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Published on H-Environment (March, 2024)
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Nature-Made Economy: Cod, Capital, and the Great Economization of the Ocean, by Kristin Asdal and Tone Huse, draws together disciplinary knowledges to explore and theorize on the production of capital in the historical and contemporary context. The authors’ backgrounds in science and technology studies (STS) and sociology ground the work firmly in social sciences, but the approach invites the humanities and economic disciplines to loosen their grip on their siloed knowledges in order to reconsider this intersection of economy and nature. Evidently, the authors draw on Bruno Latour’s argument about the instrumentalization of the sciences: that sciences “are equipped with instruments that shape their ways of seeing as well as their ways of moving and intervening” (p. 6).[1] In this vein, the book works with key notions of “little tools of valuation,” “valuation arrangement,” and “value orderings” to understand the operation(s) of economization across social, economic, and scientific terrains.

The book also methodologically works to unpack the assumptions that exist between experienced realities of place and documents describing those realities; the authors strive to “take the two site typologies of place and paper to be equally rich social realities,” a concept that helps to expand possibilities for analysis beyond data drawn solely from documents (p. 8). In the world of environmental humanities, this approach is fruitful for exploring the many restrictions encountered in more-than-human explorations of past and present lifeworlds. The “document species” that Asdal and Huse describe offer useful frames to add elements of agency and power relations into the analysis.

As the introduction and first chapter of the book explain, Nature-Made Economy builds on the work of STS scholars to examine the intersection of valuation studies and STS in order to understand the process(es) of economization and co-modification in the specific case of cod fish. Cod, a
fish that has already received interesting scholarly attention in the environmentally interested humanities and social sciences, is simultaneously considered as “the bio” and the “biocapital” in this book—a difficult balance to keep when the fish is valued, appraised, and traded in both its living and deceased forms, and when the fish are creatures with their own agencies. As the second part of the book’s title—“the Great Economization of the Ocean”—indicates, while it is human-cod interactions in context of capitalism that are explored, these assemblages are used to draw out, and contribute to, the blue humanities’ exploration of the ocean as a site for thinking with and about water.

This book articulates the value that humanities lend to the question of the economic. It demonstrates the possibilities of treating the economy as a contingent process rather than a finite and discoverable thing in the world and allows for scrutiny on the decisions and implications of treating the economy as given. The empirical-economy exploration in this book is illuminating and connects threads of scholarly concern across disciplines in a way that helps to bring old questions into new territory. In seeking complexity and the empirical in the economy, the authors are able to stay “attuned to the elusive, the messy, and the qualitative” that emerge in the economic (p. 5).

At times Asdal and Huse’s exploration of the theoretical does not acknowledge the contingencies of place and culture as explicitly as it might. Processes and assumptions are sometimes generalized to an extent that may imply more universal conclusions than the data warrants. But the conclusion of the book addresses this occasional shortcoming, acknowledging that, just as “the economy” cannot be seen as a monolithic and a cultural entity, the processes and assumptions made within and for the commodity worlds of cod are likewise contingent on time, place, culture, and language. The authors invite further scholarship exploring the methods and theories presented in Nature-Made Economy to build out more nuanced and complex series of economizations that make up the production of the economic beyond the specifics of their own field, a prospect that occurred to me many times in reading through the book, considering commodified (and co-modified) nature more familiar to me.

After the first chapter, which describes and explains the theoretical and analytical basis for the chapters and ideas to follow, chapter 2 tackles the “radical reordering and revaluing of the ocean that took place in the decades following World War II and the introduction of offshore drilling for petroleum” (p. 13). This chapter engages with three ideas of the ocean as commons and the competing political and extractive agendas that arise in these water spaces. Chapter 3 examines the history of scientific intervention on cod bodies in the 1960s and 1970s and the shift toward the industrial farming of this species. Biocapitalization is a key concept in this chapter, which begins to examine the two-way street of “co-modification” that Asdal has elsewhere introduced. [2] Chapter 4 moves into the 1980s, following shifting and competing uses of ocean spaces. The growth of ocean economies and a push to expand investments and spaces came up against solidifying notions of limits to growth, which are drawn out in reference to the changing cod fishing (and fishing industry more broadly) scene in Norway.

Chapter 5 explores the innovation economy and the failure of the “revolutionary” cod farming industry despite the industry’s best attempts to adjust and innovate to overcome limitations. Asdal and Huse argue that in the space of innovation, nature is taken in to the economy through the instrumentalizing of science. Chapter 6 attends to pricing and the “more-than-market” beyond the flattened space of economy, encountering agency that extends beyond the death of cod in co-modifying market conditions. Chapter 7 follows cod commodity into China, where the functions of particular state agencies are extended beyond tradition-
ally conceived boundaries between state entities and between public and private enterprise. The final chapter draws the chapters together to summarize how the approaches explored within the book demonstrate the utility of empirical work in answering economic questions.

*Nature-Made Economy* offers much to the broad environmental humanities in its specific analyses of cod and economic worlds, its theorizing, and its methods. Burgeoning scholarship examining (and reexamining) histories of capitalism at the intersection of environmental histories, for example, could easily take much from Asdal and Huse’s approach and could test the ideas in the context of past economic worlds and economizations within and beyond the ocean.

Note that this book is available online open access through its publisher, MIT Press. At the time of writing, the open access digital version had typing and editing errors that have been corrected for the hard-copy version.

Notes


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