

Environment, Labour and Capitalism at Sea: “Working the Ground” in Scotland

By Penny McCall Howard

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Reviewed by Timothy P. Clark¹

Howard’s (2017) *Environment, Labour and Capitalism at Sea* examines changes in marine and aquatic food systems, labour relations, and technology through the perspective of a Scottish fishing community. Howard utilises a well-grounded critical materialist perspective to frame their ethnographic study, which helps them to analyse how structural changes in political economy affect the daily lives of Scottish fishers. *Environment, Labour and Capitalism at Sea* unpacks the broader social forces that mediate interactions between human beings and their marine environment while simultaneously drawing out the individual stories and life histories of Scottish fishers.

Howard’s (2017) theoretical framing and methodological approach allows them to detail what they call ‘histories of the present’ (pp. 18). In doing so, they successfully account for the effects of capitalist commodification on the sea and the people who rely upon it. Thus, Howard’s work provides ethnographic context that pairs well with similar studies such as Longo et al.’s (2015) historical analysis of fisheries, commodification, and the socioecological tragedies that accompany abrupt shifts to meet the demands of a capitalist market. Howard does not portray the fishers as victims or dupes but as individuals who cope with, and actively struggle against, larger social forces.

Howard’s focus on human labour; what Marx (1976, pp. 284) called our ‘life-activity’ by which we realise our purpose, enables them to lucidly draw out these complexities. Howard’s emphasis on work and labour relations also guides an explication of vast and rapid changes in human environmental relations in Scotland’s fisheries. For example, the socioeconomic dependence on prawns stemmed from the fact that ‘everything else ran out’ (Howard, 2017, pp. 81) after the rise of commercial fishing. As a result of socio-structural forces, the once ecologically diverse marine system became a prawn monoculture. Locals could no longer catch and share popular and formerly abundant fish such as herring. Instead, they were forced to purchase these fish at a high cost from corporate-owned supermarkets. In this example, the reader

1 Department of Sociology, North Carolina State University, NC, United States; tpclark2@ncsu.edu.

is shown how fishers must adapt and struggle against ecological pressures that stem from, and contribute to, broader rifts in the global marine ecosystem (Clausen & Clark, 2005).

Howard (2017) argues that the capitalist political economy structures an ideological understanding of the sea. They posit that the inherent characteristics of labour at sea, such as the danger and hostility of the environment, conceal the socio-structural forces that make work at sea riskier. They present the pain and suffering of fishers who have lost friends and suffered trauma while undertaking sea-work, and augment these stories with an economic and social history of declining boat ownership and rising market competition in the fishery. Howard (2017) argues that it is these forces that drive perilous behaviour at sea, such as longer voyages and more risky trawl manoeuvres. Howard (2017) details how capitalist market pressures compelled skippers to forego boat maintenance and equipment upgrades. With this analysis, the reader is familiarised with the age and history of the boats and their technologies, the evolution of labour tactics at sea, and the processes by which people in the community know and understand the sea and their work as fishers. Howard's (2017) work critiques the structural imperatives of capital through the lens of what of Žižek (2008), Bourdieu (2000), and other social theorists term systemic, or symbolic, violence as perceived and experienced in the life histories of Scottish fishers.

Howard's utilisation of an embedded ethnography in which they ingratiate themselves as an active member of the fishing community is effective for the purposes of this book. They befriend, interview, and work with community members of different ages and experiences. This allows them to provide a rich description of the effects of agro-ecological change on the community. Howard enriches their qualitative work with reviews of the economic, ecological, and social history of the fishery and its changes in catches, profits, and corporate ownership.

At times, the book can feel disjointed. In an attempt to avoid a reductive perspective, some chapters seem forced. While interesting, the chapters about naming places at sea and rethinking navigation are a departure from the theme: how structural forces of capital induce violence, suffering, and alienation between human beings and the sea. However, this is a minor criticism. Howard's work succeeds in the overall aim. It is well written and emotive. The honest portrayal of the suffering of conflicted fishers who struggle against forces beyond their control aids in our understanding of the root causes of environmental change and the metabolic relationship between humankind and nature. Readers who study environmental sociology, food, and agricultural systems would do well to read Howard's work.

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