

(In)justice and the Blue Economy

Editorial to the Themed Section: (In)justice and the Blue Economy,

The Geographical Journal. Accepted 10.10.22

Celine Germond-Duret, Lancaster University, UK

C. Patrick Heidkamp, Southern Connecticut State University, US

John Morrissey, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland

Abstract:

While the ocean space has long been ignored by social sciences, the past fifteen years have witnessed an increased interest in the marine environment by scholars in Human Geography. The academic literature on the blue economy, almost non-existent a few years ago, is now burgeoning. The academic debate has offered some critical assessment of blue economy initiatives, but more needs to be done to address the true place of environmental protection within a blue economy, and to put people at the centre of concerns and analyses. Of particular concern, is the ambiguity of the blue economy concept and the confusion over its social and environmental sustainability, which can ultimately result in harmful practices. An important question is then how should social scientists in general and geographers, specifically, engage with these debates, and in particular how should the potential human and social costs of the blue economy be investigated and addressed while assuring justice and fairness?

The papers presented here share the vision that environmental sustainability, justice and equality should be at the heart of the blue economy; not just conceptually, but practically too. The papers pursue efforts to identify blue economy risks and the mechanisms through which they occur; assess the place of inclusion and participation in a sustainable blue economy; define what blue economy policies should include to drive just and sustainable practices; and identify where the dominant understandings of the blue economy and its priorities are coming from. In other words, they put considerations of justice and broader cultural structures at the centre of their concerns and analysis. They also highlight the need to bypass Geographical boundaries and gain insights from other disciplines and methodologies to grasp such an encompassing concept, and foster not just a blue economy with social justice, but a blue economy for social justice.

1. Introduction:

While the ocean space has long been ignored by social sciences, the past fifteen years have witnessed an increased interest in the marine environment by scholars in Human Geography. The academic literature on the blue economy, almost non-existent a few years ago, is now burgeoning. Endorsed and promoted by Small Island Developing States (SIDS) (Silver et al., 2015), the blue economy concept aims at aligning the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with economic growth objectives, including concerns for (marine) ecological protection and community prosperity, particularly for those communities economically dependent on the sea. Since its inception, the blue economy has been advocated for by diverse organisations and stakeholders, from conservation organizations to development institutions, including public and private actors. However, despite these recent developments, critical perspectives remain marginal to blue economy debates, with a dearth of critical assessment of many blue economy initiatives and prevailing narratives and importantly for our purposes here, of engagement of/with communities and impacts of blue economy on local populations. Critical engagement on these themes is a pressing necessity, as blue economy developments have been associated with not insignificant social, environmental and economic costs. Examples include conservation and development projects resulting in the dispossession of vulnerable coastal populations and extractivist projects resulting in the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. The concept of “blue acceleration” developed by Jouffray et al. (2020: 43) to characterise “a race among diverse and often competing interests for ocean food, material, and space” illustrates the risks posed by an increase of economic activities in the marine environment. The blue economy therefore demonstrates many of the same failings as established terrestrial economies and some critics point to the blue economy as simply a means of extending the frontiers of the neoliberal market economy (with risks of ocean privatisation and ocean grabbing, as well as continued ecological exploitation) (Barbesgaard, 2018; Bennet et al., 2021; Hadjimichael, 2018).

While the literature does offer some critical assessment of blue economy initiatives, more needs to be done to address the true place of environmental protection within a blue economy, and to put people at the centre of concerns and analyses, focusing on the social and cultural dimension, which is often forgotten in debates on sustainability and in policies (Germond-Duret, 2014); in other words, considering the fairness of both decision-making processes (inclusion) and outcomes (distribution). There has been more attention in recent years on the questions of justice and equity but this has not materialised as of yet as a sustained interest in the broader structures underpinning the understandings and implementation of the blue economy, nor as the systematic integration of equity goals into analytical frameworks and policies. For instance, Garland et al. (2019)’s extensive review of the blue economy literature highlights the need to understand and challenge current power structures to initiate transition towards social justice and encourage the use of a just transitions framework (Swilling and Annecke, 2012), using equity, social justice and fairness in transitions guiding principles. So far, scholarly work on the blue economy has centred on the blue economy as an economic and political discourse; the use of relational thinking and assemblage; the place of the blue economy with sustainable and just transitions; and blue economy risks and calls for blue degrowth (Germond-Duret et al., forthcoming). The inclusion of justice and injustice concerns is evident in some of these streams (i.e. just transitions and risks), and conceivable in others: analyses of discourses can link meta-narratives to the micro level by highlighting the impact

of dominant discourses on local realities; and relational approaches can further include and examine the place of people into new socio-spatial relations resulting from the blue economy.

As we discussed elsewhere, a shift to just transitions, an emphasis on local and regional geographies, and highlighting the role of people and stakeholders within the blue economy, are all instrumental for its sustainable implementation (Heidkamp et al., forthcoming). Considering the three dimensions of a sustainable blue economy (social, economic and environmental), our point is not that one dimension should take precedence over the other. Rather, we believe that considerations of justice should be incorporated in all dimensions, and that the blue economy should be considered in its plural form (blue economies) to account for the variety of ways people act and interact within a given economy. Scholarly work needs to develop and engage with fit-for-purpose approaches to help understand, analyse, criticise and facilitate the implementation of sustainable and equitable blue economies. This special issue responds to this call by highlighting the centrality of people in the blue economy and the need to focus on social and environmental justice; by doing so, it stresses the risks associated with a narrow understanding of the blue economy as nothing more than the expansion of business-as-usual economic practices into a different (marine) space.

This special issue contributes to the evolution of our understanding of blue economies by centring on a number of important arguments: 1) at the conceptual level, we need to overcome the sea blindness that has prevented to envisage the sea as a place that matters to societies and people's identities (Germond-Duret and Germond, this volume) and has resulted in a disregard for its human and social dimension; 2) risks, and especially risks of dispossession, need to be scrutinised; 3) decision-making needs to be inclusive of concerned communities and local stakeholders, both at problem identification and problem solving stages; 4) the value of interdisciplinarity within social sciences and beyond needs to be recognised.

2. Genealogies of the blue economy:

The blue economy concept gained popularity after the organization of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio + 20) and is linked to a growing interest in oceans, reflected in discussions taking place at the conference. The blue economy idea, that had already been used and considered before the conference, has mostly come from United Nations (UN) agencies and was linked to the green economy, as illustrated by several UN reports interested in incorporating oceans into the green economy (e.g. UN ESCAP's 2012 report "Green Economy in a Blue World"). Several factors can explain how the interest in the blue economy emerged.

First, the emergence of the blue economy coincides with a growing interest in oceans, which materialised in different spheres and disciplines. Mostly left to natural scientists and marine conservationists, oceans have increasingly generated interest among social scientists and beyond the sole biodiversity element; Connery noted in 2006 the nascent "scholarly turn to the ocean" (Connery, 2006), and academic work on the marine environment from a social science perspective have increased ever since, following in the steps of pioneers Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters and their call to bring the sea into human geography's ontology (Germond and Germond-Duret, 2018: 29). Economic activities at sea are obviously nothing new and have always taken place, mostly in the shape of trade, transportation and

fishery. But what is new is the recognition of the further economic potential that oceans represent and of the wide-range of sectors that can benefit from expansion into as yet untapped ocean spaces, as illustrated by the 2012 EU Blue Growth Strategy, or the OECD projecting the ocean economy to double between 2010-2030 (OECD, 2016). Oceans have become more visible as providers of opportunities to support sustainable growth, which has enhanced the marine dimension of the economy and stimulated academic debates.

Secondly, and more specifically, the blue economy also emerged from ideas and interests surrounding oceans. Two sets of representations have characterised oceans recently, “oceans as the providers of natural resources and economic opportunities, and oceans as threatened by environmental degradations” (Germond-Duret, 2022: 15). Through its sustainability dimension, the blue economy is supposed to respond to both representations, although there is an obvious contradiction, since the exploitation of marine resources for economic purposes also poses a threat to the marine environment. Voyer et al. (2018) and Silver et al. (2015) have shown that competing discourses have shaped the blue economy, informed by disparate framings of oceans as good business, oceans as reserves of natural capital and oceans as livelihoods, denoting an overwhelming utilitarian element.

Finally, the global economic context has often played a role in the shaping of priorities and political agendas. If this is not what prompted the blue economy as such, the 2007-2008 financial crisis still contributed to the need to find innovative solutions towards recovery. For example, the 2012 EU Blue Growth Strategy focused on sectors having the potential “to contribute to sustainable economic recovery in Europe, and in particular to create new jobs and foster innovation” (Sheil, 2013: 1). Recently, the High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy called for economic investment in “blue recovery” in the post-Covid era (Northrop et al., 2020).

It is noticeable that the blue economy has been widely endorsed across sectors and actors. Similar to framings of ‘sustainable development’, the concept enables a wide diversity of interpretations, and is at risk of being misused to implement and justify exploitative and unsustainable practices. Observing Rio+20 preparatory documentation as well as the conference itself, Silver et al. (2015) argue that the four discourses around which the blue economy was shaped were advocated by different sets of actors. For instance, the “natural capital” discourse was supported by international organisations, governments, some NGOs as well as collaborating scientists and experts, while “good business” was rather advocated by firms and sectoral coalitions. “Pacific SIDS” and “Small-scale fishers’ livelihood” were respectively supported by SIDS governments, NGOs and supportive donor states, and by fishers, some governments and specific international agencies. Importantly, they showed that the “blue economy was not overtly contested and actors espousing quite different human–ocean relationships freely used the term” (Silver et al., 2015: 149-150). Ten years later, the importance of the blue economy still very much benefits from a large consensus. For example, the World Bank administers a multi-donor trust supporting the blue economy, PROBLUE, that defines the blue economy as “the sustainable and integrated development of economic sectors in healthy oceans”¹. In May 2021, the European Commission proposed a transition from “blue growth” and launched its new approach for a “sustainable blue economy”, that it sees as essential to achieve its European Green Deal. It argued that “the shift to sustainability

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/problue>

will open up tangible opportunities for new jobs and businesses”², such as offshore renewable, green infrastructure, and ecotourism. Even the WWF has recognised the value of the ocean economy, that it estimated to be worth USD \$24 trillion. According to the WWF, a sustainable blue economy is necessary “to ensure that the economic development of the ocean contributes to true prosperity and resilience, today and long into the future” (WWF, 2018). For the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), a “sustainable Blue Economy combines governance, strategic priority and policy setting and investment needs while simultaneously identifying the socioeconomic opportunities provided by the coastal and ocean resources” (GEF, 2018: 2). Germond-Duret (2022) argues that the reason why the blue economy has been so easily accepted and endorsed is because it does not challenge existing discourses about development and sustainability, as well as dominant visions regarding the oceans.

Blue economy, therefore, remains broad and ambiguous, serving as an umbrella term for a wide range of visions and ideologies, and as a justification for a wide range of practices. While operationally challenging, the ambiguity has politically facilitated the development of broad and loosely aligned coalitions of organisations, actors and agendas (Brent et al., 2020). The blue economy concept, including its ever-emerging and expanding vocabulary and terminology, belies a core concern of many of these stakeholders for the control of, and influence over, coastal and marine spaces. This political dimension has real-world implications, with territorial, ecological and social consequences (Brent et al., 2020).

In practice, the blue economy is shaped by multiple interests together with associated politics and agendas, some of which may be in competition (Carver, 2020). This has resulted in a conceptually messy, non-consistent and at times contradictory discourse on the blue economy. For instance, ‘blue economy’ and ‘blue growth’ are sometimes used interchangeably, despite differences; namely, blue growth is more restrictive, referring to the ‘blueing’ of economic growth, that is to say, an economic growth centred on the exploitation of coastal and marine resources, without necessarily including further consideration for sustainability (although it is sometimes used as such, mimicking ‘green’ growth). Ertör and Hadjimichael (2020) explain that ‘blue growth’, as with green growth before it, implies that economic growth can continue unabated, without adverse impacts on ecological systems, whereby impacts such as greenhouse gases (GHGs) emissions will ultimately be solved by the emergence of novel technologies. We can argue the same regarding the blue economy, when conceived in its most restrictive sense (minimising negative environmental impacts; ignoring social sustainability). This ambiguity is more than a problem of semantics; indeed, (mis)representations and (mis)understandings pose a risk of harmful practices (e.g. further inequalities and uncontrolled exploitation). What seems to be in common in the variety of interpretations of blue growth and the blue economy, is the prevalence of the economy.

The economic dimension is indeed very present in these interpretations, concurring with Silver et al. (2015) and Voyer et al. (2018)’s classifications of blue economy discourses. The debates and concerns over the blue economy mimic the historical tension between development needs and environmental protection that have underpinned debates on ‘sustainable development’. Actually, the concept of blue economy shares similarities with the concept of sustainable development. Both suffer from some confusion over the weight given to the three pillars of

² https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/system/files/2021-05/2021-05-17-sustainable-blue-economy-factsheet_en.pdf

sustainability (priority given to economic, environmental or social needs). And, probably as a result of this confusion, both are used and promoted by diverse stakeholders, organisations and actors and are subject to different interpretations. In other words, blue economy understandings range from any economic activity conducted in the marine environment (including for example, extractivist practices characterised by little-to-no sustainability considerations) to the use of coastal and marine resources in sustainable ways to support economic development. As such, the blue economy is at risk of being mis-used to support unsustainable, exploitative practices. Despite this, sustainability is nevertheless increasingly forwarded by governmental institutions as the *raison d'être* of blue economy initiatives (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2020) whereby blue economy provides a “win-win-win” for economic growth, environmental conservation and social inclusion.

3. The blue economy and environmental sustainability:

The blue economy's broad umbrella nature has been a factor in the success of the concept, allowing actors and stakeholder with sometimes very different agendas to see their own priorities reflected in the ambiguity of blue economy discourse. Nowhere is this ambiguity more problematic than in the juxtaposition of development imperatives with ecological preservation and management of sensitive coastal and marine environments. As originally framed, environmental sustainability is supposed to be contained in the concept of blue economy. This is what differentiates it from maritime economy (Germond-Duret and Germond, this volume). However, we can question that, since the blue economy has also been associated with extractivist and unsustainable modes of natural resource use (exploitation), and inherent contradictions within blue growth policies and their ecological, social and economic objectives have been highlighted (Hadjimichael, 2018). Andriamahefazafy et al. (2020: 75) point to the “paradox behind the idea of the blue economy, where economic growth and sustainable use of resources are promoted as jointly achievable”. Bogadóttir (2020) posits that although blue growth narratives and rhetoric are framed within mainstream sustainability discourse, underpinning ideologies and visions in fact result in a continuation of economic growth as conventionally understood and associated (ecological) exploitation dynamics. Indeed, the market logic of blue growth continues to perpetuate ongoing extractivist relationships with marine resources, including fisheries for example (Hadjimichael, 2018).

The contradictions of easily achieving economic growth and sustainability simultaneously raise important questions on the dynamics of growth and potentially of degrowth, as called for by some authors (Hadjimichael, 2018; Schreiber, Wingren and Linke, 2020). In discussing the blue economy in the Faroe Islands, Bogadóttir (2020) characterises the blue growth discourse as concerned with achieving greater revenues from renewable (marine) resources, with emphasis on the need to sustainably manage these resources. However, no attention is afforded to questions of resource use reduction in absolute terms, nor indeed to the viability of pursuing endless economic growth as a primary policy objective. The degrowth concept present a socially transformative vision which aims for a reduction in overall levels of production and consumption, to be achieved through equitable means (Carver, 2020). Hadjimichael (2018) argues for a ‘blue degrowth’ as an alternative to the logic of limitless economic growth, with associated patterns of the unsustainable exploitation of marine resources. Blue degrowth imaginaries therefore deconstruct the “win–win–win” slogans of blue

growth, highlighting contradictions and gaps in blue growth discourses and practices (Kaşdoğan, 2020).

The blue economy sustainability discourse is therefore undermined by contradictions between the realities of national interests, economic growth, and capital accumulation on the one hand and narratives of sustainability and on the other (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2020). Both resources and spaces can be 'grabbed' (marine and coastal spaces alike, as shown by Bavinck et al., 2017) and the process may not be intentional (Bennett et al., 2015). More generally, Barbesgaard (2018) associates blue growth with a market-led initiative, where private entities are the main actors controlling resources and implementing market-based solutions, in the same way as McAfee (1999) warned against green developmentalism and the 'selling nature to save it' approach. This relates to the whole debate over ecosystem services and the economic valuation of Nature, which has now displaced into the marine space. In sum, while environmental sustainability is supposed to be an inherent component and an objective of the blue economy, in reality there is no guarantee that potentially harmful practices will be restrained, and the ambiguity already highlighted may open up vulnerable marine and coastal ecosystems to further unsustainable exploitation in the name of 'sustainable' blue growth or blue economy development.

4. The blue economy and social sustainability:

As we have seen, there is a tangible risk that the blue economy could result in 'blue grabbing'. Blue grabbing is more than the grab of natural resources. A social dimension is involved too, as it can also lead to the dispossession of communities, and thus relates to their exclusion in decision making, as well as questions of procedural justice. Empirical research has shown that coastal communities have often felt excluded from blue economy initiatives (e.g. Hadjimichael et al., 2014), and that they are not sufficiently represented in governance fora (Barbesgaard, 2018).

However, current framings of the blue economy are still very much centred on economic growth objectives (Victor, 2012). Problematically, this includes a lack of consideration for social sustainability, itself a larger problem with conceptualisations of sustainable development and sustainability, which transcend debates on blue economy and blue growth. Though sustainable development originally included an obvious and distinct social mandate, the social dimension has been historically marginalised in discourses that frequently frame sustainability in bio-physical environmental terms. Further, much debate on sustainability and sustainable development has conflated 'development' and 'economic growth' (Vallance et al., 2011; Germond-Duret, 2022). The end result is that of the three constituent domains of sustainability, ecological, social and environmental, the social domain has been afforded the least attention in analytical or policy terms. Narrow policy framings of sustainability in this vein are problematic, whereby growth predominates over engagement with transformation agendas to address socio-ecological crises (Andriamahefazafy et al., 2020).

For example, narrowly framed ocean policies developed solely to target economic growth can exacerbate social inequalities and further patterns of ecological deterioration (Jentoft, 2019; Schreiber et al., 2020). Cisneros-Montemayor *et al.* (2019) warns against repeating the negative social and environmental impacts that have resulted from historical development

pathways. In the African context, large scale government initiatives emphasising economic, rather than social or environmental sustainability have resulted in small-scale local operations being outcompeted by international corporations, with the result of undermining traditional livelihoods (Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2020). Bennett et al. (2020: 1) warn that the dominant and positive narrative forwarding the opportunities inherent in blue economy for developed and developing countries as well as for coastal communities may overshadow the risks of uneven distribution of benefits and negative social impacts. They associate the blue economy with ten potential risks, including Indigenous rights abuses and the marginalization of women. According to Said and MacMillan (2020), the blue economy paradigm has caused social and economic inequities in local fishing communities as well as the continued catastrophic disruption of fisheries socio-ecological systems. These cases illustrate that the social dimension, including questions of equity and justice, have been afforded insufficient attention in blue economy discourse to date (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2019). Job provision, development, and well-being are commonly highlighted to justify blue economy imperatives. However, as argued by Leposa (2020), such outcomes cannot be assumed for all actors equally. Blue economy can in practice lead to injustices across social and environmental domains, whereby the distribution of costs and benefits, gains and losses is dependent on the type, context, and form of blue growth activities (Leposa, 2020).

5. The need for justice and social approaches:

The ambiguity of the blue economy concept and the confusion over its social and environmental sustainability can ultimately result in harmful practices. An important question is then how should social scientists in general and geographers, specifically, engage with these debates, and in particular how should the potential human and social costs of the blue economy be investigated and addressed while assuring justice and fairness? Whatever the blue economy refers to, whether it serves as a tool at the service of economic gain or a way to highlight the value of the marine environment, the question of justice should be at the centre of activities conducted at sea on behalf of the blue economy. Ideas on justice and framing of who the winners and losers of societal constructs are, are directly related to understandings of social inequality (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2010), and form a key focus of efforts to address social sustainability in practice. In identifying whose voices, perspectives and priorities are reflected in the blue economy discourse, it is also imperative to question whose voices are missing, and/or are being actively excluded (Carver, 2020). Considerations for justice may need to be at the centre of blue economy projects from the onset; a fair and transparent process can ensure that local communities have their say, and participation could be extended to a wide range of societal actors (Cavaleri Gerhardinger et al., 2020). Okafor-Yarwood et al. (2020) argue that integrating top-down and bottom-up approaches is a key means of delivering real sustainability in blue economy initiatives, that is in truly meeting the triple-bottom-line of economy, society and environment. Kedia and Gautam (2020) call for nuanced engagement with, and participation by civil society in blue economy initiatives. This should be based on a track record of engagement with communities, a deep understanding of local issues and context and on principles of emancipatory and inclusive change. To achieve a blue economy characterised by social sustainability and inclusive development, there is therefore a pressing imperative to actively consider socio-cultural elements, including historical contexts, cultural practices and social identities in project design and delivery (Kedia and Gautam, 2020).

The papers presented here respond to these calls. They share the vision that environmental sustainability, justice and equality should be at the heart of the blue economy; not just conceptually, but practically too. The papers pursue efforts to identify blue economy risks and the mechanisms through which they occur; assess the significance of inclusion and participation in a sustainable blue economy; define what blue economy policies should include to drive just and sustainable practices; and identify where the dominant understandings of the blue economy and its priorities are coming from. In other words, they put the considerations of justice and broader cultural structures at the centre of their concerns and analysis. They also highlight the need to bypass Geographical boundaries and gain insights from other disciplines and methodologies to grasp such an encompassing concept.

Expanding on some of these themes, Germond-Duret and Germond show that the blue economy is largely framed as an opportunity for economic growth by the British media. They argue that “sea blindness” (“a lack of interest for the marine space, and the failure to recognise how it connects and matters to societies, cultures and people’s identity”) is an important perspective for understanding society’s the lack of awareness and the potential risks this understanding deficit can pose. The question of risks is central to many of the papers included here, and case studies highlight contested spaces and processes of dispossession. Ganseforth analyses the social and environmental justice impacts of the Japanese fishery governance reform in a blue economy context, and highlights how local fishing communities are facing dispossession and disempowerment as a result. Ebin and Trumbull explore the processes by which port space has been (re)allocated and contested in the Thames River working waterfront (Connecticut, US), and show evidence of flawed governance and dispossession of traditional port and waterfront users. Observing desalination projects in the Antofagasta Region of Chile, Campero et al. underline four mechanisms of dispossession: 1. Dispossession through exclusion from decision-making; 2. Dispossession through physical displacement; 3. Dispossession through environmental degradation (and associated social impacts); 4. Dispossession through inequitable distribution of benefits and burdens.

Contributions to this special issue also propose analytical and operational approaches to critically assess and implement the blue economy. Heidkamp et al. argue for an inclusive approach that would involve government, academia, the business community and civil society, within a transdisciplinary action research (TAR) framework (what they refer to as a quintuple helix approach to stakeholder engagement). Reflecting on the need to implement a transformation of the blue economy which is just, Russo Kelly proposes a model to integrate stakeholder systems in a more effective and meaningful way, notably highlighting the need to value local perspectives and geographic scales. Observing the proposed US ‘Blue New Deal’, Axon et al. suggest a blue justice framework that would enhance equity, resilience and sustainability. Morrissey develops a ‘just disruptions’ framework, that enables the integration of justice and resilience into blue economy initiatives.

6. Conclusion

The eight articles in this special issue underline the importance of putting people at the centre of blue economy analyses. Contradictions and ambiguities within the blue economy concept have raised concerns for its just and sustainable implementation. The risk of further

exploitation without due considerations for social and environmental imperatives is tangible. Dispossession and blue injustice; the need for inclusion, transdisciplinarity and awareness; as well as the importance of regional perspectives and geographic scales are the key themes emerging from this collection. We hope that it will stimulate debate on the importance of justice and socio-cultural approaches within a blue economy and encourage further exploration of these issues.

These important and novel contributions on the blue economy provide the conceptual lenses through which a new blue economy can be envisaged and framed, that is, one characterised by a truly balanced triple-bottom-line of economy, society and the environment and one which serves as a foundational basis for blue economy developments and initiatives where sustainability, justice and equality are foregrounded and prioritised. The timing is important; we are at a critical juncture regarding academic engagement with the blue economy. Although it remains a niche, it is a rapidly proliferating concept, whose emphasis and focus can still be shaped and directed. Our aim is to direct its understanding towards the potential for truly meaningful sustainability and to direct away from a narrative veneer for extractivism, exploitation and profiteering.

Geography and social science have a role to play to critically assess existing practices and narratives and develop frameworks that could ensure an inclusive and equitable process. The blue economy bypasses disciplinary boundaries and, as such, research on the blue economy can only be strengthened by interdisciplinary dialogues. For instance, the blue economy cannot be disassociated from the broader political and legal structures that enable the conduct of activities at sea, and the articulation between ocean governance, power structures and the place of local communities within blue economies could be further examined. In that respect, it will also be important to recognise the varied forms the blue economy can take and the cultural specificities that can reflect on different understandings and practices, and learn from other (e.g. non-Western, Indigenous) perspectives, to foster not just a blue economy with social justice, but a blue economy for social justice.

Finally, this collection of articles points to important avenues for future academic scholarship on blue economies. Blue economy, sitting as it does outside of traditional disciplinary boundaries, provides an ideal context through which to trial, apply and evolve transdisciplinary academic practice, including through action research and community engagement practices. The special issue also adds further support to calls for scholars of sustainability to more deliberately centre the social dimension, and the role of justice in particular in their enquiries. Questions on the fair distribution of costs, benefits, risks and opportunities, so pertinent across a range of sectors now in the 21st century, can be analysed effectively in microcosm in the blue economy. Such fine-grained analysis, in particular calibrated for spatial and scalar sensitivities, would undoubtedly catalyse the transformation of blue economy from an appealing, if contradictory rhetorical construct, to a more grounded and empirically shaped narrative for sustainable (and just) coastal development in the coming decades.

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