

Patrick Bresnihan, *Transforming the Fisheries: Neoliberalism, Nature, and the Commons*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8032-5425-1 (cloth)

Little disagreement exists that there is a crisis of overfishing in many parts of the world. What is more contentious are the reasons for this crisis and how to address it. In *Transforming the Fisheries: Neoliberalism, Nature, and the Commons*, Patrick Bresnihan examines how the European Union has responded to the fisheries crisis, focussing on Ireland's implementation of its policies. According to Bresnihan, the EU had two choices, either going back to a time when large numbers derived their livelihood from the sea through primarily inshore fishing, or further modernizing European industrial fisheries. Bresnihan makes the case that the EU opted for modernizing fisheries to meet the challenges of globalization. He explores the case of Ireland specifically, examining how and with what consequences its fisheries have changed over the last few decades.

Bresnihan's excellent book tries to make sense of this choice and its implications for Irish fishermen. His conceptual starting point is the much maligned Malthus, remembered by most for his lifeboat ethics and socially regressive solutions to "overpopulation". Bresnihan argues that such readings of Malthus are limiting and suggests instead that Malthus might be read as a liberal who alerted us to what he perceived of as the "natural limits" of human progress. *Transforming the Fisheries* is a critique of liberal and neoliberal responses to the decline of fish stocks that see the crisis of overfishing as a case of these natural limits being crossed. Bresnihan makes the counter-case that capitalist modernity is at the heart of the fishing crisis, and is far from natural or linear.

Transforming the Fisheries is part of a wider literature that has aimed at understanding the processes and practices of neoliberalism (for a critical overview, see Castree 2008a, 2008b; for a critique of neoliberal fisheries, see Mansfield 2004; Ruddle and Davis 2013). Bresnihan's concern is that this literature has, by emphasizing the hybridity of neoliberal processes and the heterogeneity of neoliberalism itself, perhaps undermined "our capacity to grasp the force of

neoliberalism as the governing rationality of contemporary life” (p.11). He attempts to address this impasse by analysing liberal and neoliberal responses to the fisheries crisis through the lens of Marxist political economy and the Foucauldian concept of biopower. Bresnihan makes the case that nature is not external to human action but the product of human intervention.

Bresnihan’s focus on biopower to understand the institutional form liberal and neoliberal rationalities take in particular contexts is of utmost importance. Much current analysis of neoliberalism is of the ideologically “strong” variety that sees it as a phase of capital accumulation supportive of elite interests (Arsel and Büscher 2012; Fairhead et al. 2012). More attention needs to be given, as Bresnihan argues, to the regulatory and institutional problem solving dimensions of neoliberalism. What he calls “tactics” are instruments through which governments respond to “particular social and environmental phenomena” (p.12) as a way to solve problems and help discipline subjects.

The 2013 iteration of the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) was Europe’s liberal¹ response to overfishing. The top-down quota regime had failed because it sought to regulate and enforce as opposed to facilitate and enable. Fishers, in order to deal with quota restrictions, discarded excess fish at sea, not only resulting in unreliable biological data on fish catch but also in inefficient and unsustainable fishing practices. The CFP highlighted the need to “work with and through the actions of fishermen rather than trying to control them directly” (p.27) so as to achieve “maximum sustainable yield”. In order to do so, the CFP introduced a ban on discarding and highlighted the importance of transferable quotas. While the discard ban would force fishers to improve their knowledge of fish behaviour and be more selective in their fishing methods, transferable quotas would allow them to either buy or lease more allowance from other, less efficient fishermen if they exceeded their original allocation. Bresnihan concludes that the CFP constituted new liberal “regimes of truth” (p.41) aimed at understanding and dealing with scarcity that imagined nature as *bioeconomic* nature, i.e. a meshing of biological factors with

¹ Bresnihan terms this updated CFP “liberal” because it aims, through the introduction of individual transferable quotas (ITQs), to shape the self-interested economic behaviour of fishermen.

those of economic self-interest. Their relative success, in terms of the adoption of neoliberal discourses and their partial implementation, was because they were seen by some fishermen as “pragmatic responses” to the crisis of overfishing.

In Chapter 3 Bresnihan turns his focus to neoliberalism and the green economy. Since the early 2000s and the reality of dwindling fish stocks, Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM), the Irish state agency in charge of developing the fishing industry, has increasingly stressed the importance of generating value in new ways. One of BIM’s foci has been to promote environmental accreditation of the fishing industry. As part of this, BIM introduced the “Environmental Management System” which enables fishermen to advertise their environmental credentials and apply for international eco-accreditation with the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), the gold standard of eco-accreditation. West Cork Marine, a family-run company in Castletownbere, the fishing port where the author conducted his research, processes and then exports shellfish from Iceland and has MSC certification. West Cork Marine is in the minority, however; MSC’s gold standard is difficult to attain, so BIM is also implementing a transitional eco-standard called the “Responsibly Sourced Standard”; those who meet these standards, for example the Irish South and West Fish Producers Organisation, label their products with a sticker saying “Quality Seafood Program”.

Bresnihan distinguishes between liberal individual transferable quotas (ITQs) and neoliberal green valuation. His contention is that ITQs, while also aimed at changing fishermen’s practices to make them more efficient do so primarily keeping in mind the “natural” biological health of fish stocks. Neoliberal green accreditation schemes, on the other hand, are only limited in theory by a fishermen’s willingness or not to commit himself to the environment. As Bresnihan puts it, BIM’s Environmental Management System is “a specifically neoliberal technology because it measures and evaluates individual performance in order to compare it with others” (p.72). I would argue that ITQs do a similar thing. Perhaps a better distinction, therefore, is between neoliberal governmentalities and neoliberal environmentalities (Fletcher 2010).

Bresnihan goes on to argue that recent initiatives such as community-managed inshore fisheries in Ireland, too, must be understood as a liberal response to overfishing. In other words, they are also predicated on changing the perceived unsustainable practices of fishermen and limiting the number of fishermen allowed to fish given the biological limits of the sea. Though inshore fisheries, or fisheries within six nautical miles of the coast, do not come under the jurisdiction of the CFP, inshore fishermen as early as the 1990s expressed concern about dwindling stocks of their main commercial catch, lobster. As a response, the government designated in 2008 16 territorial zones for lobster management. It was only in 2014, however, when the EU threatened Ireland with fines if it did not comply with Natura 2000 (a network of protected areas) directives to halt the destruction of biodiversity, that the Irish government at least rhetorically paid attention to biodiversity conservation in inshore areas. Though nothing came of EU threats or managed access to the lobster fishery, Bresnihan's contention is that community-based conceptualisations of the Ostrom-type that see the community as a set of rational individuals whose collective behaviour under certain conditions can be sustainable, are misplaced.² Instead of seeing the fishing problem as a result of capitalist overproduction, they see it as one of unsustainable individual behaviour.

While unpackaging what he calls the pragmatism and situatedness "that makes liberal forms of government so effective at managing the population" (p.12), Bresnihan pays equal attention to the exclusions that such governmentalities produce. Exclusions come in the form of enclosure. ITQs, for example, in the context of a ban on discards and a focus on efficiency, will necessarily result in smaller fishermen being sidelined because they are unable to invest in new technologies. Similarly, MSC accreditation involves an elaborate process of high procedural costs and large amounts of data gathering regarding the biological sustainability of fish stocks.

² Elinor Ostrom's (2008) main focus was on illustrating that Garrett Hardin's (1968) "tragedy of the commons" incorrectly assumed that rational individuals in trying to maximize their own utility would end up collectively destroying the commons. In doing so, however, Ostrom did not question the basis of a model that privileged the individual over the collective and hence did not pay attention to collective solutions that were premised on the common good not individual utility maximization.

There have only been three cases of accreditation in Ireland and they are unsurprisingly from the highly capital-intensive pelagic fleets (p.80). Caring for “liberal” environments is something that the smaller inshore fishermen cannot and often do not want to invest in. Take the example of the community-managed lobster fishery. Bresnihan highlights how many inshore fishermen have expressed concern that community management in its currently imagined form incorrectly assumes that the practices of inland fishermen are unsustainable and limits their catch in ways that would threaten their earnings. In the meantime, industrial fleets continue their plundering.

Bresnihan’s final move, and perhaps most important one in the context of searching for alternatives to industrial fishing, is to retrieve the moral economy of small-scale fishermen, which he argues provides a far more inclusive solution to overfishing. Having spent time with fishermen at their homes, over drinks, and in the sea, Bresnihan concludes that solutions to overfishing must not be found in exclusionary liberal governmentalities, including those of the commons, but in the act of commoning—the making and sharing of things amongst both humans and non-humans. Building on the work of Kevin St. Martin (2001, 2009), who has highlighted in detail the workings of non-capitalist moral economies in New England fisheries, Bresnihan problematizes the human/non-human binary to illustrate how Irish inshore fishermen depict their own relationship to the sea. Fishing is not about mastering knowledge and controlling nature, but rather about living with uncertainty. It is relational—dependent on relationships with other humans and also the more-than-human world. Caring for the sea is about looking after fellow fishermen and fisheries too and accepting the unpredictability of the sea.

Borrowing from sociologist Dimitris Papadopoulos (2010), Bresnihan makes a case for the “ecological commons” (p.174), an alternative biopolitics that challenges capitalist valorizations of nature. The recent adoption, in 2015, of the Food and Agriculture Organization’s “Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Alleviation” is a move in that direction. Small-scale fisheries globally account for the bulk of inshore fish catch and approximately half of total fish catch, as well as for 90 per cent of total harvest and post-harvest employment in fisheries. But the guidelines are

voluntary; many countries throughout the world, enmeshed in the global capitalist economy and reliant on fisheries exports, continue to subsidize large-scale industrial fishing fleets often at the expense of the small-scale sector. However, Aparna Sundar (2010) alerts us to the possibility that small-scale fishermen, who resist the growth of industrial fisheries and capitalist modernity, are themselves often integrated into the market logics of capitalist modernity in an attempt to improve their lives. As Bresnihan himself points out, the pernicious effects of neoliberal capitalism are due to the fact that they are aimed at “improvements”. While not all fishermen can participate in these neoliberal improvements because of the costs involved, they nonetheless act as enticements aimed at fostering new subjectivities (Agrawal 2005).

That said, *Transforming the Fisheries* is a must read as it is only through such situated ethnographies that it is possible to unpack the workings of neoliberalism. Its approach of seeing neoliberalism as productive, not only destructive, is necessary to understand how neoliberalism has managed to so successfully transform social and ecological relations in fisheries. The book is equally important in critiquing neoliberal governmentalities and their illiberal exclusions, and highlighting alternative, more-than-human imaginations of fisheries. To what extent the EU’s CFP is reflective of, and/or reflected in, developments in other parts of the non-Western world especially requires more attention given the vastly different ecologies of tropical fisheries.

References

- Agrawal A (2005) *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Arsel M and Büscher B (2012) Nature™ Inc.: Changes and continuities in neoliberal conservation and market-based environmental policy. *Development and Change* 43(1):53-78
- Castree N (2008a) Neoliberalising nature: The logics of deregulation and reregulation. *Environment and Planning A* 40(1):131-152
- Castree N (2008b) Neoliberalising nature: Processes, effects, and evaluations. *Environment and Planning A* 40(1):153-173
- Fairhead J, Leach M and Scoones I (2012) Green grabbing: A new appropriation of nature? *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39(2):237-261
- Fletcher R (2010) Neoliberal environmentality: Towards a poststructuralist political ecology of the conservation debate. *Conservation and Society* 8(3):171-181
- Hardin G (1968) The tragedy of the commons. *Science* 162(3859):1243-1248
- Mansfield B (2004) Neoliberalism in the ocean: "Rationalization", property rights, and the commons question. *Geoforum* 35:313-326
- Ostrom E (2008) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Papadopoulos D (2010) Insurgent posthumanism. *ephemera* 10(2):134-151
- Ruddle K and Davis A (2013) Human rights and neoliberalism in small-scale fisheries: Conjoined priorities and processes. *Marine Policy* 39:87-93
- St. Martin K (2001) Making space for community resource management in fisheries. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91(1):121-142



St. Martin K (2009) Toward a cartography of the commons: Constituting the political and economic possibilities of place. *The Professional Geographer* 61(4):493-507

Sundar A (2010) "Capitalist Transformation and the Evolution of Civil Society in a South Indian Fishery." Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Toronto

Ajit Menon
Madras Institute of Development Studies
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
ajit1112@gmail.com

February 2017