and start working again. The skipper will join them in a little while, together with the fisherman that assisted him in the hauling.

The gutting consists of taking out the roe and the liver, together with the rest of the entrails, and cutting off the heads of the skrei. There are two barrels at each side of the gutting table, one for the roe and one for the liver. On each side there is also a third container, a large box for the heads. As the gutting proceeds, one of the two fishermen at the inner end of the gutting table will leave it, from time to time, to shove a fair portion of the gutted fish into the steelyard pan, for it to be weighed.

It is only after each portion has been weighed, by the merchant's foreman, and its weight taken down, that the plant workers enter the scene, to wash the gutted fish and to take the fish away, by wheelbarrows, to be prepared for hanging, on the drying rocks, or for salting.[2]

There are also children in the gutting, boys and girls from ten to fourteen, and two to four of them at a time. They are the tongue cutters, each equipped with a wooden box with a vertical spike fastened on to it. He or she picks up the head of a skrei from the heap of heads and hooks it on to the spike so that the mouth opens. With a swift cut the tongue falls into the box and the head is thrown into another heap. After a couple of hours the box may be full of cod's tongues. Cod's tongues are delicatessen and a box full of them is well paid. It is not the same children that are at work every day, or during one day. They also have schoolwork to attend to. Even so, each tongue cutter may earn enough during a season to buy a bicycle and a gramophone, in the thirties, or an outboard motor, etc. (I have not heard of a time when the children tongue cutters were not there, and they are still at work, in 1994).

Why does a boat, or its fishermen, give away some of its saleable goods to children? I don't know, but it is always to children and never to anyone not a child. When the catches are good and the working day hard, the fishermen may well want to call it a day when the gutting has been done.

But there are also slack periods, weeks of it, where the catches are small and the gutting is quickly done. That is when the fishermen both have the time to cut the tongues themselves and the need for every krone they can make. But they give the tongues away, for the children to cut and sell. Why? According to economic theory, this is shrieking irrationality. That is to say, there is no answer to it. It is just another intrusion of chaos, as it is called nowadays when a slice of the world does not fit our theory of it and cannot be made to fit by adding another axiom to the theory (which is no easy matter).

In Husøy, the fishermen will be the fathers, brothers, uncles or neighbours of the tongue-cutters. If the fathers, the money that the tongue-cutter earn enters the same household as that of the fisherman giver. And we can see a number of non-economic reasons why a father should see a good point in letting his son or daughter make some of the money that he could easily have made himself. But what about it when the fisherman giver is the breadwinner of another household, even if he is an uncle or a close neighbour?

And what about Lofoten, where there is the same strong tradition and where most of the fishermen are foreigners to whatever village they fish from?

There is no *homo economicus* explanation of this tradition. Nor is it a case of taking responsibility for the education of your own children, or of your little brother or sister, or of your nephew or niece, etc. I do not know how to understand it.

If we conceive of its main point as educational, we must also conceive of the educator as being the whole community of coastal fishermen fishing for skrei, the particular community of which exists for the three winter months of skrei fishing, distributed over some hundred fishing villages, from Lofoten to Western Finnmark. That community will see to it that, for whatever boat that is delivering at whatever plant, if a child enters that plant asking for tongues to cut, the fishermen of that boat will say, 'You just go ahead', or something to that effect – and with the understanding that the invitation also extends to whichever child comes in next. The one fisherman that says 'go ahead' does so on behalf of his boat, or its body of fishermen, but no boat will deny a child the right to cut tongues and sell them. Whatever fisherman, speaking on behalf of whatever boat, speaks on behalf of the whole community of skrei fishermen. So there is a sense in which the community exists, or is operative, within each of its several individuals. In that sense the ethos of a community has an existence akin to language.

However we try to understand the giving of tongues, it seems to be something between the community of skrei fishermen and the children of the fishing villages, rather than between this or that fisherman and this or that child. But it may well have little to do with educating the children, bringing them into the working life of a fishing village, even though it

does that. Perhaps it should rather be understood as an offering or thanksgiving, in some religious sense of that term, where the children represent some worldy or other-worldy recipient of it. What the fishermen give in offering, then, is a small but delicate portion of their harvest.

Or perhaps it is not a case of giving at all, but rather of letting, in the sense of not hindering. Fishing for skrei with nets, or with longlines, is as close to hunting as it is to harvesting. And hunting communities have their ways of paying respect to the animals that they kill. There is very little about the cod to liken it to human beings, except its tongue. So not cutting its tongue may be the one natural way for the fisherman to show his respect for this costly fish. Only the halibut is more costly, but it is the skrei, not the halibut, that the fisherman depends on for his livelihood. If the fisherman shows his respect by not cutting, he cannot cut, but he shows no disrespect if others do it. By letting the children do it, and letting them sell it to keep all of their earnings to themselves, the fisherman dissociates himself from the tongue cutting. And so the skrei mother, the god of the skrei, or whoever, who may well exist even if he or she has no existence as an articulate concept or character, will not punish him by guiding the skrei away from his nets. And the children are outside this particular moral realm.

How do I find out which, if any, of my three different interpretations is the true one, or fits the soul of this particular community? I don't think asking any one fisherman, or fifty of them, will do. Most fisherman just do it because that is how it is done. And if they have thoughts about it, those thoughts will be, in most cases, just theories, not of the soul of what they are doing. But there may be a few with a deep understanding of this tradition, a few old fishermen perhaps, and perhaps a few young ones as well. I have not met them as yet, or I have not discovered that I have. But I still expect to meet a few and to be told their stories about it. I do not expect their stories to be so many versions of one and the same story. Whatever the story, it must make sense of two things: Fishermen never cut the tongues. Children do, and only children do. But shall I recognize a true and deep story, if it is told me? I am a townsman, lacking in the experiences and the sensibilities of those whose life has been with the sea, and with fishing there.

However we understand this particular practice, the case of the children tongue cutters touches one of the nerves of this form of life – the form of life of coastal fishing.

Since it was after six weeks of fishing that the merchant lowered the price the third time, to eight øre per kilo, it must have been on a Monday in the middle of February. At that time and at that place, the sun rises around eight in the

morning and sets around three in the afternoon. So the last glimmering of twilight has gone when *Skarven* comes in to deliver, at about eight o'clock. The merchant is standing on the quay deck, and the skipper knows well the occasion for his rare presence. Up on the deck, the skipper gives him a nod and prepares the quay winch for hoisting: 'From today, the price is 8 øre.'

The skipper goes on with his work: 'Yes, I know, with all this fish coming in...'

There is mocking in it. 'You are, of course, free to sell to the highest bidder.'

The skipper's preparations come to an abrupt halt, and he turns to the merchant: 'I call that adding insult to injury.'

The merchant says nothing and leaves the quay. He has informed the skipper of *Skarven* about his decision and he has paid him the respect of telling him himself, instead of letting his foreman bring the message. The skipper goes on with his work and two of the *Skarven* men appear on the deck to take their places along the gutting table, etc. *Skarven* is delivering.

We can take it that the skipper of *Skarven* stands in no debt to the general store, and also that none of the other three do. Otherwise the merchant would not just have said that they were free to sell to the highest bidder. He would have added: 'after you have settled your debts with me', adding also to the insult. (The minutiae of a mode of production.)

But what is the insult?

The nearest fish plant from Husøy is Øya. It takes four hours to get there, four hours to get back, and two hours to deliver, if the Øya merchant will accept a delivery between 0.30 and 2.30 in the night. That would bring *Skarven* back at Husøy at 6.30 in the morning, an hour and a half after it should be heading towards the edge. The merchant knows all this, of course, and the fishermen know that he knows.

'You are, of course, free to sell to the highest bidder'.

Had an economist said that, standing there, it would have been a remark out in the air, just the quoting of some axiom or theorem of economy. If not, had the economist been speaking to the situation, he would just have been revealing his deep ignorance of that very situation. But coming from

the merchant, that remark is an insult, or else a joke in bad taste.

At around 23.00 hours, the *Skarven* fishermen walk into their kitchens. The children are all asleep, as they were in the morning. Their wives are also asleep, but perhaps to be woken up gently, if the fishermen themselves are not too tired even to think of it. And at 4.30 it is time to get into the clothes again.

The Husøy fishermen do not sell to the highest bidder. There are no bidders, only one merchant telling them what he will pay. I take it there is a sense in which the merchant, when he sells his klipfish to Portugal or his stockfish to Italy, sells to the highest bidder. He is operating within a market. The Husøy fishermen, the Nordøy fishermen, etc. are not. There is no market for them to operate in. Nor could there be, with that terrain, such boats, etc. With boats making from six to ten knots, the fishermen must live close to the fishing grounds, and, buying wetfish to process it, the merchant must live where the fishermen live. And so on. (Absentee ownership is ruled out by tradition and, when it comes to owning a farm or a fishing boat, also by law.)

What can the fishermen do to better their lot? I shall end this story by telling what they did do, making a rich and long story simple and short.

But first a few words about the language of this chapter. When I speak about the nets fishing, the fishing boat hauling the nets, delivering the day's catch, etc., I speak the language of the coast. Don't say that nets, boats, etc., being material objects, cannot do anything. Ask instead why nets are said to fish, boats to haul, be underway, etc. *Havørn* (Sea Eagle) is the name of a 40-foot netboat. When we say that *Havørn* is hauling, it is not that material object, apart from its men, that we speak of. Nor is it the men, apart from their boat, that we speak of. Apart from their boat, they can do nothing of the sort. When we speak of *Havørn* hauling the nets, or setting them, we speak of the agent that is the union of the boat and its men. When *Havørn* has been moored, after the day's work, it is that material object that rides in the buoy (and here we don't imply that it is doing anything, viz. riding, only that its movements are of a certain pattern). When *Havørn* is being

varnished, it is that wooden structure that is being varnished. And so on. But there is also this, that if the four fishermen that make up its complement are seated around a table in the village coffee house, we may say that there is *Havørn*, at the corner table. It is a practical way of speaking. But perhaps it is more than that. A man's legs do not perhaps belong essentially to his talking body, but they do belong essentially to his walking body. And so *Havørn*, that wooden hull with its engine, wheelhouse, winch, hold, etc., belongs essentially to that union of the boat and its men, each in his proper place, which is the only agent that can haul the nets, set them again, etc. (Don't the pair of skis belong essentially to the skier skiing? When the skier makes a Telemark turn, the skis are certainly in it. Don't take it as settled that there can be no other agent than that of a single, toolless individual, or that there can be no other agent's body than that of a single, naked, and toolless human being).

REMAKING THE FORM OF LIFE OF COASTAL FISHING

In 1926 Norway's Fishermen's Union was formed, connecting various district unions that had existed for some time. The question of prices was on the agenda from day one, but the union made little headway with it. In 1935 the Labour Party was strong enough in the Storting to form a stable government. But the Labour government took no initiative in *this* price question. The Labour Party's vision was that of a thoroughly industrialized Norway, with the present and future industrial workers as the heroes. The farmers and the fishermen were hardly noticed, or else looked upon as so many obstacles to that vision. But the Labour members of the Storting could be approached. In fact, several of them were coastal fishermen from Northern Norway.

In 1936, before the great autumn fishery for cod and haddock outside the town of Vardø, and some neighbouring fishing villages in Eastern Finnmark, the Vardø fish merchants made an agreement with each other to pay the same price to the fishermen, and they made an agreement with the Vardø fishermen to pay that same price for the whole season of the autumn fishery. And the fishermen promised not to sell to

anyone below the agreed price. The price was twelve øre per kilo, which, as prices went in those days, was a good price for cod that wasn't skrei. The two agreements were connected. Two or three merchants could not pay a good price if they did not all pay that price. If one or two of them bought at a lower price from the fishermen, they could also sell at a lower price in Italy, Spain, Portugal, etc., and so take buyers from the others.

But the autumn fishery outside Vardø can be a very big thing, and so it was in 1936, with hundreds of fishing boats coming to Vardø from other places, and also several merchants with their barges, to buy fish and to salt it and store inside the holds of the large hulls. The outside merchants and the outside fishermen had no agreement with the Vardø merchants or the Vardø fishermen. The outside merchants paid only nine or ten øre per kilo, and when the season ended, they all returned to their home places with their barges full.

Why did so many fishermen sell their catches to the lowest bidders? I do not know the answer, but I can think of one.

One picture of *bidding* is this: I am at the market place with one object to sell. There are two buyers standing before me. The one says: I pay you 100 kroner for that. The other says: I pay you 110 kroner for that. There are no other buyers in sight and I sell to the highest bidder. That picture may lie at the root of our concept of a market, localized or not. It fits a great many situations, but not the situation in Vardø harbour in the autumn 1936, or 1937.

There are several hundred boats coming into Vardø harbour to deliver, in the afternoon. It takes time to deliver, and soon there will be a queue of boats before each plant, waiting to deliver. When the boats coming in find that there may be two hours' waiting before they can begin to deliver, they may well choose to sell to one of the barges, where they are paid less but where also there is no waiting. The fishermen have already had a long day. They are tired and long for their berths.

What the Vardø fishermen and the Vardø merchants had agreed to was that all the fishermen in the autumn fishery should get the same price, and a good price. And that agreement had turned out not to work.

But both parties to the agreement had learnt their lesson. In April 1937 they made a second, identical agreement about

the autumn fishery, with the added clause that, if the agreement received the protection of law, the price per kilo would be raised from twelve øre to fifteen øre. They also added a great deal of footwork, and oarwork, in other fishing towns and villages along the coast of Northern Norway.

Having signed the April agreement, the two parties sent a joint telegram to the Ministry of Trade, explaining also that if the protection of law was not given, it would be difficult to uphold the agreement or to enter into any such agreement in the future.

There must have been a few of my honest and thoughtful merchants among the Vardø merchants. But also the fish merchants had formed an export organization a few years earlier, to see to it that they did not underbid each other on the Italian, Spanish, etc., markets. As a consequence their own economy was more solid than before.

The Ministry was slow to act.

On 3 September, in the first week of the autumn fishery, the fishermen in Vardø harbour met to make the ministry act. The meeting sent a telegram to the ministry saying that if no promise of protection by law was given before 11 September, they would all stop fishing from that date until such promise was given. On 9 September the ministry sent a telegram to this effect: 'Do not stop fishing. The ministry will look into the matter.' The fishermen replied: 'Not good enough.' And on the 11th no boat left harbour to fish, not from Vardø and not from any of the neighbouring villages.

The ministry acted. By 14 September it, or the government, had a law committee ready, to work on the question of the protection by law of such agreements, and to produce a law text to be placed before the Storting.

The committee concluded that such protection could be given, and by 21 September the law text was ready to embark on its journey to the Storting. The Vardø fishermen learnt about the text the day before, and on the 21st they resumed their fishing. On 12 November, the Storting passed an interim law to protect such agreements as that between the Finnmark fishermen and the Finnmark merchants, making it illegal to sell or to buy at a price below the one agreed upon.

The coastal fishermen had made themselves visible before the Labour government and the Labour Party.

On 18 June 1938 the Storting passed a law to the effect that (1) the price that the merchants were to pay to the fishermen per kilo of fish should be determined in advance of whatever fishery; (2) that price should be determined through negotiations between representatives of the fishermen and representatives of the merchants, where (3) those negotiations should take as their point of departure the prices that the market (Italy, Spain, etc.) was likely to pay the merchants; (4) if the negotiations were to break down, the representatives of the fishermen were to determine the prices.

That is how the question of a fair price, or of a fair share, was dealt with: not through any painstaking analysis, philosophical-cum-economic-cum-anthropological-cum-moral-etc., of how to compare the relative contribution of fisherman and merchant to the final result, the price that the Italian etc. importers paid, but through establishing a certain procedure for determining the price – a procedure that both parties could accept as a fair procedure (or, perhaps closer to truth: a procedure that the Storting, the fishermen, and enough of the merchants, could accept as a fair procedure).

I have now told my story of how, and why, our coastal fishermen, assisted by several honest and thoughtful fish merchants, worked to remake the world of coastal fishing in Northern Norway – or that form of life.

The law of 18 June 1938 is called 'Råfiskloven', where 'råfisk' is the raw or fresh fish, or the wetfish, that the fisherman sells to the fish merchant. Our coastal fishermen speak of Råfiskloven as their own Magna Carta.

Before 1938 our fishermen were poor people, most of them, and, with some exceptions, they appeared before the merchant cap in hand. After 1938 most of our fishermen have been well off, and, with some exceptions, they speak to the merchants as to their equals.

Before 1938 most of our fish merchants were rich people. After 1938 most of them were still rich, but not stupendously so. Before 1938 the honest and thoughtful fish merchants would see themselves as being in a false position. After 1938 the same merchants would find themselves in a more true position.

SOME LAST REMARKS

1. My story about coastal fishing in Northern Norway before 1938 is perhaps rich enough to make it intelligible why Råfiskloven, or something like it, was called for. It also explains, I think, why our coastal fishermen speak about Råfiskloven as their own Magna Carta. But if the identity of a law, that is, what makes it *that* law, lies in the practising of it, then I have said very little about it. You could say that I have said nothing about it, nothing whatsoever. My only reason for not saying that, is that it lies deep in Norwegian legal practice, when a court is to interpret a given law, to place considerable weight on its prehistory, that is, on the occasion for its making.

What I have written is really only a preface to the study of Råfiskloven, that is, the study of how it has been implemented by Råfisklaget, the institution that was created to implement it, of the courts' practising of it when conflicting interpretations were brought before the court, and of how the practising of that law, by Råfisklaget and by the courts, has worked to transform the economic and moral situation within our coastal communities.

To explain a law is to explain its moral and practical point. In the case of Råfiskloven, that requires that we describe the situation that called for it, that is, that we describe it so as to make the reader recognize both the particular conflict built into that situation and how Råfiskloven was a way of solving it. That in turn requires that we describe the form of life, and in particular the form of working life, within which that situation was brought about, as that situation. And that requires that we describe the terrain that this form of working life is in answer to. (That terrain, together with a coastal fishing boat not making more than ten knots, also explains how that particular form of exploitation of the fishermen by the fish merchants could be brought about. Råfiskloven was perhaps the only answer to it, within that terrain.)

2. On page 458 I speak about the fishermen's debts to the fish merchant. But there is also, throughout the centuries, the fish merchant's debts to the fishermen. The fishermen deliver their daily catches of skrei to the fish merchant from early January to late March, but the fish merchant has no stockfish

or klipfish to sell, to Italy, Portugal, etc., before June or July. So he has no money to pay the fishermen before he himself has been paid, in August, say. Through most of the centuries of skrei fishing for export, there were no banks where the fish merchant could raise loans to pay the fishermen before he himself was paid. And when the banks were there, only a little more than a hundred years ago, along the northern coast, the fish merchant did not want to raise such loans, as the interests that he would then have to pay would detract from his own earnings. But even if the fishermen received no payment, in money, before August, they could be said to be paid a little every time they supplied themselves with useful articles from the general store. We could speak of the merchant house, the fish processing plant together with the general store, as a naturalia bank for the fishermen's households, where each household's ledger worked as that household's bank account. So, not being paid before August need not have bothered the fishermen a great deal, as long as they were also farmers, and until the thirties almost all of them were farmers, and as long as the general store could supply them with most of the articles that they could not supply themselves, from their fishing and farming.

3. When there are several fish merchants buying, as in Vardø harbour in the autumn of 1936, and a fishing boat sells its catch to the one who pays the least, then it sells to the lowest bidder. But those who sell to the lowest bidder, do not, I take it, sell to the lowest bidder because he is the lowest bidder. In Vardø harbour in autumn 1936 the lowest bidder will be one of the barges, but that barge will also be the one with shortest queue of boats waiting to sell, and it will be the one with the shortest queue precisely because it is the lowest bidder. The conclusion is not that the boats, or their fishermen, will sell to the highest bidder after all, but that they will do so unless there are considerations to the contrary, such as the fishermen being very tired and longing for their berths. The general formula, for coastal fishermen, is: A fisherman will sell to the highest bidder, *ceteris paribus*.

If you do not know the world of coastal fishing well, recognizing what situation delivering in Vardø harbour is, during the autumn fisheries in the thirties, recognizing what a world Husøy is, during the winter fisheries of 1932, etc., then there is

no telling in advance what the *ceteris paribus* clause may hide, of non-economic considerations, intrusions of chaos, etc.

The Vardø harbour case is not, perhaps, difficult to handle. You could add *cost of transport* to your calculations, counting waiting time as transport, and that may be all there is to it, abstractly. But with the Husøy case, filling in the *ceteris paribus* clause with my description of the Husøy world will make nonsense of the very theorem (the seller will sell to the highest bidder) whose truth that clause is there to secure. If securing the theorem is the point – and it is a simple and beautiful theorem, isn't it – then it might do to introduce the concept of a *monopoly*, explaining that the theorem is a theorem only within a model where there are at least two buyers, where the two are, in some difficult sense, independent of each other. That is not a *ceteris paribus* move. That is limiting the domain of the model.

What we need, to understand the Husøy case, is not a refinement of economic models, but a good understanding of the Husøy world, of what settlement it is in what terrain, of the traditions and the ethos of the place, etc. That is, we need a Wittgenstein-cum-Heidegger-cum-Marx description of the Husøy world. That will introduce us to the speculations of that character, the honest and thoughtful merchant. And to Råfiskloven.

Our tradition of coastal fishing is a costly tradition, sitting beautifully in its terrain, and our fishing villages are fine places for children to grow up, close to nature and close to the working life of their parents and their neighbours. Don't let the free market people destroy it with their abstract dogmas. Abstract capitalist dogmas are no less destructive of the thriving of communities and individuals than abstract communist ones.

4. This study is based on my own experiences from the coast, first as a child and later as a teacher of philosophy at a coastal university. But there is also some reading behind it. Most of what I know about the Vardø events, and about the responses of our government to those events, I have learnt from Pål Christensen and Abraham Hallenstvedt: *På første hånd*, Norges Råfisklag, 1990. Erik Rakoczy of Norges Råfisklag made me aware of the fish merchants' debts to the fishermen. Erik Rakoczy does not think that my honest and thoughtful

fish merchant is a very likely character, and he should know. But he also named one or two that might have been like that, and that is enough for me. What understanding I have of netfishing on the edge, I owe to Kjell Roald Hansen, the skipper of the 80-foot netboat *Skagøysund*, of Sommarøy.

NOTES

1. The edge, or stretches of what is now identified as the edge, may well have been discovered several times, and under several descriptions, more than a thousand years ago, but with no consequence to our coastal communities beyond adding to the repertoire of stories about the wonders of the far out sea. As long as most fishing was for supplying the household with food, food that could be stocked, a discovery of the edge would be of no practical consequence. Whenever it was first discovered, with or without consequence, it is likely that it was by fishermen from what is now the county of Troms, since there is where the edge makes a couple of inward bends. And to make sure that its discovery would be of practical consequence to the coastal communities, I place it as late as two hundred years ago, though it may well have been discovered, with consequence, several centuries earlier. I do not know that any historian of our fisheries have tried to investigate this matter. As far as the crafts go, the edge may well have been discovered more than a thousand years ago. And the Lofoten fisheries, which is fishing for trade, were well established around the year 1100.
2. I am not sure why there is this division of labour. Why don't the fishermen just deliver their catch, whole, and leave it to the merchant's workers to gut it, to sort the roe and the liver, etc.? Since both parties accept this order of things, there must be a reason for the merchant to accept, and a reason for the fishermen to do so. And both reasons may be quite practical.

   Take the merchant first. Say the first to deliver are three one-man boats, one after the other. Then there is a pause for close to an hour before the next one-man boat comes to deliver. And then another pause before the first four-man boat comes in, with a much larger catch, etc. And there is no boat delivering before 16.00, say. How many workers, men or women, should the plant hire for the gutting, from 16.00 to 24.00? With four, there might be long periods of being idle. With two, many boats might have to wait a long time for their turn to deliver. With each boat gutting its own catch, there will always be the right number of people working on it. And when there is a pause in the delivery, there is no one whose pause it is, and so no one to pay, or not to pay, for it.

This division of labour may be a practical solution to the merchant's practical problem. But it certainly makes for long working days for the fishermen. Why do they accept it? The price per kilo skrei is the price per kilo gutted skrei, and there are separate prices for the roe and the liver, both per litre. So what the whole delivery measures, in kilos of skrei, litres of roe, and litres of liver, and what it all amounts to in kroner, is not known before the whole catch has been gutted and measured. Maybe the fishermen want to see for themselves what it all measures up to, and what it all amounts to, before they leave the plant. Maybe this merchant can be trusted to take down the right measures, and work out the right multiplications, but many cannot, and so it is better to make an institution of it.

(And that is their good answer, if a dishonest merchant should propose to let his own men do the gutting, at only a scarcely noticeable cut in the kilo price, only one øre less per five kilos, say, 'so that you can get your well deserved eight hours' sleep'. The fishermen can then explain why it is not such a good idea, without accusing *him*. There are many remarks that have their life deep in the minutiae of a mode of production. And, friends of Wittgenstein or Heidegger, don't forget that there is not only our basic trust. There is also the trusting that contrasts with distrusting.)

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