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Colás, Alejandro (2022) IR's sea sickness: a materialist diagnosis. In: de Carvalho, B. and Leira, H. (eds.) *The Sea and International Relations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. ISBN 9781526155108. (In Press)

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IR's Sea Sickness: A Materialist Diagnosis¹

Chapter in Benjamin de Carvalho and Halvard Leira (eds) *International Relations and the Sea*

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Since International Relations' formal inception as an academic discipline after World War I, only a handful of significant scholars have addressed the place of the sea in international relations. Schematically, these have fallen into either the geopolitical Realism of Haushofer, Schmitt, Spykman and - in a different register – Mearsheimer, or the liberal institutionalism of Peter Haas and Oran R. Young.² Despite their radically contrasting political outlooks, the sea has remained a relatively static space in these accounts of world politics – acting as either a passive backdrop in the exercise of terrestrial authority, or as a mere geographical void that represents the 'stopping power of water'.³ More recently, the critical-geographical work of Phil Steinberg, and a new wave of historical-sociological accounts of the modern states system in part inspired by Lauren Benton's 'legal pluralism' have, together with 'tidalectical' interpretations from the Pacific and Caribbean, begun to recognise the oceans as distinctive spaces of world politics.⁴ Phil Steinberg and Kim Peters have perhaps gone furthest in invoking a 'wet ontology' which looks at the ocean 'not as a space of discrete points between which objects move but rather as a dynamic environment of flows and continual recomposition [or 'churning' as they elsewhere put it] where, because there is no static background, "place" can be understood only in the context of mobility'.⁵ They advocate an incorporation of the oceans as vibrant matter that interacts chaotically with other planetary vital forces to generate 'new understandings of mapping and representing; living and knowing; governing and resisting' ie. disruptive, fluid and de-centered conceptions and practices of (international) politics.

Though not as wedded to the notion of 'assemblage' that accompanies Steinberg and Peters' wet ontology, Andrew Phillips and Jason Sharman's work on heterogeneity in the Indian Ocean international system, or Jeppe Mulich's incursions into the coastal 'space between empires' also enjoin us to incorporate the diversity or plurality of polities and territorialities fostered in large measure by the particularities of the sea, into our explanations of

¹ This paper draws on a forthcoming book written with Liam Campling, *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World*, London and New York, NY: Verso and a jointly-authored article 'Capitalism and the Sea: Sovereignty, Territory, and Appropriation in the Global Ocean', *Environment and Planning D Society and Space*, Vol. 36, No.4, 2018, pp. 776-794.

² Klaus Haushofer, *Geopolitik des Pazifischen Ozeans: Studien über die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Geographie und Geschichte*, Heidelberg and Berlin: Kurt Vowinckel Verlag, 1938; Nicholas Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944; Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, Washington, DC: Plutarch Press, 1997 [1942]; John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York; W.W. Norton, 2014; Peter M. Haas, *Saving the Mediterranean: The Politics of International Environmental Cooperation, Political Economy of International Change*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990; Oran R. Young, *Arctic Politics Conflict and Cooperation in the Circumpolar North*, Chicago; Chicago University Press, 1992.

³ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*

⁴ Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

⁵ Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, 'Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking' *Environment and Planning D*, Vol. 33, No.2, 2015, pp. 247-264.

international relations.⁶ Such ocean-facing approaches to world politics differ from more ‘idealist’ conceptions, one recent and sophisticated example of which is Andrew Lambert’s theory of seapower states.⁷ For Lambert, the latter represent particular forms of oligarchic rule which – from Athens and Venice through to the Dutch Republic and Great Britain - fashioned inclusive, dynamic, outward-looking and progressive polities and cultures with the sea as their chief commercial and diplomatic resource. In direct contrast to the geographical-historical materialism outlined below, Lambert argues that the sea is mobilised as site of a maritime culture in the creation of seapowers: ‘it is not a consequence of geography, or circumstance. The creation of seapower identities has been deliberate, and is normally a conscious response to weakness and vulnerability’.⁸

There is, then, a growing and engaging body of work within contemporary IR that takes on board the importance of distinctive political ecologies upon diverse dispensations of power between political communities – that is, from a maritime perspective, a view which considers the saltwater part of our planet as a dynamic, changing and differentiated force in world politics. This furthermore generally implies adopting some kind of materialist understanding of nature as having distinguishing properties that are unevenly transformed through human intervention. With regard to the sea, its fluidity, salinity, depth, density, biomass and energy represent some of these unique natural attributes (although of course seawater can also solidify into ice and evaporate into air), and the oceans’ hostility toward permanent occupation its social distinctiveness. In *The Nomos of the Earth* and in his earlier essay *Land and Sea*, Carl Schmitt posited an ontological division between static landmasses and fluid oceans where the former deliver an order built on law, delimitation and appropriation, and the latter is a sphere of open, borderless, common ownership – the double vowels in its German rendition (*Meer*) evoking an characterless void; a transitory space merely defined in relation to land. In contrast to land, where the triple process of appropriation-distribution-production (or more literally ‘seizing-dividing-tending’) aligns this spatial orientation to a concrete order, the ocean space is a featureless realm of freedom and universality: ‘on the sea, fields cannot be planted and firm lines cannot be engraved’.⁹

One need not fully accept Schmitt’s telluric metaphysics (even less so the odious politics that accompanied them) to acknowledge that the oceans’ resistance to effective occupation in the way that political sovereignty is imposed on land, gives the blue water world a distinctive power in international relations. The rest of this chapter draws out the implications of this line of thinking by offering an overview of what a terraqueous conception of the world can add to the study of IR. For, glaringly self-evident as it is, the multiple socio-economic and political implications of the Earth’s separation into land and sea have largely been overlooked in IR, suggesting the ‘malaise’ of the discipline when it comes to the maritime factor in international relations lies in the lack of attention to this elementary geophysical interaction.

⁶ Andrew Phillips and J.C. Sharman, *International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Jeppe Mulich (with Lauren Benton) ‘The Space between Empires: Coastal and Insular Microregions in the Early Nineteenth-Century World’, in *The Uses of Space in Early Modern History*, ed. Paul Stock, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 151-171 .

⁷ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that made the Modern World*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018.

⁸ Lambert, *Seapower States*, p. 8.

⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, p.1.

Exploring world politics through a terraqueous lens, I suggest, deepens and enriches our understanding of international relations in multiple ways.

Ordering the Unruly Sea

The first of these concerns the challenges of imposing order on a high sea that is nobody's property. During the early-modern period England and the Netherlands in particular made the oceans a prized venue not just of state-formation through plunder, profit and naval prowess, but also of world-ordering via new doctrines of international law. 'Freedom of the Seas' (*Mare Liberum*) was one such principle, famously articulated by Hugo Grotius under instructions of the Dutch East India Company, as the latter sought to secure its seaborne trading monopolies (*dominium*) whilst insisting the high seas were exempt from possession by any single jurisdiction (*imperium*). The tight public-private partnership between political rulers and trading companies which characterised both Dutch and English fiscal-military state (in seventeenth-century Netherlands, its East India Company *was* the state) reflected the centrality of maritime commerce to the very existence of these rising powers.¹⁰ Thus, at the very least, we should continue with recent historiographical critiques decentring and destabilising the Westphalian foundational myth by adding the Malacca Straits – where the privateering incident that prompted Grotius' *Mare Liberum* unfolded – as a synchronous birthplace of the modern international system.¹¹ We might then also think of modern territorial sovereignty as an amphibious affair that witnessed new socio-economic and legal-political forms and processes generated by the unique interaction between land and sea.

A good illustration of the materiality of such terraqueousness in shaping modern international relations lies in the practice of piracy. Predation on the high seas is as old as war and trade but, as de Carvalho and Leira's contribution to this volume shows, it acquired unique form and function in the age of mercantile Empires, both as (legitimate) privateering and (outlaw) piracy. In particular, maritime predation both exploited and subverted freedom of navigation as state-sponsored and non-state actors alike preyed freely on enemy vessels, often recycling personnel, ships and letters of marque and reprisal across public and private domains.¹² Despite parallels between land-based banditry and warlordism on the one hand, and seaborne piracy and privateering on the other, the ocean's fluid nature dilutes attempts at establishing a monopoly over the means of violence across its surface. Public authorities, including most recently multilateral organisations like the UN or international alliances like NATO, have tried to enforce the law through 'transit corridors' or 'high risk zones' in the western Indian Ocean. But it is telling that the preferred spatial forms here are undelimited zones rather than bordered territories, and that much of the counter-piracy monitoring and surveillance is conducted from onshore sites. Similar amphibious experiments characterised the early eighteenth-century war on Atlantic piracy, which relied on a necklace of colonial outposts across the region – military garrisons, trading entrepôts, diplomatic enclaves – both supportive of, and protected by the Royal Navy's anti-buccaneering campaigns, thereby

¹⁰ Pepijn Brandon, *War, Capital, and the Dutch State (1588–1795)*, Leiden: Brill, 2015.

¹¹ See Alex Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*, London: Pluto, 2015.

¹² Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

generating what Lauren Benton memorably called the ‘imperfect geographies and variegated spaces’ of a terraqueous legal pluriverse.¹³

By the same token, an unintended consequence of the eighteenth-century wars on piracy was the development of universal jurisdiction against the figure of the pirate as an ‘enemy of humankind’ (*hostis humani generis*). This legal norm allowed ship captains of any flag to apprehend and in extreme cases, court-martial and execute those engaged in acts of piracy on the high seas – a principle that was also subsequently extended to slaving ships once the trade in humans was outlawed. It has more recently informed notions of humanitarian law and crimes against humanity which trump principles of sovereign immunity or territorial integrity when addressing mass violations of human rights. The refractory nature of the sea has therefore engendered innovative forms of international rule, most notably though not exclusively through law and governance which, in instances like universal jurisdiction, have found their way back onto land. The oceans thus act as an obstacle that requires taming or mastering, as mooted in the book’s Introduction, in the process producing specific expressions of international relations. The challenge for those wishing to render the bluewater world visible in IR is to identify these specificities: what is unique and distinctive about the relationship between land and sea at any given time and in any given place?

One response is to consider, as Phil Steinberg did in his seminal volume on the subject, different social constructions of ‘ocean governance’ - ranging from the ‘asocial’ conceptions of the Indian Ocean as ‘a space between societies’, to the ‘stewardship’ model characteristic of both Mediterranean antiquity and modern European merchant empires, where the sea acts as a ‘force-field’ that can be controlled (e.g. through protected sea-lanes and convoying) but not possessed.¹⁴ From a materialist perspective, there is much to recommend in this understanding since it underlines the centrality of social reproduction when identifying the particularities of different socio-natural relationships between land and sea. Plainly the ‘deep time’ of our bluewater planet has allowed for, and indeed conditioned the development of multiple geopolitical relationships between land and sea across history. Barbadian poet and intellectual Kamau Brathwaite identified a diasporic ‘submarine unity’ among African peoples forcibly transported from their homeland, and such underwater connections also apply to other sea-going civilizations, both during and before the modern period.¹⁵ Several millennia before the Roman Empire constructed its famed road network, the coastal peoples of Atlantic Europe had established a dense lattice of ‘seaways’ - the Gaelic *astar mara*, the Norse *veger* or *hwael-weg* (the whale’s way) in Old English – which linked today’s northern Spain with England, France, Ireland, as well as the Atlantic and Baltic beyond, while the Norse and Icelandic sagas reflect a rich culture of maritime trade, skill, plunder, conquest and enslavement where the oceans become an active historical force.¹⁶ Seafaring populations of the Pacific have, moreover, for centuries developed intricate cosmologies that conceive of the waters surrounding them as a ‘sea of islands’. Far from being an alien and alienating space

¹³ Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires 1400-1900* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

¹⁴ Steinberg *The Social Construction*

¹⁵ Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* Mona: Savacou Publications, 1974, p. 64.

¹⁶ Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011, p. 91.

beyond everyday human experience, the sea was for most Pacific peoples a sacred ancestral resting place as much as a source of protein and propulsion.¹⁷

In western Europe on the other hand, as Alain Corbin's classic study suggests, the ocean was mainly feared and reviled as a realm of chaos and destruction until the ascent of Dutch maritime hegemony in the early seventeenth century, when the sea and its shores started to be the subject of admiration.¹⁸ To be sure, as in the rest of the world, pre-modern distant-fishery communities (and even Basques, Bretons, Norse 'nations') could be found across Europe's Atlantic littoral, and their folklore and worldviews were deeply interconnected with the sea. But the bulk of coastal populations in Europe combined near-shore fishing with inland agriculture, thereby replicating an almost universal suspicion of, when not outright disdain for merchants and fear of 'going out' to sea. Even classical and modern empires - from ancient Rome to the Ottomans - generally mobilised their navies for purposes of conquest or commerce (the Ming Dynasty abruptly cancelling all Chinese maritime expeditions in 1433), rather than gearing their societies toward wealth accumulation through trade. Of course, these and many other continental empires engaged in overseas trade and plunder, but this was ancillary to their dominant mode of social reproduction premised on the extraction of tax and tribute from those living on land. Put bluntly, a tributary empire like Habsburg Spain used the sea as a medium to extend its terrestrial frontier; merchant empires like seventeenth-century Netherlands on the other hand used their territorial sovereignty to control lucrative sea-lanes. The former extended to the Americas the practices of the Iberian raiding frontier, essentially extracting precious metals from subject populations; the latter on the other hand, exploited commercial networks by facilitating and intensifying the maritime circulation of commodities from one marketplace to another.

Another, by no means incompatible response to the question of what is particular to the spatio-temporal relationship between land and sea, is to recalibrate the conventional temporalities of international relations according to the geophysical properties of the sea. That is, to re-envision notions of world-time through experiences of 'the international' *at sea*, and created *by* the sea. As just noted, the long sixteenth century conventionally marks the beginning of a modern epoch which generated the agents and structures - the sovereign state, the global market, social classes and ethno-national identities among others - that continue to drive international relations today. Yet accompanying these generally more visible forces of epochal change are historical undercurrents literally submerged below the sea's surface which offer counternarratives to modern IR, or at least afford perspectives that enhance and complement prevailing conceptions of the modern world system. The much-quoted poem 'The Sea is History' by St Lucian Nobel laureate Derek Walcott has become a shorthand for these complex and overlapping conceptions of historical time that shadow modernity's relationship to the sea. From the perspective of many Americans and Caribbeans of African descent, the answer to the loaded question 'but where is your Renaissance?' is: 'Sir, it is locked in them sea-sands/out there past the reef's moiling shelf, where the men-o'- war

¹⁷ David Lewis, *We, the Navigators: The Ancient Art of Landfinding in the Pacific*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

¹⁸ Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750-1840*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.

floated down'.¹⁹ Contrary to the common perception of the sea as a smooth horizon of opportunity which simply connects one market to another, merely acting as a surface of circulation, the ocean seabeds – not just of the Atlantic – can also be seen as the underwater resting place, both real and imagined, of lives sacrificed and destroyed at sea.

The Atlantic slave trade is one notable instance of this. The reinvention of chattel slavery in the Western hemisphere integrated the merchandise of captive Africans into the emerging seaborne world market, thereby contributing to the process of capitalist development in Europe. The sea played a key role in this experience, acting both as the main conduit for human trafficking on an industrial scale, and as the site for the production of geographical distance necessary in the generation of profit through conveyance. The Atlantic Ocean thus became a real geo-physical and logistical barrier in forcible population transfers, whilst also creating multiple profit-making opportunities for insurers, traders, bankers, ship- and slaveowners, manufacturers, and shipbuilders by turning distance into a market for risk, credit, manufacture, commodity exchange and transport – realising differential accumulation when 'buying cheap' in one coast and 'selling dear' in the other. Viewed from the depths of the Atlantic and the holds of the slave ships that criss-crossed it, there is therefore something historically peculiar about the modern ways of social reproduction at and through the sea.

While the rise of Atlantic slavery signals the sixteenth-century conjuncture that inaugurated the modern international system, the place of the ocean-world in today's unfolding climate emergency points to a deep time that has moulded our world in the very *longue durée*. The sea and its islands are a repository for all kinds of terrestrial waste, excess and surplus, the most threatening of which is the amount of carbon and heat absorbed by the oceans. Nowhere is the presence of historical capitalism's production of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases (GHG) more apparent than in the warming, expansion and acidification of the oceans. If the compound accumulation of past GHG emissions today means, in Andreas Malm's arresting phrase that 'the air is heavy with time', even more so is the sea.²⁰ Indeed, the widely contrasting temporalities at play here – marine life has been slowly changing over millions of years, only to be rapidly transformed in the space of a few decades by a social system barely a few centuries old – already tell a powerful story about the disjointed time-scales of the crisis we are facing. To make matters worse, the centrality of the oceans to the reproduction of our biosphere – its critical role in regulating atmospheric temperatures and humidity, and thereby extreme weather events; its significance in the global food chain; its part in sustaining both marine and terrestrial ecosystems – accentuates the risks of seaborne climate change. The full implications of warmer, anoxic and acidified oceans today may not become entirely apparent until a more distant future since the sea's heat and carbon release is a more protracted process than say, that produced through deforestation.

Incorporating the sea and its socio-natural interaction with land into an analysis of IR thus allows us to articulate specific events with conjunctural and deep-time, arguably enriching our causal assessment of change and continuity in world politics. A good example of this is the Indian Ocean monsoon system, which combines this tripartite division of historical time

¹⁹ Derek Walcott, 'The Sea is History', in *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1980.

²⁰ Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, London and New York, NY: Verso, 2016.

in shaping (and indirectly, being shaped by) not just the circuits of seaborne commercial, spiritual and cultural exchange across that intercontinental basin, but also the political ecologies of much of South and southeast Asia.²¹ Time is inscribed in the very etymology of the word 'monsoon' (derived from *mawsim*, Arabic for 'season') and its existence for millions of years as a recognisable weather pattern integrated into the planetary El Niño/Southern Oscillation attests to the permanency of the monsoon in the long duration. The fact that it is the 'thermal contrast between the land and the ocean, and the availability of moisture' that drives monsoons and determines their socio-natural effects moreover underscores terraqueous character of the phenomenon.²² Across 'Monsoon Asia', peasants and sailors, rural farmers and urban dwellers have through the centuries learnt to read the skies in anticipation of either much-needed wind and rainfall, or catastrophic typhoons and flooding (sometimes all of the above).

Global warming is manifestly disrupting and altering monsoons in ways that make their accompanying weather patterns more erratic and extreme. Yet the temporal disjuncture between the immediate causes and future consequences of climate change makes it difficult to pin-point these radical changes to any specific event in any particular place. There is no clear beginning or predictable political outcome to climate change, nor a single, identifiable enemy that might be defeated (although plainly decarbonising our societies might begin to mitigate the climate crisis). Instead, there are a multiplicity of causes and temporalities that have to be disentangled and then reassembled into a tentative whole. Here, focusing on the terraqueous nature of the monsoon across an event in time, a historical conjuncture, and the long duration of deep time gives us greater purchase on the current predicament and the past sequencing of critical aspects of world politics, like the growth of coastal megalopolises, the intensifying inequalities within and between urban and rural livelihoods, or the disappearance of small island states resulting from sea level rises. This is emphatically not about reverting to some spurious environmental determinism where geography is destiny, but it does require giving due causal power to the natural forces particular to the relationship between land and sea – that is, taking seriously the contribution of the ocean's unique material properties to the evolution and transformation of the international system.

Ocean Crossings

That much of the history of international relations concerns taming the seemingly unruly high seas should not distract us from the blindingly obvious fact that the oceans have mainly served as facilitators of movement – as the fastest and relatively cheapest highway for all sorts of intercontinental transactions between peoples and nations.²³ Traversing the sea has multiple implications for human societies, all of which involve some reckoning of geographical distance

²¹ See Abdul Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam*, London: Hurst & Company, 2010; Lakshmi Subramanian, *Medieval Seafarers*, New Delhi: the Lotus Collection, 1999; Patricia Risso, *Merchants and Faith: Muslim Commerce and Culture in the Indian Ocean* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995; Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith in the Medieval Malabar Coast*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; and Gunnell Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India's North-Eastern Frontiers, 1790-1840*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

²² Sunil Amrith, *Unruly Waters: How Rains, Rivers, Coasts, and Seas Have Shaped Asia's History*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2018.

²³ Martin Stopford, *Maritime Economics*, (third edition) London: Routledge, 2009.

through distinctively maritime instruments of measuring and regulating space and time. What Jason W. Moore has labelled the ‘technics of global appropriation’ (the caravel, the magnetic compass, the seaman’s astrolabe, and their corresponding maps and charts) clearly involved attempts at ordering the sea during the modern period as we just saw.²⁴ But these instruments needed to be designed, manufactured, mastered and operated by those with seafaring knowledge and expertise. This also applied to the seamen, doctors, cooks and – after the age of sail – stokers, trimmers and engineers who made long-distance shipping possible. The very notion of ‘globalisation’ and its associated practices is therefore intimately connected to the sea, and deepening our conception of international relations so as to encompass diverse transnational phenomena necessarily involves paying attention to lives spent at sea. A brief consideration of maritime logistics can shed light on ways in which the geophysical properties of the sea, and its relationship to land, have underpinned some of the most salient practices and institutions of modern international relations, including ‘global governance’.

The modern shipping container, also known as the Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit (TEU) is the socio-technical artifact most often linked to seaborne globalisation. As Rose George and Marc Levinson’s celebrated books would have it, by transporting ‘90% of everything’ the container is the box that ‘made the world smaller and the world economy bigger’.²⁵ The universal equivalence designed into the shipping container, as well as its inter-modal quality as a ‘sea-going truck’ has made the TEU an especially loaded metaphor for a capitalist globalisation where the ocean freeways enable the annihilation of space by time.²⁶ Yet such Whiggish associations of seaborne commerce with progress and prosperity tend to underplay how much logistics is above all a form of capitalist *planning* – with all its socio-political frictions and uncertainties – and how far this ‘art and science of management’ originates in the imperial age of steamship lines (with notable antecedents in the Atlantic slave trade).²⁷ The sea’s critical role as a flat, horizontal transport surface thus has to be complemented by an appreciation of the very vertical hierarchies that accompany the unfolding of maritime logistics – including those of state agencies, labour processes, racist laws, and indeed geophysical phenomena ranging from storms and currents to water depth and ice extent. Much of modern international relations, even more so the global political economy, has been shaped by these various social and natural forces issuing from the sea.

The essence of capitalist logistics lies in managing turnover time so that each transfer across any given supply chain is completed as smoothly and cost-effectively as possible. This usually means accelerating movement so as to minimise turnover time, but it can also involve cutting labour and capital costs (‘slow steaming’ of ships is one way of reducing fuel outlays in

²⁴ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* London: Verso, 2015.

²⁵ Rose George, *Deep Sea and Foreign Going: Inside Shipping, the Invisible Industry That Brings You 90% of Everything*, London: Portobello Books, 2013 and Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.

²⁶ Edna Bonacich and Jake B. Wilson, *Getting the Goods: Ports, Labor, and the Logistics Revolution*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. See also Alexander Klose, *The Container Principle: How a Box Changes the Way We Think* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.

²⁷ For an iconic case, see Freda Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism: The P&O Company and the Politics of Empire from its Origins to 1867*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006.

maritime logistics) or investing in new time-saving and perishability-reducing technologies. Reliability and regularity are the main currency of logistics, planning and coordination the way of securing market share and profitability. In principle, shipping has the comparative advantage of uninterrupted transit through the ‘free sea’. Yet, even if weather, piracy, war or technical breakdown fail to disrupt navigation, different degrees of land-side ‘friction’ (customs inspections and paperwork, delays, strike action, repairs and, in extreme cases, war and conflict) can and do affect the management of turnover time.²⁸ Inter-state agreements, multilateral cooperation, industry and regional development bodies, port authorities and shipping firms, international and maritime law, and sector-wide collective bargaining (i.e. state, capital, labour and international organisations) will all determine the nature and efficiency of such logistical planning. Moreover, the terraqueous features of our planet make an appearance once more as shipping routes are still largely dictated by enduring geophysical features – aside from the Panama and Suez canals, most of the world’s maritime chokepoints remain the same as in previous millennia.

Sea merchants have been aware of such spatio-temporal determinants of their trade since time immemorial, but the advent of capitalist shipping – and the introduction of industrial steamships in particular – witnessed the commercial decoupling of cargo ownership from the transport of commodities (and indeed shipbuilding), thus intensifying the separation between traders, shippers and shipbuilders.²⁹ This in turn encouraged during the second half of the nineteenth century the frenzied development of a global logistical infrastructure of docks, wharfs, coaling stations, passenger ports, freight forwarding roads and railways, as well as the accompanying undersea telegraphic networks which sustained such intercontinental webs of transport and communication.³⁰ Imperial power was at the root of such technological globalisation, and liberal internationalism its outgrowth. Seen in this light, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of the first multilateral institutions of ‘global governance’ had early origins in European and world conferences dealing with riverine navigation (1861, 1863 and 1866), marine signalling (1864), and the ‘neutralisation of submarine cables’ (1882).³¹ The liberal internationalist romance with the ocean as a space that underwrites progress, prosperity and liberty (perhaps most emblematically represented in Captain Nemo’s proclamation that ‘the sea does not belong to despots’) thus reflected a reality sustained by the *Pax Britannica* (1815-1870) where millions could pursue across a seaborne world market what Marx sarcastically referred to as the dream of ‘Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham’.³² The Grotian promise of the free seas was here married to the Kantian notion of international communication and cooperation delivering perpetual peace.

Of course, these experiences of maritime internationalism tell only part of the story of the

²⁸ Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

²⁹ Lincoln Paine, *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World* New York, NY: Atlantic Books, 2015.

³⁰ Simone M. Müller and Heidi J.S. Tworek, ‘“The Telegraph and the Bank”: on the Interdependence of Global Communications and Capitalism, 1866–1914’, *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 10, 2015, pp. 259–283.

³¹ Craig N. Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance Since 1850* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, p. 57

³² Jules Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014 [1870], p. 66.

nineteenth century's 'great transformation'. For in the lower decks of ships; in the imperial wharves, dockyards and naval bases dotted across the globe, a saltwater cosmopolitanism was also being forged among the subaltern classes of all races and nations who served as the 'muscles of empire', both onboard and ashore.³³ Maritime logistics above all requires manpower (though women have, like in the rest of society, historically played a crucial reproductive role in seafaring lives).³⁴ Shifting bulk across oceans is almost by definition reliant on multinational workforces drawn from diverse labour markets. This was (and in many instances continues to be) in part a consequence of chronic labour shortages occasioned by, inter-alia, protectionist laws, war-time demands on navies, and the dangerous, gruelling, confined and therefore unappealing nature of work at sea, generally compounded by the high mortality and desertion rates, particularly among European crew on outgoing voyages. In the course of the nineteenth century internationalising the workforce also became part of a deliberate cost-saving and labour-disciplining strategy whereby ratings were hired, paid and organised along a racialised hierarchy reliant on labour conveyancing (recruiting low-waged labour in foreign ports) and the crew management by intermediary 'headmen'.³⁵ Underlying these practices is the ocean's unique quality as a workspace that produces geographical distance, yet is premised on the physical proximity of crewmembers in the highly stratified and bounded 'mobile factories' that are ships.

If the sea is a site for the formal expressions of International Relations in the shape of international law, global governance or multilateral cooperation, it is also a venue for international relations understood as the more prosaic movement of people, commodities and ideas across states. The figure of the 'lascar' – a seaman originating from any part of the Indian Ocean region hired to work on metropolitan ships – is perhaps the quintessential personification, together with the eighteenth-century 'motley crew', of this contradictory combination of movement and confinement, freedom and domination, anarchy and hierarchy that encapsulates both types of international relations.³⁶ Lascars were simultaneously essential to the reproduction of empire into the early twentieth-century, and an oppressed, marginalised class of colonial subjects; their ethno-national identity was indeterminate and fluid, yet their status as 'lascars' sharply codified and violently enforced. Such racialised and super-exploitative conditions continue today among the bulk of the world's ocean-faring workforce.³⁷ However, as in the past, the singularly strategic position of the blue-water proletariat in the global economy, together with its inherently multinational composition offers unique opportunities for internationalist politics.³⁸ As in the case of universal

³³ The phrase is Frank Broeze's, 'The Muscles of Empire: Indian Seamen and the Raj, 1919-1939', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 1, 1981, pp. 43-67.

³⁴ Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (eds) *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920* Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

³⁵ Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

³⁶ See Gopal Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?: Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870-1945* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. For the eighteenth-century, see the classic study by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, London: Verso, 2000.

³⁷ Alastair Couper, Hance D. Smith and Bruno Ciceri, *Fishers and Plunderers: Theft, Slavery and Violence at Sea*, London: Pluto, 2015.

³⁸ Helen Sampson, *International Seafarers and Transnationalism in the Twenty-First Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

organisations, it is unsurprising that the late nineteenth-century 'new', mass unionism was pioneered by workers in maritime-oriented sectors around for instance, the International Transport Workers' Federation, ITF (though, anecdotally, the modern usage of 'strike' in industrial relations originates in London-based sailors and port-workers 'striking the sail' for pay rises in 1767).³⁹ Nor is it a mystery why stevedores or longshoremen have historically been at the forefront of internationalist solidarity – with fellow workers or against repressive regimes like apartheid South Africa.⁴⁰ These same ocean-facing workers – dockers, shipbuilders, seamen – have, however, also represented the most egregious instances of labour aristocracies using trade unions as racist closed shops organised along strict colour lines. The inherently globalising dynamics of maritime logistics, and all the labour that subtends it, therefore represent the critical place of ocean crossings in the construction of modern international relations.

Valorising the Oceans

We have thus far seen how the high seas present both challenges and opportunities to diverse transnational maritime agents, in the process generating new practices, institutions and structures of international relations. At stake here is a particular dialectic between land and sea, where socio-natural forces clash (and occasionally cooperate) over the shape of order, movement, commodity circulation and sovereign rule across our terraqueous planet. These conflicts and contradictions are resolved, however temporarily, through new global configurations of power mediated through law, multilateral agencies, maritime corporations, and the labour organisations representing saltwater proletarians who keep the world economy moving. The sea's unique geophysical properties, moreover, open fresh possibilities for re-thinking the conventional temporalities prevalent in IR – be these related to the periodisation of our contemporary international system, or the deeper notions of ecological time and how they connect to biospheric crisis. The material power of the oceans is reflected in a further arena of international affairs, namely the appropriation of the ocean's energy and biomass.

Two of the notable legal-political innovations in accommodating the sea to a logic of territorial sovereignty are Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and Open Registers (Flags of Convenience, FOC). Although emerging at different junctures in the last century, and often propelled by divergent constellations of interests, both these juridical forms reveal how the recalcitrant qualities of the sea in the face of attempts at imposing terrestrial methods of rule have in fact delivered novel and peculiarly hybrid modes of terraqueous territoriality. The EEZ is emblematic of such spatial effects in that it incorporates sovereignty (exclusive), appropriation (economic) and territory (zone) in its very title. The codification of the EEZ

³⁹ Frank Broeze, 'Militancy and Pragmatism: An International Perspective on Maritime Labour, 1870-1914', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 1991, pp. 165-200.

⁴⁰ See Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness (eds.), *Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupting the Global Supply Chain*, London: Pluto, 2018; David Featherstone, 'Maritime Labour and Subaltern Geographies of Internationalism: Black Internationalist Seafarers' Organising in the Interwar Period', *Political Geography*, Vol. 49, 2015, pp. 7-16; Holger Weiss, 'The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers: A Radical Global Labour Union of the Waterfront or a Subversive World-Wide Web?' in Holger Weiss (ed) *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919-1939* Leiden, Brill: 2017; and also *Solidarity - The First 100 Years of the International Transport Workers' Federation*, London: Pluto, 1996.

under UNCLOS III in 1982 was the single greatest territorial enclosure in human history. The outcome was a distinctive legal framework allowing coastal states to claim special sovereign rights (but not territorial sovereignty) over a delimited zone 200 nautical miles from a defined littoral baseline.

Under this order, so long as the principles of freedom of navigation and innocent passage for the world's largest fleets are upheld, coastal states can do with their marine resources as they please. The sea's currents and the biomass that move with them, however, do not respect the tidy logic of the states-system. Highly migratory species like tuna in particular continually, and naturally, subvert any straight lines mapped upon the ocean space: as such, straddling fish species can only be nobodies' property until they are caught. The socio-spatial form of the EEZ thus challenges a common view of the global ocean as a lawless frontier. Even on the High Seas, fishing activities are governed by complex layers of international law, including the partial regulatory reach of regional fisheries management organisations over fish stocks, the International Maritime Organisation's authority over shipping pollution, and the International Labour Organisation's remit over the pay, working conditions, and occupational health and safety of crew on boats.⁴¹ For its part, an International Seabed Authority administers the ocean floor beyond extended continental shelves (the 'Area') as the common heritage of humanity (including for deep-sea mining and bioprospecting), while the self-explanatory Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf does something similar when setting the baselines of territorial waters.⁴²

There are, then, plenty of instances where diverse global governance regimes and institutions seek to manage the global ocean in its surface, deep-water and sub-sea totality. The difficulty for many of these multilateral agencies lies in conjugating the liberal principle of the 'freedom of the seas' with the drive to secure sovereign property rights over, and the capture of ground-rent through these resources. The EEZ represents one such attempt at marrying unfettered mobility and legal appropriation, albeit with the sea in this context serving as a laboratory in the experimentation with forms of overlapping governance that have subsequently been applied on land. In this regard, it is helpful to understand the EEZ not just as an area or zone but also, as Gavin Bridge has suggested, to consider it in volumetric terms 'as a spatial form of property through which the circulation of resources and commodities is controlled'. In contrast to a stable, purely grounded conception of resources as 'fixed territory', Bridge encourages us to think of 'quanta-based' rights to fish, water or other biomass as the principal way that capital can 'secure flow'.⁴³ To that extent, the EEZ does in effect act as maritime prolongation of the coastal state's landed property. Yet, the technical and operational complexity involved in prospecting and exploiting offshore oil and gas, for example, places high barriers to entry which only powerful states (through National Oil Companies) and multinational corporations can afford to meet. Thus relative newcomers to offshore hydrocarbons like Ghana and Equatorial Guinea rely overwhelmingly on foreign companies to deliver the costly infrastructure required for exploring, drilling, extracting and transporting deep-water crude and gas.⁴⁴ The resource flows at sea are replicated in the mobility of both

⁴¹ Elizabeth R. DeSombre, *Fish*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

⁴² John Hannigan, *The Geopolitics of Deep Oceans*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.

⁴³ Gavin Bridge, 'Territory, Now in 3D!' *Political Geography* Vol. 34, NoA1-A4, 2013, pp. 55-57, p. 57.

⁴⁴ Brenda Chalfin, 'Governing Offshore Oil: Mapping Maritime Political Space in Ghana and the Western Gulf of

maritime installations (in the form of mobile deep-water drill rigs, or floating production storage and offloading vessels - FPSOs) as well as in the rotating multinational workforce. The materiality of the sea here once again reproduces a terraqueous territoriality: not only is the exploitation of marine resources reliant on land-side infrastructure and property regimes (that much is fairly obvious), but the forms of surplus appropriation adopted by terrestrial sovereign states and capitalist firms are strongly conditioned by the socio-natural cycles and forces at sea.

These challenges to, and distinctive if unstable resolutions of sovereign principles are also reflected in the existing practices of flagging at sea.⁴⁵ Designed in the 1920s to avoid US labour law and Prohibition, the legal innovation of the modern FOC originated in Panama, where formal sovereignty granted both legal and illicit American firms the right to register vessels under its flag, in return for a small fee. From the 1970s, revenue-poor countries like Liberia, Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Bahamas joined Panama as leading FOC states, leasing their sovereignty through the open registry system. As with the EEZ, the relationship between sovereignty, territory and appropriation for FOC boats is full of nuance and complexity. It is helpful to conceptualise FOC vessels as terraqueous territories in two senses: as sovereign spaces and as a strategy of accumulation. On the high seas, the notion of comity (involving mutual deference or courtesy between sovereigns) operates as the dominant principle when sharing a free space and settling disputes across different maritime jurisdictions. In this way, the law of the flag state establishes borders and territorialises space on board ships even when steaming through another state's sovereign waters. In such cases, the particular relation between land and sea becomes sharply apparent, as legal principles like comity articulate sovereignty, territory and appropriation in a global ocean otherwise deemed to be lawless and unruly. Moreover, given that a characteristic of the open registry is the ability of shipowners to 'buy' a sovereign and thus the legal jurisdiction that regulates their activities, shipowners produce territory as an accumulation strategy. Shipowners use sovereignty invested in state jurisdiction to cut crew costs and undermine the self-organisation of labour, as well as minimising tax bills and avoiding agreements on fishing quotas.

The cruel irony is of course that the system of 'open' registers disguises some of the world economy's worst working practices and most opaque ownership and taxation structures. The FOC regime guarantees all the surface speed, flexibility and mobility privileged by capital whilst condemning those who work and live in the ship's lower quarters to confinement, regimentation and domination. In contrast to factories and fields, fishing circumscribes physically the labour process to floating platforms of production that can transcend jurisdictions in various ways (e.g. legally through FOC and/or geographically following the fish between EEZs and the legal grey zone of the high seas). The ship in this regard becomes what Jonathan Bach (via Bruno Latour) calls an 'immutable mobile' – an object that moves through space without thereby losing its property as a site of production.⁴⁶ As in other sectors highly

Guinea' *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 114, No.1, 2015, pp. 1-118.

⁴⁵ See Elizabeth DeSombre, *Flagging Standards: Globalization and Environmental, Safety and Labor Regulations at Sea*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006,

⁴⁶ Jonathan Bach, 2011 'Modernity and the Urban Imagination in Economic Zones', *Theory, Culture & Society* 28 (5): 98-122.

reliant on migrant labour, the shipping and fishing industries exploit the flexible, low-cost but highly-controlled labour process afforded by the open registry system. Yet the difference is that, at sea, it is the floating capital that is in constant movement. Labour remains relatively static within the factory ship, and the possibilities of shore leave are highly restricted. In extreme, though hardly rare cases, seafarers are in effect imprisoned for years on ships (or stranded undocumented on foreign ports), acting as bonded and even slave labour tied by land-side debts and obligations to shipowners and operators. The integrated network of legal-bureaucratic and market power sustaining the open registry regime from land thus contrasts – and has a corollary – in the isolation, precariousness and vulnerability of fishers and seafarers working on FOC ships at sea. These uniquely terraqueous organisations of space deliver distinctive geographies of labour exploitation, identity and solidarity mentioned above. In sum, the ‘open registry’ regime illustrates how fishing vessels in particular are never far off land when they’re at sea: they carry with them all of the characteristics of a land-based labour process associated to say, mining - ethnic segmentation of the workforce, strict labour discipline, repetitive tasks, combination of workplace and lifeworld - in a single confined space. Most important for our purposes, the FOC is a vector for the inherently multinational organisation of maritime logistics where at any given time a ‘Greek owned vessel, built in Korea, may be chartered to a Danish operator, who employs Filipino seafarers via a Cypriot crewing agent, is registered in Panama, insured in the United Kingdom, and transports German-made cargo in the name of a Swiss freight forwarder from a Dutch port to Argentina, through terminals whose concessions have been granted to port operators from Singapore’.⁴⁷

Toward a Terraqueous IR

The centrality of the social system we call capitalism in shaping the relationship between international relations and the sea has been implicit throughout this chapter. Plainly, the premise throughout has been that this unique mode of production conditioned both the form and content of a maritime factor in the development of modern international relations. The socio-economic, technological, juridical, and political innovations spurred on by the ceaseless quest for value, characteristic of industrial capitalism in particular, have now encompassed almost the entirety of the planet, as illustrated above. Yet IR has been attentive only to a fraction of these transformations, remaining stubbornly terrestrial in its core assumptions about the nature of world politics. Even among those theorists of the sea like Alfred Thayer Mahan or Sir Julian Corbett, who might reasonably be incorporated into the canon of classical IR, the ocean world remains an unchanging geopolitical fact: a highway of commerce and communication to be commanded and protected from enemy incursion or control.⁴⁸

The argument presented here, on the other hand, emphasises the dynamic nature of the sea, and indeed that of its relationship with land. Considering the uneven and protracted interaction between these geophysical entities, I have suggested, brings to the fore multiple dimensions of international relations that might otherwise be submerged or entirely

⁴⁷ Andrea Bottalico, ‘Across the Chain: labor and Conflicts in the European Maritime Logistics Sector’ in Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness, *Choke Points* pp. 35-49, p.44.

⁴⁸ Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [1890] and Julian Stafford Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, New York: Pantianos Classics, 1911.

forgotten in mainstream accounts of world politics. Among the former are the maritime origins of many key practices of modern international relations, including global governance, international law or multilateral cooperation. Plainly, these norms and institutions did not emerge, Neptune-like, fully-formed from the sea, but they are the expression of several specifically oceanic features identified throughout this chapter which are inescapable to socio-economic and political developments on land. In return, terrestrial institutions and practices have clearly also transformed the nature of the sea – most obviously through anthropogenic climate change. But it is perhaps the analytical neglect of the many seaborne experiences of international relations that is most damaging for our discipline. For in marginalising or overlooking the profoundly transnational lives spent and sacrificed at sea, there is a real danger we continue to reify terra-centric accounts of world politics focused around the dominant notions of sovereignty, war, diplomacy and trade. The sea offers us a vantage point of international relations which immediately and almost inherently relativises the anchoring of world politics on land.

This, to conclude, is not simply a plea to ‘bring the sea back in’ to IR (though obviously that is part of the task). It is mainly an argument for a genuinely amphibious or terraqueous IR that takes seriously the material properties of land and sea in their complex interaction. Doing so can begin to remedy IR’s ‘seasickness’ and deliver a much more complete account of the geopolitical nature of world politics, whilst simultaneously recognising the variable (though not ‘stadial’) historical temporalities being operationalised both within human societies, and in our collective relation to the non-human world. As has been suggested throughout this chapter, we can thereby account for the more prominent dimensions of contemporary interstate relations as part-manifestation of the more mundane, transnational experiences of people at, through or near the sea. A terraqueous IR might in this way both contribute to a spatio-temporal de-centring of the modern international system, while still acknowledging that it is the material effects of capitalism as a historically peculiar way of organising the social exploitation of nature which most profoundly conditions our planetary present and future.