

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Sociology Faculty Publications and
Presentations

Sociology

2016

Review of The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture

Julius McGee

Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/soc_fac



Part of the [Demography, Population, and Ecology Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

McGee, Julius Alexander 2016 Review of The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture By Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark Human Ecology Review in press [INSERT ACCESS DATE].

This Pre-Print is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.



Society for Human Ecology

Human Ecology Review Formatted Preprint

McGee, Julius Alexander 2016 Review of The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture By Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark *Human Ecology Review* in press [INSERT ACCESS DATE] url: <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/101122>

This preprint is a pdf of a manuscript that has been accepted for publication in a future issue of Human Ecology Review (HER), published by ANU press. It is the final version of the manuscript and has been approved by the author and copyedited. This formatted preprint will be reformatted by ANU press when the volume in which it is to appear is compiled. At that time, minor further copy edits may occur, and changes to the layout and pagination are likely. The Society for Human Ecology (SHE) is posting this preliminary version of the manuscript online at <http://societyforhumanecology.org/> in the interest of making this work available for distribution and citation as quickly as possible. It can be referenced using the citation given above (insert the date of access).

Once ANU press publish the issue of HER in which this article appears this preprint version will be taken down from the SHE webpage and replaced with a link to the online journal at <http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/human-ecology-review/> Future citations of this article should then reference the published volume, not this preprint.

HER is a free online open access journal for members of SHE and other scholars of Human Ecology. Manuscript submissions following the author guidelines appearing under the HER section of the society's website <http://societyforhumanecology.org/>.

The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture

By Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark
New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 274 pp., 2015

ISBN: 978-0-8135-6577-4

Reviewed by Julius Alexander McGee¹

In 1978, William Catton and Riley Dunlap published their groundbreaking piece, “Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm”, outlining the “new environmental paradigm”, which urged sociologists to be mindful of ecological constraints when conducting analyses on issues such as stratification and social justice. In the proceeding decades, the work of Allan Schnaiberg (1980) and John Bellamy Foster (1999, 2000) would expand on this point, bringing to light how deeply ingrained the destructive relationship between human society and nature truly is. Since then, a slew of environmental sociological analyses have operated under the framework set forth by Catton, Dunlap, Schnaiberg, and Foster, demonstrating the specific fundamental features of capitalist societies that perpetuate environmental degradation. The book *The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture*, written by Stefano Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark, takes the next logical step in the vein of environmental sociological inquiry, bringing to light not only an underexplored area of environmental sociology (marine ecosystems), but the pitfalls of specific attempts within capitalist economies to correct the ecological contradictions they bring out. In doing so, the authors write a new but intriguingly familiar book that combines interdisciplinary research, comparative historical analysis, and critical Marxism in a unique and fascinating way.

Longo, Clausen, and Clark’s book is the next logical step in environmental sociological research because it deals heavily with the issue of sustainability. While sustainability is not new to environmental sociological inquiry, critical discussions regarding capitalism and sustainability that are grounded in empiricism are few and far between, which is what makes this work so important. *The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture* does not just argue that fisheries and aquaculture are intentionally hazardous to the environment due to the choices made by individuals operating within them; on the contrary, it demonstrates that

1 University of Oregon; julimcgee9@gmail.com

the contradictions between capitalism and nature are so perverse that attempts at sustainability are mostly futile. This is one of the book's strongest features, and although it isn't necessarily a focal point of the book, it lays the groundwork for future critical Marxist analyses into environmental sustainability. My personal fascination with the book is its discussion on sustainability, which highlights the range of environmental sociologists this research would appeal to, and why it should be read by more than just those of us embedded within the critical Marxist tradition.

Perhaps the most compelling feature of the book is its diverse range of contributions. On one hand, the book outlines the importance of sociological inquiry into marine environments, demonstrating the disastrous relationship between humans and water ecosystems. On the other hand, the book is a great theoretical contribution that takes Garrett Hardin's concept of the tragedy of the commons and turns it on its head by placing it within a Marxist framework. The book also puts forth concrete solutions to the ecological crises faced by marine ecosystems. In this, the authors succeed where many fail, by not simply providing an alarmists' cry against modern human–environment relations, but also outlining potential ways to move forward. It accomplishes all of these feats in a concise, coherent way that never gets too tangential, which is what makes the book such a great contribution.

The book is not without flaws though. The middle chapters, which focus on two separate case studies—the trapping of bluefin tuna and salmon fisheries—feel somewhat disconnected from each other. Although they are tied together by the theory of the tragedy of the commodity, the purpose behind focusing on these specific cases as opposed to others is not explained, and would have given the book some much-needed empirical depth. While this does not take away from the overall contributions of the book, it falls into the trap that many Marxist-driven analyses are often criticized for, which is cherry picking its empirical cases to prove its point. I am sure there are multiple reasons why these case studies were chosen over others that would easily put this argument to rest, but, without acknowledgment of this, the book runs the potential of being dismissed by some academics as polemic for the sake of being provocative. Aside from this admittedly minor gripe, *The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture* is a fantastic piece of literature that should be a staple book for graduate courses in environmental sociology.

References

- Catton, W. R., & Dunlap, R. (1978). Environmental sociology: A new paradigm. *The American Sociologist*, 13, 41–49.

- Foster, J. B. (1999). Marx's theory of metabolic rift: Classical foundations for environmental sociology. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 105(2), 366–405.
- Foster, J. B. (2000). *Marx's ecology: Materialism and nature*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Schnaiberg, A. (1980). *The environment: From surplus to scarcity*. New York: Oxford University Press.