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THE RUSH FOR OCEANIA: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY OCEANS GOVERNANCE AND STEWARDSHIP

Reclaiming Oceania Collective



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The Rush for Oceania: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Oceans Governance and Stewardship

The management, governance and control of the world's oceans have become major policy and research agendas. Nowhere is this more the case than in the Pacific Ocean, the world's largest ocean. The world wants Oceania like never before.

Against a backdrop of renewed geostrategic competition, Pacific-rim powers view the Pacific Ocean as an important 'domain' for the maintenance of regional and global order (Ratuva 2017; Medcalfe 2018; Morgan 2018). Furthermore, in a context of global natural resource scarcity and environmental overshoot, remaining oceanic 'wild spaces' are increasingly important both for capitalist accumulation and for ecological conservation (Voyer et al. 2018b). Corporations and states have their eyes on rare minerals on the Pacific seabed (Blue Ocean Law and PANG 2016); distant water fishing fleets (having driven fisheries in other waters to catastrophic collapse) are keener than ever to exploit Pacific tuna stocks (Tarai 2016; Aqorau 2016; Tarte 2009); and corporate-friendly conservation organisations are working to set aside large areas of Oceania as 'protected areas' and to shape regional governance of maritime spaces (Bennett et al. 2015; Conservation International 2010).

The imperatives of external actors are driving a political re-spacing or 're-scaling' of the Pacific Ocean (Brenner 2001; Swyngedouw 2004): strategic thinkers view Oceania as a single naval 'domain'; region-wide regulatory regimes have evolved to govern fisheries and seabed minerals; and conservation groups press for a joined-up 'Oceanscape' of marine-protected areas, linked across national jurisdictions (see Pratt and Govan 2010).

At the same time however, Oceania is also a space of resistance. Pacific islanders – stewards of the ocean for thousands of years – are organising at unprecedented scales. New social movements aim to reassert an 'oceanic' identity, and are confronting forces that would usurp their sovereignty and heritage (Teaiwa 2018). Pacific islanders are also leveraging their 'oceanic presence' in processes of multilateral oceans diplomacy; and in so doing so have become global leaders, actively shaping international regimes designed to protect the world's ocean and to tackle climate change (Quirk and Hanich 2016; Gruby and Campbell 2013).

Three moments: Conceptualising the contemporary ‘Rush for Oceania’

Early in the 21st Century three distinct ‘moments’ are combining to produce an unprecedented ‘rush’ for the Pacific Ocean (See Table 1 for key processes associated with each of the three ‘moments’). These three moments can be broadly characterised in the following way:

- 1.) The ‘Securitisation’ of Oceania:** An intensified securitisation of Oceania in the context of the re-emergence of ‘sea power’ and the ‘maritime domain’ in renewed great power rivalry.
- 2.) The ‘Blue Economy’ in Oceania:** An intensification of efforts to exploit, commodify and enclose the Pacific Ocean’s natural resources, including in the name of conservation.
- 3.) Resistance in Oceania:** Indigenous-led activism and resistance to moves to securitise and commodify the Pacific Ocean; and an assertion of ‘Oceanic’ identity and stewardship in regional and global processes of governance.

Following Steinberg (2001), these three ‘moments’ broadly map onto three competing social constructions of the Pacific Ocean, namely:

The *Securitisation* moment is primarily grounded in a construction of the ocean as a ‘placeless void’ and a ‘frictionless surface’ upon which force can be projected – as a ‘force field’ or ‘maritime domain’ over which maritime powers maintain naval hegemony, but no one state has sovereignty. This construction also reserves the ocean as a space of free movement and free trade (approximately 90% of global trade is carried across the sea).

The *Blue Economy* moment is grounded in a construction of the ocean as a space inhabited by places and things that can be enclosed, accessed and exploited, primarily for the purposes of capitalist accumulation, but also for management and conservation.

The *Resistance* moment is grounded in a Pacific construction of the ocean as ‘place-full’, densely connected and networked, and inseparable from history, society, political and cultural identities. This construction is closely associated with the writing of Samoan author Albert Wendt (1976 and 1984); the work of Pacific philosopher Epeli Hau’ofa and his conceptualisations of ‘Our Sea of Islands’ (1993) and ‘the Ocean in Us’ (1998), as well as the work of Teresia Teaiwa (1995, 2006, 2008) and Katerina Teaiwa (2014 a & b, 2018).

While there is at times considerable overlap and shades of grey between these three constructions,¹ each one offers an all-encompassing conception of the Pacific Ocean as a discrete governable space.² Seen in this manner, as competing and encompassing constructions – each produced by particular configurations of actors and interests – oceans governance can be understood as a dynamic set of institutional and community arrangements which, at any particular point in time, reflect a negotiated compromise between competing constructions of the ocean itself (Steinberg 2001, Campbell et al 2016:519).

A (very) brief history of oceans governance

Globally, the modern (Western, capitalist) history of oceans governance has been dominated by tensions and compromises between the first two constructions: on the one hand, the desire to keep the oceans free and open as a surface for trade and the projection of military force; and, on the other, the desire to enclose (or territorialise) the ocean in the service of capitalist exploitation and accumulation. Since the Second World War, technological advances (particularly in fishing technology and the extraction of offshore oil and gas), growing uneven development (between North and South), and increasing resource scarcity and environmental degradation (both on land and at sea) have seen a rapid intensification of agendas to territorialise the ocean (see Steinberg 2001, Oxman 2006).

In the context of decolonisation, developing-country coastal states have also sought to assert rights to maritime resources (Aqorau 2014; Hanich et al. 2009). Beginning in the 1950s and over subsequent decades, a series of global negotiations fleshed out, and ultimately codified, a compromise amongst competing conceptions of the ocean; culminating in the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Today, moves to extend and strengthen the international maritime legal regime continue in UN negotiations for a new treaty to govern the high seas (a treaty governing marine biodiversity in Areas Beyond National Jurisdictions) and a

¹ Securitisation, for example, covers both the re-emergence of sea power in geopolitics and the desire to police the blue economy.

² This is evident in the ways in which the constructions are expressed in discourses and narratives: for example, ‘the Pacific theatre’ (the United States navy), ‘the Blue Pacific’ and the ‘Pacific Oceanscape’ (the Pacific Islands Forum), and ‘Our Sea of Islands’ (Hau’ofa 1993).

number of other on-going international negotiations concerning different aspects of oceans governance, including in relation to deep-sea mining.

As several scholars have noted, UNCLOS represents a compromise between these two longstanding Western social constructions of the ocean, one emphasising ‘free mobility’ on the high seas and the other emphasising ‘fixity’ and clearly assigned rights to maritime and seabed resources (for discussion see Steinberg 2001 and Oxman 2006). The global oceans legal regime also represents a compromise between industrialised maritime powers in the global North and coastal states in the global South (Hanich et al. 2009:24).

Ultimately coastal states have been granted rights of stewardship (including exploitation) over resources within their Exclusive Economic Zones, but this territoriality falls well short of full state sovereignty thereby preserving the principle of freedom of movement and navigation. It would now appear that a similar compromise may be extended to the high seas in the context of current negotiations for a UN High Seas Treaty, with a key difference being that rights of access, enclosure and exploitation may be assigned to non-state and corporate actors, rather than to contiguous seaboard and island states, and will be managed by an international body (the UN Oceans Commission).

The Ocean in Us: Pacific constructions of Oceania

Alongside dominant Western social constructions of Oceania – and never fully submerged by them – are indigenous Pacific understandings of the ocean as a place full of rich meaning and connection (see Hau'ofa 1993, 1998; Teaiwa 2008). In the traditions of Oceania, the sea is not understood predominantly as a space for free trade, naval power-projection or resource extraction. Of course, countless economic and political agendas have been played out on the ocean by Pacific islanders; but these activities have been conducted within a cultural context marked by long-term, embodied and spiritual relationships with ocean spaces. Diverse Pacific island cultures have, for countless generations, understood the ocean in intimate imbrication with society, identity and place. Rich and diverse systems of management and stewardship patterned maritime spaces long before – and throughout – the era of European colonialism (see Veitayaki 1998; Norman 1949).

In the post-colonial period, Pacific islanders have sought to reassert their identities as ocean states, even as they have struggled for control of resources in their waters (Aqorau 2014:345). Key works

by Pacific writers and artists have ‘destabilised myths of island isolation’ and helped reclaim a ‘transoceanic imaginary’; one rooted in kinship connections and indigenous agency (see Deloughrey 2007:96-157). Pacific researchers and educators have also sought to decentre Western epistemologies and assert the importance of indigenous ways of knowing (see Koya-Vaka’uta 2018, 2017).

During Law of the Sea negotiations at the UN, newly independent countries like Fiji diverged sharply from centuries of continental, land-centred, legal norms (which based maritime sovereignty in reference to land-masses) and asserted an identity as ‘a country of water interspersed with islands, and claim[ed] jurisdiction over a block of ocean, far from any continent’ (Andrew 1978:50). In the 21st Century, Pacific islanders are again reasserting oceanic identities, repositioning themselves as ‘large ocean states’ and working together as a ‘blue continent’ in order to shape regional and global political contestation around oceanic spaces (see Malielegaoi 2018; Taylor 2017; Quirk and Hanich 2016). Pacific civil society voices are also organising at scale, and defending Oceania from those who would usurp their sovereignty and heritage (see Teaiwa 2018).

Toward a research agenda for the ‘Rush for Oceania’

In October 2018 academics, artists, and civil society representatives met at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, to discuss a new research agenda exploring oceans governance and stewardship in the Pacific. From that initial meeting emerged a project intended to critically interrogate competing social constructions of the contemporary Pacific Ocean. In other words, to document and analyse the actors, interests, agendas, strategies (material, spatial and discursive), knowledge systems and world views that are working to solidify and harden the Pacific Ocean as discrete space or scale of contestation, accumulation and resistance. This research agenda seeks to unpack the political economy (and political ecology) of the contemporary ‘rush for Oceania’, with a view to informing scholarly debates and influencing policy processes in this critically important arena of governance and heritage. Recognising that oceans research and policy agendas have long been dominated by economists, lawyers and marine scientists – and the production of highly technical and managerialist forms of knowledge (see Campbell et al 2016) – the research will adopt a transdisciplinary and decolonised social science and humanities approach involving a research team consisting of human geographers, anthropologists and international relations scholars, as well as key Pacific civil society partners, writers and artists.

Table 1. Contemporary social constructions of Oceania: Key processes, discourses and programmes*

Securitisation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maritime strategies of Pacific-rim powers (China, US, Australia, NZ) • ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (Japan, US, Australia, India?) • ‘Maritime Silk Road’ (China) • Pacific Fusion Centre (Australia, Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), Pacific Islands Forum) • Pacific Maritime Security Program (Australia, FFA, Pacific Islands Forum) • Australia-Pacific Security College (Australia, Pacific Islands Forum) • ‘Boe Declaration’ on regional security cooperation (Pacific Islands Forum) • Manus Island naval facility (Australia, United States, Papua New Guinea)
Blue Economy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN High Seas Treaty • Pacific ‘Oceanscape’ Framework • Large scale Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) • Fixing maritime boundaries/claims under UN Convention on Law of the Sea • Pacific regional treaty on Seabed Mining • Tuna fisheries management: e.g. Nauru Agreement (PNA) Vessel Day Scheme • Marine spatial planning /management and remote sensing
Resistance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacific Ocean/Climate diplomacy at the UN • The ‘Blue Pacific’ narrative (Pacific Islands Forum) • ‘Green Growth for Blue Economies’ narrative (Pacific Islands Development Forum) • Pan-Pacific civil society regionalism and activism • Wansolwara/ Youngsolwara activism and the arts • Rethinking and reframing Oceania indigenous scholarship • Pacific feminist scholarship and activism • Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement
*Table indicative only, not intended as an exhaustive list.

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Working Papers

Vasemaca Lutu, Vijay Naidu and Kesaia Seniloli (2017) *The Fijian Ethos and Dawasamu Miraculous Healing Water: A Study of Delakado and Natadradave Villagers' Response to God's Gift*. Working Paper No 1, SGDIA, USP, September 2017.

Paul Carnegie (2017) *Rethinking constitutional reform in the Pacific: What can we learn from the Indonesian experience?* Working Paper No 2, SGDIA, USP, September 2017.

Cordelia Belezair (2018) *Rethinking the Limits of Labour Casualisation in the Public Service*. Working Paper No 10, SGDIA, USP, December 2018