**It's not just a Blue *Economy* Moment…**

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**Abstract**

Winder & Le Heron (forthcoming) advocates for geographers to engage directly, and critically, with the Blue Economy, to remove the 'disciplinary framings' from which the notion of the Blue Economy has emerged. While endorsing Winder & Le Heron's call for human geography to engage with debates about the Blue Economy this commentary sets out that the lack of critical engagement within the geographical community on the Blue Economy has not been imposed by 'disciplinary framings'. Instead I ask Winder and Le Heron to clarify how a social and cultural critique of the Blue Economy will expand the current knowledge base of our oceans and seas. I also ask whether a critique of extensive literature within economics, planning and governance on the ocean resource have been the building blocks for the critical analysis of the Blue Economy provided by Winder & Le Heron.

Key words: Blue Economy, Oceans and Seas, Marine Research, Human Geography

**Commentary**

The ocean has attracted multiple use for centuries, with fisheries, oil and gas extraction, shipping and transportation, the military, mining, recreation, and conservation, among others. Many areas attract a variety of competing uses, which overlap and cause conflicts between users (user-user conflicts) and users and the environment (user-environment conflicts) (Cicin-Sain & Knecht, 1998). However, the realisation that land activities have reach their limits and the availability of new technologies that allow for greater interaction with the sea (Morrissey et al., 2011; Stojanovic and Farmer, 2013; Zhao et al., 2014), the Blue Economy; the future wide-scale exploitation of the marine resource is increasingly inevitable (Ellis and Flannery, 2016). However, a history of single-sector management of marine activities with little engagement with relevant communities and stakeholders means that an estimated 60% of the world's major marine ecosystems have been degraded or are being used unsustainably (UNEP, 2011). Indeed, there are many indicators that suggest we are failing to effectively regulate and conserve vital ocean-based resources, and that this failure will potentially lead to consequences that include ecosystem tipping points, or dramatic shifts in structure and function that are hard to reverse (Selkoe et al., 2015).

Within this context, coastal and marine policymakers and managers have become increasing aware of the need to support and analysis the economic and social dimension of marine activity. Suddenly, the few social scientists working on anything that constituted an ocean-based activity, along with marine biologists, ocean chemists and physicists were called on to build an evidence base from which the plethora of ocean activities could be developed in a sustainable manner. In response, a large body of research across the social sciences has begun to document and map this exploitation, including research in planning (Douvere and Elher, 2009; Flannery and Cinnéide, 2008; O'Mahony et al., 2009), governance (Evans et al.,

2011; Flannery and Ellis, 2016), citizenship (Fletcher & Potts, 2007; McKinley and Fletcher, 2012) and economics (Kildow & McIlgorm, 2010; Morrissey et al., 2011; Colgan, 2013). International journals such as Marine Policy, Coastal Management and the Journal of Ocean and Coastal Management publish papers on all aspects of the oceans and new journals such as the Journal of Ocean and Coastal Economics further increase the platforms in which research on the social aspects of the marine can be disseminated.

The social scientists active in research on the marine resource have all had to reconceptualise their disciplines to meet the unique properties of the ocean and seas. From an economics' perspective, thirty years of debating the definition of ocean based economic activity has laid the foreground for what is now the sub-discipline of 'marine economics' (Kildow and McIlgorm, 2010). Planning and governance colleagues have spent the last twenty years actively wrestling with adapting their static, land-based approaches to the management of the sea. The attitude among the small research community interested in the ocean-based social science research has always been one of 'there is more to be done' and lets 'get on with it'. Along with the pressures of meeting business and policy demands, this attitude has perhaps fostered a culture of 'doing' rather than 'thinking' for the social scientists engaged in marine research. However, this 'doing' has not been to the exclusion of other disciplines.

Yet it seems to be this body of research that Winder and Le heron in their paper, '**Assembling a Blue Economy moment? Geographic engagement with globalising biological-economic relations in multi-use marine environments**' base their call to Human geographers to re-frame the direction and focus of research on the 'Blue Economy'. However, my question to Winder and Le Heron is, with the exception of the lives and livelihoods of fishers (Urquhurt and Acott, 2012), what research base has social and critical geography to reframe the debate around the Blue Economy? Research by Human Geographers (Steinberg, 2001; Peters 2010) has already noted that while representing 70% of the earth's surface, the marine or ocean or 'Blue' resource has mostly been ignored by social and cultural geographers. This lack of engagement with the marine is even starker when compared to the rich critical debates offered by Human Geographers in other natural resource sectors including agriculture, mining, forestry and energy. Each of these sectors has encouraged academic debates and lively sub-disciplines within Human Geography. In contrast to Le Heron and Winder's commentary, which assumes that strong disciplinary framings around the concept of the Blue Economy is to blame for the lack of social and critical research on ocean resources, Peters (2010) contends that this dearth of research is actually due to a lack of everyday consciousness of the marine environment among social and cultural geographers. As an economist having worked in a Geography department and attending geography conferences and seminars since 2009, it is Peters (2010) narrative that I find more realistic.

However, if Human Geography become more engaged and reframe current research on the Blue Economy, from what basis will this take place? Winder and Le Heron offer geographic assemblage theory as a new way in which to depict and conceptualise our ocean and sea resources. Assemblage theory is a well-established theoretical framework. However, is it

applicable to the marine resource and the 'Bluing' of the global economy? Winder and Le Heron present the ability of the marine resource to fit within this theoretical framework, but is it actually capturing the essence of the marine? If so, how? The social science community active in marine research fully realise the pitfalls of conceptualising marine activities in land-based practices. Planners such as Jay (2013) and Ellis and Flannery, (2016) are openly critiquing the use of land based planning practices, particularly zoning in the marine environment. Research in marine economics is reconceptualising the role of natural resources in the core-periphery debate offered by New Economic Geography and establishing marine activities as a mobile, high-tech, high value added industry (Morrissey and O'Donoghue, 2012; Morrissey et al., 2014). Research by Evans et al., (2011) examines whether current best practice in ocean governance is applicable to Developing countries. Developing countries are for the first time at the centre of an economic agenda.

Thus, my question to Winder and Le Heron is how a social and cultural critique of the Blue Economy will expand the current knowledge base of our oceans and seas. Or will it be a narrative built on a critique of the research done to date in other disciplines. Either way, it is clear from Winder and Le Heron's paper that the 'disciplinary framings' of the Blue Economy, at least provide an initial building block from which social and cultural geographers can now engage with the marine resource.

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