



Review of *Beyond the Tragedy in Global Fisheries*

D.G. Webster. 2015. *Beyond the Tragedy in Global Fisheries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 468 pages, ISBN 978-0-262-02955-1 Cloth (\$39.00).

Many critiques of modern environmental problems have focused on climate change. While certainly the most visible issue, as well as the widest-reaching, few sociologists have examined human impacts on the ocean, specifically with regard to fisheries. Oceans are a vital component of the Earth's ecosystem, covering over three-quarters of the planet and generating over half of its oxygen. Marine fisheries produced 148 million tons in 2010, valued at \$217.5 billion. In 2009, this supplied 16.6% of the world's protein intake, with higher proportions reported in developing and least developed countries.

D.G. Webster's *Beyond the Tragedy in Global Fisheries* offers a formidable history of (mis)management in the global fisheries system. The framework utilized by Webster, termed the Action Cycle/Structural Context (AC/SC) framework, offers a robust account of the decisions made within certain structural contexts, and how these have affected overfishing. The AC/SC framework is eminently dialectic and materialist in its approach, focusing on how technological, political, and economic trends (such as the broadening of production and consumption frontiers) have expanded the capacity of fisheries beyond the ecosystem's ability to maintain them.

The result is the history of capitalism—violence leading to the expansion and intensification of the system in order to increase profits in the face of declining supply—writ onto the fisheries industry. As fishers exhaust local supplies, they need bigger and better technology to locate and



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exploit more distant stocks. This technology is costly, and so banks and the financial system are brought into the production process, increasing and concentrating the amount of capital held by firms as they absorb each other until only the largest factor as real players. Access rights to fisheries are now enshrined in international law at the United Nations, but they were previously enforced by state violence, as military conquests meant expanded territory to fish (with fishers themselves often resorting to violence as well). Due to its greater size and the reduced number of serious players, the fisheries industry can clearly articulate its interests to governments, entrenching it as a political-economic power. However, the result of all this, as the AC/SC framework makes clear, is that powerful actors in the fisheries industry are insulated from negative ecosystem consequences, since the predominant mode of action has been to shift production elsewhere or intensify marketing efforts to stimulate consumption in order to maintain profit.

Despite its focus on a single industry, Webster's account of the history of fisheries management is exhaustive and at times exhausting. Webster examines a broad range of spheres of society that come to bear on fisheries, such as refrigeration and other preservation technologies, which were necessary to expand the market for fish beyond coastal regions, and marketing efforts to make certain species of fish more appealing to consumers (witness the orange roughy, formerly known as the slimehead). Webster also examines the role of science in fisheries management, which began in an attempt to determine the size of the stock and the amount that could be sustainably harvested. There are interesting parallels between how the fisheries industry has used science in advance of its own goals and how climate science has been rebuked by the fossil fuel industries.

At its core, *Beyond the Tragedy in Global Fisheries* is a detailed history of a specific industry, but it is told in a way that draws on connections to many other fields, such as political economy, political science, sociology, history, international relations, and economics. Unfortunately, the ecological impacts of overfishing too often lurk in the background, but this allows Webster to tell a more coherent story without having to constantly remind readers of the impending collapse of global fisheries. Webster's story focuses on the largest historical fish producers: the United States, the United Kingdom and continental Europe, and Japan. Impressively, the history reaches back beyond capitalism to provide an account of fishing in ancient and medieval times, although this period is necessarily less detailed than more recent history due to the lack of primary sources.

Overall, Webster's work succeeds as a dialectical history of global fisheries management. Although some sections might have benefitted from editing for length (the introduction is nearly sixty pages long, and other chapters are as long or longer), there is no doubting the detail and inexhaustibility of the account provided here. Because it tells a story familiar to critical students of capitalism, its somewhat niche subject matter has enough broad applicability to be appreciated

across a wide range of fields. Readers interested in this neglected, but by no means unimportant, facet of the modern environmental crisis would benefit greatly from this book.

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