

Book Review

Transforming the Fisheries: Neoliberalism, Nature and the Commons by Patrick Bresnihan, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2018, x + 225 pp., US\$25.00 (paperback), ISBN 0- 978-1-4962-0640-4.

Introduction

Winner of the Geographical Society of Ireland's Book of the Year Award in 2018, this fine and ambitious book uses the Irish Fisheries sector as a case study of resource management that extends to much wider discussion on neoliberalism, the 'commons' and environmental governmentality. It draws from a rich set of theoretical framings from Malthus and Foucault to Barad and Swyngedouw but combines this with deep personal research to identify the complex more-than-human assemblages that act themselves out in Irish fisheries practice and policy. It skillfully shows how older discussions on the commons and enclosure reemerge in new and complex ways in contemporary society, within which the slippery blue spaces of fish and fishing communities interact with the equally slippery spaces and strands of contemporary neoliberalism and wider blue economic policy. It is perhaps no coincidence that many EU regulations use the term 'commons', with the Common Fisheries Policy (CAP) being the key one discussed in the book. While the book is complex and at times I longed for a glossary of the acronyms, it does provide some rich explanatory endnotes that help readers of all types. The introduction provides some important contextual information on older liberal and newer neoliberal takes on how demand for resources, in this case fish, can be seen through several lenses, from scarcity and pressure to sustainable management and beyond. Along with an introduction and conclusion, the first three chapters of the book set the scene in terms of policy and theory, though this is balanced all through by empirical content. A fourth more explicitly empirical chapter gives voices to the everyday lived geographies from and in the water as well as those of key-stakeholders from the policy and governance side.

Chapter Two, entitled, *End of the Line: Scarcity, Liberalism and Enclosure* provides a well-argued account of shifting thinking on resources management from a freedom to regulation. While laissez-faire liberalism is introduced as one approach, there is a very interesting historical comparison with Foucault's writing on grain scarcity in eighteenth-century France; reframing it as a way of working with scarcity in relation to fish stocks, universally acknowledgment to be in genuine danger at a global scale. More usefully, he draws on Foucault's ideas of governmentality to begin to think around the

unruly subjects of the book, and how specific marked forces shape policy and practice in the fisheries sector. Bresnihan brings this idea alive with specific empirical content from his own research around discards and by-product and tensions between scientific measurement and a more realistic take on fish stocks which are by their nature variable and unpredictable. The chapter provides a nice intermeshing of policy intent and subtext, blue experience and wider theory around the governance of nature as political economy. It successfully argues that there are internal illogics in using science and measurement in the fluid and unpredictable spaces of the sea and the more-than-human subjects who live in and out of it. But more broadly, it sets out one policy position on fisheries managements in terms of economic governmentality.

Chapter Three, entitled, *Stewards of the Sea: Neoliberalism and the making of the Environmental Entrepreneur*, presents a different slant on governmentality and how new tools of neoliberalism create a form of environmental governance, drawing from wider debates on green, and by extension, blue economies. This model feels closer to Foucault's take on a self-regulatory governmentality identifying how discourse and terminologies mark such shifts in thinking. Bresnihan provides some striking examples, such as the rebranding from fishing to seafood industry (from practice to product) alongside mechanisms that promote a new type of eco-responsibilisation. He explores this clearly through the model of eco-accreditation (Marine Stewardship Council) and how a supposed freedom for fishermen and women brought by this opportunity, in fact creates competition around labelling and almost impossible to achieve targets for accreditation, made evident by the very small number of accreditations achieved in Ireland. Even with BIM, the Irish Fisheries Board, offering stop gap variants to encourage take-up, this neoliberal model of environmental entrepreneurship is almost impossible to implement. The chapter does mix in some good empirical material, especially from key informants on how such policies play out on the water, but the chapter also provides a very helpful explanation of the differences between liberalism and neoliberalism; the former presented as *laissez faire* and natural; the latter with an added artificial conditional competition component. Yet both are perversely highly regulated and the inclusion of Swyngebouw's idea of governance-beyond-the-state idea is helpful in developing the arguments in the book. In particular, the role of the state in resource management of the Irish fisheries shows a shift from a direct management to a more indirect, from-the-side position, often hiding behind wider EU directives. This is an approach not solely to be found in the fisheries section which as Bresnihan notes elsewhere, also applies in other sectors such as health and education.

Chapter Four, called, *Community-Managed Resources: A 'Third Way' for environmental governmentality*, is interestingly one of the shortest in the book and feels a tad under-developed relative to other parts of the book. It uses lobster fishing as a mini-case study to describe how a collective approach might appear as an effective compromise solution that produces a shared governmentality. Using the widely documented best-practice model of the Maine Lobster Fisheries, the chapter provides sound empirical reasoning as to why the translation of such 'best-practice' models don't always work, often for

specifically geographical and place-based reasons. What works in Maine is less effective in Ireland, where looser legal regulation and individual licences allowed in Ireland have a real impact. In addition, there is a sort of fluid cartography at play here that Bresnihan notes, wherein enclosure-like lines drawn on a land map are harder to fix on water. The section of the book also teases out an idea from geospatial thinking around how hard a fixed centralized model of governance works and how this might need to be better seen as, geographically-weighted. Finally, the chapter uses actor-network theory to introduce the fish as a key actant – almost a blue form of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome – that follows all the relational rules of being fluid, mobile, hybrid, elusive, liminal in its own subjectivities and in relation to humans. As the book shows, finding and catching fish is as complex a process as selling and marketing them.

The fifth and richest chapter in empirical terms is called, *The More-Than-Human Commons: From Commons to Commoning* and is a section that gives voice to the fishing communities and indeed to the researcher himself. Here, based mostly on the author’s 16-month stay in Casteltownbeare, a long-established but threatened fishing community in West Cork, we get a fuller sense of the lived geographies of those communities. This chapter really works for anyone interested in applying ‘more-than’ perspectives in geographical research and introduces that theoretical idea through a blended and braided exploration of nature-culture that includes human emotions alongside aspects of fairness, care and reciprocity. In living and interacting within a fishing community the reality of trying to work in a hyper-regulated local place that sits relationally within a weirdly free and global environment emerged beautifully. Indeed, it was especially affective to see the voice and body of the author emerge in this section and how his direct immersion in place helped to really produce thick description. His own intimate sensing, all part of an active and proactive mapping of lived regulation in place, is also central to that approach. The innovative model of commoning, described neatly across pages 149-150, are really at the heart of the book and present an alternative model of the new commons. Used in verb form, he presents a model of communing as a flow/circulation of resources that works more effectively in place, when compared with models that see limiting access to a resource as the best way to protect it. This is nicely exemplified in how bait is sourced, illegally on one level, but also as a very real example of a shared-care disposal of surplus within an active and pragmatic community, struggling to survive. That teasing out of how to manage limits, illustrated with some excellent quotes from Illich and Linebaugh also tell us something about liminality more widely, in marginal places on the edge of land and sea, where human deeds matter more than title deeds.

This chapter also provides a blue variant of Ingold’s interpretation of Bruegel’s *The Harvesters* as a taskscape, as well as invoking Barad’s idea of intra-action; both examples of a rich take-home theory emerging from an equally rich empirical content. In providing accounts of everyday experience of policy in action, one begins to see how crude governmentality assumes a self-organising body of people responding to a form of managerial control set by policy and directives. Yet as Bresnihan’s research shows, without a lived and experiential dimension, both direct and indirect policy implementation can

become almost directionless. While there are hints in the book of an admiration for a rugged individualism, this would be an unfair position. The book is much more even-handed, recognizing how complex assemblages of experiential lived responses provide a deeper description of how fishing as a livelihood and fishing policy interact. In this excellent embodied deep mapping of place, practice, people and more-than-human assemblages, the richness of the author's own experience as a researcher also shine through. I would almost have liked to see more of this, such as his account of a night on a deep-sea trawler that showed an admirable commitment to an ethnographically framed research approach. It's also a methodological lesson to new postgraduate researchers that when you literally throw yourself into it rather than poking around the edges of reports and interviews, a richer knowledge can sometimes emerge.

The book concludes with a final section that brings the empirical, theoretical and policy strands back together under the title, *Neoliberalism and the Commons*. It also proposes an alter-politics of the commons, one that draws from the co-productive relationships with land and water to be found in indigenous practices in the Global South. Perhaps the idea of *One Health* (where humans, more-than-humans, pathogens and cures are all in a constant flow) might be extended to *One Water* but the book sets this out neatly in a new ecological commons practice that is not a fourth or fifth approach to governmentality. The book starts with Malthus and ends with John Clare and it's hard not to think too of songs that encapsulate those themes, Dick Gaughan's *The World Turned Upside Down* and Chris Wood's *Mad John*, both of which recount enclosure as actually a form of internal colonialism in which 'chain is laid upon the land, the straightened stream has lost her bend'. Perhaps more protest sea-shanties are needed. In this rich and always beautifully-written account of how we can still work with an idea of the commons and the act of commoning that is not backward-looking and works around new shifts in environmental governance, Patrick Bresnihan has given us new ways of thinking and seeing the spatial and social constraints within which modern fishing operates but that can continue to do so in a caring and sustainable way.

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