



The ontological politics of marine spatial planning: Assembling the ocean and shaping the capacities of ‘Community’ and ‘Environment’



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ABSTRACT

Governance projects to measure and organize socio-natural spaces have often resulted in the marginalization of human communities (e.g., national parks) or in the destruction of environmental resources (e.g., mining). In the United States, new marine spatial planning (MSP) policies seek to categorize and represent ocean spaces and activities in an effort to provide a solution to long-standing controversies stemming from individual sector-based management (e.g., fisheries, energy, transportation, marine mammal conservation). In this paper we examine how the ontological politics of MSP are being shaped through the narratives and practices of emerging MSP projects. We employ the ideas of ontological politics and assemblage to explore how communities and environments are being constituted through their association with MSP and its key conceptual framework (ecosystem-based management) and operational tools (geospatial databases). We trace how the ontological formations of MSP—people, places, technologies, and organisms—are being actively assembled in concurrent processes of stabilization and disruption through narratives and processes of inscription that create new political-spatial imaginaries and relationships. We show that while some emerging MSP ontologies restrict the capacities of ‘environment’ and ‘community’—for instance in the language of ‘salvation’ and in the organization of certain geospatial databases—other practices offer space to expand the capacities of community and environmental actors (for example in participatory mapping projects and in the aspirations of many practitioners themselves).

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1. Introduction

“The strategy of ontological politics is never forgetting about [the] performances that go into reality.”

[Carolan, 2004, p. 512]

“Assemblages are always works in progress. They involve invention, labour, politics and struggle.”

[McCann, 2011, p. 145]

Around the globe, unprecedented levels of scientific, governance, and private resources are turning toward ocean space—and how to characterize, divide, share, rent, or preserve it (Campbell et al., 2013; Silver et al., 2015; Silver, 2013). This ‘turn’ includes a host of governance and technoscience initiatives designed to quell the controversies—‘hot’ situations (Callon, 1998) that emerged from the limits of historic attempts at ocean

management (e.g. events of fisheries collapses, unresolved debates over energy development, pollution and plastics, etc.). These far-reaching controversies are to be addressed by an equally sweeping and ambitious solution called Marine Spatial Planning (MSP). In the evolving outcomes of this solution there is much at stake—who and what count as citizens of the ocean? What capacities might environments and human communities develop in conjunction with it? Will MSP amount to an ‘ocean grab’ by the most well-represented, data-rich actors, or could it be a mechanism that helps constitute greater socio-natural well-being?

In this paper we examine the ontological politics of MSP—the real “conditions of possibility” (Mol, 1999, p. 74) as they are being shaped through the narratives and practices of emerging MSP projects. In doing so, we recognize that governance projects to measure and organize socio-natural spaces have often resulted in the marginalization of human communities (e.g., as with national parks) or in the destruction of environmental resources (e.g., as with mining in the American West or oil leases in the Gulf of Mexico). The movement toward MSP could therefore be viewed

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through a lens that examines this process as a neoliberalization of nature, (Heynen et al., 2007; Castree, 2008) where a macro-structure (Callon and Latour, 1981; Collier, 2012) engages in a process of enclosure and exploitation. And indeed there are some signs of MSP developing along these lines, for instance in its drive to comprehensively map and parse ocean spaces for particular uses and (human or nonhuman) users, setting up the potential for ocean enclosures to privilege the most powerful actors.

While acknowledging this trajectory, however, we also respond affirmatively to Ferguson's (2009, p. 169) question about whether we can engage with "new configurations of governmental power in a way that goes beyond the politics of denunciation, the politics of the 'anti.'" Rooted in our ethical concern for the well-being of human and ecological communities, we do not ignore signs of territorialization or enclosure, but we also insist on identifying where MSP governance is being (or could be) performed differently.

With this goal, we employ the idea of assemblage to assist in examining the ontological politics of MSP practices. More specifically, we use assemblage to explore how communities and environments are being constituted by—and through—their association with MSP and its key conceptual frameworks (e.g., ecosystem-based management) and operational tools (e.g., geospatial databases). We trace how the ontological formations of MSP—people, places, technologies, and organisms—are being actively assembled in concurrent processes of stabilization and disruption through narratives and processes of inscription (Ingold, 2000; McFarlane, 2011) that create new political-spatial imaginaries and relationships. We show that while some emerging MSP ontologies restrict the capacities of environment and community—for instance in the language of 'salvation' and in the organization of certain geospatial databases—other practices offer space to expand the capacities of community and environmental actors (for example in participatory mapping projects and in the aspirations of many practitioners themselves).

Our analysis contributes to a growing engagement with the idea of assemblage in geography (Allen, 2011; Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Anderson et al., 2012b; McFarlane, 2009, 2011; Rossiter et al., 2015), and shows how the concept can serve to reveal variety in forms of power at work and to highlight potential spaces for intervention (Mol, 1999) in the ontological politics of socio-natural systems. Rooted in a strong empirical case, this effort furthers theoretical conversations about the uses of the assemblage concept in working toward 'arts of government' that support greater socio-natural well-being (Ferguson, 2009). Further, this research responds to calls for more relational approaches to ocean geographies (Spence, 2014) and engagement by human geographers with ocean spaces more generally (Anderson and Peters, 2014; Bear, 2013). Finally, this analysis offers insights into the role of 'calculative infrastructures'—in this case geospatial databases—in shaping political and material engagements with the world around us (Mennicken and Miller, 2012).

2. Ontological politics and assemblage in conversation

2.1. Ontological politics and assemblage

Here we seek to combine insights from scholarship in ontological politics and assemblage to better analyze the complex, shifting, and power-full world of MSP, and to highlight what we feel is fertile theoretical ground for further exploration. Though ontological politics has been productively linked with a variety of theory in anthropology, sociology, and geography (including Actor-Network Theory (ANT), cultural studies, and Science and Technology Studies) (Bear and Eden, 2011; Blaser, 2009a; Law and Lien, 2012; van Heur et al., 2013), it has rarely been explicitly linked

to assemblage (though see Carolan, 2004; Mol, 1999), something we aim to do in this work.

In "Slippery: Field Notes on Empirical Ontology" Law and Lien (2012, p. 371) exhort their readers to "take any practice. Ask about its choreography. Ask how it weaves its relations and enacts its objects." Though their focus is primarily on the ontological component, such questions are also central to ontological politics. With roots in ANT and Science and Technology Studies (STS), at the heart of ontological politics is the notion that reality is multiple— that the reality of X is the multiple performances of X (Carolan, 2004; Law and Benschop, 1997; Mol, 1999). If reality is multiple, moreover, it is also political (Carolan, 2004; Mol, 1999), since "the conditions of reality are not given" but rather are part of differing (political) enactments (Robins, 2012, p. 188). This implies for scholars of ontological politics that the metaphors "of intervention and performance" are most appropriate to work with (as opposed to social construction for instance), as "these suggest a reality that is *done* and *enacted* rather than observed" (Mol, 1999, p. 77, emphasis original).

The emphasis in ontological politics on intervention, performance, and possibility complements key elements of assemblage thinking. Drawing on diverse theoretical origins including ANT (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005; Law, 1992), Deleuzian philosophy (Dewsbury, 2011; Deleuze and Guattari, 2004), and Foucauldian notions of governmentality (Foucault et al., 1991), the concept of assemblage emphasizes the active performance of relationships between human and non-human actors mediated by information, ideas, work, and uneven, shifting power relations (e.g., Bennett, 2005; McCann, 2011; Robbins and Marks, 2009). Ideally, researchers might use 'assemblage thinking' to trace how human and non-human elements, ideas, and practices come together; how particular configurations are maintained or dissolved; and (more normatively), how diverse possibilities might exist for assemblages to be performed differently (Anderson et al., 2012a).

The term assemblage is frequently used to denote both 'objects in the world' (e.g., material actors and relationships) as well as a theoretical approach to highlighting the ongoing efforts involved in maintaining particular relationships and the political, social, and spatial products or consequences of those efforts (Bear, 2013; Bennett, 2005; McFarlane, 2011). Ontological politics similarly has implications for both actual relations-in-the-world and for those studying such relations. As Blaser (2009a, p. 877) highlights,

'political ontology' connotes two inter-related meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the politics involved in the practices that shape a particular world or ontology. On the other hand, it refers to a field of study that focuses on the conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other.

Both assemblage and ontological politics thus emphasize our interest in processes-in-motion, and the political implications of such processes. They open up questions about where agency lies in human and nonhuman relationships, and how and why particular performances are enacted.

The diversity of intellectual threads leading to assemblage means that it is a messy concept, with some significant tensions and debates. Anderson and McFarlane (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011) outline assemblage as variously used by scholars as a descriptor, concept, and ethos, which are sometimes but not always complementary. If solely used as a descriptor, they argue, assemblage loses much of its power as a unique lens through which to examine the shifting and multiple relationships between people, ideas, and nonhuman elements that form the core of an assemblage approach. They emphasize the usefulness of assem-

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