

Olof Hasslöf: *Svenska Västkustfiskarna*

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What characterises the social organisation of coastal communities and fishermen's working culture? These were central questions discussed by Swedish ethnographer Olof Hasslöf in his influential dissertation *Svenska Västkustfiskarna* from 1949. Hasslöf's work formed the basis of much Scandinavian research on maritime communities in the decades following its publication. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Hasslöf established a paradigm for maritime ethnography.

Hasslöf analysed the development of the Swedish coastal communities, mainly in the county of Bohuslän, from the Middle Ages to the 1940s. He described how the fishermen organised their work and focused on their working culture. Hasslöf analysed the fishermen's working teams and the cooperation within the maritime communities. He achieved this despite the fact that the fishermen had produced only a few written sources themselves. Before the twentieth century most sources regarding fishing communities came from government agencies or from academics. It was difficult to understand the social structure of the maritime communities based on such external observations. Hasslöf bypassed this problem, however, by using ethnographic interviews, and let the fishermen and their families speak for themselves. Some of the interviewees were born as early as the 1850s. The interviews are preserved and readily accessible in museum archives in Göteborg and Uddevalla in Sweden.

Hasslöf concluded that the Bohuslän fishermen had a very strong, democratic and cooperative social organisation. They organised in boat-fellowships and owned the gear and the vessels themselves. The Bohuslän communities were characterised by egalitarianism and solidarity. In contrast, the Swedish Baltic Sea fishermen were controlled by landowners. The fishermen worked within a hierarchical social organisation, in which onshore, capitalist companies were in control of the fisheries. Such company ownership of vessels and gear was successfully opposed in Bohuslän where the fishermen remained independent from outside capitalists. The Bohuslän fishermen warned each other against

company ownership and emphasized solidarity in order to preserve their position as free men in free teams.

By contrasting an egalitarian, democratic social organisation with hierarchical, capitalist structures, Hasslöf developed an influential model for maritime research. Though published more than fifty years ago, Hasslöf's model discussed central issues, which are still relevant to discuss for maritime historians and ethnographer working with the social dynamics in coastal communities.

Olof Hasslöf, *Svenska Västkustfiskarna*

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