

Disrupting Enclosure in New England Fisheries

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INTRODUCTION

I am drawn to thinking about the commons because of its ability to define a place as outside of capitalism; I am enticed by stories of societies and environments and their myriad productive combinations before capitalism; and I am inspired to imagine alternative ways of being that real people have lived and are living on the commons. I am, however, frustrated by representations of the commons as always subject to an inevitable displacement by a dominant and invasive capitalism.¹ It would seem that all of our stories of the commons revolve around a capitalist imaginary: capitalism's origin in the enclosure of the commons, capitalism's commodification of natural resources, capitalism's expansion and its penetration of common property regimes globally, and capitalism's most recent push to privatize remaining common property resources via neoliberal policies at a variety of scales.² A commons future is difficult to imagine.

How this problematic of representing the commons is enacted in a contemporary common property regime, marine fisheries of New England, is examined in this paper. Here, the problematic is clearly evident in the narrow range of solutions available to address environmental and industrial crises. Fisheries in New England (and around the world) are being gradually but inevitably privatized (commodified, marketized, etc.) in an effort to place them within the domain of capitalism where private rights to resources will ensure an attitude of stewardship amongst capitalists and, as the dominant ideology would have it, a long term environmental sustainability.³ While many doubt the promise of privatization will be realized (in either social or environmental terms), any evidence that fisheries might be alternatively managed by, for example, communities or within community-based economies is dismissed via its relegation to the status of a vestige. Processes that might suggest other futures are possible are read as remnants of a pre-capitalist past where fishers *were* embedded in communities, territories, and a socially produced economy. The presence of alternative (i.e. non-capitalist) identities, understandings of the commons, and economic possibilities slips, along with the commons, into the past. Once touched by capitalism, the fisheries commons can only have a capitalist future.

This problematic is a direct result of the power of discourses of capitalism to enclose the commons, to place it within a teleology of capitalist development. The

¹ J.K. Gibson-Graham and David Ruccio, "'After' Development: Re-imagining Economy and Class," in J.K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff, eds., *Re/presenting Class* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 158-81.

² On the persistence of a capitalist imaginary and its impediment to a noncapitalist future see Community Economies Collective, "Imagining and Enacting Noncapitalist Futures," *Socialist Review*, 28, 3+4, 2001, pp. 93-135.

³ Advocates of such measures dominate fisheries economic discourse. For example, see Francis T. Christy, "The Death Rattle of Open Access and the Advent of Property Rights Regimes in Fisheries," *Marine Resource Economics*, 11, 1996, pp. 287-304; Ross D. Eckert, *The Enclosure of Ocean Resources: Economics and the Law of the Sea* (Stanford CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1979); S. M. Garcia, K. Cochrane, G. Van Santen, and Francis Christy, "Towards sustainable fisheries: a strategy for FAO and the World Bank," *Ocean and Coastal Management*, 42, 1999, pp. 369-398; and Elmer A. Keen, *Ownership and Productivity of Marine Fishery Resources* (Blacksburg, VA: The McDonald and Woodward Publishing Company, 1988).

commons, once captured within the totalizing narrative of capitalism, can no longer sustain/contain other economic processes; it must always be understood as essentially pre-capitalist.⁴ A theory of class processes, however, suggests a different way to read the commons and its transformations.⁵ Using the Marxian notion of the multiplicity of class processes (e.g. feudal, slave, ancient, capitalist, etc.), we might rethink the commons as not just a pre-capitalist space but as a space of diverse economies (capitalist or otherwise).⁶ The penetration of capitalism into a common property regime could then be understood as the existence of a capitalist class process or its conditions of existence where there was none previously. Such an understanding would not, however, preclude the existence of other non-capitalist class processes or non-class processes constitutive of non-capitalism. The commons, despite being a site of an emerging capitalism, might be seen to contain other emergent possibilities as well.

While represented as archaic, distant, or subordinate, the commons nevertheless remains a powerful metaphor for alternative forms of human and environmental organization.⁷ As a spatial metaphor for economic difference, I want to suggest that we reexamine the potential of the commons as a contemporary location of multiple economic becomings⁸ rather than always a location enclosed or to be enclosed and hence generative of only a capitalist future. In so doing we should not ignore processes of enclosure and their clear ability to transform economies, societies, and environments, but neither should we concede the entirety and the rhetorical power of the commons to a narrative of capitalist enclosure.

Below, I will suggest that the on-going enclosure of fisheries in New England is the result of “capitalocentric” representations of the commons that make alternative solutions to commons problems difficult to imagine.⁹ While the commons of fisheries in New England is a degraded (even tragic) environment subject to industrial

⁴ Antonio Callari, “Economics and the Postcolonial Other,” in *Postcolonialism Meets Economics*, Eiman O. Zein-Elabdin and S. Charusheela, eds., (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 113-129.

⁵ While many understand and utilize the concept of class as a process rather than a category, this work relies upon a particular anti-essentialist approach. See Jack Amariglio and David F. Ruccio, “Postmodernism, Marxism, and the Critique of Modern Economic Thought,” in *Marxism in the Postmodern Age*, Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, and Carole Biewener, eds., (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), pp. 13-23 and Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, *Knowledge and Class* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁶ For case studies see J.K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen A. Resnick, and Richard D. Wolff, eds., *Class and Its Others* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and Marianna Pavlovskaya, “Other Transitions: Multiple Economies of Moscow Households in the 1990s,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 94, 2, 2004, pp. 329-51. Also R. Lee, A. Leyshon, and C. Williams, eds., *Alternative Economic Spaces: Rethinking the ‘Economic’ in Economic Geography* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁷ The “Buffalo Commons” (Deborah Popper and Frank Popper, “The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method,” *Geographical Review*, 89, 4, 1999) provides a clear example of the power of metaphor to suggest an alternative imaginary of space. In this case, re-imagining the Great Plains as a commons has facilitated a rich and varied set of alternatives to a failing regional economy.

⁸ J. K. Gibson-Graham et al. *op. cit.* suggest that there are (and we should work to reveal) openings for a variety of economic futures/becomings.

⁹ “Capitalocentric” representations of the economy and economic development are theories, policies, and practices that position capitalism as the essence of the economy, as a central and dominant totality relative to which all other forms of economy are peripheral and subordinate. See *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1996).

overcapitalization and increased fishing effort over time due to the investment strategies of individual boat owners, it is also a commons filled with and constituted by community relations, community-economic processes, territorializations, and local understandings and representations of resources.¹⁰ It is not enough to address the marginalization and silencing of the latter processes by documenting their existence in contemporary first-world New England because such revelation too easily becomes an archeology, an unearthing of processes and ways of being belonging to a commons past. Rather, we need to document community/commons processes such that they can be freed from their association with the past; we need to see them as not in retreat but always simultaneously emerging along with other contradictory (even capitalist) identities and spaces.

REPRESENTING A FISHERIES COMMONS

The following is based upon results from a set of semi-structured interviews with 24 trawl fishers¹¹ in Massachusetts as well as several years of participant observation of fisheries science and management in New England (e.g. attending fisheries management council meetings, participating on scientific and management committees, etc.). The research is, however, presented via the story of Bob, a trawl fisher and key informant who was interviewed four times while he was working out of Plymouth, Massachusetts at the time of the interviews (1998/99). While written from the perspective of a single key informant and his fishing practices, the story nevertheless illustrates a set of processes found across the region (as corroborated by other fishers) and provides a grounded example of the problematic discussed above.

The interviews with Bob and the other fishers were designed to document the processes of community and territory in which they might participate. The goal was to locate and make evident processes that were thought not to exist in the industrialized fisheries of New England, to uncover community-based identities and spatial processes reminiscent of a pre-capitalist commons and hence an opening for community-based forms of resource use and economy. These discoveries, it was hoped, would replace/correct the assumed individual identity and open access nature of fisheries that are more commonly ascribed to this location and point to a necessary enclosure and capitalist solution to the ongoing environmental crisis.¹² Examining, in detail, the practices of a single fisher, however, suggests that identity and spatial understandings of the commons do not fit easily into a capitalist/pre-capitalist binary with its respective

¹⁰ Kevin St. Martin, "Making Space for Community Resource Management in Fisheries," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 91, 1, 2001, pp. 122-42.

¹¹ The interviews were part of an oral history project (S-K Grant 96-NER-166) belonging to the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association (GFWA). Angela Sanfilippo (director of the GFWA), Dr. Madeleine Hall-Arber (MIT, Sea-Grant Program), and Dr. Christopher Dyer (URI, Marine Affairs) were the principal investigators on the project. The author participated in the research design, interviews, and subsequent analysis.

¹² St. Martin, *op. cit.*

proscriptions for resource management.¹³ That is, both fishing identities and understandings of space are of a fluid and shifting nature.

Bob's breadth of experience in the fisheries of Southern New England made him an ideal candidate for an enquiry into questions of fishers' identity as well as their spatial practices. Bob had extensive experience on both offshore and inshore boats; he held a number of positions throughout his career (deckhand, engineer, mate, and captain); he now owned and operated an inshore boat crewed by himself and a single deckhand; and he traveled seasonally to different fishing grounds and interacted with several communities of fishers. He was moderately successful and well respected by other fishers in Plymouth and other nearby ports.

The port of Plymouth is located in Cape Cod Bay and provides easy access to a number of inshore fishing areas in the Bay as well as Vineyard Sound. The port harbors a small community of inshore fishers who fish for groundfish, scallops, squid, and lobsters; they operate small to medium sized boats; and their fishing trips are only day trips. The community itself is divided into those whose primary catch is lobsters and those who trawl for groundfish and scallops. Bob owns a 65-foot trawler and focuses on cod and flounder when fishing from Plymouth. Unlike many of the other boats that tie up in Plymouth, Bob's "homeport" is not Plymouth. That is, he fishes from Plymouth only seasonally and has done so for only the last eight years (at the time of interview). At other times of the year he pursues fluke and squid south of Cape Cod in Vineyard Sound (as do some other Plymouth fishers) closer to his homeport of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Bob's insights into the fishing community of Plymouth are possible largely because of his initial status as an "outsider." Indeed, the question of community as well as the complex nature of Bob's identity as a fisher is revealed by his interactions with the other fishers of Plymouth (see below).

NEW ENGLAND FISHERIES AS ENCLOSURE

What follows is a standard and somewhat leftist story of the regime in fisheries in New England. While very brief, it captures the tenor of current fisheries management and its impacts upon fishers such as Bob. The story is a self-conscious capitalocentric representation that I have relied upon (and continue to rely upon) for a deeper understanding of industrial and environmental change than is available from the dominant neoclassical and liberal discourses of fisheries. While this story serves to provide yet another example of the negative impacts of neoliberal resource management policies and to produce a general indignation relative to capitalism, I am interested here to point to what might be the limitations of remaining within such a narrative. That is, what

¹³ This is nowhere clearer than in representations of common property fisheries that suggest related binary pairs: industrial/artisanal, modern/traditional, large scale/small scale, etc. These pairs map onto the binary of capitalist commons/pre-capitalist commons and their attendant notions of domination and subordination. While there are debates as to the boundaries between these forms, they are nevertheless the terms of representation in fisheries bioeconomics, anthropology, and policy documents. See, for example, Christopher Dahl "Traditional marine tenure: A basis for artisanal fisheries management," *Marine Policy*, 12, 1, 1988, pp. 40-48; Christopher L. Dyer and James R. McGoodwin, *Folk Management of the World's Fisheries* (University of Colorado Press, 1994); Freire and Garcia-Allut, "Socioeconomic and biological causes of management failures in European artisanal fisheries: the case of Galicia (NW Spain)," *Marine Policy*, 24, 5, 2000, pp. 375-384, and Joshua John, *Managing Redundancy in Overexploited Fisheries* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1994).

economic potentials do we forfeit by seeing the fisheries commons of New England as always a location where community and commons-based economies are retreating and capitalism is advancing?

The fishers of Plymouth, like those throughout New England, have over the last decade seen their access to fish curtailed via a variety of scientifically informed management mechanisms designed to reduce fishing effort by species for the management region as a whole. Moratoria on licenses for particular species, limitations on the numbers of days-at-sea per year (DAS), a variety of gear restrictions, ever-smaller landing limits, and seasonal or spatial closures of fishing grounds are all part of the regulatory regime these fishers must now navigate in order to survive. The fisheries commons of New England, due to pressures from environmental organizations to comply with federal regulations designed to stop overfishing, has been rapidly transformed from an “open access” resource to one where access to resources is highly regulated and limited at the scale of the management region.¹⁴

Effort regulation is, however, of a particular character. In the case of New England, the thrust of the most recent round of regulation has been to control/reduce fishing effort through restrictions that suggest an incremental privatization as seen in “ownership” of permissible days-at-sea or fishing licenses. Indeed, the sense that today’s broad mix of regulations is temporary and that full privatization, via Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs),¹⁵ is the ultimate solution is palpable across a variety of documents, management meetings, and in interviews with a range of people involved in New England fisheries. Although itself having different forms,¹⁶ ITQs have been implemented in fisheries around the world but most notably in New Zealand, Iceland, Nova Scotia, and select fisheries of the United States.¹⁷ In these cases, and to varying degrees, access to fish in the form of catch quotas becomes itself a commodity that can be bought and sold on open markets, consolidated by individuals or corporations, and employed anywhere within the management region.

¹⁴ As with most valuable resources, there have been many (international) struggles over access to the fisheries of the Northeast U.S. (i.e., the Northwest Atlantic); see, for example, Mark Kurlansky, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* (New York: Walker and Company, 1997) and Donald Cameron Watt, “First Steps in the Enclosure of the Oceans,” *Marine Policy*, 3, 3, 1979, pp. 211-24. Since 1976, however, the U.S. federal government instituted a new regime of governance that extended out to 200 miles. Foreign vessels were essentially eliminated from this Exclusive Economic Zone and a domestic fleet encouraged (M. L. Miller and J. Van Maanen, “The Emerging Organization of Fisheries in the United States,” *Coastal Zone Management Journal*, 10, 4, 1983, pp. 369-86). It is in this context of an expanding and federally encouraged movement toward resource extraction that the resource could be said to be “open access.” In the heyday that followed the banning of foreign fleets, virtually anyone could invest in a boat and begin fishing. Today, many fishers are looking for a way out.

¹⁵ Anthony Davis, “Barbed Wire and Bandwagons: A Comment on ITQ Fisheries Management,” *Reviews in Fish Biology and Fisheries*, 6, 1996, pp. 97-107.

¹⁶ David Symes and Kevin Crean, “Privatization of the Commons: the Introduction of Individual Transferable Quotas in Developed Fisheries,” *Geoforum*, 26, 2, 1995, pp. 175-85.

¹⁷ e.g. Richard Apostle, Bonnie McCay, and Knut H. Mikalsen, *Enclosing the Commons: Individual Transferable Quotas in the Nova Scotia Fishery* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 2002); B. McCay and S. Brandt, “Changes in Fleet Capacity and Ownership of Harvesting Rights in the United States Surf Clam and Ocean Quahog Fishery,” in *Case Studies on the Effects of Transferable Fishing Rights on Fleet Capacity and Concentration of Quota Ownership*, Ross Shotton, ed., (Rome: FAO, 2001).

Regulation in New England fisheries (as elsewhere) is driven by bioeconomic assessments of fish populations relative to fishing effort and as such produces fisheries as enumerated quantities of fish.¹⁸ As control over fishing effort increases so too does the predictive power of science. Fisheries scientists employed by the state can now set total allowable catches (TACs) of fish on an annual basis. As a means to “save fisheries resources for future generations” the setting of TACs and the privatization of access to that catch via ITQs have the added benefit of reducing risk to investment capital, long a barrier to the capitalization of fisheries.¹⁹ Science and management combine such that fish stock are open to appropriation and fisheries to capitalism.²⁰

This movement in fisheries can be easily read as a classic enclosure of the commons with implications not unlike the enclosures of agricultural commons in Europe and elsewhere. The negative impacts of enclosure in fisheries, specifically the institutionalization of ITQs, have been predicted and documented by social scientists.²¹ In these stories the positive effects of ITQs to limit and stabilize fishing effort (and hence the resource) are counterpoised with the host of social and economic disruptions faced by fishing communities. While ITQs may indeed be a benefit for those who hold the right to access fish, they necessarily remove that right from other fishers and citizens generally. Such systems are plagued by the threat of consolidation and ownership of fishing rights by individuals or corporations no longer embedded within fishing communities. They can lead to a spatial consolidation of the fishing industry such that smaller ports are abandoned as the industry is rationalized and centralized. As with Marx’s recollection of English and Scottish enclosures,²² abandoned homes, churches, processing plants, and docks can be found in those ports along the New England coast that are too far from more populated areas for gentrification or summer home construction.

ITQs not only have the potential to consolidate the right to fish, they also suggest a transformation of relations amongst fishers who work together on individual boats. Currently, all crew onboard most fishing boats work not for wages but an equal share of the catch. This is known as the “lay system” in fishing and is currently widespread

¹⁸ St. Martin, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Becky Mansfield, “Neoliberalism in the oceans: ‘rationalization,’ property rights, and the commons question,” *Geoforum* 35, 3, 2004, pp. 313-26; Peter B. Doeringer, Philip I. Moss, and David G. Terkla, *The New England Fishing Economy: Jobs, Income, and Kinship* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

²⁰ Capitalist investment in fisheries has happened well before the current “opening.” In the later half of the 19th century new technologies greatly increased catch, and fish stocks were still thought unexhaustible. See Tim D. Smith, *Scaling Fisheries: The Science of Measuring the Effects of Fishing, 1855-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Fishing in the North Atlantic was largely a characterized by a capitalist class process. See Wayne M. O’Leary, *Maine Sea Fisheries: The Rise and Fall of a Native Industry, 1830-1890* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996) and Paul Thompson, *Living the Fishing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983). This capitalism, which preceeded a later pre-capitalism, could be read as an early and aborted foray into the tranformation of fisheries commons or as evidence of capitalism’s partiality and fragility (cf. Gabriel Fried and Richard D. Wolff, “Modern Ancients: Self-Employed Truckers,” *Rethinking Marxism* 7, 4, 1994, pp. 103-14). A capitalocentric story would, of course, require the former reading.

²¹ Davis, *op. cit.*; Apostle et al. *op. cit.*; Gilsi Palsson and Agnar Helgason, “Figuring Fish and Measuring Men: The Quota System in the Icelandic Cod Fishery,” in *Proceedings from the Annual Science Conference of The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea* (St. John’s Newfoundland, 1994).

²² Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

throughout New England.²³ All crew are legally “co-venturers,” which positions them as “fishermen” along with those fishers who own boats. Once access to fish is given to boat owners rather than, for example, some larger definition of “fisherman,” the potential for a deepening division between owners and non-owners seems imminent. The dispossession of the right to fish from non-boat-owning fishers (co-venturers) represents a “quiet confiscation”²⁴ of the fisheries commons and a potential proletarianization of the majority of fishers in New England.

In New England, drastic reduction measures and the specter of ITQs have produced, not surprisingly, a politics of opposition and a culture of non-compliance. In this case, fishers and/or a variety of fishing interest groups (e.g., place-based groups, sectors of the industry organized by type of fishing gear used, fishermen’s wives organizations, and fleet owner associations) vie for greater allocations of fish from the management body. This is done by lobbying local and federal representatives, utilizing the media, employing various rhetorical strategies at management meetings, protesting in public, and challenging the findings of science (as to the quantities of fish that remain available for extraction). These desperate attempts to increase allocations are, however, increasingly undermined by legal challenges primarily from environmental groups. As a result, management must now comply with ever more specific and stringent scientific/managerial advice as to the levels of permissible fishing effort, thus leaving little or no margin with which to aid struggling fishers and/or fishing communities.

To end the constant struggle for allocations, questioning of scientific recommendations, and court battles over the speed and degree of compliance, the logic of privatization and its neoclassical promise of stability (both environmental and industrial) appears more and more enticing. Looking again to Marx, enclosure is clearly constituted by a wide range of processes: legislative redefinitions of property rights, technological innovations, trade and market mechanisms, the availability of capital for investment, greed, violence, and the performance of a discourse and logic of enclosure. A closer examination of this last process is warranted because it is at this level that public policy is legitimated, assumptions about fishers’ identities and behaviors are formulated, and capitalism is produced as the natural and inevitable future for the commons.

LEGITIMATING ENCLOSURE AND PRODUCING CAPITALIST IDENTITIES

The discourse that legitimates the enclosure of fisheries commons does so by conceiving the commons as essentially the same as other sites of capitalism except for the curious institution of common property.²⁵ This is perhaps most clearly the case in

²³ Doeringer et al., *op. cit.*

²⁴ Marx, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Tsjalle van der Burg, “Neo-classical economics, institutional economics and improved fisheries management,” *Marine Policy*, 24, 1, 2000, pp. 45-51.

Hardin's often-referenced article on the "tragedy of the commons."²⁶ There, Hardin proposes a logic of the commons that situates it within a discourse of capitalism in at least two ways. The first is by its reliance upon a particular set of assumptions concerning economic identity and spatiality. There is a precise and singular ontology that defines who works on the commons and the nature of the commons resources they utilize. Like other neoclassical discourses of economy, Hardin's story is based upon the behavior of utility maximizing individuals operating within a space understood as a container of resources available for appropriation. The economic dynamic of an individual will to appropriate and to profit is central to this discourse as is the abstraction of the environment into discrete quantities of resources that are open to appropriation.²⁷

While the economic subject, space, and dynamic assumed by Hardin are identical to other neoclassical theories of capitalism, they become clearly capitalocentric insofar as the commons is part of a linear trajectory of society, embedded within a story of modernization, technological advance, and population growth that necessitates enclosure as essential to economic development. Like other stages of development theories, Hardin's story contributes to a before and after binary that revolves around a modernist development practice where enclosure becomes the hallmark of a modern, capitalist, economy.²⁸ Defined this way, Hardin's story and the story of enclosure in New England fisheries told above share a common belief in the direction of economic transformation (i.e. towards capitalism) despite their divergent politics around this transformation.

In addition to the necessity of enclosure for environmental sustainability and economic development, Hardin also makes explicit the necessity of enclosure relative to a stable and centered capitalist identity. That is, a space where resources are available to all (the open access commons) combined with the desires of the modern/capitalist economic subject produces not only environmental degradation but also a psychological crisis. Torn between good conscience/restraint, which would benefit all, and their desire to abuse the commons for their own individual benefit, individuals are caught in a "double bind" that produces "pathogenic effects" such as guilt and anxiety. The double bind is also

...an important causative factor in the genesis of schizophrenia. The double bind may not always be so damaging, but it always endangers the mental health of anyone to whom it is applied. "A bad conscience," said Nietzsche, "is a kind of illness."²⁹

²⁶ While I focus on Hardin ("The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science*, 162, 1968, pp. 1243-48), this story could be told just as easily using fisheries bioeconomic references. Indeed, Hardin himself references the work of H. Scott Gordon, one of the leading theorists of fisheries bioeconomics, as having recognized the problem of the commons in fisheries previous to Hardin's 1968 article; see Garrett Hardin, "Ethical Implications of Carrying Capacity," in *Managing the Commons*, Garrett Hardin and John Baden, eds., (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1977), pp. 112-25. The Gordon/Hardin model is pervasive in fisheries; see Arthur F. McEvoy, *The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Indeed, it is moving from a local discourse of the North Atlantic to a global discourse explaining fisheries crisis in terms identical to that of Hardin (e.g. J. A. Gulland, "Fisheries: Looking Beyond the Golden Age," *Marine Policy*, 8, 2, 1984, pp. 137-50; Garcia et al. *op. cit.*).

²⁷ St. Martin, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Callari, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *op. cit.*, p. 1246.

The modern and economically rational individual within a commons regime finds their mental health threatened as well as their ability to appropriate resource rent. On the commons, the subject (a natural and immutable economic man) cannot be a whole, centered, and modern economic being. The resolution to this problematic is to admit our denial of the simple truth of the commons³⁰ and enclose the commons. The goal is to erase contradiction, thereby producing the conditions of a sound environmental, economic, and psychological well-being. Subjectivity, space, and identity are fixed by a technical and discursive enclosure such that they merge into a single dynamic that is clearly recognizable as capitalism.

As the subject of empirical study for several decades, the commons has been discovered to be much more complex than originally theorized by Hardin and other neoclassical common property theorists.³¹ That is, many institutional studies of contemporary commons have corrected and qualified Hardin's thesis and have produced a rich literature on the variety of commons solutions, ways in which the commons can continue despite the forces of industrialization, modernization, population growth, etc.³² While the rules of the commons, how they are developed, the degree to which they stem environmental degradation, their ability to produce wealth, and (less often) their potential for producing uneven distributions of wealth have been thoroughly examined, these studies continue to reference the same basic economic ontology as Hardin. In these examples as in Hardin's, the commons is constituted as a container of enumerated resources utilized by some group of utility-maximizing individuals. The solutions to tragedy are represented as technical solutions that build upon the rational economic choices of individuals to appropriate resources and produce individual wealth. In these cases tragedy may have been averted, but these commons are not seen as sites of economic difference. They remain negotiations between essentially individual utility-maximizing subjects who seek to appropriate quantities of resources; the commons remains within the domain of capitalism, an essentially capitalist economic space.

Finally, in much anthropological and political ecology literature the commons is represented not as a capitalist space but, either explicitly or implicitly, as a space of economic difference.³³ On these commons, there is an escape from the singular form of industrial capitalism and a focus on other forms of economy where kin, community, culture, territory, and other processes are the bases for resource management and economic practice. These representations remain, however, within a capitalocentric discourse insofar as they are stories from locations bounded by capitalism. That is, originating in the "Third World" or other locations that are distinctly peripheral to capitalism (e.g. rural areas, first nation territories, etc.), they are relegated to a binary

³⁰ Garrett Hardin, "Denial and Disguise," in *Managing the Commons*, Garrett Hardin and John Baden, eds., (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1977), p. 45.

³¹ Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

³² E.g., Elinor Ostrom, Roy Gardner, and James Walker, *Rules, Games, and Common-Pool Resources*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994); E. Schlager and E. Ostrom, "Property-Rights Regimes and Natural Resources: A Conceptual Analysis," *Land Economics*, 68, 3, 1992, pp. 249-62.

³³ E.g. Shankar Aswani, "Common property models of sea tenure: A case study from the Roviana and Vonavona Lagoons, New Georgia, Solomon Islands," *Human Ecology*, 27, 3, 1999, pp. 417-53; Dyer and McGoodwin, *op. cit.*; Bonnie J. McCay and James M. Acheson, *The Question of the Commons* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1987); B. Nietschmann, "Defending the Miskito Reefs with Maps and GPS," *Cultural Survival*, 18, 4, 1995, pp. 34-37.

position (in this case, the subordinate, weak, and often literally distant position) relative to the presence of capitalism.³⁴ In terms of identity, these distant commons play the vital role of providing a location where the non-capitalist subject might reside, the other that gives the capitalist subject his/her identity. Importantly, these representations of the commons offer an imaginary of economic difference but, insofar as capitalism retains its hegemony, they remain unimaginable solutions to the problems of proximate commons.³⁵

LIMITATIONS OF THE BINARY COMMONS

Returning to the example of Bob, how can he be represented given the binary capitalist/pre-capitalist as it relates to the commons? The standard neoclassical discourse of fisheries positions Bob as an individual economic agent who moves from one utility-maximizing opportunity to another, as seen in Bob's seasonal shifting from one fishing ground and/or species to another. In this movement Bob is unconstrained and is, indeed, legally free to fish anywhere. In addition, he is unconstrained by cultural, territorial, or community based relations or restrictions (Figure 1). That some of his New England neighbors might demonstrate other behaviors based on such constraints³⁶ is the degree to which they are remnants of pre-modern forms of fishing. Bob's level of capital investment, advanced onboard technologies, and fishing capacity suggest a level of modernization and industrialization that places him beyond any remaining processes of culture, territory, or community.

For similar reasons, it becomes difficult to see Bob as a member of a traditional fishing community. Bob lives in Westport, a relatively small coastal town in the southeastern corner of Massachusetts. This town has a small population of resident fishers with whom he does not associate. His "homeport" is not where he lives; it is in New Bedford, an historic center for the fishing industry in this region. However, most boats in New Bedford are larger than Bob's, and they fish offshore while Bob fishes inshore. Bob's seasonal movements place him in different ports at different times of the year along with other small boats from a number of Southern New England towns. Bob lands his catch in a variety of locations depending upon price. Finally, Bob's boat is financed through a credit union in New Bedford run by and catering to the ethnically Portuguese fishers of that city. To which "traditional" community does Bob belong? Which of his several fishing locations is the "territory" of his "community?" When asked, Bob could not insert himself into a particular bounded community or territory, nor could he claim membership in any fisher related community group, fishers' union, or fishers' association. It is clear that Bob has moved away from tradition toward modernity. To the degree that there might be communities that remain traditional in New England, they are embattled and in defense.

The capitalocentric story of the commons successfully produces a desire for non-capitalism and a place for its enactment but, at the same time, relegates those desires and locations always to the past. As a result, Bob can only be represented as either the archaic

³⁴ c.f. Gibson-Graham and Ruccio, *op. cit.*

³⁵ Kevin St. Martin, "Mapping Economic Diversity in the First World: The Case of Fisheries," *Environment and Planning A*, forthcoming, 2005.

³⁶ e.g. James M. Acheson, *The Lobster Gangs of Maine* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University of New England Press, 1988).

subject of a fading pre-capitalism or as the emerging capitalist on the now enclosed commons. The enclosure of the commons as within or bounded by capitalism does not challenge or disrupt capitalism; nor does it contradict the essentialist assumptions of subjectivity and space that are fundamental to a capitalist imaginary of economy and economic progress. Even successful commons, those where a tragedy has been averted, are either necessarily distant (as well as fragile, small, etc.) or they proceed from technical solutions that build upon individual forms of rationality and a resource open to appropriation.

RE-PRESENTING THE COMMONS

[T]hey... redefine space as something that cannot be definitively dedicated to particular activities or exhaustively structured by a single form or 'identity,' ...[t]his space is open, full of overlaps and inconsistencies, a place of aleatory relations and redefinitions, never fully colonized by the pretensions of a singular identity.³⁷

Is it possible to reread/remap the capitalocentric commons? Can it be represented not in terms of the existence/presence of capitalism but as a site where there are a variety of economic possibilities suggested by a common resource? Can it be a space within which economic identity is not reduced to a choice between a capitalist identity and archaism? To do so would be to reveal and reread the contradictions that are evident on the commons, those moments where the assumed subject or space is disrupted by the simultaneous presence of its other.³⁸ Evidences of attitudes or practices that contradict dominant neoclassical assumptions of the fisheries commons, for example, might be reread not as vestiges of some pre-capitalist past but as evidence of the inability to fix economic identities and understandings of the commons.

The search for alternatives to neoliberal policy in New England fisheries cannot proceed by fixing Bob's identity as a pre-capitalist subject on the commons (and all that that implies). This untenable position offers little in terms of a viable and progressive politics for Bob and fishers like him. An alternative strategy is to disrupt the singularity (and capitalocentrism) of dominant (and subordinate) economic identities and commons spaces, to open up the space of the commons to experimentation, negotiation, and multiple economic identities. The goal is to produce an uncertainty as to the future of fisheries resource management and economies, an ambiguity in our representations of the commons. Producing ambiguous identities and images of the commons disrupts the inevitability of capitalism and suggests instead a discourse and politics where the commons future is unknown and open-ended.

Detailed information concerning the fishing practices of Bob is presented below. It suggests the irreducibility of Bob's identity and behavior to any single representation and, therefore, opens the space of the commons to more than one (i.e. capitalist) future.

³⁷ Gibson-Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 87, is here referring to the work of M. Moon, E. K. Sedgwick, B. Gianni, and S. Weir, "Queers in (single family) space," *Assemblage*, 24, 1994, pp. 30-7.

³⁸ Amariglio and Ruccio, *op. cit.*

THE AMBIGUOUS COMMONS OR HOW TO FISH SUCCESSFULLY

Bob, despite great pressure to produce him as such, is not reducible to the mobile, disembedded, and independent Gloucester Fisherman (figure 1). Indeed, if we look closely at how fishers (in this case Bob) enact mobility, disembeddedness, and independence, we can reveal within these processes their contradictory nature, i.e., the way they cannot be reduced to or aligned with the fixed identity of the dominant image of fishing in New England. Bob's ability to fish (or not) in a variety of places and his ambiguous relationship to fishing "communities" are, in part, determined by Bob's sharing of cartographic/environmental knowledge with other fishers. That is, we can see in the process of knowledge exchange how Bob's identity as a community member and the degree to which he is mobile and independent can be represented in multiple (and contradictory) ways.

The problem of "search," overlooked by the dominant discourse of fisheries but vital to fishers' success, is embedded in fishers' practices of sharing knowledge, in particular, detailed knowledge of the geography of the ocean bottom.³⁹ Rocky bottoms provide habitat for groundfish, which are increasingly scarce elsewhere. Rocky bottoms also damage nets, particularly those towed by small and medium sized boats that, unlike larger boats, do not have crews to mend damaged nets. Success in the inshore areas frequented by Bob and fishers of Plymouth is largely a function of the detailed knowledge of where a net can be towed near rocky areas without being damaged. Other inshore areas, particularly those with smooth or sandy bottoms, are known by most fishers and no detailed knowledge of the bottom is needed. These areas, however, don't have as many fish perhaps because they lack the rocky habitat or because they are overfished due to the ease of access by fishers from many ports.

In Plymouth, knowledge of the rocky areas is traded amongst fishers in the form of "papers" produced on plotter machines on board each boat. When the net is cast and towed (usually for 30 minutes to one hour) the plotter is turned on. It traces the path of the boat until the tow is complete and the net reeled in. The path appears as a simple line within the Loran coordinate system grid, which is also traced by the plotter. Successful paths are repeatedly used and mapped on a single paper. Over time, they are referred to as "tows" and are given place names by those who fish there. "Papers" containing good "tows" are often sheets of loose-leaf paper that are easily photocopied and traded amongst fishers. The result is a community of fishers who share information about individual or multiple tows in specific locations -- tows that determine the success of inshore fishers.

Papers are traded depending upon relationships between fishers, the expectations of reciprocity, and the value of the paper being traded. For example, general tows that are widely known are traded readily even to "outsiders" as a way to express welcome and openness; however, valuable papers showing more productive and esoteric tows would not be traded to these fishers. Bob, as a non-native to Plymouth, was in the position of the "outsider" and was not given valuable papers until he had resided in Plymouth for several years. He was fortunate to have information from other sources which allowed him to

³⁹ James A. Wilson, "Fishing for Knowledge," *Land Economics*, 66, 1, 1990, pp. 12-29. Gisli Palsson, "Enskillment at Sea," *Man*, 29, December 1994, pp. 875-900.

fish the area until trust and conditions of reciprocity were established. Bob now possesses many papers from several individual fishers from within this community.

Figure 2 shows a typical paper provided by Bob for an area within a day trip of Plymouth. This figure shows the specificity of the pathways around and through rocky areas and “humps.” The multiple lines on the paper represent individual sets of a boat’s net and where it was towed during each set. This paper was used repeatedly, probably over the course of several years. Some pathways are more often traveled than others; it can be assumed that they were more successful tows in terms of fish caught. Some pathways may represent unsuccessful trials to maneuver through rocks or humps. The paper in figure 2 is typical of the papers belonging to trawl fishers who work inshore.

Figure 3 shows a similar paper; however, this one is the product not of a trawl fisher using a plotter but a lobster fisher who probably mapped the bottom over a long period of time using sonar. While our example is of the trawler community, the lobster map is interesting, because it is a map of the hard bottom avoided by the trawl fisher who produced the paper in figure 2. Figure 3 is the inverse of figure 2. Hard and rocky areas are of interest to lobster fishers and trawl fishers; however, the trawl fisher must find pathways near but not on top of the hard bottom. Clearly there is a complex and detailed “landscape” that is known to varying degrees by different fishers in this community. While it is the lobster paper that is annotated with landscape names, these names are common to both lobster and trawl fishers and are very much the language of fishing in Plymouth. The common and often historic tows depicted in these papers are called Airplane Tow, Mud Hole, Slew, and Peter’s Tow. However, the trawler paper also reveals other pathways that may not appear on common papers of this area, for example, the tow that exits beneath the Mud Hole.

CONCLUSION

The community of fishers in Plymouth is an ongoing process rather than a fixed and traditional entity.⁴⁰ It is neither permanent nor closed and changes as new fishers try to enter and others exit. Also, the commons itself, the space produced and maintained by Plymouth fishers through processes that limit access, remains unbounded insofar as it cannot act as the community’s traditional or exclusive territory. These processes and practices introduce an ambiguity relative to Bob’s identity and representations of the commons. While he is certainly mobile and independent (e.g., he moves between several such communities and locations in search of better opportunities), he is, nevertheless, dependent upon community and community-produced knowledge for his success. The locations into which he ventures are similarly ambiguous; they are “open access,” yet successful utilization of resources is only attained through a negotiation with other fishers. It would seem that it is possible to read the fishers of Plymouth as both independent utility-maximizing individuals on an open access resource and as community members operating within territories of limited access.

⁴⁰ c.f. Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Rivera Gutiérrez, “Neither Duck Nor Rabbit: Sustainability, Political Economy, and the Dialectics of Economy,” in *The Spaces of Neoliberalism: Land, Place and Family in Latin America*, Jacquelyn Chase, ed., (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2002), pp. 159-86; Blake D. Ratner and Alberto Rivera Gutierrez, “Reasserting Community: The Social Challenge of Wastewater Management in Panajachel, Guatemala,” *Human Organization*, 63, 1, 2004, pp. 47-56.

The fishing commons of New England is represented by a dominant neoclassical discourse of fisheries as a site of potential tragedy only redeemable through a movement toward enclosure and privatization of access to fisheries resources. While this particular narrative of the commons (in fisheries and elsewhere) has been roundly criticized and qualified, it remains hegemonic in New England and is increasingly used to represent fisheries throughout the world. The pervasiveness of this representation is due not only to its enticing promise of delivering stability and environmental sustainability but also to the impossibility of any alternative. This and other representations of the commons relegate economic difference to an epoch before (or beyond) the present of the capitalist commons.

Rereading the commons, however, as a site of multiple economic/class processes and identities attempts to displace the binary of pre-capitalist past and capitalist present. In the case of Bob and the fishers of Plymouth, past and present are seen to coexist and mingle in unexpected ways. The dominant capitalocentric representation of the commons fixes the economic identity of Bob such that his participation in a community economy would be unimaginable or, worse, a sign of schizophrenia. Where the economy is seen as diverse, the multiple (and mutable) nature of Bob's economic subjectivity allows us to imagine and, perhaps, facilitate more than one economic future (and economic past) for the fishers of Plymouth.

FIGURES



Figure 1 The famous fisherman of Gloucester, MA can be read as depicting the neoclassical subject and space of fishing. Individual, rugged and independent, this fisherman appears to work alone in his struggle against nature and in competition with other fisherman. The space into which he ventures is a location unspecified and his individuality is deeply entwined with his freedom to roam widely in search of fish.

