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A critical turn in marine spatial planning

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Although area-based approaches to marine management have a long history, over the last 10–15 years marine spatial planning (MSP) has risen to become the dominant marine management paradigm. Spatial planning in the marine environment can, in part, be traced back to integrated coastal zone management (Agardy et al. 2011) and large marine ecosystem programs, such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (Day 2002). However, a special issue in *Marine Policy* in 2008 (see Douvère and Elher 2008, for an introduction to this issue) and the publication of an associated UNESCO guidance document in 2009 (Elher and Douvère 2009) popularized and defined the concept of MSP more clearly. Since then, MSP has been widely promoted by academics, practitioners, and policymakers as a solution to a vast array of management issues. It has been presented, amongst other things, as a process for implementing ecosystem-based management in the marine environment (Foley et al. 2010), a mechanism for reducing user conflict (Tuda et al. 2014), a means of enhancing

environmental protection (Halpern et al. 2012), and a process for facilitating the expansion of maritime economies (Rodríguez-Rodríguez et al. 2016).

Mirroring its extensive commendation as a solution to these and other issues, and its rapid implementation worldwide (Jay et al. 2013; UNESCO online), MSP has grown as an area of academic research. While there has been much academic interest in the concept of MSP, a considerable portion of the literature has been critiqued for being asocial and atheoretical (Flannery et al. 2016) or for failing to deal with the *realpolitik* of implementing MSP (Santos et al. 2018). As noted by Flannery et al., in 2016, of the 1192 MSP papers available on Scopus at that time only 250 were from the social sciences, and many of these lacked a critical, theoretically informed engagement with MSP. The utility of this first wave of MSP scholarship should not be dismissed. It helped to develop a broad understanding of the core concepts involved and drew together an academic community focused on its development and concerned to contribute to improved practice. Also, as highlighted by Kidd and Ellis (2012) this body of work contributed significantly to our broad understanding of the institutional structures and policy regimes for MSP.

This early MSP work tended to follow the tenets of environmental resource management, working within a broadly rationalist, natural science paradigm (Jay 2010). Much of this literature also tended to be promotional in nature, with little evidence of questioning the assumed benefits of MSP or of considering the complexities of putting it into practice. More critical contributions have been restricted to procedural aspects of MSP, such as developing improved methods of data management, stakeholder engagement or evaluation of plans. Although valuable, this work has operated largely within its own terms and has not engaged with wider, socially oriented conceptual frameworks. In particular, it has shown little awareness of the governance and planning dimensions of MSP and has often ignored the socio-political aspects inherent in spatially planning the ocean. The majority of MSP academic literature could thus be accused of assuming a naïve, rationalist model of decision-making that has long been discredited in broader planning circles (Faludi 1987), and it has been

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generally disconnected from long-standing traditions of critical planning and decision-making theory (Healey 2006). Surprisingly, perhaps, this early scholarship has also not engaged with developments in spatial theory, particularly as these have focused on unconventional geographies, explicitly including, most recently, the seas (Steinberg and Peters 2015).

This lack of social science perspective can perhaps be attributed to the disciplinary background of many scholars that have been drawn to MSP studies, which is generally of a natural science and environmental management nature. Their contribution is not to be dismissed, but it has inevitably led to calls for strong social science engagement with MSP. For example, Kidd and Ellis (2012) draw attention to the lack of reflexivity within early MSP scholarship and call for more thorough engagement with the possibilities of social science analysis, while Jay et al. (2012) call for a closer engagement with established planning thought within MSP. Similarly, Flannery et al. (2016) call for a critical turn in MSP scholarship and a deeper engagement with social processes such as power, justice, distributional impacts, and the potential for progressive forms of MSP. It is, therefore, encouraging to see the growth in critical MSP scholarship in recent years. For example, recent papers have applied theories of assemblage, enclosure, critical cartography, spatial imaginaries, and political ecology to explore how MSP has emerged in specific forms and how it can be made different (Boucquey et al. 2016; Fairbanks et al. 2018; Barbesgaard 2019; Walsh 2018; Trouillet 2019, 2020; Toonen and van Tatenhove 2013); adopted a post-political lens to investigate MSP decision-making (Flannery et al. 2018; Tafon 2018; Aschenbrenner and Winder 2019; Clarke and Flannery 2020); evaluated public policy decision making through multilevel policy frameworks (Vince 2014; Jones et al. 2016; Sander 2018; Saunders et al. 2019); and explored how issues of power and social justice can be re-centred in MSP research and practice (Smith and Jentoft 2017; Tafon et al. 2019; Saunders et al. 2020). This list of critical MSP scholarship is not intended to be exhaustive, but, rather, points to a recent and growing interest in theoretically informed, social science MSP research (see Fairbanks et al. 2019, for a more comprehensive account of critical perspectives on MSP).

We view this Thematic Series entitled *Critical turn in Marine Spatial Planning—whence and whither?* as an opportunity to contribute to this literature and to answer the calls for more theoretically informed research. Through this thematic series, which emerged from the *Marine Spatial Planning Research Network* (<https://www.msprn.net/home>) workshops and related sessions at the *MARE 2019 People and The Sea Conference*, we seek to highlight where and how this critical engagement is occurring, to point to possible future research areas, and to invite the readership of *Maritime Studies* to reflect on how their work can engage with

and extend the corpus of theoretically informed, social science MSP scholarship.

The eleven papers published in this thematic series exemplify the wide variety of social science issues that are being explored by researchers engaged in critical MSP research. These contributions span a variety of geographies, disciplines and theoretical traditions, and cover a range of topics. Ritchie and McElduff (2020) revisit possibly the earliest critical look at MSP, that of an article by Peel and Lloyd (2004), which explored the extent to which MSP could be considered a socially constructed expression of ‘the marine problem’ (following Hannigan (1995)). Ritchie and McElduff (2020) consider that, since then, this has become an even more legitimate interpretation of MSP, as marine issues increasingly gain public and institutional attention, and MSP is positioned as a response to these. However, with particular reference to the UK context, they feel that there is scope for further development of this perspective, with, for example, the need for a stronger institutional sponsor for marine issues.

Grounded in the field of legal geography, Ntona and Schröder (2020) define marine space as a socio-legal construction. Arguing for a relational conceptualization, they explore the ontologies and epistemologies inscribed in law and regulatory frameworks by connecting the themes of law as discourse, law as representation and law as power. They show how legal aspects within MSP frameworks restate a focus on neutrality, managerial approaches, and particular understanding of oceans as commons, and the legitimate enclosure of such space. They argue for a shift in focus that critically understands the position and role of law in co-constituting marine space and its socio-material realities.

Jay (2020) examines striated and smooth spaces in MSP, with these concepts being derived from the work of Deleuze and Guatarri (1988) where the ‘spatial’ concept is not only understood as enviro-physical but also through socio-institutional dimensions. He expands these concepts by bringing together existing and new perspectives from MSP and argues that striated and smooth have to be temporally and physically productive and are in continual production and interchange. Jay (2020) finds that drawing the attention of actors to new understandings of space, and suggesting alternative ways of working, is a political act that can influence other actors to change their ways. He applies this theoretical framework to the Shetland MSP process which reveals to have striated and smooth spatialities and that policy stages can progress through the interaction of the two spatial dynamics.

Flannery and McAteer (2020) use the Foucauldian concept of governmentality to understand MSP as a power-laden arena, particularly how power dynamics play out in subsequent phases (normative, strategic, operational, monitoring) of planning processes. They assess how MSP has been operationalized in the UK, with a focus on the East marine plans in

England, by looking into three core elements within governance processes: problematizations, rationalities, and technologies. The authors show that while in the earlier (normative) phase, MSP was coupled with progressive reform; this becomes deradicalized in later stages, resulting in the development of hegemonic (neoliberal) goals. However, Flannery and McAteer (2020) argue that by understanding how governmentalities travel through time and space, they can be changed and resisted.

Campbell et al. (2020) apply assemblage and governance theories to critically reflect on the emergence of ocean planning in US federal waters. Highlighting how ocean planning has been implemented during a distinctly neoliberal era in which there is little enthusiasm for big government, Campbell et al. (2020) frame the ocean planning process in the USA as a governance rather than a government project. By focusing on governance actors, the scales at which they function, and the data infrastructure that was created to support ocean planning, Campbell et al. (2020) demonstrate how US ocean planning is reflective of contemporary environmental governance. Although its origin as an Executive Order creates inherent weaknesses (e.g. lacking legislation and funding), they demonstrate that US ocean planning has the potential, fragile though it may be, to deliver outcomes that empower communities and resist the enclosure of marine areas for capital accumulation.

Greenhill et al. (2020) also tease out the tensions between government and governance in the implementation of MSP in Scotland. They examine the extent to which MSP arrangements in Scotland constrain or enable adaptive governance. Drawing on adaptive governance theory, they illustrate that MSP in Scotland endeavours to enable synchronicity between ‘top-down’ government and lower scale governance. Greenhill et al. (2020) demonstrate how the national government provides legitimacy, incentives, and oversight for MSP implementation, while governance partnerships support collaboration and innovation at the regional level. They illustrate the tensions within these arrangements and their impact on the implementation of adaptive governance.

Vince and Day (2020) restate the widely shared notion that MSP has great potential to integrate fragmented and sector-based marine governance but argue that integrative capacity needs to be unpacked to assess effective integration within MSP. Drawing on two Australian cases, the authors show how integrative capacity underpins a broad set of MSP principles, such as cross-sectoral coordination, cross-cultural deliberation, and intra-agency collaborations. They conclude that MSP becomes more effective when agencies enhance their often limited ability to recognize and respond to a multiplicity of interests and demands, by modifying, and even changing, their practices and processes.

Keijser et al. (2020) also focus on a commonly shared idea, that of the importance of learning in MSP, and argue that it is currently understudied. They build on the work of Armitage et al. (2008) who outline five dimensions of learning by unpacking the ‘learning paradox’ in MSP and by adding two more dimensions—the object of learning and the timing of learning. Keijser et al. (2020) then apply this framework to the MSP process in the Netherlands. They analyse the Dutch MSP literature and draw out where learning is mentioned explicitly for the seven dimensions. Keijser et al. (2020) find that little explicit attention is given to the MSP process in the Netherlands and that not all seven dimensions are equally important for policymakers. They argue that learning is important, and it needs to be an explicit part of the MSP process.

Said and Trouillet (2020) focus on the types of knowledge that are being incorporated into MSP processes, with particular reference to fisheries. They contrast quantitative, bio-economic fisheries’ data with the ‘deep knowledge’ of fishers themselves on such things as social and cultural aspects of their activities. They contend that MSP typically relies on the former, leading to mapping outputs and planning decisions that do not necessarily represent the interests of the industry. They argue instead for a more participatory approach to mapping, incorporating currently excluded forms of information, which also implies a reflexive approach to knowledge production itself.

Looking beyond the role of the state, Toonen and van Tatenhove (2020) explore how marine problems are constructed and how actors deliberate, learn, and react to information. Drawing on their previous work on marine scaping (Toonen and van Tatenhove 2013) and reflexivity in Transboundary MSP (TMSP) arrangements (van Tatenhove 2017) they conceptualize TMSP as a reflexive governance process for addressing complex socio-spatial issues. They argue that ‘informational flows’ are core to governance processes and, as these flows are not the sole purview of the state, that they provide opportunities for non-state actors to shape TMSP. They use case studies of the International Seabed Authority and The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) to illustrate the different relationships between informational flows and reflectiveness. Toonen and van Tatenhove (2020) conclude that TMSP arrangements should be redesigned to emphasize the interplay between reflexivity and information and that this will enable researchers to identify when and how new governance rules are created by non-state actors.

Karnad and St. Martin (2020) also focus on the role of non-state actors in MSP-like processes. Using the example of India, where the state-led MSP has not yet been implemented, they illustrate how MSP principles and practices are employed to divide ocean space. Rather than being implemented by the state, MSP-like processes are being

introduced by international agencies in response to large-scale industrial developments in India's marine environment. Although these processes often mirror the inclusive and holistic rhetoric of MSP elsewhere in the world, they tend to reproduce particular power relations that reject local knowledge. Karnad and St. Martin (2020) argue that despite appearing to be rational, post-political, and technocratic processes, these MSP-like processes produce an ontological politics that provides a novel space in which to engage in political struggle.

We view this thematic series as adding a further rotation to the critical turn in MSP research. These papers provide useful insights into some of the topics and theories that are being explored within MSP research, including, power, participation, reflectiveness/reflexivity, the construction and mobilization of specific, and often uncontested, concepts within MSP. While each paper provides a novel contribution to the critical turn in MSP research, some common issues are raised across several papers that could be explored further. For example, Ritchie and McElduff (2020), Ntona and Schröder (2020), and Jay (2020) highlight that 'marine space' is not a neutral concept and that it needs to be understood through the application of constructivist frameworks. Campbell et al. (2020), Flannery and McAteer (2020), and Greenhill et al. (2020) highlight that MSP is not an apolitical process, but is, rather, a multi-layered power arena in which the socio-political dynamics need to be scrutinized through the application of governance and power theories. Toonen and van Tatenhove (2020) and Karnad and St. Martin (2020) draw our attention to the role of non-state actors and the development of MSP-like processes beyond the state. Vince and Day (2020), Keijser et al. (2020), and Said and Trouillet (2020) extended the analysis of power beyond the governance realm and analyse how 'taken-for-granted' terms like integration, learning, and knowledge are mobilized to shape MSP in specific ways.

There are, however, some key gaps that were not addressed within this thematic series that urgently needed to be addressed through the application of critical MSP perspectives. Although this series does include contributions that examine MSP in a Global South context, we acknowledge that there is an overrepresentation of contributions from researchers in the Global North. As MSP is rapidly exported around the world, it is crucial that the conceptual, theoretical, and practical insights from a broader cohort of researchers and a wider range of social theory, including southern theory (Connell 2007), are brought to bear on these processes. Building on this, there is also scope to apply geopolitical perspectives to understand how nation states use MSP to compete for ocean space and to attract and capture inward development. The connection between

MSP, Blue Growth, and Blue Economy narratives are lightly touched upon in the papers in this series. Although there is a growing body of research examining the relationship between these two concepts (e.g. Silver and Campbell 2018; Schutter and Hicks 2019), the recent emergence of various narratives connecting 'blue deals' and post-COVID-19 recovery means that there is scope for further work in this area. Finally, we urge the development of research that not only critically engages with MSP but that also imagines how MSP can be made better. For example, we should consider the interaction of MSP practice and thought with the likely post-COVID 19 return to the fore of the ever more serious climate emergency, and how politically attuned and spatially agile forms of MSP might be vehicles for wider social adaptation in response to the far-reaching changes becoming apparent in the seas and oceans (Santos et al. 2020). In this manner, we think that there is a need to develop stronger links between scholarship and practice and to communicate the value of theoretically informed marine social science in terms of its capacity to improve MSP processes and outcomes.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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