



The matter of market devices: Economic transformation in a southwest Alaskan salmon fishery



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ABSTRACT

The past few decades have witnessed the reconfiguration of a sweep of industries and sectors to more closely mirror economic models, often interpreted as a hallmark of neoliberal reordering in the growing body of scholarship on the topic. Analyses have emphasized not simply the primacy of market designs in these transformations, but also their performative force: the degree to which they bring into being the phenomena they would seem to merely describe. While studies have begun to probe how transformations are effected through market devices, less attention has been directed toward understanding the conditions under which performative properties take hold, or are confounded. This article outlines recent shifts in the operations of a commercial salmon fishery in southwest Alaska in order to examine how broader modes of industry restructuring are accomplished, at least in part, through the material reworking of everyday objects and actions, such as market goods and the practices through which they are produced and consumed. It demonstrates that the abstract designs that inform fishery change, including rationalization and niche-marketing efforts, emerge not merely from the minds of economic analysts but also, and perhaps even more consequentially, through the material reconfiguration of fish flesh. At the same time, ethnographic evidence from southwest Alaska reveals the limits of performative reordering as well: Salmon fishers and their products are never very smoothly remade in the image of market models. The article argues that market materialities thus constitute both vehicles for and disruptions to the worldly realizations of neoliberal designs.

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1. Introduction

Recent scholarship in economic sociology, geography, and related fields has pursued new lines of inquiry following what has been dubbed the “performative turn.” Generally linked to Michel Callon’s influential edited volume *The Laws of the Markets* (1998), the performativity perspective makes a case for how economics “performs, shapes, and formats the economy” rather than simply observing it—how it actually brings into being the phenomena it would seem to merely describe (Callon, 1998, 2). Inspired by this view and the theoretical commitments that underlie it, including those of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a growing body of literature examines the role of everyday artifacts, tools, and procedures in realizing economic models. This work emphasizes that markets do not spring whole cloth from the minds of economists, but instead are built through what Fabian Muniesa, Yuval Millo, and Michel Callon term “market devices,” theorized as “the material and

discursive assemblages that intervene in the construction of markets” (2007, 2).¹ Underscoring the significance of materiality for market processes, case studies explore how items such as the shopping cart, a financial pricing model, or the stock ticker constitute market devices insofar as they configure interactions, equip practices, and create new modes of calculation (Grandclément and Cochoy, 2006; MacKenzie, 2006; Preda, 2006).

This focus on market devices and their performative properties has opened important analytical avenues, yet less attention has been directed to the conditions under which such properties take hold, or are confounded. Although Callon (2010) emphasizes the rarity and fragility of the arrangements that result in performative effects, studies employing the notion of the market device tend to focus on successful performances. This leaves unanswered questions about why certain economic models seem to smoothly reconfigure the world in their image, while others gain little traction,

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¹ See also Callon et al. (2007), MacKenzie et al. (2007), Pinch and Swedberg (2008), and MacKenzie (2009); Berndt and Boeckler (2010) provide a review of the concept.

never moving much beyond the drawing board. A focus on failures or mixed results may thus prove illuminating.² As Judith Butler observes, the mechanisms that enable success may be most visible during moments of breakdown or disruption, and “if certain operations of performativity fail, then it is useful to know when and why they do, and whether they ought to” (2010, 154). Given the proliferation of economic models deployed to advance neoliberal agendas, these are pressing questions.

In this article, I engage such questions by offering a crisper conceptualization of how the materialities of market devices both shape and limit economic transformation. I do so through an analysis of a decade-long period of change in a commercial salmon fishery in southwest Alaska, focusing on the divergent fates of different market-oriented interventions to address an economic downturn, which was most acute in the early to mid-2000s. Since that time, various industry actors have developed and debated industry recovery efforts. These include proposals to revamp fisheries regulation to encourage economic efficiency through resource rationalization, as well as initiatives to alter products to more closely meet the quality specifications associated with growing seafood niche markets. While their tactics differ, these recovery designs tend to converge in a common vision for a new kind of salmon fishery: one in which a sleeker, more precisely figured fish is caught by a leaner, more market-savvy fleet.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in the rural region of Bristol Bay, I examine how economic restructuring is both accomplished and stymied through the material reworking of everyday objects and actions, including market goods and the practices through which they are produced and consumed.³ In Bristol Bay, salmon industry change has been pursued through various efforts to remake the fish themselves. I show how rationalization and niche marketing projects engage market devices such as salmon catch shares and fillet quality standards to realize widely circulating economic models. As these tools interact with the region’s fish products, practices, and politics, however, they reveal both the workings and the failures of performative reordering. The proposed regulatory tool of transferable salmon quotas has not remade the Bristol Bay fishery according to its logic, while new salmon specifications meant to guarantee quality have begun to substantially reorient production, though never quite as anticipated. Through an analysis of these divergent outcomes, I argue that market materialities constitute both vehicles for and disruptions to the worldly realizations of neoliberal designs.

The Bristol Bay case provides an especially fruitful vantage for examining the significance of materiality for economic processes. It is not merely a window onto a market “made flesh” in the sense developed by *Mirowski and Nik-Khah (2007)*—that is, animated by political-economic power and the strategic interests of social actors and institutions. Nor is it simply a site of economics “in the wild” as conjured by *Callon (see Callon and Rabeharisoa, 2003)*, meaning the circulation of social-scientific precepts in real-world contexts, outside the confines of the academy. The Bay is even more straightforwardly fleshy and wild: Its wild salmon runs have especially unruly elements, and its market objects tend to be

entangled with literal fish flesh. In this article, I tease apart the formation of market devices in Bristol Bay, and trace what happens as they become entwined with the region’s pulsing salmon, diverse fishing practices, and messy fish politics. I conclude by demonstrating how the matter of market devices introduces a certain form of indeterminacy into the workings of markets themselves.

2. Models, materiality, and market devices

Over the past few decades, innumerable industries and environments have been reconfigured to more closely mirror economic models, often interpreted as a hallmark of neoliberal reordering in the growing body of scholarship on the topic. Much of this has been accomplished through the creation of new market objects, such as carbon credits (*Lohmann, 2005*), ecosystem services priced for sale (*Robertson, 2012*), and property titles introduced to monetize informal economic activity (*Mitchell, 2005, 2007*). In the fisheries, rationalization designs have reconfigured fish populations into items of individual ownership (*Holm, 2007; Holm and Nielsen, 2007*), while other market-driven processes, such as sustainable harvest certification, have multiplied market relations (*Foley and Hébert, 2013*). This reordering often involves extending private property forms into new domains, which facilitates the adoption of market-based regimes for economic change along with the broader neoliberal agendas that presume and promote them.

Recent work on market devices speaks to how such transformations take place. As *Muniesa et al. (2007, 2–3)* outline, the concept is taken from Michel Foucault’s notion of the *dispositif*, translated as “device” or “apparatus,” as well as from its elaboration by Gilles Deleuze, who links the idea to his and Felix Guattari’s concept of *agencement*, often translated as “assemblage,” which conveys how agency itself emerges through such arrangements. In theorizing the *dispositif*, Foucault and Deleuze draw particular attention to the composite nature of what Foucault describes as a “thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble” (1980, 194) and *Deleuze (2006, 338)* calls “a skein, a multilineal whole”. To both, the concept of the device helps account for the connections that hold highly discontinuous elements together, which *Deleuze (2006, 338)* depicts in metaphorical terms as the multiple moving, tangled lines of a fishing operation. This focus on the joining of different and sometimes divergent properties into a configuration with transformative effects recalls the efforts of semiotic theorists to show how distinct qualities become bundled together in the material forms that generate meaning. I elaborate on this feature of market devices to provide a fuller picture of how “the risk of breakdown and disruption are constitutive to any and all performative operations” (cf. *Butler, 2010, 152*).

An expanding body of recent scholarship in anthropology converges with ANT perspectives in its emphasis on materiality, underscoring that even the most abstract visions must take material form in order to exist in and move through the world (see *Miller, 2005*). Some contributions draw on materialist semiotics to highlight how any given form of signification is not merely an empty container for meaning but a material entity in its own right (*Keane, 2005, 2007*; see also *Reno, 2011; Hull, 2012*). As *Webb Keane* explains, the quality of redness, for example, can appear only in the context of *something* red, but anything that fits this description also comes with other properties, such as an apple’s spherical shape, sweet taste, and tendency to rot (2005, 187–188). Insofar as market models are devices with material form, they too carry with them a variety of sensuous entailments, including those that speak to the contexts of their creation. The specifications of quality salmon, for example, cannot be peeled apart from the fishery production conditions responsible for their bundling.

² This takes up a longstanding emphasis by scholars contributing to science and technology studies, from Bruno *Latour’s (1996)* focus on a failed French transit system, to Andrew *Pickering’s (1995)* attention to how even the most abstract scientific models are “mangled” in practice.

³ I have conducted ongoing anthropological field research on the Alaska salmon industry since 2002, including a two-year primary fieldwork period from 2002 to 2004. During most of this time, I was based in the Bristol Bay hub community of Dillingham, where the majority of the town’s 2300 residents identify as Alaska Native (*State of Alaska, 2013*). My research followed commercial fishers and other industry players as they traveled between sites of salmon harvesting, processing, and policymaking, taking them from Bristol Bay fishing grounds to venues in Anchorage, Seattle, and beyond.

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