

**Constructing Counter-Narrative: A Key to Challenging Neo-Slavery in the De-
Nationalized World of Globalization – the Shipping Industry and the Case of the
*M/V Agios Minas.***

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of *neo-slavery* using a narrative approach in the case of the Motor/Vessel (M/V) *Agios Minas*. Transformation of an oppressive structure was achieved through juxtaposing to the dominant narrative a counter-narrative, and bringing words into action. Use of narrative, storytelling, provides an effective qualitative, rather than quantitative, means of challenging oppressive social structures. Also explored is the process of counter-narrative development in communicating the complexity and nuance of conflict while simultaneously negotiating new realities. The abstract concept of *neo-slavery* in today's global economy is defined and given a human face. When people are exposed to the narratives of oppressed people they are provided an opportunity to act. Action, advocacy, is the potential result of the interplay between narrative – counter-narrative.

It is globalization. Immigration debate highlights one of globalization's major human costs. By definition, globalization erodes national boundaries (Menyhart, 2003). Cross-boundary labor flows, legal or otherwise, are an inevitable outgrowth of globalization. Labor migrates across porous national boundaries pursuing work; work chases cheap labor in a global market. Like water, the labor market seeks a common level, often the lowest point. And that is the bedeviling issue. Yet, people can formulate rational and humane policies even when national boundaries and jurisdictions fade. Policy is the outgrowth of narrative.

Ill-defined and ill-understood globalization now is based on an anachronism. Its wheels are oiled by a primitive form of labor most think extinct: slavery, well disguised slavery, but slavery nonetheless. Call it *neo-slavery*, and it is easy to miss. It walks our streets, indeed it cleans our streets, it may even build our streets. It is not slavery characterized by whips and chains but a more subtle slavery almost invisible because it appears so terribly normal.

The issue, then, is exploitation. An unregulated global labor bazaar evolved that leaves workers unprotected and without effective legal redress, employed by economically rational entities void of social responsibility. Today's globalization returns us to a Hobbesian world. It is a condition devoid of a social contract. The strong dominate the weak and justice is defined by brute economic necessity. Brutish behavior abandons people to slave-like subservience.

We live in a world of neo-slavery, but slaves without a defining narrative. They are invisible. American literature creates a slave-story evoking one of two images; paternal or brutal. In one, content individuals happily serve their masters with a touching loyalty. In the

other, ruthless coercion forms a population of vicious workers: vengeful, frightening, and dangerous. Neither image is particularly apt to define neo-slavery.

Neo-slavery is insidious and systemic. Images of the sex trade, or of young children confined in prison-like factories, evoke the same anger that stirred abolitionists in the past. The narrative is obvious, dramatic, and unquestionable. It readily generates a public outcry. Neo-slavery is a pervasive exploitation that most deny since many benefit, its survival rests on a false narrative.

Globalization promises long-run benefit for all, but it is too often discussed in economic terms stripped of its human dimension. Economists measure outcomes never processes. Outcomes are measured quantitatively; process defines quality of life (Figini, P.& Santarelli, E., Spring 2006; Brady, D., March 2003; Goldberg, P. K. & Pavcink, N., 2004). This article pleads for a counter-narrative that confronts the human dimension of globalization. The human face of globalization – neo-slavery – first emerged in the international merchant marine some thirty years ago.

A Story of People

The economic stress of the 1973 OPEC oil embargo initiated a tectonic shift in the modern merchant marine. Ship owners, chiefly in the developed nations, were most impacted and desperately needed cost-savings. And people were the source of such savings. Lesser developed nations auctioned their flags. These Flags Of Convenience (FOC) offered significant tax advantages and, more importantly, allowed ship owners to recruit anywhere in the world with little enforced regulation. A convenient flag saves ship owners hundreds of thousands of dollars

on every vessel each year, primarily labor costs.

Shops, factories, and farms are lastingly anchored, ships are not. Ships may, and do, readily recruit or discharge crews virtually anywhere on the globe. Seafarers face unlimited competition; a chaotic, anarchistic market. I first saw the results of this anarchy in Brunswick, Georgia. As executive director of the International Seafarers' Center for less than 90 days, I confronted the chaos, the bitter and negative experiences of a mariner's life. Early one morning, in the midst of routine operations, I received a plea for help from the Master of the M/V (Motor Vessel) *Agios Minas*.

His was a two hundred foot long ship of less than a thousand gross tons. She looked the part of a tramp, badly maintained, rusty and disheveled. The *Agio Minas* was characteristic of many ships in the lowest tier of the maritime shipping industry, hauling the bulk cargoes - fertilizers, animal feed, pine stumps – whose value will bear no more than minimum shipping costs. She carried the cargoes many ships disdain. Though a tramp, the *Agios Minas* was a metaphor for problems characteristic at every level in shipping (Matyok, 2004).

At the end of her functional life, the *Agios Minas* followed the *one-more-trip* model of shipping. The vessel's debt exceeded its value. There was no profit in repairing the ship and making it livable. Only one toilet worked. The owners did only what was absolutely necessary for the ship to sail. A Byzantine system allows ship owners and operators to conceal ownership and avoid moral and legal responsibilities. If a ship sinks, or if it can no longer operate, the owners and leasees can simply walk away, never to be found or resurfacing in a different guise.

Snatching what charters she could, the *Agios Minas* sailed from port to port, in thrall to the vagaries of trade. Small, she passed Coast Guard safety requirements with a minimal crew. Her ghostly owners, hidden by a miasma of legal paperwork, had offices in Greece. But they

gathered mariners from around the world. Eight men, no more than two or three per watch, operated the ship. They came from Greece, Panama, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. She was old and tired, manned by over-worked seamen, and kept in service to squeeze the final few dollars of revenue from her doubtful hull and weary engines, hostage to the economic interest of her owners.

The ordeal was initiated by a plea: “Good morning. I like to inform you my position is anchorage Brunswick and awaiting orders from Trinity, but my situation no so good. I send message and tell about my condition.” Later, the Master added, “situation [is] desperate.” The *Agios Minas*’ owners ordered the ship to anchor outside the Port of Brunswick. She was in the ship channel but still ten miles from the harbor. The master was instructed to await orders about the next port and cargo. Anchoring at sea is commonly used by ship-owners to evade dockage fees. No word ever came from the ship’s owner. The Master and crew waited more than forty days. They were abandoned, no orders, no support: imprisoned.

Food, water, and fuel nearly gone, the plight of the *Agios Minas* was dismal. When the captain’s appeal to the owner’s agent proved futile, he turned to the International Seafarers’ Center. Our center requested assistance of the regional Coast Guard and they sent someone aboard the vessel. Another futile effort. The Coast Guard views their chief mandate as port security, navigational safety, and pollution prevention. Since the vessel posed no navigational hazard, nor endangered the environment, and was nowhere near the port, officialdom washed its hands of the matter. The welfare of the eight seamen manning the *Agios Minas* was *inconsistent with their mission*. They even refused to transport food and water. After all, they stated with bureaucratic logic, it was not a “dark ship,” it was still manned and a lack of food and water created no immediate threat to the safety of the port nor to the free, safe passage of ships entering

and leaving it. Like all other government agencies, they perceived their duty as enforcement not welfare. The men of the *Agios Minas* were on their own.

Hostage to charity, their human dignity rested in the hands of the civilian port community and on the goodwill of strangers. The Center mobilized community resources. Volunteers quickly dealt with the immediate and most obvious problems. Food and water were ferried to the ship in private boats. The failure of officialdom, the indifference to the crew, reflects commonplace structural violence in shipping. Humane resolution depends on chance.

Structural violence (Bourdieu, P., 2001; Galtung, J., 1996) operates in the shadow of indifference and is cloaked in seeming legitimacy. Knowledge illuminates. The Center mobilized the news media. And to educate the media we recruited a team of maritime experts to bring the crew's voice forward with credibility. That was the problem, the crew needed to speak in its own voice. Advocates ought to carry the voice of the crew, not speak for the crew. Otherwise, we all become part of the structure of violence. Creating narrative in the international shipping industry is difficult. The difficulty reflects fear among seafarers (Matyok, 2004). But difficulty must not prevent action. When we silence people we inflict violence.

And their voice was heard. Crewman Carlos Garcia told a *New York Times* reporter that "Not much water was left. When it rained, we would open up our water tank. But it didn't rain much." They cobbled together a channel along the oily, greasy deck to direct rainwater into the ship's water tanks. This they used for bathing, sanitation, cooking, and cleaning. Had we not brought bottled water, they would have drunk it. Jose Orlando Galeano expressed the sense of the crew that they were ". . . completely abandoned. The owners only cared about themselves, not the worker." Hilario Alfaro, with studied irony, stated that, while this situation was bad, it was not his worst experience: "In 1975, my boat capsized. I swam for seventeen hours. I saw a

crewmate eaten by a shark” (Starr A., 2001).

Perhaps not torn by sharks but the crew still suffered social and psychological amputation. Severed from land, from contact with the vessel’s owners, from any official protection, they were cut off and cast aside. And, there was shame. Unable to sail or return to port, control of their own lives was ripped from them. All that remained was hope. Hope is the entanglement that sustains neo-slavery; that sustains the floating *plantation* in contemporary global shipping.

Once exposed to a counter-narrative, the public was never indifferent to the situation. Indeed, each member of the crew became known by name and face, a person rather than an abstraction. Agencies and officials started to act under the glare of publicity.

Counter-narrative transformed the situation. Within three months, the incident was resolved in court. When the lawyers arrived they were operating with a single, unchallenged narrative. The crew’s deposition, a counter-narrative, changed the attorneys’ perceptions of reality and appreciation of justice. Now, even they became advocates for the crew. Narrative and counter-narrative are implements of struggle.

Why Counter-Narrative?

Counter-narrative *re*-humanizes. Counter-narrative democratizes peace-making activities by giving silenced individuals a public forum (Rimstead, 1996). Senhi (2000) proposes that “If voice is power, storytelling – which facilitates voice – is empowering” and

When personal stories are shared in a social context, individual experience may come to represent a group’s shared experience, and in this way gains import. This occurs in a

social space where members' voices are dominant (that is, no longer silenced) and where they are free to analyze their situation. As personal stories begin to shape a group narrative, the individual stories gain power. The personal becomes the political. The new group narrative becomes a new framework for thought and blueprint for action” (26), Freire's *conscienzation*.

Through a democratized peace process, individuals become part of a *supranational, supracultural* community; a community forged by people's identification of common problems and goals. Dignity is restored.

The crew of the *Agios Minas* was re-humanized through the reframing of identity brought forward in a counter-narrative. The counter-narrative unfolded over time, as a film does, with a past, present, and future. We sought to present an holistic story that moved those who heard it to action. We stepped into an aspect of peace journalism.

Creation of counter-narrative is peace journalism. Conflict journalism focuses on presenting a photograph, a snapshot, of an event. The present is disconnected from past and future. In presenting facts, little room is provided for truth. In a post-modern, deconstructed social space pursuit of the truth is devalued, if not discounted. Through peace journalism a balance can come about where deconstruction and truth coexist. In the case of the *Agios Minas* we sought to present a truth not limited by facts.

In the telling of stories, narrators and listeners interact; thus, becoming collaborators in a process of understanding and communication that can result in the peaceful transformation of conflict context. Narrator and listener negotiate a *new* future-story. Peace narratives seek truth through a never-ending re-negotiation of the present. This is a vital component of peace journalism.

Defining Chaos: Paradigm of the Modern International Merchant Marine

During the first three quarters of the twentieth century, significant progress was realized in the regulation of international shipping. This reflected the ease with which flag states *those with significant merchant fleets* were defined. They were essentially the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, Greece, Norway, and a handful of others whose citizens owned the bulk of the world's merchant fleet. Owners simply registered their vessels in their own country. These countries also provided officers and crewmembers to sail their national-flag ships. Thus, regulation reflected a national bond and sense of responsibility for those citizens who manned a nation's merchant fleet. Working conditions and terms of employment were defined by agreements between owners and maritime unions and were enforced by the courts of the flag state. Hiring and dismissal were also regulated and the seafarers' rights protected. Very importantly, countries with large fleets developed advanced institutions and programs to supply a steady stream of well trained mariners for both their own fleets and for the ships of other nations. This picture began to change in the 1970s. The oil crisis triggered a marked, if temporary, decline in world trade and so a surplus in shipping. Many ship owners faced ruin and were forced to cut operational costs to the bone. How? The owners carved away at the largest cost and only major expense under their control, labor. And this was accomplished by re-flagging ships *offshore*. Shifting registries offshore to *Flags Of Convenience* allowed owners to slash crew costs by hiring in a free, unregulated, global labor market where many workers competed for fewer jobs. *Convenient* registration in countries such as Liberia, Panama, and, more recently, Cyprus, Bermuda, and the Marshall Islands, and numerous others, bought owners considerable

economic relief. But, at considerable social cost. (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, et al, 2002; International Transport Workers Federation, 2000.)

National sovereignty enforced a social contract between ship owner and crew. Erasing national sovereignties dissolved the social contract. Now, crews became the *other*. International shipping came to resemble a state of nature in which power is the only arbiter.

Everybody in shipping has power, except for the seafarer. While shipping is heavily regulated, enforcement is sporadic and whimsical. The shared sense of national responsibility is corroded and shattered. The modern international merchant fleet virtually precludes labor from developed economies. Seafarers live lives of continual alienation. They are constant strangers; strangers on multi-cultural and multi-ethnic vessels, and strangers in the ports at which they call. And this generates considerable indifference and poor oversight.

Ships' flags establish state control of vessels and responsibility for the protection of seafarers' rights. FOC nations have precious little incentive to protect the men who sail under their flags. There is no lack of international regulation but enforcement is national. The hard and unfortunate reality is that most flag of convenience states have precious little law protecting their own nationals let alone those seafarers recruited in other countries. Indeed, non-enforcement is what they sell with a wink and a nod. Ship crews are essentially stateless.

Maritime operations now depend on this unique labor force. Seafarers' welfare is conditional. Agencies – national *or* international – are poorly equipped to effectively protect them from exploitation and oppression by unscrupulous or indifferent owners. (Some agencies which do struggle for the welfare of international seafarers include the Apostleship of the Sea [*Stella Maris*]), the Center for Seafarers' Rights, the International Labor Organization, and the International Transport Workers Federation, and of course, the International Seafarers' Center of

Brunswick, Georgia.) In the amorphous global setting, lines of authority tend to be obscure and enforcement is defused and divided. Indifference, combined with institutional self-interest, leaves seafarer welfare basically reliant on the chance decency and humanity of others. Seafarers are not owned in the sense of legal slavery, but are slaves to structural violence and coercion.

Lack of access to redress is the hallmark of statelessness. It is a given under traditional practices that a person's legal rights devolve from their national citizenship and allegiance to a particular sovereignty. Seafarers are *denationalized workers* whose home nation cannot protect their rights while at sea. They effectively abandon nationality on the dock, at the end of the gangway. Stateless *de facto*, they are perpetual aliens.

Neo-slavery is part of the social, political, and economic structure that shapes today's international merchant marine. It is well documented by those who study the practices of the international merchant marine (Hackett, T., 1999; Lazenby, C., 1997/1998; Merriggioli, A., 1998; International Commission on Shipping, 2000; International Transport Workers Federation, 2000; and others). But, documentation has not been woven into a narrative. Constructing a narrative can generate a consensus among those working with and for mariners; a recognition that merchant seafarers are prototypical workers in a *globalized* economy and have been transformed into *commodities* to be bought and sold on the international labor market. They were the first of the new, emergent body of neo-slave workers.

Three criteria establish the general circumstance of enslavement. These criteria are outlined in the *Slavery Convention of the League of Nations (1926)* and the *Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956)*. For slavery to exist three conditions must be met: first, "inherent right to

freedom of movement [is denied];” second, “control [of an] individual’s personal belongings [is restricted];” and, third, “existence of informed consent [is absent].” As Kevin Bales (2002) pointed out, “[if] workers are unable to walk away, the situation is tantamount to slavery” (p.86).

The modern merchant marine defines these criteria. Free movement is virtually nonexistent under maritime employment contracts and port security regulations. Confinement is coupled with continuous surveillance of person and property. A leading maritime expert notes, contracts are *pro forma* documents and may be little more than “four pages of nonsense hieroglyphics” (Merriggioli, A., 1998). If hieroglyphics, they are incomprehensible and open to arbitrary interpretation. Whenever the relationship between worker and employer, regardless of the contractual arrangement, depends upon the *diktat* of the owner or his agents, there is no real, informed consent. Seafarers are shackled, and their property hostage, to their ships.

The slave-like conditions of the contemporary merchant marine are fairly obvious. They partake of the conventional characterization of slavery. They may be forerunners of a system which will effectively extend neo-slavery to the bulk of working men and women. Their story provides insight into an emerging global economic structure.

A vivid concept such as slavery is hard to accept in a modern world. Those engaged in enslavement are careful to disguise its reality. Perhaps they are not even conscious of their participation. Slavers construct narratives to justify gross injustice. Many of us buy into their narratives because the slave’s voice goes unheard, there is no counter-narrative. Victims need to be heard and defined.

A New Definition of Slavery

Kevin Bales (2004) in *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* outlines a form of *new slavery*, which “is not about owning people in the traditional sense of the old slavery, but about controlling them completely. People become completely disposable tools for making money” (p. 4). New slavery is “the total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation” (p. 6). This is a concise definition of neo-slavery, but what are its particular characteristics?

- Poverty is relative. Whatever the degree, it is a powerful incentive for selling oneself. Neo-slavery is fostered by the perception of poverty and the expectation of betterment.
- Hope is the cruelty that maintains the system. Hope is the shackle and lash framing the concept of neo-slavery. Hope loses its power to control when its aims are realized. Like Sisyphus, neo-slaves never quite make it up the hill, hope always recedes over the horizon.
- Neo-slaves purchase hope with their rights. Expectations are the coin with which seafarers are purchased. Once purchased, the neo-slave transfers his or her personal sovereignty to a Master.

- Defenseless against the imbalance of power, their weakness ratified by contract, sustained by context, and enforced by structural violence, neo-slaves are essentially powerless. They can only look for justice defined by others and often by those benefiting most from their slavery.
- The dynamo of neo-slavery is the redundancy of labor. Everybody is expendable or disposable. On a global level there is an almost infinite supply of workers. Virtually, every business activity is a moveable plantation and can go wherever people are cheapest. And, when the business cannot move, the labor force can be brought to it and, unlike traditional slavery, a neo-slave is not an investment. They lack even the last resort of slaves, suicide, destruction of the owners' human capital.
- Mobility and misdirection is the context of the neo-slave system. Questions of injustice are evaded by readily shifting operations. It is all too easy to distract society with irrelevancies. The cloak of invisibility -- the absence of a counter-narrative -- prevents neo-slavery from being dragged into the open. Injustice flourishes when a public is deprived of alternatives and *what is* is unquestioned. Without a counter-narrative, debate is impossible. Under these conditions, the justice or injustice of contemporary globalization, certainly in the international merchant marine, will never be examined.

- Like a ship, the new slavery operates in isolation. Even ashore, neo-slaves tend to be segregated by language, by appearance and, perhaps, by fear. Surveillance is easy and constant, privacy is negligible, and retribution is easy. Isolation submerges the will to challenge authority. All facets of resistance are undercut by separation. Too often, the new slaveholders, like the old, control by division – cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, and social.
- Citizen as commodity is the modern analogue of the tribal chief selling his subjects. Governments' of lesser developed states perceive the pursuit of economic advantage as greater than the interests of its citizens. The export of people is a sure source of hard currency and investment funds.
- If one is stripped of nationality, culture, and family, in essence identity, one has little strength to resist. Alienation was a foundation for slavery and is a prop to neo-slavery. Neo-slaves work to feed their families, but in the merchant marine, as with migrant workers, their labor means divorce from the family, a status of perpetual alien. Often working away from the family, the neo-slave may no longer be a part of the family narrative, he or she is transformed into a mere economic provider.
- As an economic resource whose only value derives from his labor the neo-slave must participate in his own enslavement. To fail in his role is to be *de*-valued. To

succeed forces him to identify with his oppressor. And this endows neo-slavery with a veil of legitimacy.

Conclusion

We are controlled by what we are told. Our uncritical acceptance of, and our control by those setting the narrative, leaves us crippled, blind. And most of us are content living a fiction. We are re-assured, reinforced by the notion that what is *is* best. Like Candide, we gladly accept a world defined by Pangloss' glowing assurances that all is well. The secret of our contemporary Pangloss is, as it always was, the disconnect with reality, the disconnect from the humanity that is fundamental to economics. We have become prisoners of theories, of abstractions and of false measurement.

The *Agios Minas* was no abstraction. It was hard reality in microcosm. In two hundred feet of rusted metal, occupied by eight typical human beings, the reality of work in an anarchic global economy is revealed.

Without a human face, "low costs everyday" are all too easy to accept. We are able to rationalize our advantages, comforts, because we do not see the sweat, the psychological and physical suffering, that underlays our advantages. We are in a real sense what Socratic philosophers described as *idiots*: those who do not care about the common good. We in the developed world are most un-common, the majority of people live at levels far below ours, and it is easy to defend our privilege by a willing blindness. In short, we accept the dominant narrative

and in that narrative exploitation becomes accepted policy. Without a counter-narrative there is no challenge.

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