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AGORA

Aboard the 'Commonist Lifeboat': Metaphor, custom, materiality

Response to Itamar Mann Agora

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Abstract

In *From Survival Cannibalism to Climate Politics* (2025) as well as in *Law and Politics from the Sea* (2024) Mann proposes the 'commonist lifeboat' as a political metaphor for the age of climate change. This response to Itamar Mann's re-reading of *Regina vs. Dudley and Stephens* proposes a materialist reading of his political theory of the 'commonist lifeboat', arguing that the lifeboat may be a metaphorical *and* practical site from which alternatives to our current ways of doing and thinking about politics in times of climate crisis might emerge. The text brings Mann's lifeboat into conversation with my own and other scholars' work on radical vessels – historical and contemporary – in order to demonstrate and expand its analytical capacity as a more-than-metaphorical term. Building on Mann's use of the lifeboat as a *metaphor* and a site of maritime *custom*, I propose to understand the 'commonist lifeboat' also as a *material* container that operates in a specific material environment: the sea. I argue that a focus on the materiality of the sea and of the lifeboat may point to political practice, community and customs *yet to be invented*, which may help us navigate the turbulent political environment of our time.

Keywords: lifeboat; maritime; materiality; ocean activism; solidarity

Introduction

In *From Survival Cannibalism to Climate Politics* (2025) as well as in *Law and Politics from the Sea* Mann proposes the 'commonist lifeboat' as a 'metaphor for politics in the age of climate crisis' (2024: 2). Mann distinguishes his concept of the lifeboat from two other ways in which the term has been used: (1) the 'providential' lifeboat, a universalist iteration, according to which climate change puts us 'all in the same boat' and which risks ignoring how ecological issues intersect with global injustices and class-based inequalities; and (2) the 'armed' or 'catastrophic' lifeboat, which merely saves the rich and powerful according to a nationalist logic. By contrast, Mann's 'commonist lifeboat',

inspired by the work of Linebaugh and Rediker (2013), describes a kind of grassroots transnationalism or 'cosmopolitanism 'from below" (Mann 2024: 94) that derives from vessel-based customs and rethinks the meaning of law and politics from the bottom up.

This response focusses on the final part of Mann's *From Survival Cannibalism to Climate Politics* and discusses how the lifeboat may be a metaphorical *and* practical site from which alternatives to our current ways of doing and thinking about politics in times of climate crisis might emerge. As a social movement ethnographer working with a specific focus on transnational and maritime civil society, I share Mann's ambition to rethink politics from the bottom up, and, indeed, from aboard radical vessels. In my ongoing work, I investigate what it means for civil society actors to *act politically at sea* by joining activists on ships and into the water across different struggles: from civil sea rescue actors to conservation divers and marine environmental activists (Scharenberg 2024, 2025). My argument in this text derives thus from shore-, underwater- and ship-based ethnography that has been undertaken in and at European seas, including participant observation conducted *aboard* civil sea rescue vessels in the Mediterranean.

Taking a ship-based view, the aim of this response is to demonstrate that Mann's 'commonist lifeboat' may fruitfully be brought into discussion with accounts of other radical vessels, whether historical or contemporary. I propose that we figuratively and literally *board these vessels*, which reveals the 'commonist lifeboat' to be not only a useful political metaphor, but a site from which political alternatives that may help us navigate the contemporary climate crisis may emerge from radical political practice and maritime customs *as well as* the materiality of the sea and this ship itself. What I will ultimately suggest is that we may theorise the lifeboat not only via its associated *customs* but also in terms of its *material* qualities to expand the term's analytical capacity.

Metaphor

When slave ships embarked on the Middle Passage throughout the centuries-long period of the transatlantic trade of enslaved people, they often carried an object called a *speculum oris.* A *speculum oris* is a metallic device that was originally 'designed by surgeons to deal with lock- jaw' (Walvin 2011: 36–37). Slave ships, however, carried a *speculum oris* for a different reason, for the refusal of food was a widespread strategy of resisting the horrors of enslavement. Indeed, this form of resistance was so important that historian Marcus Rediker (2007) argues we may think of the transatlantic trade of enslaved people as a four-hundred-years hunger strike. The *speculum oris*, thus, was taken onboard *in anticipation of respective strikes* and used to 'force-feed resistant Africans' (Walvin 2011: 37).

While particularly horrific, the *speculum oris* was not the only means by which the anticipation of resistance was *built into ship design.* To prevent people from jumping overboard, that is, choosing death by drowning over the enslavement in the plantations, nets were installed around the vessel or people chained to the deck (Rediker 2007; Walvin 2011). Moreover, to anticipate rebellions, ships were specifically built:

> 'Some ships had a raised 'after-deck', with mounted guns, to provide the crew with a vantage from which to muster a defence against possible slave revolt. Other ships had a barrier, *a barricado*, behind which the crew could defend themselves against rebellious Africans' (Walvin 2011: 36).

What the built-in anticipation of resistance on slave ships tells us, then, is that ships can be both: an essential technology of colonial capitalism *and* a site of resistance (Linebaugh and

Rediker 2013; Scharenberg, 2025, Vessels of Solidarity). Thus, for the decolonial scholar Malcolm Ferdinand, slave ships are 'a *political metaphor* for the world', because they hold the capacity 'to concentrate the world within them':

> 'From Christopher Columbus's *Niña* to container ships, from trawlers to warships, from whalers to oil tankers, from slave ships to migrant ships capsizing in the Mediterranean, through their functions, routes, and cargo, ships reveal the relationships of the world.' (2022: 22, emphasis added).

Crucially, for Ferdinand, the metaphor of the slave ship does not only help us better understand the horrors of the transatlantic trade of enslaved people – it may also help us move beyond what he calls modernity's *double fracture* and think together both colonial and environmental injustices. Ferdinand, in a similar move to Mann's 'commonist lifeboat', mobilises the ship as a metaphor to radically rethink politics in times of climate crisis in the shape of what he calls a 'world-ship'.

As Mann demonstrates in an earlier article (2024), the use of ship metaphors is not new. Indeed, ships and lifeboats have been mobilised as metaphors throughout the history of political theory and philosophy. Mann himself cites one of the most famous examples: Plato's ship of state simile, in which the ship works both as a metaphor of good *and* bad governance. For Plato, 'a ship with an orderly crew and a competent steersman' represents 'his *ideal* city', while 'a ship with an unruly crew' stands for 'the Greek cities with which he was familiar and of Athens in particular' (Keyt 2006: 189). Foucault's often-cited idea of a ship as a 'heterotopia *par excellence*' (1986: 27) similarly captures this Janus-faced meaning of seagoing vessels, in which the vessel represents both the status quo *and* its radically different alternative. For Foucault, a ship is a heterotopia in the sense that it functions both as an 'instrument of economic development' *as well as* being 'the greatest reserve of the imagination': 'without boats, dreams dry up […] and the police take the place of pirates' (27).

Like in these famous examples of ships in political theory and philosophy Mann's contrasting analysis of the lifeboat metaphor as either 'providential', 'catastrophic' or 'commonist' reveals both the problems of the status quo *and* how we might move beyond it. As such, Mann's lifeboat can, first of all, be read as part of a wider history of employing ships as political *metaphors.* At the same time, what makes Mann's discussion of ships particularly compelling is that, for him, 'these lifeboats are not *only* metaphors' (2025: 2, original emphasis). Rather, Mann's – as well as Ferdinand's and Rediker's – use of the ship metaphor is 'historically grounded' (Mann 2025: 1). In his case, the metaphor of the 'commonist lifeboat' is, amongst other aspects, 'rooted in the historical realities of maritime custom' (22).

Custom

When the Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin wrote about mutual aid, he was inspired by a distinctly maritime iteration of the practice, namely the mutual agreement to provide support to people who find themselves in distress at sea:[1]

> 'The Lifeboat Association in this country, and similar institutions on the Continent, must be mentioned in the first place… The crews consist, however, of volunteers, whose readiness to sacrifice their lives for the rescue of absolute strangers to them is

[1]I owe this observation to my colleague Eloise Harding, who kindly pointed me towards this reference.

> put every year to a severe test; every winter the loss of several of the bravest among them stands on record. And if we ask these men what moves them to risk their lives, even when there is no reasonable chance of success, their answer is something on the following lines. A fearful snowstorm, blowing across the Channel, raged on the flat, sandy coast of a tiny village in Kent, and a small smack, laden with oranges, stranded on the sands near by. In these shallow waters only a flat-bottomed lifeboat of a simplified type can be kept, and to launch it during such a storm was to face an almost certain disaster… I asked [one of the men], how they came to make that desperate attempt? "I don't know myself," was his reply. …We all felt that something must be done' (2006: 227).

The UK's *Royal National Lifeboat Institution* (RNLI), originally called the *National Institution for the Preservation from Shipwreck*, which Kropotkin sees as a prime example of mutual aid, is but the institutionalised form of a custom that is much older than the organisation's inauguration in 1824. As Mann writes, the practice of rescuing people in distress at sea has existed for centuries. It is with reference to this 'larger normative universe that constituted the life of seafarers' that Mann develops his political theory of the 'commonist lifeboat' and within which, he argues, 'the duty of rescue and survival cannibalism' need to be understood (2025: 4). His theory of the 'commonist lifeboat' derives from a combination of the two, demonstrating that survival cannibalism onboard the *Mignionette* only makes sense in the wider context of the custom of rescue at sea, that is with the prospect of being rescued on the horizon.

I agree with Mann that a customs-focused analysis can give way to new political theories and practices. Elsewhere, Peter Rees and I show this by theorising the role of the sea in civil sea rescue to advance our understanding of solidarity with maritime migrants, based on ethnographic work conducted with civil society groups operating in the English Channel and the Mediterranean Sea (Scharenberg and Rees, 2024). Here, we show how reference to maritime customs was used to challenge illegal pushback practices developed in conjunction with the UK's Secretary of State for the Home Department, in which UK Border Force vessels were supposed to be used to physically push small boats transiting the English Channel back into French Waters. One of the organisations we conducted research with legally challenged the practice in a claim that was based in maritime law and drew on the Merchant Shipping (Distress Signals and Prevention of Collisions) Regulations 1996 (COLREGS) and the expertise of master mariner Captain John Simpson. Here, attention to maritime custom strengthened their case, for Simpson concluded that 'the pushback policy was "completely at odds with the *ordinary practice of seamen*, good seamanship and a contravention of the COLREGs" (emphasis added)' (6).

Crucially, however, Rees and I stress that we also need to pay attention to the materiality of the sea itself, for it is the *material specificity of the sea from which certain customs derive* in the first place. Mann acknowledges this in *From Survival Cannibalism to Climate Politics* when he argues that it would be 'impossible to understand the duty to rescue, without close attention to the role that weather played in nautical imagination' (2025: 8). Indeed, the weather and 'environmental characteristics of the sea', which seafarers are equally exposed to in their 'encounter between humans and nature', are a '*constitutive*' element for the custom of rescue to emerge (8, emphasis added). As Mann writes elsewhere: 'What enabled rival power to come together and formulate rules for mutual assistance between their ships was a common external enemy – nature' (2024: 94). Like in Kropotkin's description of the 'fearful snowstorm', Mann pays attention to numerous environmental aspects throughout his article, including sailors' 'dialogue with

water, moon, and marine life' such as turtles and, possibly, sharks (2025: 7–8); the very 'gale' that shipwrecked the *Mignionette* out at sea in the first place (3); or the lack of drinking water that led them to first consume a turtle, and later one of their fellow travellers, in anticipation of rescue by another ship. Comparing seafaring customs like the duty to rescue to other contexts, Mann also shows how 'in deserts too the natural threat has given birth to traditions of sharing, hospitality, and mutual assistance' (18).

It is such 'custom and local practices' of mutual aid that Mann values in his conclusion, arguing that 'careful consideration of custom can broaden our political horizon' (22). At the same time, Mann cautions us that it is not advisable to blindly follow *all* historical traditions and customs merely because they have existed for a long time. Given this note of caution regarding the application of custom in his conclusion, as well as his references to environmental aspects throughout his article, I want to suggest a complimentary, materialist reading of the 'commonist lifeboat', which understands the lifeboat not primarily as a metaphor or a site of customs, but asks how the materiality of the sea and the ship itself may shape alternative practices and *customs to come* that can help us navigate through an era of climate change.

Materiality

When I boarded a civil sea rescue vessel in a Central Mediterranean shipyard in the spring of 2023 as part of my ethnographic fieldwork with ocean activists (Scharenberg 2024, 2025), one of the first observations that particularly struck me was how much the materiality of the sea and, indeed, the ship itself seemed to matter for how solidarity with maritime migrants was practiced. While it is the EU's lethal migration policies that makes this kind of solidarity work necessary in the first place and which even actively limit solidarity actors' capacity to perform rescues, as several scholars have demonstrated (see, for instance, Mainwaring and DeBono 2021, Tazzioli, 2018), it was the materiality of the sea and its effects on the ship that shaped our daily routines in the shipyard:

> 'Barnacles and other sea creatures need to be removed from the hull to avoid drag in the water, rusty parts need to be replaced and bolts sealed to avoid seawater from coming into the ship, and the engine requires ongoing maintenance to avoid failure at sea.' (Scharenberg, 2025, p.8) At sea, too, the materiality of the ocean matters for how solidarity is enacted (Scharenberg, 2025; see also Scharenberg and Rees, 2024). Wind, weather and waves all impact on how solidarity can be practiced and how sea rescue is coordinated between different groups operating rescue vessels of varying capacities in size and speed as part of a wider 'civil fleet' (Stierl 2023: 356). What I show in my own work is that the material need to collaborate in the shipyard and aboard rescue vessels at sea helps to sustains relations of transversal solidarity between different kinds of actors across space *and* time (Scharenberg, 2025). Ships, in other words, are the containers holding together a 'motley crew' (Linebaugh and Rediker 2013: 165).

Indeed, over the last decade, geographic scholarship of the ocean has already demonstrated why attention to the sea's elemental qualities, including its wetness, movement and turbulence, matters for how we understand ocean politics and governance (for instance, Steinberg and Peter 2015, Lehman et al. 2021). What my brief anecdote from the shipyard demonstrates, then, is that the ship's materiality, too, is worth considering in this context (Scharenberg 2024, 2025). Once again, besides discussing the marine

environmental aspects of *Regina vs. Dudley and Stephens*, Mann also acknowledges the need to pay attention to the materiality of lifeboats elsewhere in his work. In a co-written article with Keady-Tabbal, the authors demonstrate how the materiality of the lifeboat gets weaponised as a tool of border violence in the context of Europe's so-called 'migration management' in the Aegean, 'transforming life-saving materials into life-threatening ones' (2023: 62)

Crucially, however, attention to the materiality of ships can not only help us better understand the status quo of ocean politics but also lead to a new understanding of political theory and practice. What my discussion of the material politics of civil sea rescue ships revealed is that what emerges here is an alternative way of organising political community. Rather than being organised along the borders of nation states, this community is held together by what I call 'vessels of solidarity', which work according to a different spatial logic that connects solidarity actors 'across categorical, spatial and temporal boundaries' (Scharenberg, 2025, p. 8). Linked by the vessels' material need for labour, resources and collaboration between different organisations as well as with solidarity cities and ports in which the ships receive further support and shelter, respective infrastructures of solidarity illustrate how political community may be organised beyond sedentary forms of kinship (see also Scharenberg and Rees, 2024).

The story of the *speculum oris* – the metal object used to force-feed enslaved people on hunger strike during the Middle Passage – which I mentioned earlier in this text, is another case in point of how alternative forms of kinship can come into being via the material conditions aboard ships. Rediker shows how the term 'shipmate' was used by people who had survived the horrors of the Middle Passage to refer to a kind of 'seafaring kinship' that derived from shared experiences of the daily torture but also acts of resistance onboard slave vessels (2007: 306). The term kinship, here, is broadened 'from immediate family…to the whole of the lower deck': This kinship is based on having had the same food, having slept on the same planks, having 'shared violence, terror, and difficult conditions, as well as resistance, community, and finally survival on the lower deck of the slave ship', and forms what Rediker understands as 'miniature mutual-aid societies' (304–306). Kinship, in other words, is derived, quite literally, from having been *in the same boat* together. Here, more than a metaphor, the ship is a material site of radical political practice from which alternative conceptions of community might emerge.

Conclusion

This response to Itamar Mann's re-reading of *Regina vs. Dudley and Stephens* proposed a materialist reading of Mann's political theory of the 'commonist lifeboat'. I brought Mann's lifeboat into conversation with my own and other scholars' work on radical vessels to demonstrate and expand its analytical capacity as a more-than-metaphorical term. Building on Mann's use of the lifeboat as a metaphor and a site of maritime custom, I proposed to understand the 'commonist lifeboat' also as a material container that operates in a specific material environment: the sea.

While I agree with Mann that paying close attention to maritime customs and the social environment in which they come into being can be a fruitful way to expand our horizon in terms of what is politically possible and desirable in times of climate change, my proposed focus on materiality expands and complements his approach. It urges us to take a further step back and start not (only) from maritime customs but from the sea's and the ship's material specificities *from which maritime customs and mutual aid communities*

derive in the first place (such as the duty to rescue or the seafaring kinship of enslaved people during the Middle Passage).

By *literally* boarding 'commonist lifeboats', or what I have called, in my own work, 'vessels of solidarity' (Scharenberg, 2025), I have demonstrated how alternative political theories and 'opportunities for transnational solidarity' (Mann 2024: 94) in times of climate crisis can come into view. Indeed, a focus on the materiality of the sea and of the lifeboat may thus point to political concepts, communities, and *customs yet to be invented* in order to help us navigate the turbulent political environment of our time.

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