

Book Review Essay

Understanding the Blue Acceleration: What It Means, How It Works, and Why It Matters

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Asdal, Kristin, and Tone Huse. 2023. *Nature-Made Economy: Cod, Capital, and the Great Transformation of the Ocean*. Inside Technology. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Urbina, Ian. 2019. *The Outlaw Ocean: Crime and Survival in the Last Untamed Frontier*. London, UK: Bodley Head.

Armstrong, Chris. 2023. *A Blue New Deal: Why We Need a New Politics for the Ocean*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

The ocean is in the spotlight. This attention is driven by a growing appreciation of the multiple ways in which the state of the ocean is integrated with the interest and well-being of states, firms, communities, and people. Indeed, as *Nature-Made Economy*, *The Outlaw Ocean*, and *A Blue New Deal* point out, human relationships with the ocean take many different, and vital, but often antagonistic forms. We use the ocean for food production, for biodiversity conservation, as a source of fossil fuels and deep seabed minerals, as a pollution sink, and to expand the sovereign borders of states. We regulate these processes through a variety of different institutions and norms, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change; the UN Convention on Biological Diversity; and the accumulated actions of firms, nongovernmental organizations, and transnational activists.

Our attention to the ocean is also driven by fear. The norms, rules, and institutions of ocean governance—largely constructed during the twentieth century—are insufficient to the task of achieving conservation, sustainable use, equity, and other social goals. Building on data available in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's first *Special Report on the Ocean*

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and *Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* from 2019 and on research for the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, Armstrong points out what should be clear: “the ocean is in a period of massive and multifaceted ecological crisis” (95). Ocean problems have become more difficult to resolve. And we know it.

These three books “join a still small, but already rich and now rapidly growing literature that seeks to counteract a long-standing neglect of the ocean” (Asdal and Huse, 39). Academic work prompting rethinking of the materiality of the ocean (Steinberg 2013) has sparked rethinking of the place of the ocean in international relations scholarship (de Carvalho and Leira 2022). But these are very different types of books. *The Outlaw Ocean* is a journalistic travelogue, *Nature-Made Economy* is academic research, and *A Blue New Deal* is a policy proposal. Yet collectively, these books make significant contributions to our understanding of the human–ocean relationship, mediated through governance institutions, globalized markets, and human communities. All of them address environmental crises in the ocean, including overexploitation, habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change. They lay the groundwork for a more nuanced conversation about emerging paradigms, such as the blue economy, blue growth, blue acceleration, and blue carbon. *A Blue New Deal* is intended to dislodge the blue acceleration narrative (Scharenberg and Armstrong 2023, 9). *Nature-Made Economy* helps us understand what blue growth means and how it works. *The Outlaw Ocean* portrays an ocean whose laws are stunted, perverted, and exploited by the pursuit of profits at the expense of people. All is not well in the ocean economy.

Nature-Made Economy

Nature-Made Economy is an academic book—its authors intend to make theoretical contributions to various literatures, each of which is thoroughly described in the first chapter.¹ This makes *Nature-Made Economy* less accessible to the general reader but more likely to have a long-term impact on a defined set of audiences. Asdal and Huse’s main goal is to chart a path for work on “empirical economy” (5) in cultural and social studies, using methods like “ethnography of the past” (82). The book’s “main character” is the Atlantic cod, and the authors use its story in Norway to explore “the great economization of the ocean” (2).

The “great economization” is essentially the same idea as blue growth or blue acceleration. Asdal and Huse define the great economization as “an economic transformation in which the ocean, its environments, and beings are set to be exploited at all depths and surfaces, and to an unprecedented extent and magnitude” (2). This great economization is ongoing and

1. These include economic sociology, studies of governmentality, science and technology studies, and sociology. Asdal and Huse aim to contribute to the social studies of markets and valuation studies.

multifarious; it includes different versions of economization and different types of nature–economy relationship. For example, whereas one version of economization sees the ocean as a place of extraction (oil drilling), another sees it as a place of insertion and cultivation (aquaculture) (55, 85). To characterize the varieties of economization related to the cod in Norway, the authors explore two “equally rich social realities” (8)—those enacted in paper (such as surveys of the Chinese consumer) and those enacted in place (such as landing stations that connect fishers with exporters).

Nature-Made Economy charts a path for a more nuanced and critical account of the blue economy paradigm, in which the authors challenge the idea that humans are fully in control of the economization of ocean resources. Their approach avoids “pacifying” (18) nature by treating it as a set of knowable and passive objects, highlights the role of the state, and demonstrates that new versions of economization can be “fragile and unstable” (106). Key concepts (defined in a glossary) emphasize the construction and character of value—tools of valuation, value orderings, and valuation arrangements. These assist in the creation of versions of economization, but nature itself shapes the process. The great economization is a two-way street: nature and economy co-modify one another. Cod have agency, and their “affordances and propensities” (6) shape the tools of valuation, value orderings, and valuation arrangements that characterize economization. The cod’s agency is described as defensive; the authors highlight how the cod “reacts, resists, and troubles” (17) commodification practices, via escape, cannibalism, drug resistance, too-early sexual maturation, and quick decay upon death. This defensiveness has made the cod, along with its ocean environs, “exceedingly difficult to domesticate” (82) and the creation of predictable and stable economic values of ocean resources prone to reversals and failures. In addition, the authors’ research shows that the economization of resources differs across species. The Norwegian experience with salmon could not be re-created with cod because cod are not salmon.

And yet, Norway continues to (co-)generate versions of economization for cod, both aquaculture and wild capture. Asdal and Huse describe economization as resulting from long-standing efforts and investments, and the Norwegian government and its organs play key roles (3). Chapter 2 investigates the conflicting economizations spurred by claims over the continental shelf and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the spatial configurations of their relevant industries (drilling and fishing). In this case, the state used “political procedure, policy documents, and public inquiries” (47) as tools of valuation and related maps to enact value orderings. Chapter 4 uses government “document tools” as sites of evolving (and contrasting) value orderings related to coastal aquaculture: a 1970s–1980s “modesty” ordering elevates livelihoods, is pessimistic about markets, and eschews investment capital, while a more recent “ocean growing” ordering emphasizes market potential and an ocean with “abundant space for more” (125). Chapter 5

unpacks the innovation paradigm that sees “no limits to growth ... no limits to modifications” (162). This paradigm is found in a series of “Cod Plans” (2001–2009), whereby state investment drives simultaneous processes of capitalization and marketization through semipublic bodies like the Norwegian Seafood Council. Chapter 7 describes in detail the 2018 China Fisheries and Seafood Expo as a site where states build and design market architectures, via “seafood diplomacy,” consumer surveys, consultant reports, and promotional branding. Throughout these social realities, the cod shapes the versions of economization spun for and around it.

Nature-Made Economy shows that the Blue Economy cannot be defined by human ambitions and narratives about the ocean as a site of production. The ocean itself, and the life it contains, sets limits and challenges expectations, commodifying the multiple versions of economization that are coming into being at any given time. Although Asdal and Huse characterize the cod as an agent, they do not go so far as to suggest that cod deserve our moral consideration. *Nature-Made Economy* gives us tools for analyzing economizations and draws our attention to the ways that private and especially government actors pursue and co-create forms of value.

The Outlaw Ocean

The Outlaw Ocean is the book at the heart of a larger project. *New York Times* journalist Ian Urbina put in years of field reporting, often quite dangerous, to produce a series of articles, starting in 2015, that became the kernels for book chapters and an accompanying podcast. This body of work is, among other things, extremely useful for educators looking for engaging readings for disinterested students. In fifteen chapters and over 400 pages, Urbina chronicles many lives on the ocean, painting a detailed picture of a lawless, coercive, and isolated place. His goal is “to bring to life the full cast of characters who roam the high seas” (xi) and cultivate “awareness of these people and this place” (xiii).

Urbina gives a master class in investigative journalism, in descriptions of his methods and reflections on the profession. He claims to be “perpetually surprised” (237) by how much people share with him but deploys thoughtful interview tactics. At times, Urbina operates like a private investigator, hiring “eyes and ears,” confronting wrongdoers, and becoming obsessed with finding the truth. He notes that his risk taking was fueled by a “possibly foolhardy” (265) assumption that being a foreign journalist would give him a degree of protection. Indeed, Urbina’s life was at risk more than once during his research. But he also invests in more mundane methods, like building a database of violent crime at sea and crowdsourcing for help on Facebook.

The Outlaw Ocean is extremely well written and the kind of book that readers tend to devour. It often reads like a travelogue. Urbina puts himself in the book in a big way, and it helps the reader imagine *themselves* in the

distant and disturbing locations that he writes from and about. He discusses his feelings, his fears, his sense of balance, bodily experiences, sounds and smells, communications with family, self-understandings, calls to his credit card company, and what he packed. He appears in six of the more than eighty photos contained in the book, looking like the archetype of a rugged, intrepid journalist. In one memorable anecdote, he describes the challenge of defecating off the side of a rocking fishing boat while its crew watched (197). *The Outlaw Ocean* does nothing if not put the people front and center—their loneliness and boredom, their morality and motivations, their persistent rashes. And Urbina is attentive to specific social settings, such as the culture of cruise ship engine rooms.

The book is organized as a series of essays, each of which contains diverse but related stories. *The Outlaw Ocean* covers a wide variety of “outlaw” maritime activity, including trafficking and coerced labor, abandoned seafarers and stowaways, fisheries enforcement and border disputes, illegal dumping and abandoned platforms, seasteading and geoengineering, high-seas abortions and interrogations, floating armories and private security, port scams and repossession, environmental protest, and other activities. Unlike *Nature-Made Economy* and *A Blue New Deal*, *The Outlaw Ocean* does not tell the reader what to take from these essays. Urbina invites readers to “connect the dots in their own ways” (xiii).

Throughout the book, Urbina describes his fear that he is producing “misery porn.” So many of the stories he recounts are deeply tragic, “dark inhumanities” (xi). But the value of *The Outlaw Ocean* is clear. For the general reader, the book is likely to shape their thinking, and possibly their behavior. For the ocean governance professional, the book highlights a range of nongovernmental actors that are often given short shrift in scholarly research and policy development. These include moralistic “vigilantes” like Sea Shepherd, Greenpeace, and Women on Waves, alongside aid groups like Mission to Seafarers and Stella Maris. Private companies include more than shipping companies, cruise lines, charterers, creditors, and insurers; Urbina highlights less obvious, but no less critical, firms, including manning agencies, private security firms, and maritime repossession companies. Even karaoke bars are, Urbina finds, part of the dystopian world of human trafficking at sea. Consequently, the scope of the human economy that is dependent on the ocean is much larger than commonly understood.

Urbina does a decent job describing the international legal framework for the ocean, given that he is a nonexpert. UNCLOS experts will find places to quibble with his descriptions of “international waters” and the EEZ and the lack of distinction between *continental shelf* and *international seabed*. His description of the seafloor as a “lawless and enigmatic domain” (204) will be surprising to anyone following developments at the International Seabed Authority. But Urbina’s lack of focus on the ocean governance regime does not detract from the central contribution of *The Outlaw Ocean*: making people

understand and think seriously about the human lives at the core of the global ocean economy.

A Blue New Deal

I didn't expect to like *A Blue New Deal*. It reads like popular nonfiction but covers my area of expertise: the ocean governance regime centered on UNCLOS. The introductory chapter talks a big game; Armstrong intends to both dismantle the current regime and outline a "radical new vision" (5) for ocean governance. From some perspectives, Armstrong might be characterized as a newcomer, or even an interloper, in the field of ocean governance. He is a professor of political theory with a long-standing focus on global justice. He publishes a lot. Armstrong has pivoted with purpose in the last few years, toward climate, biodiversity, and oceans. Although I didn't always agree with his characterizations of UNCLOS, I found his contribution to law of the sea scholarship refreshing, well argued, and more persuasive than I anticipated.

Like Urbina, Armstrong's goal is to shed light, to open "vital debates about the ocean's future" (viii) and create "a sense of possibility about the options open to us" (9). His concern is twin ocean crises, related to equity and the environment. The environmental crises are familiar and well documented. In terms of equity, Armstrong focuses on asymmetries in geography, capacity, and access to capital. EEZs—which give coastal states sovereign rights over living resources out to 200 nautical miles—are at the center of this story: colonial possessions give colonial powers more EEZ, and uneven capacity in both fishing and enforcement means that "fish as a commodity overwhelmingly flows from South to North" (73). Armstrong is particularly sensitive to the geographical disadvantage of landlocked states, although he does not address the rights granted to them in UNCLOS² or their ability to flag vessels. Like Urbina, Armstrong covers the plight of maritime laborers, especially fishers (chapter 6). But *A Blue New Deal* also considers the plight of marine animals (chapter 7) and the situation of small island states in a world of sea level rise (chapter 8).

A Blue New Deal is not the place to learn about UNCLOS. It contains minor elisions and conflation that will annoy the knowledgeable reader. The Area is defined in the glossary as "the deep seabed lying underneath the High Seas" (x), even though the two are not co-extensive. Armstrong overlooks the leadership role of developing states in formulating the EEZ concept. He emphasizes that the EEZ is about rights over resources but seems unaware that the EEZ also includes jurisdiction over marine scientific research and

2. Armstrong says, "If we were prepared to be imaginative, rules could be put in place that gave landlocked countries access to the ocean and its resources. ... The convention has brought riches to some, while shutting landlocked countries out of the spoils of the sea" (18). Part X of UNCLOS is titled "Right of Access of Land-locked States to and from the Sea and Freedom of Transit."

artificial islands, installations, and structures. While Armstrong is correct that EEZs “are not about the right to live in a particular place,” he is incorrect in saying that coastal states do not control who can “live there” (where would humans live, except on a structure?) (56). He writes that UNCLOS “was signed in 1982” (xii) when he means opened for signature by states. But he gets some things right, like the process for claiming an extended continental shelf, which others often confuse (53–57). The organization of chapters 2, 3, and 4 around three main principles of UNCLOS³ makes sense, although it feels like one is missing: flag state jurisdiction. Armstrong is very attentive to the role of flags of convenience as “mobile exploitation havens” (188) but not to why and how they emerged as part of the ocean governance regime (125).

Armstrong makes a strong argument that the “common heritage of humankind” principle is a better foundation for ocean governance than the dominant alternatives: freedom of the seas and enclosure. These principles are radically different from one another: freedom of the seas is essentially open access, enclosure is coastal state control, and common heritage is shared ownership. His history of the common heritage principle—its association with seabed mining, decolonization, and the movement for a new international economic order—is well done and captures both its peak and its decline. But Armstrong presents a version of common heritage that is more radical than what is contained in UNCLOS. The recent Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction treaty replaced the common heritage of “mankind” with “humankind” but emphasized that the meaning of the principle remains the same. Armstrong believes we should recognize “the common heritage of *all* life on earth, rather than humanity in particular” (91). Indeed, he believes the Blue New Deal should include mechanisms for representing “the interests of other animals” (94). This goes beyond the fish-as-agents understanding offered by Asdal and Huse in that it is explicitly normative: fish and other marine animals (especially the smart ones) are potential members of our moral community. For Armstrong, resource exploitation should be replaced with stewardship and protection. And perhaps most worrying to maritime states, Armstrong wants to expand the “radical kernel” (94) of common heritage to new parts of the ocean.

I found myself feeling extremely sympathetic to Armstrong’s proposals. He wants to put the interests of nonhumans “at the heart of the struggle for ocean justice” (7). He envisions world government, although he doesn’t use the term. A “World Ocean Authority” would make all the decisions about the high seas and allow exploitation only if it “genuinely helped people in the global South to catch up with the rich North” (207). For labor issues, he envisions an Ocean Police, with legal rights to board vessels regardless of flag (132). Armstrong thinks both the World Ocean Authority and the Ocean Police should be able to reach into EEZs. Notably, if such institutions were created, they would

3. Freedom of the seas, enclosure/territorial seas, and common heritage of (hu)mankind.

address the multiple issues discussed in all three books—the labor and human rights violations in *The Outlaw Ocean* and the overfishing in *Nature-Made Economy* included.

What is most unrealistic about these proposals is the idea of hierarchy: his World Ocean Authority “would stand above states, which would not have the power to veto or depart from its rules” (209). Armstrong promises that it could be democratic, just not among or between states. The World Ocean Authority would be tasked with “including, and representing, a whole variety of actors in ocean governance. ... Individual citizens, local communities and indigenous groups should be given direct voice in the collective management of the ocean” (210). These dreams are laudable, but not actionable in our present world, as Armstrong admits (202). They would require that sovereign states create an organization that could override state sovereignty in the interest of some of the most marginalized people on earth, as well as nonhuman living creatures.

Conclusions

Together these books portray the sordid, dysfunctional, and delusional side of the blue economy. Urbina uncovers the role of the ocean as a “refuge of depravity” (408), where lax enforcement and lack of accountability mean that the rule of law is fluid or absent. Asdal and Huse show “how the great economization of the ocean is accompanied by massive disorder” (230), such as the liquidity slaughtering that followed the collapse of the cod farming industry in the 2010s. Armstrong argues that “the current politics of the ocean is not fit for purpose” and that laws are “too fragmented, too weak and too amenable to powerful vested interests” (5). But what are we to do? *Nature-Made Economy* is not prescriptive, except insofar as it implies a future research agenda for social scientific investigations of the blue economy. *The Outlaw Ocean* is lightly prescriptive in that it includes an appendix that provides a “brief tour” of organizations worth supporting. *A Blue New Deal* is primarily prescriptive; Armstrong spends a chapter outlining seven principles of ocean justice and five additional chapters outlining a governance architecture that could put them into practice. *Nature-Made Economy* helps us understand, *The Outlaw Ocean* makes us care, and *A Blue New Deal* encourages us to dream. But none really feels like a useful guide for fixing the ocean governance regime.

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