

# ‘One blue’

**Ronan Foley**

Maynooth University, Ireland

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## Abstract

This paper responds to Winder and Le Heron's (2017) article on the Blue Economy and starts by acknowledging their laudable attempt to critically examine the terminology and in particular its economic framing. Their articulation of how this can be extended to consider bioeconomic relations, ethics and politics and where geographers play a role in innovative forms of knowledge production is then critically examined. I suggest that the term blue needs to be examined more fully alongside the term economic and identify a range of complex palettes and forms that need to be considered. In addition, I propose that health in a range of forms, both human and non-human, might be fed into the mix to deepen their discussion of both value and ethics of care. Finally, the notion of ‘one blue’, following the example of ‘one health’, is tentatively suggested as a conceptual term to deepen their call for stronger aspects of therapeutic assemblage thinking to be fed into future ocean and marine management.

## Keywords

assemblage, healthy blue space, palettes of place, relational geography

## Introduction

Rose George's *Deep Sea and Ocean Going* starkly outlined the extent of our global economic dependency on the blue (George, 2013). Ninety per cent of the world's goods are moved by sea in container ships by skeleton crews along connective transport routes and hubs in a relational and more-than-human geography that skims the surfaces of blue space. Gordon Winder and Richard Le Heron's paper takes a similarly relational position to critically consider deeper dimensions of the Blue Economy. Framed by contradictory contexts of resource exploitation and sustainability visions of ocean management, they argue persuasively for a reframing of the term to consider wider ontologies and forms of knowledge production. Given one reading of ocean spaces as new ‘offshore enclosures’, their

clear focus is on broadening out such a bounded and territorial view of oceans, currently dominated by economic management – especially fisheries – and ecosystems services perspectives. They propose that Blue Economies might be better considered through assemblage theory, a wider biological–ecological vision and a particular critical focus on investment-institutional projects. My response to their work is inevitably informed by my positionality as a health geographer with a particular interest in healthy blue space (Foley and Kistemann, 2015).

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### Corresponding author:

Ronan Foley, Department of Geography, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Collegeland, Co. Kildare, Ireland.  
Email: ronan.foley@nuim.ie

## **Blue Economy: Assemblages and co-productions**

The paper's aim is relatively clear: to open up discussions around how the Blue Economy can be extended to consider bio-economic relations, ethics and politics and where geographers can play a role in innovative forms of knowledge production. At heart is an attempt to broaden ontologies and epistemologies in relation to the Blue Economy and to challenge existing partial or siloed visions via wider critical scrutiny and an assemblage vision of how such spaces can be seen and understood. In both acknowledging and disrupting primarily economic drivers, a relational recalibration is required that produces a more holistic and connected vision of the value of the blue; one that moves more towards a shared care vision, yet still recognizes the unavoidable and pragmatic resource potential of the oceans.

Structurally, the paper introduces the very broad and at times confusing concept of Blue Economy from its sustainable technologies roots in the work of Pauli (2010) – with limited nautical content – through to its appropriated association as a catch-all term for ocean and marine management, planning and policy. In these new appropriations, they identify the narrow and 'economocentric' readings and uses of the term, especially evident in European Union policy and other global networks, where a 'quota-led' vision holds sway, both in terms of the valuing of the blue and specific forms of management dominated by 'farmed/conserved' approaches. They challenge such limiting approaches and instead put forward a conceptual model that introduces a flat ontology, drawn from an assemblage model of thinking. This is especially evident in their figure 1, in which a large number of terms associated with Blue Economy are listed in an open and unconnected array. The terms include dominant existing terms like fishing, marine spatial planning, energy and aquaculture; yet other settings, uses, needs and actants (heritage, cable, resilience and remote sensing) are listed equally. In leaving everything open, such that new assemblies and connections can be built from a list that has 'compositional diversity and conceptual fluidity', 'potential

collisions' are deliberately made visible. They then add empirical examples from New Zealand that tease out more indigenous visions and reframings of the ocean aligned to a range of additional perspectives, some of which may not yet be known. Their open assemblage model leaves space in knowledge production for unexpected alignments to emerge through transparency and negotiation. In showing that 'values-means-ends' ontologies are central to the politics of knowledge production, they argue that paying close attention to and effectively challenging existing 'diverse investment-institutional projects' will broaden discussions of the Blue Economy towards a multiple and emergent set of new 'trading environments' in which ecologies, cultures and connectivities are more carefully conceived and mapped.

### **Commentary: Ethics of care**

The paper is broad in ambition and scope. While at all times appreciating the author's intent for the paper to be wide in its thinking, inevitably it finds this a tricky task to carry off. On one level, the complexity of the argument makes the muddy waters of the subject even muddier, while the use of unexplained acronyms makes some of the key policy drivers hard to follow. Inevitable also is the difficult balance between proposing new ontologies that try to move beyond existing empirical studies (especially land-based ones not necessarily transferable to the seas), yet provide clarity to those ontologies through understandable examples. These do appear, sometimes in frustratingly oblique forms, across the paper and do help us make a little more sense of the conceptual side. Equally one of the dangers of assemblage thinking is that it can sometimes feel like a theory that considers everything and nothing at the same time.

There are clear definitional issues with the term blue and the multiple spaces of water discussed in the text. While there is a strong focus on marine waters, a truly relational vision – partially noted in the text – would incorporate an ecological view that would see them as reservoirs/containers which are part of a bigger cycle of more-than-seawater, fed from both sky and land, yet also seeping forwards and backwards via inland seas, riverine and tidal

systems as well as storm surges and rising sea levels. Equally the blurred liminality of coastal lands and waters (Jones, 2011; Ryan, 2012) reflecting both human geographies of acculturation (smuggling, leisure and escape) and physical geographies of loss and gain (coastal erosion and spit development), provide additional muddyings of the water, both literally and metaphorically. Such hybrid spaces, simultaneously in and out of water, are permeable, porous and nebulous, disrupting both orientations and navigations of space as well as the palettes we used to describe them.

Given the intended breadth of the paper's content, it feels churlish to note what is missing. Nonetheless there are a number of additional perspectives that feel relevant. The focus on 'value' could be much stronger, notwithstanding the fully articulated economic costings identified in the paper. A wider valuing might reframe the potential of the oceans and other waters to incorporate other dimensions, especially health and well-being and wider cultural practices; thereby opening up the ontology to an ethically framed duty of care. In thinking about health and well-being, this can be applied to both human and marine health (flora-fauna environments) that considers the health of the water itself and the humans around, near and in it. Equally one might think about human health, especially given the assemblage/relational ontologies suggested, as relational spaces for human movement (trade/refugees/migration/globalization) that in turn shapes health outcomes. Additionally the emotional/affective power of the blue has important well-being dimensions especially in considering such spaces as psychotherapeutic geographies (Bondi, 2005). Such a therapeutic geographies vision can reflect notions of root-shock (Fullilove, 2006), transferable as a loss of biotic habitats, for example, the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef (Slezak, 2016) and social communities, such as the almost overnight closures of the Grimsby/Hull fishing fleets after the cod wars.

Cultural elements reflect the good example used in the paper of Māori stewardship, especially its traditional problematizing of the idea of 'sovereignty' but equally deepen the focus on contested ownerships, which are problematic elements

underdeveloped in the paper. As noted in passing, new 'wet-cartographies' are creating a 'blue scramble' as the early modern mania for marking lines of power and ownership on and through maps are reinvented in new and troubling geopolitical mappings of the ocean floor for subfloor mineral extraction and exploitation (The Economist, 2009). While Winder and Le Heron also reference Foucauldian aspects of the disciplining of nature, knowledge politics are always about whose knowledge is privileged and even enforced. While the paper does talk around the issues of legitimization and ownership, aspects of hegemonic power need to be more fully discussed. Legal geographies might also be developed, in terms of illegal practices from piracy to tax evasion (equally found in Small Island Developing States [SIDS]) to new economic pressures that continue, like water itself, to problematize livelihood choices for people living in poverty and need. However, in simple terms the paper does identify that it's not just about who owns what – in material terms – in the Blue Economy but also who owns how the term is discussed, debated and presented to the world.

### **Relational blue geographies**

Despite the critical comments above, I like the ambition of the paper in proposing new ontologies around the Blue Economy. Its critical and conceptual framings draw from a very wide scholarship that, as Le Heron et al. (2016) suggest, continue to 'keep things complex'. It also encourages geographers in the development of a spatial visioning that reflects new shifts in 'wet/blue' turns in the subject. Equally the flat ontology proposed is reflected in non-judgemental graphics and tables that represent key terms and meetings as open agendas for a prospective view in the paper; not so much ground-truthing as 'fluid-storying'. In addition, there is a 'bathymetric' spatial vision built in to their thinking, which is a realistic representation of volumetric space and perhaps intended to reflect the disorientations inherent in such spaces around multiple flows, folds, depths and swells. Getting this across to the audiences to which it is intended – the drivers of more careless resource/exploitation

models of Blue Economy – is another matter entirely. It's much easier to turn, slip and slide in water than it is on land, and while the 'mandating of a strong commercial presence through/in governance' is well noted, a stronger response to those elusive and legitimizing forces is still necessary.

The ontologies suggested for multi-use marine spaces are framed in terms of boundedness and unboundedness; reflecting both inputs and outputs, but also insisting on both positive and negative potentials of the Blue Economy. In forcing both sides of the equation onto the table at least, it opens up how place- or context-specific future studies might operate, for example, the potential benefits and dangers of developing surfing cultures into new settings, that is, women in Iran (Waves of Freedom, 2016) or their role in reviving declining coastal communities in Ireland and France. The power of the swell will always have the capacity to be both destructive and joyful and the value is in acknowledging both aspects and working with the swell rather than trying to manage/control it or protect oneself from it. In arguing for similarly nuanced approaches to other aspects of the Blue Economy, ethical and political aspects of globalization, commodification and the social and cultural production of place can be made visible at all times.

In arguing for an assemblage approach to the Blue Economy, the authors frequently note their reluctance to use land-based analogies and this brings us to a key issue of translation. One could see this as a translational project, a necessary action given the different languages used in knowledge production. While multiple discourses can exist in parallel, meaningful interdisciplinary research cannot exist without some form of translational/relational vision. Geographers are well placed to push for such translations and arguably speak these languages well, even if the vocabulary is a little over-complicated at times.

## Conclusion: One blue

In Veronica Strang's (2004) always interesting writing on water, she notes its unlimited capacity for metaphor, but equally, the intriguing question, 'is water alive'? As both natural and cultural actant,

water can be co-opted into the Blue Economy yet equally resists such a co-option through its own unruly and mobile vitality. Such contested possibilities are visible (flood, wave, wind) yet also invisible within the 'black/blue box' natures of the ocean in particular. Winder and Le Heron's paper tries to address this unusual form of vital geography in their plea for a consideration of biological and ecology systems that recognize the agentive power of the blue and a wider water politics. While future global wars may be fought over (fresh)water, one can extend that analogy to the control of the marine as well. In writing on healthy blue space, attention has been drawn to the idea of palettes of place. A paletic vision of the global economy has seen it turn toward the blue after the arguable exhaustion of other colourful economies; green/brown/black and so on. Yet the point of a palette is to offer a range of colours that can be combined to produce new shadings, an idea at the heart of this work.

This paper combines increasing interest in wet ontologies with specific political economy futures and in so doing identifies an important area of global spatial concern. Philip Hoare (2014), in his review of the Blue Mind book/movement, notes, 'I am wary of things as soon as they acquire a name. Once categorised, they become commodities, ideas to be sold'. In drawing attention to the categorical term Blue Economy, Winder and Le Heron echo such a wariness and ask us to contest and trouble the term, especially the upfront use of 'economy'. Such an attentiveness, properly developed and coherently argued, has the potential to provoke global responses and alternative initiatives. At the risk of repeating the same mistake, the more systemic aspects of their call might argue for a fuller articulation of the idea of 'one water'; following the model of 'one health' (<http://www.onehealthglobal.net/>) as an integrative multidisciplinary effort, working in multi-scalar ways to attain optimal benefits for humans, non-humans and the environment.

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