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Building a Blue Economy in the Arctic Ocean: Sustaining the Sea, or Sustaining the State?

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*“The Norwegian government’s new ocean strategy is all about increasing opportunities for sustainable growth, creating more jobs and exploiting the potential of our oceans.”*

*Per Sandberg, Norwegian Minister of Fisheries (Progress Party), at the European Commission for Fisheries, April 24<sup>th</sup> 2017*

*“If I had the chance to define the High North Strategy for the years ahead, then the connecting link for the next chapter in the story about Norway, all of Norway, which would sum up climate change, nature, environment, knowledge, people, challenges, expectations, [and] geopolitics, is the emphasis on the sea.”*

*Jonas Gahr Støre (leader of the Labour Party), “The High North – 10 years later. At the beginning of a new chapter in the story about Norway”, lecture at UiT – the Arctic University of Norway, November 10<sup>th</sup> 2015*

## Introduction

As sustainability discourses extend to the Arctic, planners and politicians are faced with the fact that the Arctic is fundamentally a maritime region. The oceans cover the majority of the planet’s surface, and the Arctic is no exception. Although precise definitions of the Arctic vary (Arctic Human Development Report 2004: 18), by any definition the Arctic remains unified by a central ocean that takes up the majority of its expanse (Steinberg 2016). As such, any strategy for developing the Arctic’s economies or securing its environmental future must be, necessarily, a maritime strategy. And thus it should come as no surprise that calls for sustainable development in the Arctic are linked with the global turn to a Blue Economy.

In this chapter, we explore this turn through an investigation of Norwegian ocean policy. As the quotations above illustrate, Norwegian officials

from both the right (e.g. Per Sandberg) and the left (e.g. Jonas Gahr Støre) have systematically argued for 'sustainable growth' in the ocean as essential for the country's future. By extending this Blue Economy discourse from its origins in fisheries to the breadth of ocean uses, Norway is opening up political space to redefine its Arctic policy. At the same time, we argue, Norway is engineering a new future for its all-important offshore oil and gas industry by placing it within an emergent 'blue' ideal for integrated ocean management. In effect, then, by locating the Norwegian state's primary mission – sustaining itself – within a more conventional referent object of the sustainability discourse – the ocean environment – the Norwegian state is proposing a future where its governmental authority is both enabled and exemplified by its rational management of ocean resources.

To develop this argument, the remainder of this chapter proceeds in three parts. First we consider the literature on Blue Economy discourse and development programmes, drawing in particular on the work of Young Rae Choi (2017) who, in her study of China's ocean development strategy, emphasises that the Blue Economy is neither simply a well-intentioned programme for sustainable development nor a cynical attempt at 'green-grabbing'. Rather, Choi argues, promotion of a Blue Economy should be seen as part of the effort to apply state governmentality in an emergent space of sovereign interest. We then apply this analysis to the Arctic through a study of Norway's Blue Economy initiative that is shaping state policy with reference to its northern resource frontiers. We conclude by suggesting that in its effort to group together numerous competing ocean uses within a single, sustainably managed, ocean industry, the Norwegian state constructs the ocean as a space that is beyond politics and therefore appropriate for state intervention. This finding, in turn, suggests that when the sustainability discourse is integrated with a post-political managerial agenda, the ultimate referent object of sustainability may be the manager itself: in this case, the state.

## The Blue Economy as Sustainability Strategy

In their comprehensive review of calls for a Blue Economy at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (the 'Rio + 20' conference), Silver et al. (2015: 137) locate the term within the broader promotion of a Green Economy: a "managerial ontology of natural capital" in which a state's natural resources become valued as capital stock, with its value typically incorporating its ecosystem services as well as its extractive resource potential. In contrast with 'brown' development models in which resources are costed without regard to their externalities, in the Green Economy (and, by extension, its maritime, Blue, version), the rational management of these resources (including through internalisation of externalities) is to be taken up by partnerships of states, global finance bodies, and environmental NGOs, with measured liquidation of these resources to be undertaken by private capital (see also, Winder and Le Heron 2017).

Green (and Blue) Economy programmes locate themselves within the broader sustainability discourse, but then take that discourse in a specific direction that favours the economisation of nature's capital (Corson and McDonald 202; Onesti 2012). Silver et al. (2015) are generally critical of this economisation programme. It effectively reduces the environment to use value while justifying the combination of public management with private accumulation that is the hallmark of neoliberalism. In the process, the concern for equity that frequently features within the rhetoric, if not the actual practice, of sustainable development initiatives is subsumed within an overarching agenda for growth and accumulation.

Nonetheless, Silver et al. caution that when Green Economy discourse is applied to the ocean – through references to the Blue Economy – there is more at hand than the 'green grabbing' characterised by the Green Economy's critics. In their analysis of references to the Blue Economy at Rio + 20, Silver et al. identify four distinct elements: a 'natural capital' discourse that values the ocean for its long-term ecosystem services and that typically calls for the enrolment of large financial institutions (e.g. the World Bank) and global conservation groups (e.g. The Nature Conservancy) to facilitate leveraging of this value; a 'good business' discourse that promotes and commends private enterprise that operates in a relatively environmentally friendly manner; a 'SIDS' [small island developing states] discourse that highlights the ocean's economic and environmental significance in order to facilitate the economic development of these states; and a 'small-scale fishers' discourse wherein appeals to the Blue Economy are used to promote the survival of small scale fishers against the threats posed by overfishing by large-scale, heavily capitalised fishing fleets. While aspects of each of these elements can support each other, the four can also work at cross-purposes, and thus Silver et al. suggest that the Blue Economy discourse provides grounds for negotiation rather than simply being a tool of 'green-grabbing' hegemony.

While Silver et al. shed light on the way in which the Blue Economy concept is applied in the framework of global governance initiatives and how it is being utilised by SIDS, their analysis appears less well suited for interpreting the ways in which the term is being applied in the Arctic. Notably absent from Silver et al.'s article is any mention of the ocean resource most prevalent in discussions of the maritime Arctic's resource potential: offshore oil and gas. To an extent, this omission is understandable as oil and gas are rarely considered 'green' (or, in the ocean, 'blue') industries, although, as is discussed below, in Norway in particular the state often takes credit for 'greening' oil and gas extraction and thereby integrating it into its Blue Economy strategy (see also Kristoffersen 2015). In addition, the gap may be the result of Silver et al.'s focus on international conferences. Oil and gas extraction is presently restricted to areas within a single state's sovereign jurisdiction or, in some instances, in areas where two states have bilaterally established a joint development zone. Therefore, global regulation of the industry (including its 'greening') might best be achieved through corporate take-up of best practices rather than through spatial management tools. Nonetheless, even if hydrocarbon extraction is rejected as an industry that can never be 'greened', its persistence in the ocean

must be integrated into any understanding of the Blue Economy agenda. As of 2015, nearly thirty percent of total global oil output came from offshore production. Maintaining a focus on oil and gas is particularly important when one turns to Norway. Norwegian fields accounted for seven percent of global offshore production, and Norway's Statoil is engaged in production around the world (US Department of Energy 2016).

The inapplicability of Silver et al.'s framework to the Arctic goes beyond its omission of oil and gas, however. Silver et al. focus on parts of the world where management by international institutions (UN-system organisations, bilateral aid bodies, environmental NGOs, etc.) is typically seen as beneficial for advancing one or more of the four goals that the authors identify (achieving full valuation of the ocean's resources, promoting good business practices, enhancing the development of small island states, or promoting small-scale fisheries). By contrast, as was articulated in the Ilulissat Declaration (2008), the five Arctic Ocean littoral states prefer a unilateral approach where each state has uncompromised sovereignty over the development of 'its' ocean. While a limited role may be given to cooperatively formed regional organisations (e.g. the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council), the Ilulissat Declaration makes it clear that there is no role for higher global governance bodies, since none is sanctioned by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which reigns supreme as the spatial management framework for the Arctic Ocean. Reflecting on Arctic Blue Economy initiatives, then, it becomes apparent that the problem with Silver et al.'s framework is not just that it largely focuses on the Global South whilst the Arctic is in the Global North (although parts of the region would generally merit classification as 'Global South' when using standard development indicators). Rather, the ill fit stems from the fact that in the Arctic Blue Economy strategies are more often associated with national and regional 'sustainable development' initiatives than with attempts to marshal global conservation capital, secure global development funds, or support small-scale fisheries.

Given the differences between applications of Blue Economy discourse in the Global South and Global North, one might assume that a better entry point for understanding Arctic Blue Economy initiatives would be Winder and Le Heron's (2017) study of Blue Economy references in European Union workshops and policy documents. Winder and Le Heron understand ocean-space as an assemblage of multiple practices and elements that intersect, inform each other, and congeal into institutions in varying and unstable ways. Winder and Le Heron suggest that the Blue Economy assembles the ocean in one specific way (particularly with reference to its biological and economic properties) while forestalling other possible assemblages. Significantly, though, they also note that once one understands the ocean (and its rhetorical-institutional frameworks) as assemblages one frees oneself to consider alternate rationalities for ocean management, and they develop this final point through a consideration of ocean management initiatives in New Zealand.

Winder and Le Heron's assemblage approach has been thoroughly considered and critiqued from numerous angles,<sup>1</sup> and we will not rehearse all of these critiques here. However two bear further elaboration. One concerns the relatively weak version of assemblage theory employed by Winder and Le Heron and the suggestion, articulated by Bear (2017), that to truly understand the ocean as an assemblage one must also accommodate the mosaic of temporalities and spatialities (rhythms, repetitions, stabilisations, and destabilisations) that constitute the ocean's materiality (see also, Steinberg and Peters, 2015). Although we do not belabour this point in the analysis of Norway's ocean development strategy that follows, elsewhere we have demonstrated how Norway's policies for oil and gas extraction in its icy waters seek to stabilise and rationalise the intersection of climatological, biological, and oceanographic forcings that vary over time and space and that, in their very complexity, defy stabilisation into fixed, essential categories (Steinberg, Kristoffersen, and Shake, 2018).

Of greater relevance to our concern with the role of sustainability narratives within Blue Economy programmes, however, is the critique by Choi (2017), who stresses that an explicit consideration of governmentality is largely missing from Winder and Le Heron's analysis. In her analysis of China's Blue Economy policy, Choi writes,

It is on the one hand an expansion of capitalist space driven by the state to the oceans, which are perceived as underdeveloped frontier spaces through which infinite possibilities of "better" uses are imagined, institutionalized, and invested. On the other hand, it is intrinsically a spatial intervention that rearranges people and resources so as to avoid waste and to achieve their economic use. In other words, *infinite possibilities collide with finite space*. (Choi, 2017: 39, emphasis added)

The need to foster 'infinite possibilities' in 'finite space', in turn, requires far-seeing management of spaces and the practices that occur within them. Proactive management is required to prevent environmental decline (e.g. from overfishing, unregulated pollutant outflow, etc.), to stave off conflict (e.g. between seascape-dependent coastal tourism industries and unsightly offshore wind farms), and to foster emergent industries that will require state-sponsored investment before becoming profitable (e.g. deep sea bioprospecting). Thus, in China, the Blue Economy agenda has been used to justify "a comprehensive sea governance system through which the country's sovereign sea space is imagined and managed in its entirety" (Choi, 2017: 38).

Significantly, although this "embedding [of the] marine economy in national development planning... has made sovereign sea space increasingly visible and legible and effectively conceptualized it primarily as economic space" (Choi, 2017: 39), it has not been accompanied by the reduction of the ocean to a de-natured spatial abstraction. Rather, the Blue Economy is constructed as particularly sensitive to nature's variations and interdependencies. Substantial resources are devoted to expanding knowledge of the sea, not just to increase

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of *Dialogues in Human Geography* in which Winder and Le Heron's (2017) article appeared (vol. 7, no. 1) also included five critical responses.

extractive potential but also to inform policy that can sustain its numerous environments. The ocean's future – China's future – is defined as one that necessarily must be sustainable. This is understood as requiring comprehensive management, as well as cutting edge science to support that management. However, this knowledge is always carried with an eye toward defining and separating the ocean's numerous processes, physical states, functions, and uses. The sustainability of the sea and the sustainability of the state are thus seamlessly interwoven: A vibrant sea economy is required to sustain the state and a strong, managerial state is required to sustain the sea as an environment of resources and riches.

The pathway toward the goal of sustainability is thus characterised by the institutionalisation of spatial rationalities that, in the interest of regulation, simplify the very processes that they attempt to sustain. To quote Choi again:

The natural attributes have not changed; it is the new relations between the natural world and the economy, assembled in the soil of the desire for economic growth and technological optimism that justify particular uses in particular geographic places. (Choi, 2017: 39)

In our previous work on Norway's efforts to manage oil and gas activities in the Southeast Barents Sea, we similarly illustrated how ocean management, although informed by an attentiveness to the complex biological processes of ecoclines, resulted in a reduction of dynamic surfaces to static binary categories that neither adequately reflected temporal-spatial variability nor accounted for the complex processes whose vulnerability initiated the planning process in the first place (Steinberg and Kristoffersen, 2017; Steinberg, Kristoffersen, and Shake, 2018). In this chapter, as we move our focus to Norway's broader effort to construct a Blue Economy, we find that the effort to achieve sustainable development in Norway's maritime Arctic is accompanied by a mixture of optimism and concern similar to that which characterises the Chinese effort: once the ocean is established as a space of 'infinite possibilities in finite spaces', one requires comprehensive management to maximise potential, minimise harm, and ensure a sustainable future.

## Norway: The Arctic Blue Economy as Maritime Manifest Destiny

As leaders of a self-declared ambitious maritime nation, Norway's political elite has embraced the Blue Economy as the cornerstone of the country's future. Illustrating Choi's assertion that the Blue Economy agenda institutionalises governmentality, Norway's leaders go beyond simply appealing to the ideal of sustainability. Rather, Norwegian officials assert that in the hostile, complex, and interconnected environment of the ocean frontier, the intersection of what Choi calls 'infinite possibilities in finite spaces' requires proactive management. Thus, for sustainability to be achieved in the ocean, environmental sensitivity and a thirst for growth must be informed by the application of knowledge. Norway claims a long history of understanding, extracting resources from, and sustainably managing its northern waters; indeed the encounter with the Arctic

as a fundamentally maritime region plays a central role in Norwegian state identity (Medby 2015, see also Leira et al. 2007).

Thus, Norway's institutional *knowledge* and *history* of the Arctic marine environment (which might be joined together via the concept of *expertise*) are heralded by Norwegian officials as justifications for Norway's leadership. This fusion of history with knowledge is buttressed in turn by appeals to geographic destiny. Labour Party leader Jonas Gahr Støre has stressed that Norway will "conquer ocean space" by becoming a "global knowledge hub" akin to Silicon Valley (Støre 2015), while also noting that "for Norway (being) North in the world, North - towards the Arctic, nobody is better positioned than us..." In a similar vein, the Norwegian Government's 2017 Ocean Strategy, *New Growth, Proud History*, boasts of Norway's leading presence across a range of ocean sectors:

Every day hundreds of thousands of Norwegians go to work in the ocean industries, which together represent about 70 per cent of our export income. Norway is one of the world's largest producers of oil and gas. We are one of the world's largest and most advanced seafaring nations. We are the world's second largest exporter of fish and seafood. In addition, we have a world class service and supply industry. Norway is also at the forefront of marine research and responsible management of marine resources. (Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries / Ministry of Petroleum and Energy 2017: 4)

The strategy, which builds upon a previous strategy, *Maritime Possibilities: Blue Growth for a Green Future* (Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries 2015), emphasises the embeddedness of the marine economy across sectors and stresses how the marine sector is at the forefront for developing economic knowledge and practice. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has taken up the programme as well. Stressing the Blue Economy strategy's alignment with UN Sustainable Development Goal 14, (which calls for conservation and sustainable use of the oceans), the Ministry publicises Norway's commitment to ocean development to evidence the country's environmentalist credentials (Aas 2017; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017).

In short, Norway is positioning itself as the Arctic Ocean's rightful and natural steward, a country with the capacity, presence, and vision, as well as the appropriate geographic location and cultural-economic history, to manage its northern waters. Norway thus claims to be poised to maximise production and conservation across a range of sectors, while minimising conflict. Norway advocates its maritime manifest destiny<sup>2</sup> through the management of a single, integrated plan for extracting value from the ocean that will facilitate "blue growth through green restructuring" (Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries / Ministry of Petroleum and Energy 2017: 8). Norwegian officials have often described this as a single, multi-sector ocean industry, where technology and

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<sup>2</sup> Manifest destiny is a term that originated in the United States in the 1840s, when expansionist journalists and their allies in office asserted that, due to the confluence of historic, geographic, and cultural factors, the United States was naturally destined to expand across the extent of the North American continent.

knowledge are smooth and mobile, floating across and among the various sectors that extract value from the sea. Thus the Conservative Party's press release announcing the strategy declared that the "[n]ew ocean strategy will ensure more jobs in the ocean industry" (Høyre 2017). The same year, the Labour Party's Jonas Gahr Støre launched his campaign for Prime Minister by noting that "the first thing I will do as Prime Minister is to establish a value creation program for the ocean industries" (Norwegian Broadcasting Agency 2017). This vision of a single, multi-sectoral ocean industry (or, in Støre's terms, a linked family of industries) is illustrated in a poster produced for a 2016 workshop co-organised by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries and the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy (Figure 1). Wind power, oil drilling, fish farming, and trawling exist in peaceful co-existence, aided by the gaze of a satellite and the order of a geodetic map. The material properties of the ocean – the presence of sea ice, the topography of the seabed, the power of currents, the variability of depth – not to mention the conflicts that persist among multiple users, are elided amidst the ideal of peaceful co-existence under the watchful eye of the state.

**[INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]**

Figure 1: Poster from conference on the Norwegian seabed (Bergen, 30 May 2016), sponsored by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries, and the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy. Reprinted with permission from the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries.

### Blue Economy, Brown Oil

Not evident from this poster, however, is that this managerial approach toward an ocean of multiple, compatible uses united by the pursuit of a Blue Economy, has its origins in the remaking of the North in the wake of an energy crisis. As Norway's oil production peaked in 2001, the oil industry and its state allies increasingly turned toward northern waters as the country's next hydrocarbon frontier. However, the extension of hydrocarbon exploration to the Norwegian Arctic opened a new space of political conflict, as the potential for oil and gas drilling sat uneasily amidst efforts to sustain local and national fishing economies as well as protect rich ecosystems in fragile Arctic environments. To meet its various goals, the Norwegian state proposed an integrated approach based on the zoning of ocean space. The *Lofoten-Barents Sea Management Plan*, which sought to "facilitate the coexistence of different industries, particularly the fisheries industry, maritime transport and petroleum industry" (Ministry of Environment 2006: 7-8). The plan established guidelines for hydrocarbon extraction in the country's northernmost waters while calling for the protection of a number of environmentally sensitive regions, including the fishing-rich Lofoten islands in the southern part of the Norwegian Arctic and the areas around the marginal ice zone (the area with seasonal ice cover) in the North.

While the strategy of constructing order through allocating specific activities to individual regions is a common technique of the managerial state, including in ocean regions (Steinberg 2011), it has the effect of depoliticising what are, in fact, inherently conflictual situations. Choi notes that the Blue Economy agenda often celebrates the coexistence of various groups “that may be incompatible in other venues” (Choi 2017:40), and this would certainly seem to be the case with Norway’s advocacy of a single ‘ocean industry’ that unites numerous means for extracting value from the sea. In fact, a close examination of Figure 1 reveals that its vision is dependent on a number of cartopolitical oversimplifications. Although spatial differentiation can be employed to prevent the co-location of incompatible economic activities, many ocean activities have impacts that affect other, adjacent areas. Thus, for instance, although the image shows the oil rig and the school of herring coexisting by occupying different areas of ocean-space, in actuality the fish could swim under the rig or, conversely, pollution from the well could contaminate adjacent fish habitats. Additionally, all spatial management strategies have outer bounds, both for defining the limits of the space being managed and for defining the extent of managed activities. In the case of the Norwegian ‘ocean industry’ graphic, the focus is exclusively on the deep sea, which means that both coastal regions and coastal activities are, quite literally, off the map. In actuality, some of the most heated contests in Norwegian ocean management in the past decades have involved coastal residents who have contested further expansion of the ‘resource frontier’ whether through nearshore oil and gas drilling, mining (dumping waste) or fish farming. The image thus smoothes over potential disposessions, or ‘new extractivism’ in the “name of sustainable ocean management” (Winder and Le Heron 2017: 20).

The Norwegian oil industry has a long history of co-opting opposition by proclaiming its environmentalist credentials (Kristoffersen 2014), and the repositioning of that industry as the cornerstone of an emergent Blue Economy would seem to be a continuation of this trend. Indeed, while the commitment to develop new marine technologies may be seen, in one sense, as part of a programme for advancing Norway’s ocean economy beyond oil and gas, these technological developments can also permit oil and gas extraction to reach into new frontiers. The technological fusion thus goes in both directions. As the Minister of Fisheries told the European Commission, “Testing new technologies are also central points to our ocean strategy. Norway has a long-standing tradition of transferring knowledge between industries. And we would like to see more of this” (Sandberg 2017). The implication here is that out of this technological fusion Norway will become the leader in a new multi-sector ocean industry that can set a high-technology, low-environmental-impact model for countries around the world as they seek to engage the Blue Economy in pursuit of sustainable development.

## Conclusion: Contesting the Blue Economy

As the quotations presented at the beginning of this chapter suggest, Norway’s turn to a Blue Economy strategy crosses, and claims to transcend, political

divides. It thus echoes the concept of the post-political, in which contesting practices and priorities are subsumed within questions of 'management'. A number of scholars, most notably Eric Swyngedouw (2007), have associated this celebration of the post-political with the turn to sustainable development discourse. Within the sustainable development discourse, the omniscient state asserts its authority in the name of efficiency and productivity, securing a future for itself and its citizens and thereby elevating itself seemingly above politics.

As our analysis of Norway's Blue Economy strategy suggests, Norwegian ocean management policy is directed less toward the sustainable management of the marine environment than toward the expansion of oil and gas production in a manner that accommodates other ocean uses. The state thus emerges as both the initiator and beneficiary of these management activities. Indeed, its institutions, as well as its authority, are deemed necessary for keeping politics *out of the sea*. And yet despite the best efforts of politicians from both the left and the right, ocean policy remains a central focus of political conflict. For instance, in the national election in September 2017, the future of the offshore oil and gas industry and its central role in the Norwegian economy were key points of debate (Holter 2017; Lahn 2017). The ensuing discussion over the petroleum economy spilled over to related questions in marine management, including the government's ambition to quintuple production from aquaculture as well as concerns regarding the rights of coastal fleets to fishery resources. In short, the integrated, spatially differentiated, multi-sector "ocean industry" depicted in Figure 1 emerged less as a model of post-political consensus than as a comprehensive list of areas for public contestation.

In conclusion, the Blue Economy agenda, as a state programme that seeks to blend the sustainable development discourse with a turn to post-political management, is itself the site of political conflict. As such, it should be understood less as a means for rationalising the longevity of ocean resources than as a means for legitimising and maintaining state power, as well as extending that power to emergent resource frontiers. As the world's oceans present new opportunities for the realisation of state power, the case of Norway's Blue Economy agenda reminds us that efforts to sustain the seas may be rooted in efforts to sustain the state.

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