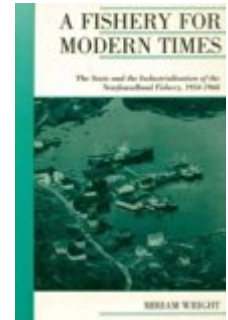


Miriam Wright. *A Fishery for Modern Times: The State and the Industrialization of the Newfoundland Fishery, 1934-1968.* The Canadian Social History Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. viii + 196 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-541620-6.



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Too Many Fishermen or Too Much Capital?

When the Government of Canada announced a moratorium upon fishing northern cod, many commentators repeated the catchy phrase "too many fishermen chasing too few fish" as if this were an explanation of what had happened. This was not helpful. First, as Orwell pointed out, clichés are the enemy of understanding since they serve as an automatic response that does not require we think about what we are saying. Secondly, the very people who were to bear the brunt of a problem not entirely of their making were also being kicked when they were down. It also exemplified the pejorative view pundits and officials had of those who fished. If only these thousands of people, ran the familiar sub-text, had abandoned fishing and their homes and gotten modern wage-paying jobs everyone would have been better off. The underlying assumption here was that "backward" workers were to blame for continuing to fish and not embracing "modern" capital-intensive industrial methods.

Miriam Wright's study of the industrialization of the fishery takes the opposite approach. She

points out that between 1934 and 1968 the state and fish companies embarked upon an effort to "modernize" the industry, to the exclusion of all other considerations. Rather than too many fishermen being the problem, Wright implies that too much capital was to blame. As she points out, the dominant assumption among government officials was that the solution to Newfoundland's problems lay in "modernization." Provincial and federal policies encouraged, and state subsidies paid for, the rapid expansion of the industrial fishery. This led to an industry that was in the long term unsustainable. The over-capacity in capital investment led to the chase for the last fish. As she puts it, "The logic of fisheries development is that the more money you spend upon development, the more fish you have to catch and process to pay for it" (p. 103). In other words, the over-harvesting of the resource is an effect of "modernizing" the industry, not a sign that the industry had too many fishermen.

Wright makes a valuable contribution to the literature upon the fishery and the state. While some government officials have treated the year

1949 as year one, and many Newfoundlanders have been quick to blame the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans for the mess we are in, she shows continuity between the policies of the pre-confederation Commission Government and the post-1949 provincial government. Both shared a common approach to solving the low incomes in the fishery by encouraging capital investment in the "modern" fresh-frozen fishery. Wright also counters the prevailing notion that Joseph Smallwood was uninterested in the fishery, as exemplified in the reports that he told Newfoundlanders to "burn your boats." She shows Smallwood to have been as interested in "modern" industrial fishing as he was in other "modern" industries which he used government funds to establish. Wright shows how the controversial resettlement program and subsidies to fish plants fit into Smallwood's drive to create an industrial revolution in Newfoundland that would forge a prosperous and modern society.

This book can be read as a companion to David Alexander's study of the salted cod fishery, *The Decay of Trade*.^[1] Alexander found the Commission willing to impose a common marketing strategy upon exporters. But this promising start was undermined by Ottawa's unwillingness to use the power of the state to support an industry that exported to Europe and the developing world, at a time when the attention of the Canadian government was focused upon exporting to the United States. He also argued that the federal government neglected marketing salted cod during the 1950s because it did not share the Newfoundland government's willingness to intervene in the free market. In contrast to salted cod, which seemed like an industry of the past, Wright shows how the provincial and federal governments were more willing to support the development of a fresh-frozen industry. Frozen fish seemed "modern" compared to salted cod and the market for this product was the United States. While fresh-frozen fish didn't suffer from the prejudice identified by Alexander, Wright finds a similar hesitancy to

regulate on the part of the federal government during the era of cold war politics. Further, the federal government's attitude toward the resources of the continental shelf during the rapid expansion of the fleet of foreign factory freezer vessels shows the same pattern. Yet she differs with Alexander's belief that the federal state could have "developed" the salt cod fishery. Wright points out that the federal state did support the expansion of the frozen-fish industry, especially in the era of renewed nationalism in the 1960s, with long-term disastrous results that were not apparent to Alexander at the time he was writing.

While Wright reveals much about fisheries policies, her book says little about "hegemony" despite her suggestion in the introduction that it is a central organizing concept in the book. What she calls "hegemony" in her invocation of Gramsci would be, in this instance, more aptly described as the prevailing dominant assumptions of policy makers. Gramsci described a negotiation between intellectuals representing different classes. This cultural struggle results in the emergence of a consensus (which in the last analysis supports the status quo distribution of power). Wright is mute upon the cultural and intellectual struggle that goes into the setting of such a hegemonic consensus. She takes government policy and extrapolates back to expose what the underlying assumptions were. Many similar studies of government policy illuminate the views of policy makers without drawing upon a theoretician, particularly one whose principal contribution was to highlight how what we all accept as common sense has been contested. Gramsci's concept also assumes the working class has an alternative view. Wright concedes that she does not know the views of fishers, nor can she show any resistance on cultural or ideological terrain. I feel that this is a bit of a minor quibble, since all references to Gramsci and hegemony could be excised from the book and it would stand on its own as a valuable study of the state and the fishery. Yet the fact that one

can imagine this book being just as persuasive without the concept of "hegemony" demonstrates that the concept is not integral to the argument.

In all, Miriam Wright has written a concise study of public policy that demonstrates how the concept of the "modern" underlay state perceptions of the problems of the industry. She argues that the ideology of modernization led the state to policies which, in the long term, led to the collapse of the resource. She points out that only by questioning our underlying notions can we design state policies and harvesting strategies that are both ecologically sustainable and humane to those who have to bear the brunt of our choices.

Note

[1]. David Alexander, *The Decay of Trade: An Economic History of the Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1935-1965* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977).

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