



Industrial aquaculture and the politics of resignation

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Aquaculture
Atlantic salmon
Newfoundland
Corporate social responsibility
Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA)
Genetic pollution

ABSTRACT

While neoliberalism is often framed as a withdrawal of the state, many scholars have noted that what is occurring is not so much a withdrawal, as a repositioning. Although many social services and regulatory functions once provided by government agencies have indeed been eroded, there has been a simultaneous channeling of new resources into other arenas, in an effort to create conditions in which private corporations can operate more profitably. This, however, often places the state in a contradictory position, simultaneously serving as regulator, investor, and development advocate for the private sector. This can become especially problematic in moments of ecological crisis when decisive and unbiased responses are needed. This paper explores these dynamics through an examination of the cycles of growth and crisis that have characterized the aquaculture industry on the south coast of Newfoundland since the late 1970s as well as the ongoing attempts by aquaculture advocates to characterize industrial-scale fish farming as a sustainable industry, despite evidence to the contrary.

1. Introduction: corporations, environmental risks, and the politics of resignation

In recent years, a number of scholars have explored the ways in which corporations have sought to engage with the media and the general public in order to present themselves in a more favourable light. Many have examined the rise of the "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) movement, which has endeavoured to portray private corporations as an important part of the solution to social and environmental problems rather than as villains or pillagers [1–10]. Welker observes that CSR has become an industry unto itself, "complete with profit and non-profit organizations, journals, classes and workshops, guidelines, and prizes" [6]. Yet, despite the growing ubiquity of CSR rhetoric, many critics have noted that most companies have been reluctant to embrace fundamental changes to their operations that have the potential to lower profits [11–13].

In their article, "Capitalism and the Politics of Resignation" Peter Benson and Stuart Kirsch identify a set of generalized behaviour patterns they have found to be common to so-called "harm industries," such as tobacco and mining, which must, by necessity, produce negative impacts on ecological and/or human health in order to remain profitable [14]. They argue that such companies must continually employ a range of public relations strategies in an effort to counteract and neutralize critiques of their operations and "protect themselves from potential de-legitimization, so as to allow them to continue

operating in favourable regulatory environments." They identify three main phases that such corporations typically pass through when faced with growing public criticism. The first phase is denial, in which company representatives argue that their actions are in no way harmful and will sometimes employ corporate-sponsored counter-science in an effort to proliferate a sense of doubt, all the while refusing to engage directly with the claims of their critics. If the accusations become impossible to deny any longer, however, corporations may enter phase 2 in which they will acknowledge that a problem may exist and make token gestures to address it, but still continue to operate largely as they had previously. If problems reach a point of crisis, however, they will move to phase 3 and will be forced to engage directly with the arguments of their critics and devise new strategies in their efforts to steer political, regulatory, and management decisions in ways that will enable them to continue to operate profitably [14].

Rather than suggesting that corporate social responsibility discourse effectively manufactures consent, however, Benson and Kirsch suggest that these sorts of strategies are never complete, instead giving rise to what they call a "politics of resignation." Borrowing from Gramsci, Zizek and Williams, they argue that the era of corporate triumphalism is giving rise to new "structures of feeling," producing widespread sentiments of cynicism and futility, as many people have come to expect that corporations will be allowed to continue to manufacture harms with relative impunity. This feeling of impotence, in turn reinforces the status quo by leading to inaction [14].

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While Benson and Kirsch make a compelling argument, one significant shortcoming of their analysis is that it fails to fully explore the degree to which governments and some forms of university research have become active agents in the corporate legitimization processes they describe. While neoliberalism is often framed as a withdrawal of the state, many scholars have noted that what we are witnessing is not so much a withdrawal, as a repositioning, as government sponsored research and investment is increasingly committed to buffering and encouraging the private sector [15,16]. While many social services and regulatory functions once borne by the state have indeed been eroded, there has been a simultaneous channeling of new resources into other arenas, in an effort to create conditions in which private corporations can operate more profitably. This, however, often places the state in a contradictory position, simultaneously serving as regulator, investor, and development advocate for the private sector [17]. This situation can become especially problematic in moments of ecological crisis when decisive and unbiased responses are needed. The result can be a situation in which development is allowed to proceed, in spite of undeniable evidence of environmental or social harms.

This paper explores these dynamics through an examination of the cycles of growth and crisis that have characterized the aquaculture industry on the south coast of Newfoundland since it was established in the late 1970s, paying particular attention to a series of crises that have taken place over the course of the last five years. The aquaculture industry has been the recipient of ongoing injections of public money in recent decades from multiple departments in both the provincial and federal government, particularly after the collapse of the cod fishery in the early 1990s, when industrial aquaculture was framed as a more predictable and lucrative alternative to the inescapable flux and uncertainty of wild fisheries. Building upon the model developed by Benson and Kirsch, the paper draws upon archival research, media content analysis and ethnographic fieldwork data to show how corporations and government departments have continually worked together to promote an image of sustainable salmonid (salmon and trout) aquaculture, despite growing evidence of ecological crises, such as infectious salmon anemia outbreaks, and escapes leading to interbreeding between farmed and wild salmon.

2. The Blue Revolution

The transition from wild fisheries to aquaculture is often presented as an inevitable evolution, one which is destined to become the norm for seafood production internationally. An editorial from *The Economist* magazine in 2003 entitled “The Promise of a Blue Revolution” stated: “New technologies, new breeds and newly domesticated species of fish offer great hope for the future. They promise a blue revolution in this century to match the green revolution of the last...” [18]. This allusion to the Green Revolution is fitting, since modern industrial aquaculture is, in many respects, the heir to this modernizing tradition. Proponents of expanding industrial aquaculture around the world have long argued that the industry holds the key to preventing a looming global protein shortage caused by declining wild fish stocks in the world's oceans [19,20]. Organizations like the World Bank and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have been especially active in stressing the important role to be played by large-scale aquaculture in promoting economic growth and food security in developing countries, despite growing concerns about ecological destruction caused by fish and shellfish farming in many areas, particularly Southeast Asia [21–23]. Aquaculture advocates have also stressed the potential for the industry to make a major contribution to rural employment [24]. The industry often presents itself as being especially well positioned to deliver on these promises, since it claims to be able to offer a degree of rationalization and managerial control over both fish and fishery workers that would be unimaginable in wild fisheries [25].

Despite these promises, however, industrial salmonid aquaculture, which has been the primary focus in North America, Europe, and Australia, has faced severe criticism from environmental activists and local residents alike [26]. Some have argued that, in many areas, industrial aquaculture has expanded too quickly and on too large of a scale, and have argued that it poses serious risks to the environment and to human health [27]. Many have noted the toll that producing fish meal to feed farmed fish takes on certain species of wild fish, most of which are procured from the Global South. As of 2011, roughly 63% of world fishmeal production and 81% of fish oil was utilized for producing aquaculture feed [28]. Others have pointed out that open pen salmonid aquaculture requires the enclosure of large areas of ocean space and this often brings it into direct conflict with local fisheries and other uses of the coast, such as marine tourism [26,29]. Some have also questioned the argument that the industry has the potential to be an economic salvation for rural areas, noting the tendency for aquaculture operations to generate primarily low-wage and unstable seasonal employment, and to produce fewer secure jobs than anticipated once they become operational [30,31]. Further undermining the public image of the industry is the fact that, since its early days, diseases have led to the loss of entire harvests; fish escapes have occurred with as yet poorly understood effects on wild stocks; and diseases like Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA) and parasites like sea lice have been shown to spread from farmed fish to wild salmon. These concerns have necessitated heavy investment in public relations in order to support the argument that the industry can be a sustainable anchor for local economies and justify calls for continued expansion.

3. The growth of salmonid aquaculture in Newfoundland and Labrador

While the practice of fish farming has a long history in parts of East Asia and Europe, the earliest industrial finfish aquaculture operations were not established until the 1960's, mainly in northern and western Europe. Most of these operations focused on the farming of Atlantic Salmon. First developed in Norway, salmonid aquaculture soon spread to Scotland, Ireland, the Faroe Islands, Chile, Australia, the United States and Canada [32].

By the mid-1980s, Norway had established itself as the undisputed global leader in the salmon aquaculture industry, producing around 100,000 metric tonnes of farmed salmon per year, roughly four times that of its nearest competitor, Scotland [33]. By contrast, in 1986, Canada produced a mere 3249 metric tonnes of salmon, mostly on the coast of British Columbia and in the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. That same year, Newfoundland fish farms, which had first developed in the late 1970s, produced just one metric tonne of Atlantic salmon and eighteen metric tonnes of trout [34]. While many aquaculture operations were established in this region by the early 1980s, they bore little resemblance to the large-scale farms that exist in the area today. They were reliant on locally sourced stocks of wild fish harvested from nearby rivers, which were then grown to larger sizes in captivity. While a few operations experienced some modest commercial success, high infrastructure and feed costs, sporadic disease outbreaks, and unpredictable weather conditions contributed to frequent setbacks [35]. The fledgling industry would grow steadily in the years to come, however. After several unsuccessful attempts at open net pen aquaculture in different parts of the island, the south coast ultimately emerged as the epicentre of finfish aquaculture in the province. While the area experienced severe winters, it had many geographical advantages over other regions [36]. The main attraction of the south coast was the fact that it contained many long narrow inlets and offered protection from sea ice year-round, thanks in part to the fact that it was sheltered from the cold Labrador Current. Another advantage to developing aquaculture along the south coast was the fact that the area is quite isolated geographically and offered a sizable reserve labor force that had long awaited the development of a stable industry in the

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