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Blue growth: saviour or ocean grabbing?

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Blue growth: saviour or ocean grabbing?

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Abstract

While the global rush to control land resources is well established, similar ‘power-grabs’ in relation to aquatic resources are less well-known and researched. Through on-going collaborative work between representatives of fisher peoples’ movements, scholar-activists and social justice organisations such processes have recently been coined as ‘ocean grabbing’. Increasingly, under the rubric of ‘Blue Growth’, global policy processes that purportedly align the needs of the poor with profit interests and environmental concerns are being pushed forward by burgeoning alliances of environmental NGOs, the private sector and international institutions. These blue growth policy proposals, drawing on market-based mechanisms, effectively open up for widespread commodification, yet are being advocated as the only ‘sustainable’ response to the increasingly dire straits of the ocean’s ‘health’. Coupled with this broader process of ‘selling nature to save it’, valuation efforts that also take the carbon storage and capture abilities of coastal ecosystems into account are increasingly being pushed as a crucial tool to fight the climate crisis. While proponents guarantee sustainable outcomes, similar market-based conservation efforts on land have had huge socio-ecological consequences for communities on the ground. Will blue growth projects have similar consequences for coastal communities? This contribution will, critically examine the policy proposals flowing from Blue Growth proponents and situate them within the broader discussion on multistakeholder governance and ocean grabbing.

1 Introduction

“Talk of the ocean as a new economic frontier, of a new phase of industrialisation of the seas, will become widespread in 2016.”

— *The Economist, 2015*

In the past years, a wide array of actors have become interested and engaged in maritime and coastal policies. In this process, new types of alliances converging around specific ideas about how maritime and coastal resources should be organised (to whose benefit, on which terms and to what end?) are being formed. In the spring of last year, actors with seemingly unaligned interests spanning The Nature Conservancy, Goldman Sachs, Lockheed Martin and the World Bank took part in an Executive Roundtable discussion in New York on how to “Invest in the Blue Economy”. A few months later at the World Ocean Summit (WOS) organised by the Economist Intelligence Unit in Portugal these actors were supplemented by the likes of Credit Suisse, WWF and government officials from across the world under the heading “Blue Growth”. In the run-up to the WOS, luring reports like ‘The Ocean Prosperity Roadmap’ were put out giving guidance to decision-makers on marine and coastal resource management strategies that purportedly would “maximise economic, conservation and societal benefit”. With the coinciding claim from WWF that the ocean’s ‘economic powerhouse’ could be valued at USD 24 trillion, such strategies were deemed crucial. And finally, in November 2015 in Singapore, special invitees and the members of the World Ocean Council – The International Business Alliance for Corporate Ocean Responsibility – were gathered at the triennial Sustainable Ocean Summit under the title ‘Sustainable Development and Growing the Blue Economy – the next 50 years’. The striking feature at all of these elite summits and conferences is how a wide-range of actors are converging on the necessity of implementing policies across scales that are conducive to the ‘blue economy’ following a reasoning that this will create win-win-win situations in the pursuit of ‘sustainable development’ entailing pro-poor, conservation-sensitive (blue) growth.

The concept of a blue economy came out of the Rio +20 conference simultaneous with the rise of the ‘green economy’. However, in contrast to how scholars within the critical agrarian studies tradition have leapt over the concept of the green economy, there are relatively few studies that have engaged explicitly with the blue economy and the policies deemed conducive to it from a critical perspective. This intervention seeks to remedy this, by critically engaging with a series of global processes through which the commodification of marine and coastal resources is being opened up under the guise of conservation.

Section two recounts different bodies of literature on firstly, neoliberal conservation and green-grabbing and secondly, the political economy of fisheries and argues for the need to rub these two together. Through this lens, the third section looks at Blue Growth uncovering the underlying assumptions in proponents’ analysis and argues that policies deemed conducive to Blue Growth entail massive shifts in control of and access to maritime and coastal resources. The fourth section discusses how the push for Blue Growth is symptomatic of a broader change in global governance towards “multistakeholder’ism” and stresses how this contrasts with the demands of social movements and the related emerging power struggles involved in ‘governing the oceans’. I conclude with suggestions for future research in this vein.

2 Theoretical lens

Neoliberal conservation, primitive accumulation and appropriation

In the past years, a wealth of literature has been devoted to the analysis of the governing of human interactions with the physical environment under neoliberal capitalism. While initially seen through the prism of neoliberalisation of nature (see Heynen et al. 2007; Castree 2008), with the ascendance of the green economy and ever-more market-based mechanisms to conservation and climate change the rubric of ‘green-grabbing’ (Fairhead et al. 2012) and its inversion of ‘grabbing green’ (Corson et al.

2013) have been put forward. Especially the latter two, draw on rich historical debates centering on shifts in control of natural resources dating back to Marx's elucidation of the necessary prerequisite to capitalism: primitive accumulation. With reference to enclosures of agricultural lands in Britain from the 14th through the 18th century, Marx explains how dramatic changes to the property-regimes had the dual purpose of "converting the land into a merely commercial commodity" and simultaneously "extending the supply of free and rightless proletarians driven from their land." (Marx 1990, 885) Drawing on Harvey (2003), a range of scholars have argued that far from merely being an historical transition period, primitive accumulation is a continuing process that, if anything, has been accentuated in recent years – perhaps most popularly known through the acceleration of 'land-grabbing' (Borras et al. 2011). This has in turn reinvigorated debates on drivers of such processes, as the 'theoretical busyness' (Bernstein 2014) surrounding Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession suggests (see Hall 2012 for overview). In the green-grabbing frame, conservation initiatives have become a key force driving primitive accumulation (Buscher 2009, Kelly 2011, Fairhead et al. 2012). Although, as these authors stress, the form that primitive accumulation through conservation takes is very different from that initially described by Marx, as conservation initiatives involve taking nature *out* of production – as opposed to bringing them *in* through the initial enclosures described by Marx. Despite this different form, through the concept of appropriation Fairhead et al. explain how similar mechanisms and consequences unfold: "'Appropriation' implies the transfer of ownership, use rights and control over resources that were once publicly or privately owned - or not even the subject of ownership - from the poor (or everyone including the poor) in to the hands of the powerful." (2012, 238)

They elaborate on this by pulling in Harvey's four key dimensions in neoliberalism that fuel accumulation by dispossession (2003, 2005), namely 'privatisation', 'financialisation', 'the management of and manipulation of crises', and 'state redistribution', to explain how each of these spur on the appropriation in different ways. As each of these play a crucial role also in relation to appropriation of marine and coastal resources, I will briefly recount them.

Privatization happens through both the classical form of primitive accumulation as described by Marx, whereby resources, property etc. is transferred from the state to private owners. As Fairhead et al., note in the context of natural resources this may also initially involve 'securing rights for the poor'. However, they stress that even if such processes initially mean allocation of resources to marginalized groups, this opens up for successive rounds of appropriation in many other ways through: outright violence, delegitimizing of the new resource-owners through new legislation and, crucially, 'through the market'. Despite underlying neoclassical assumptions of privatization opening up for smooth market exchanges that by necessity benefit both buyers and sellers with no costs to society (McAfee 2012) such processes thereby actually involve massive shifts in and struggles over social relations, socio-economic (in)equality and power more broadly (Fairhead et al. 2012).

Related to this, processes of financialisation involving "the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors and financial institutions in the operation of the domestic and international economies" (Epstein 2005, 3) have characterized the past years. As Fairhead et al. stress, this has also meant bringing evermore aspects of society into financial circulation – including nature. Through a myriad of different market-based mechanisms nature is parceled into tradable commodities that can be speculated on and 'new' nature is actively produced and made tradable e.g. through emissions trading schemes. This means that the governing of nature also becomes subject to the fluctuations of financial markets. A prerequisite to this is that our whole understanding of 'nature' is changed: "ontologies of ecology are being replaced by those of 'natural capital' and 'ecosystem services'." (Fairhead et al. 2012, 244) As Sikor has explained in relation to the rise of the ecosystem services framework, this means that rather than nature having an intrinsic value, "nature is a stock that provides a flow of services to people" (Sikor 2013, 3). From this perspective then, in tune with neoclassical reasoning, the key is to ensure a correct and extensive valuation of these services, so they can be incorporated into the cost-benefit accounting considerations of individuals, governments, transnational corporations etc. (McAfee 2012). This process of valuation was initially pushed forward already in the 1980s by environmental economists, but with the rise of the Ecosystem Services

Framework this has become an all-encompassing endeavor meaning the valuation of all ecosystem services from biological diversity to carbon storage (Sikor 2013). While initially, the valuation was seen as a means to ensure wide-spread support for conservation, with the rise of market-based environmentalism, the translation into policy of this approach has been the creation of markets for the different elements of the valued ecosystems. Through these markets, individuals, governments, transnational corporations etc. can pay for the identified ecosystem services. The underlying assumption is that payments for these services will ensure the conservation of the ecosystems that the services are derived from. Furthermore, proponents argue that this mobilises new funding opportunities for conservation initiatives in the Global South in a time of diminishing funds for such conservation and development projects through Official Development Aid (McAfee 2015). However, with these markets, new avenues of financialisation also arise through the creation of “‘fictitious conservation’ intimately linked to the circulation of capital in new economic systems” (Fairhead et al. 2012, 244). Furthermore, this process of valuation disregards use-value and converts everything into commensurable exchange value where one service can be traded off for another depending on where the most value can be attained (McAfee 2012). Crucially, in terms of appropriation processes, Corson et al. note how financialisation “create value, produce new natures and landscapes as commodities and empower certain actors to accumulate from these newly created values.” (2012, 269)

The third aspect involves the managing and manipulation of crises. Fairhead et al. highlight how the construction and perpetuation of a sense of crisis plays out through global environmental governance. Alluding to Klein’s ‘disaster capitalism’ (2007) and the related unfolding of shock-doctrine, whereby often controversial neoliberalisation processes are legitimated with reference to responding to crises, environmental crisis is perhaps the biggest one facing humanity. And, as Harvey stresses, responses to such crisis necessarily involve accumulation for some and dispossession for others – or more directly: “the environmental crisis is providing a speculative frontier for finance capitalists.” (Corson et al. 2012, 269) Related to this, these crises also legitimate bringing in new actors, as states are increasingly cast as being incapable of solving ‘global’ issues requiring increased participation of non-state actors. This has resulted in actors that are much more “embedded in capitalist networks” (Fairhead et al. 2012, 239) having a firm place in global policy processes, and in turn, greatly impacting on resource control and access.

Finally, Harvey stresses how, states under neoliberalism become increasingly oriented toward attracting foreign direct investment, i.e. specifically actors with the capital to invest whereas all others are overlooked and/or lose out. This means states implementing all manner of market-friendly policies that create the appropriate ‘enabling environment’ for investors, which, for Harvey, amounts to a class-project involving the immense redistribution of wealth and income from the majority to a political and economic elite minority (Harvey 2005).

Central in all of these dimensions is the assumption in market-based neoliberal conservation that “once property rights are established and transaction costs are minimized, voluntary trade in environmental goods and bads will produce optimal, least-cost outcomes with little or no need for state involvement.” (McAfee 2012, 109) This implies that win-win-win outcomes with benefits on all fronts spanning corporate investors, the local communities, biodiversity, national economies etc., are possible if only the right technocratic policies are put in place. By extension this also means side-stepping intrinsically political questions with reference to effective management through economic rationality informed by cutting-edge ecological science, in turn making the transition to the ‘green economy’ conflict-free as long as the “invisible hand of the market is guided by [neutral] scientific expertise” (McAfee 2015, n.p.).

Unfortunately, symptomatic of critical agrarian studies more generally, with a few notable exceptions (Beymer-Farris & Basset 2012; Benjaminsen & Bryceson 2012) none of these studies on green-grabbing and neoliberal conservation have looked into how these dynamics play out in relation to appropriation of marine and coastal resources.

‘Privatize-or-perish’¹

While marine and coastal resources may have been largely overlooked in the discussions on green grabbing and neoliberal conservation, a “robust, but small, critical literature” (Campling et al. 2012, 178) has been devoted to looking specifically into the political economy of fisheries systems. Focusing on one sector in the outlined ‘blue economy’ then, this literature uncovers “how capitalist relations and dynamics (in their diverse and varying forms) shape and/or constitute fisheries systems.” (182) These scholars have joined earlier commons property theorists (e.g. Ostrom 1990; Bromley 1992), geographers (Mansfield 2004; 2007) and others in responding to decades of debates amongst economists and biologists, pushing neo-Malthusian argumentation about how growing populations and lacking private property regimes are driving economic as well as environmental crises in fisheries. Indeed, as Campling et al. point out in their introductory article to a special issue of *The Journal of Agrarian Change* on capture fisheries, “the analysis of fisheries systems and their decline are foundational to neo-Malthusian arguments that human population pressures yield the ‘tragedy of the commons’” (2012, 181). As this doctrine from neoclassical economists through the concept of blue growth coalesces with the rise of the ESF-approach, the following briefly gives an overview of these discussions.

Predating Hardin (1968) by 14 years the economist, Gordon, put out a seminal paper in 1954 that has since then dominated in policy-debates. Building on several centuries of biological modeling of human population and natural resource dynamics (Kolding & van Zwieten 2011), Gordon placed the ‘the commons’ at the heart of the discussion on economic crisis in fisheries. In line with neoclassical economics, he reasoned that a lack of property rights and the consequent ‘open access’ to the ocean’s resources would inevitably lead to overcapitalization, as the individual fisher continues to invest in order to maximize profits from the ‘open access’ commons. Thus, the situation would lead to overfishing, as the rational fisher would catch as many fish today as possible, leading to the notion of ‘the race for fish’ and, consequently, economic crisis would ensue (Gordon 1954). In contrast to Hardin’s (1968) infamous intervention, Gordon stuck to neoclassical reasoning that in the end led him to the conclusion that the only way the crisis can be avoided is by introducing clearly defined and strongly enforced (private) property rights as a management tool in fisheries. Inspired by this first intervention, hordes of fisheries economists have followed in the tracks of Gordon, making the same analysis and thereby reaching the same policy conclusions – with varying levels of hyperbole. As Arnasson put it in 2000, “[...] without property rights, human society seems doomed to abject poverty. In fact, with little or no property rights, human society would be primitive indeed, not much different from the more advanced versions of animal societies ... It follows immediately that the fisheries problem would disappear if only the appropriate property rights could be defined, imposed and enforced” (2000, 17). This ‘hardcore’ neoclassical reasoning surrounding lacking property rights in fisheries systems continues to this day, indeed Macinko argues that fisheries economists are approaching a state of ‘evangelism’ leading to what he calls a “privatize-or-perish dichotomy” (2014, 40). Furthermore, with the aforementioned rise of market-based environmentalism more generally, the initial argument that private property rights were necessary to counter economic crisis in fisheries was supplemented by an environmental one. Privatization is no longer purely needed for economic reasons, but also – again in tune with neoclassical economics – under the assumption that ownership will promote stewardship (Bromley 2009).

It is in this context that scholars drawing on the agrarian political economy tradition have intervened putting “analyses of capture fisheries in the broader context of the capitalist relations of production through which most now operate.” (Campling et al. 2012, 178) Through these historical and contextual analyses, alternative explanations concerning the causes of contemporary socio-ecological crises in fisheries systems have been put forward, including how capitalist production methods and the underlying accumulation imperative are the actual drivers (Longo et al. 2015). Crucially, this body of literature has helped uncover the broader political economic dynamics surrounding access to and control of fisheries resources. Far from the characterization of current fisheries systems as ‘open

¹ Quip taken from Macinko (2014, 40)

access', Campling & Havice (2014) through an historical analysis of property rights in fisheries show how, in fact, "marine fisheries have been moving towards the enclosure of open access regimes for hundreds of years." (714) Most notably, through the United Nations' Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), all fishery resources within 200 nautical miles of coasts, so-called Exclusive Economic Zones, became state property. Nonetheless, state property, and any other variant than private property, is not seen as sufficient from the neoclassical approach to solving the connected economic and environmental crisis in fisheries – only full privatization and marketization will result in optimal and rational economic and environmental behavior (Mansfield 2004) where resource users are transformed to resource-stewards.

While this body of literature has uncovered how the resulting socio-ecological transformations from privatization processes do not result in the intended outcomes, none of these interventions however, have so far engaged with the above described literature on market-based environmentalism missing out on a fruitful engagement – especially with green grabbing – to examine how the push for privatization and commodification is increasingly legitimized with reference to conservation. This gap is identified by the editors of the special issue of *Agrarian Change*, with reference to how new policy efforts related to climate change have the (potentially) contradictory aims of increasing productivity while also protecting nature by taking marine resources out of production and possible conflicts within and between fishing and non-fishing activities arising as a result (Campling et al. 2012). With the aforementioned recognition that states remain the main arbiters of property relations within their EEZ's the question is whether and how privatization of fisheries is just one step in a broader push for privatizing maritime and coastal resources generally. The perspective given from fisheries economists is clear, "[ITQs] are only a stage in the development ... [of] private rights. This evolution can be expected to continue ... until he [sic] has an owner's share in management of the bio-mass and its environment." (Scott 1989, 33)

3 Blue Growth

As the reviewed fisheries economics literature suggests, the crisis narrative concerning the state of the world's fisheries and oceans in general is rife. Work in the academic field is compounded by media and NGO-reports that put forward similar crisis-narratives of declines in biodiversity and destruction of marine and coastal ecosystems to the detriment of "life on earth as we know it", as WWF has put it. This has pushed a number of global policy processes forward, that in their own words approach 'ocean health' from a more holistic perspective, stressing the opportunity for win-win-win solutions: "fragmented solutions [are] insufficient to meet the web of challenges confronting ocean health. Properly designed, integrated efforts can result in sustainable and shared economic development, poverty reduction, and healthy marine ecosystems." (Hoegh-Guldberg et al. 2013, 12) Such integrated efforts are increasingly happening under the rubric of 'Blue Growth'.

In the past years, blue growth and the blue economy (interchangeably blue wealth, ocean economy and maritime economy) has gained center-stage amongst a wide-range of actors. This has gone beyond mere discussions at the elite global conferences alluded to above. Decision-makers and global institutions around the world are increasingly pursuing or implementing policies related to 'blue growth'. Figuring prominently at the Rio +20 summit with the fanfare surrounding 'green growth', the UN's FAO followed up with the launching of its Blue Growth Initiative (BGI) in 2013, defining blue growth as: "the sustainable growth and development emanating from economic activities in the oceans, wetlands and coastal zones, that minimize environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and unsustainable use of living aquatic resources, and maximize economic and social benefits." (FAO 2015a, 8) The BGI has four core components, namely capture fisheries, aquaculture, livelihood & food systems (i.e. access to markets and value chains) and economic growth from ecosystem services. A range of challenges and crises are identified as the reasoning behind the BGI. These primarily relate to the continuing abysmal reports from the FAO and many others on the degradation and destruction of habitats, loss of biodiversity, overexploited fish stocks and general climate change related impacts on marine and coastal ecosystems (e.g. ocean acidification and warming). In order to respond to these crises, it is deemed necessary with increased international coordination aimed at "strengthen[ing]

responsible management regimes and practices that reconcile economic growth and food security with the restoration of the eco-systems they sustain.” (FAO 2015a, 8) The FAO’s BGI is one of many recent initiatives oriented toward facilitating blue growth at global and national level, including the World Bank’s USD 6.4 billion Blue Growth Portfolio, The EU’s Blue Growth Strategy, the African Union’s Integrated Maritime Strategy and a wide range of countries in the Global South that, according to the FAO, are already implementing Blue Growth programs (FAO 2015a). This is supplemented by a huge interest from the private sector with a stake in one or more of these four components as well as investors eager to provide capital for the ‘transition’ to the blue economy.

Picking up on Campling & Havice’s (2014) point of a centuries long enclosure process in the fisheries sector, this increased attention to and focus on the growth opportunities provided by marine and coastal ecosystems suggests a new qualitative phase in this enclosure that is much wider than just the fisheries sector. In tune with the broader move towards more market-based mechanisms in conservation then, each of the four components stress the catalyzing role of market-based mechanisms in ensuring “ecosystem stewardship”. Furthermore, the BGI stresses the need for partnerships among industry, governments and communities and how especially the private sector and public-private partnerships play a fundamental role in this process. The following sections look into two of the components of the BGI, namely capture fisheries and economic growth from ecosystem services, and how these principles of market-based mechanisms lead to processes of appropriation.

The Coastal Fisheries Initiative

Although not initially framed as market-based mechanisms to meet environmental ends, privatization policies in fisheries have been at the forefront of commodification and marketization with the stated aim of bringing about positive economic and environmental outcomes. As Mansfield has explained on such policies: “[Individual Transferable Quotas] marketise allocation of fish catch. Individual fishers receive an initial quota allocation that represents a percentage of the total catch. Each year thereafter fishers can then either catch that amount or lease or sell their quota allocation to other fishers.” (Mansfield 2004, 320) In this process, the resource is *de facto* relinquished from the state (and thus, the public) and is given to a number of private actors, who can then trade with the resource as they please through the market that is created for the ITQs. While the first introductions of ITQ-policies in fisheries date back to the 1970s, there has been a new push for the widespread implementation of them especially with the rise of green-growth jargon (Longo et al. 2015). As a result, in the recent years a whole number of partnerships, alliances and initiatives dedicated to the restoration of the ocean’s health using market mechanisms associated with property rights, economic incentives and thereby unfolding of rational decision-making by fisheries actors have been put forward (TNI 2014). Most recently, the Coastal Fisheries Initiative (CFI) aimed at reforming fisheries in six countries across three continents: Cape Verde, Cote D’Ivoire, Ecuador, Indonesia, Perú and Senegal has seen the light of day. Through a period of 4 years, USD 235 million will be distributed through a number of projects in these countries. The program is headed by the FAO together with UNEP, UNDP, Conservation International, WWF and the World Bank and is funded jointly by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), the implementing governments, environmental NGOs, foundations and private sector actors. At the point of writing, the CFI is yet to be implemented, however, the program’s framework document (FAO 2015b) gives an idea of the restructuring in control of the resource that the program envisions.

The ‘root causes’ of the current environmental and economic crisis in fisheries, as identified in the framework document reflect Gordonian logic. In tune with his initial reasoning in 1954, the document explains: “coastal fisheries² are often characterized by perverse incentives that encourage overfishing and overinvestment” (6) and, to be clear, these perverse incentives are a result of lacking, unclear or insecure tenure rights especially in the EEZs of developing countries. This sweeping statement is supplemented by later neo-Malthusian argumentation about how there are essentially too many fishers chasing too few fish. Consequently, having placed the root causes squarely within the ‘tragedy of the

² As pointed out in the document, ‘coastal’ in this instance refers to all fisheries within the EEZ.

commons' frame, the alternative solution put forward by the CFI is to put in place new or amended fisheries management that create the appropriate incentives, by introducing secure tenure and access rights. Through this – and only through this – “a more responsible behavior is expected and the incentives behind the ‘race for fish’ are dismantled.” (18)

Furthermore, secure tenure rights are a vital step in terms of “catalyzing private sector involvement” (23). And in order to ensure this involvement, a key component of the CFI is a ‘Challenge Fund’ led by the World Bank and Conservation International. The fund will act as grant mechanism that supports “market-based solutions that help leverage improved fisheries management” (23), which involves that CFI-countries and regions creating an “enabling governance context for investment.” (23)

Finally, throughout the program document, it is stressed that it will deliver on environmental, social and economic goals and it continually mentions the need to be sensitive to different objectives – from “ensuring the human well-being” of fisher communities to “ensuring wealth creation and investment” in order to appeal to private sector actors. The underlying assumption is that these opposing interests are actually not opposing; that the program can safeguard the interests of everyone involved in fisheries – from small-scale fisherfolk to the private sectors actors that the CFI wants to give a central role to.

Activating dead capital

In this manner the CFI totally overlooks broader issues on social relations, power, and inequality. In line with the general turn in fisheries policy toward what Macinko has called a “strategically benign rhetoric” (2014, 40), i.e. no longer explicitly talking about privatization, but rather variants of ‘sustainability’ etc., the actual political-economic consequences of these policies are not considered. As pointed out above, fisheries resources are currently under the control of states. The policy proposal as put forward here, would involve the transferal of state property to private owners encompassing the next round in the historical enclosure of maritime resources. This latest round would (further) shift the interest in maritime resources from the public to the private. While this approach is in tune with the neoclassical assumptions of unfolding of smooth and conflict-free market transactions that will ensure optimal economic and environmental outcomes, actual experiences on the ground as documented by geographers (e.g. Mansfield 2004; Benediktsson & Karlsdóttir 2011), ethnologists (Høst 2012; 2013) and sociologists (Longo et al. 2015) with these types of commodification and marketization schemes suggest a much more conflict-ridden process with adverse social outcomes and at best doubtful environmental outcomes.

Doing work on the introduction of ITQs in Danish fisheries, Høst (2013) has highlighted how the marketization process led to massive social disruption within and between coastal communities in Denmark, as a select few capital-strong boat-owners amassed quota through a rampant appropriation through the market. By 2015 one fishing enterprise owned ITQs worth over USD 130 million (DR, 2015). This also had clear geographical impacts, where ownership of the resource was concentrated in a few harbours, whereas fishing operations – predominantly the small-scale actors – in over 100 harbours were either totally closed down or lost half of their formerly active fishers. Needless to say this had massive impacts on the coastal communities in question across the country. Following from this, an entire restructuring of the productive forces was set off as the new owners invested heavily in their fishing capacity in order to facilitate profit accumulation. In parts of the fishery, this also meant an increase in more destructive forms of fishing, including bottom-trawling. As Høst (2012, 1) notes: “In one catch area 85 % of the cod is caught by trawl and 10 boats account for half the catch [...] This development can be seen as part of a rationalization process where fewer larger vessels in fewer larger harbors take over the activity and exclusive ownership of the fishing rights.” (Høst, 2012 :1) To be clear, this was not a side-effect of the program. As the chief civil-servant behind the reform-process later explained in an interview³: “There are fewer vessels – they have become larger, more efficient and more expensive to finance ... There has been a definitive concentration to a very small number of

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUzCcAFhqrs>

highly specialized vessels, which can be valued at over USD 100 million. This is a result of the regulation and this is the intended result.”

Simultaneously, the ITQ-policy offset a massive speculation-drive, whereby actors that were in no way involved in fisheries began to trade on the newly created market, despite the attempt at imposing regulations to rule out the rise of such ‘absentee owners’. In the most extreme example, recently documented by the Danish Public Broadcasting service, the owner of a 5.5 meter long boat owned quota to the value of over USD 11 million. Similar financialisation processes were also offset in Iceland (Benediktsson & Karlsdóttir 2011), where the speculation in the fisheries sector played a key role in the financial meltdown. Also here, the setup was very explicitly aimed at providing new circuits for capital by commodifying and marketising the fishery. As one of the ideologues behind the reform in Iceland explained: “We activated capital that was dead before. ... The fish stocks did not have a price tag, they were non-transferable and could not be used as collateral – non-tradable. Then the quotas are allocated, which creates capital. ... Here in Iceland, capital was handed over to private owners, and then it became alive.” (quoted in Benediktsson & Karlsdóttir 2011, 231)

In their review of the socio-ecological experiences of ITQ policies from across the world, Longo et al. (2015), conclude that the commodification has severe negative social consequences that privilege powerful market actors, whereas small-scale actors, local knowledge and traditional systems and practices lose out. From an ecological perspective, market-based solutions are doubtful at best. Thus, as they write, the resulting “production systems that focus narrowly and intensely on economic gain and capital accumulation seek growth of capital first and foremost, and tend to subordinate ecological and social costs.” (2015, 61)

These experiences are a far cry away from the celebratory accounts of such fishery reforms offered by proponents that – with reference to amongst others Danish experiences – claim they lead to “reversing overfishing, reviving coastal communities and bringing the oceans back to life” (Costello et al. 2015, 5). Nonetheless, through programs like the CFI, these silver-bullet solutions are being pushed forward globally.

Blue Carbon and valuing nature

“Blue carbon advocates like myself are not selling nature, but rather commodifying an ecosystem service, just as we do with other ecosystem services. People find value in the environment through its use, whether it be fish production, tourism and recreation, or otherwise. Blue carbon is no different in this respect.”

Anonymised response to critique of Blue Carbon from an employee in conservation organisation

Blue Carbon is still a policy solution ‘in the making’, this section therefore shows how environmental NGOs, policy-makers and natural scientists are working feverishly to commodify the ecosystem service provided by blue carbon and draws on critical work on similar processes on land to discuss the consequences.

Blue Carbon refers to CO₂ stored in coastal ecosystems, notably, mangroves, tidal marshes and seagrass meadows. The concept was first introduced by the FAO and a number of other actors in 2009 in a report titled ‘Blue Carbon: the role of healthy oceans in binding carbon’. In line with the Ecosystems Services Framework’s approach to nature-society relations, the report stresses how the coastal ecosystems through their ability to capture and store carbon provide a major ‘service’ in the fight against climate change. This service, the report argues, make coastal ecosystems a key tool to mitigate global greenhouse gas emissions. While similar mitigating abilities of rainforests and other land-based resources has been recognized for some time, this is still not the case for coastal ecosystems. Consequently, the report makes the case for protecting and revitalizing coastal ecosystems by documenting their ability to absorb and store carbon, argue for the need to value this service appropriately and to create mechanisms to allow for trade in blue carbon. In tune with the logic in the

already existing REDD+ mechanisms, a prerequisite for trading is putting a monetary value on coastal ecosystems. Blue carbon projects therefore aim to value these areas based on how much carbon they can capture and store and open them up for investment that - it is assumed - will ensure protection. This will in turn give the investor (e.g. governments, transnational corporations etc.) an amount of carbon credits corresponding to the stored and expected capture of carbon, which in theory 'offsets' carbon emissions elsewhere. These carbon credits would ideally be traded through carbon markets in the future. However, blue carbon projects do not necessarily involve markets – they can also take the form of payment through tourist-fees etc. In any case, proponents stress that Blue Carbon Projects should involve 'win-win-win' mitigation strategies where the investment to protect the area also "promotes business, jobs and coastal development opportunities." (Nelleman et al. 2009, 69) At its core then, Blue Carbon follows the logic of market-based environmentalism and is basically aimed at using the existing mechanisms concerning Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) and carbon trading to include marine and coastal ecosystems. Indeed, as proponents themselves have framed it, blue carbon aims to be: "the ocean equivalent of REDD" (FAO 2009).

As Blue Carbon proponents lament, however, this 'sink' "has not yet been recognized in the global protocols and carbon trading schemes." (Nelleman et al. 2009, 7) This remains so to this day and consequently; a myriad of studies that document it as a 'sink' are being produced. This is being pushed forward by many different actors, and has become one aspect of a broader push for valuation of ocean resources.

The foremost example of this valuation process came from the WWF in 2015 with its 'Reviving the Ocean Economy' report. In the preface to the report, the Director General of WWF International, Marco Lambertini, sets the frame by stressing how the main reason for the continuing destruction of marine and coastal ecosystems is that "Policymakers and corporate executives have not had a mechanism to account for the real costs of exploiting ocean resources." (Hoegh-Guldberg 2015, 5) Consequently, the report seeks to make the 'economic case' for action to decision-makers, based on identifying the many services provided: direct outputs from the oceans (fisheries and aquaculture), the services enabled (tourism, education, trade and transportation) and adjacent benefits (carbon sequestration, biotechnology). In total it is estimated that this "asset base" of the ocean is worth "at least USD 24 trillion." Moving on to the role played by mangroves, notably in terms of their role in storing carbon, the report argues that they provide ecosystem services worth up to USD 57,000 per hectare – herein a variety of other goods and services including fisheries.

In tune with how these types of reports according to Robertson (2006, 373) "function as instruments of translation between science, policy and economics" throughout the report, the decline of marine species, habitats and biodiversity are all framed in terms of an erosion of 'principal capital' – drawing on an analogy of the ocean as a 'shared wealth fund'. Later on, it is explained how the ocean economy is currently made up of 'underperforming assets' – hence leading to a global ocean economy in decline. Consequently, the report calls for the need to 'push the reset button', through a series of actions, including an increased effort at further and more precise valuation of the services provided by the ocean economy: "It is important that we move to proper accounting of the value of ocean goods and services, and integrate those costs and values into economic systems and decision-making. Only then can decisions be made that are based on the true economic ramifications." (Hoegh-Guldberg 2015, 46)

The WWF-report is however, just the latest in a series of attempts at valuation and creating the mechanisms for trade with these new commodities. In 2010, Forest Trends and the Katoomba Group put out a report specifically targeted at getting PES-like projects started in Marine and Coastal Ecosystems, with the first step being the identification of marine ecosystem services and 'emerging markets'. Crucially, this draws on the above described creation of market-based mechanisms in fisheries through ITQ-systems as a blue print for moving forward in the marketization of other maritime ecosystem services. As the report notes optimistically in the preface: "The expansion of markets and market-like mechanisms to the marine and coastal realm has generated excitement among conservationists, government authorities, and the private sector alike." (2010, iv)

Thus, the current push for valuation of the specific service of blue carbon needs to be seen in the light of this broader push for valuation and commodification. One of the core forums pushing this valuation and thus, Blue Carbon as a policy solution more generally, is the so-called Blue Carbon Initiative, consisting of a coalition of Conservation International, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and UNESCO's International Oceanographic Commission. The initiative is divided into a science and a policy working group. In light of the problems with getting Blue Carbon integrated into global protocols and carbon trading schemes, the science group works on "synthesiz[ing] current and emerging blue carbon research and provide the robust scientific basis for coastal blue carbon conservation, management and assessment." On the initiative's website, tons of such blue carbon research is made available and compiled in more reader-friendly reports and based on this work then, one of the focal areas for the policy working group is to integrate blue carbon activities into existing voluntary carbon markets as a mechanism for climate change mitigation (Herr et al. 2012).

In this manner, environmental NGOs, international institutions and consultancy firms have been drawn together in the attempt to commodify marine and coastal ecosystems and facilitate the establishment of new markets. This follows the reasoning behind market-based environmentalism where the main obstacle to efficient conservation is that not all aspects of nature have been sufficiently commodified and drawn into market relations (Igoe & Brockington 2007). From this perspective, environmental degradation and the climate crisis more broadly is seen as a market failure (McAfee 2012). From this perspective, the only way forward is a deepening of market relations, facilitated through evermore and new modes of valuation. This is coupled with mechanisms that ensure that the identified value of the ecosystem services are commensurable in order to bring about smooth market exchanges and hence, "economically efficient means of mitigating climate change and conserving biological diversity without curtailing economic growth." (McAfee 2015, n.p.) Furthermore, in an attempt to draw in new funding opportunities for these types of conservation and restoration projects, new mechanisms established explicitly to accommodate the logic of finance capital are being created. As WWF remarks on on-going work to establish such mechanisms, they have "the potential to generate profits exceeding the original investment." (Hoegh-Guldberg 2015, 44)

Efficient and win-win-win?

Kathleen McAfee (2012, 2015) has put forward a critique of this market-based approach to conservation, arguing that contrary to the claims of efficiency and win-win-win outcomes they fail both on ecological as well as social terms.

From an ecological perspective, she argues that as they are based on the logic of Payment for Ecosystem Services, i.e. paying resource-users to forego profit from activities seen as destructive, they will by necessity never tackle the large-scale drivers of environmental destruction, because of the underlying economic efficiency logic of getting as much conservation benefit per dollar. This means that the focus for PES-projects will always be on 'buying out' small- or medium-scale users, while the truly destructive large-scale projects are not targeted, as the buying out of these actors (e.g. transnational logging companies) would be too expensive (McAfee 2012). For the moment, no critical academic research of Blue Carbon exist⁴. In a recent 'global study', Wylie et al. (2016) give an overview of a few selected Blue Carbon projects, 2 of which cover already implemented projects in Kenya and India. In the Kenyan case, which concerns restoration and reforestation of mangroves in Gazi Bay, the 'driver' targeted is deforestation amounting from individuals cutting down mangroves in order to attain wood for building materials. For the Indian case, a driver is not clearly identified, but reasons for destruction of mangroves include sea-level rise due to climate change as well as population growth and prawn harvesting. Thus, the project attains carbon credits through restoration and planting of new mangroves, thereby creating future carbon offsets (Wylie et al. 2016). Furthermore, as clarified by a recent report by a range of environmental NGOs on how to support Blue Carbon Projects through financial mechanisms (Herr et al. 2015), it is stressed that when using Voluntary Carbon Markets, as is

⁴ Though see Barbesgaard 2016 for an attempt at starting a critical debate on the issue.

a key goal for the Blue Carbon Initiative, considerations around opportunity costs will dominate and be decisive in terms of which types of projects can be initiated, automatically directing investments towards projects that can be achieved at the lowest costs. Thus, the critique put forward by McAfee of how, “market efficiency reasoning would restrict smallholder and communal land and forest use while allowing more profitable, more destructive activities to continue” (McAfee 2012, 124) seems to be fitting also for Blue Carbon Projects. As the drivers of coastal ecosystem destruction identified by the Blue Carbon Initiative include “aquaculture, agriculture, mangrove forest exploitation, terrestrial and marine sources of pollution and industrial and urban coastal development”, the question is how ‘efficient’ these projects can be in countering destruction of coastal ecosystems, if they never target the large-scale variant of these activities?

From a social perspective, McAfee points out how the PES-projects’ lack of understanding of broader power issues, not least resource control and access, inevitably lead to further entrenching of these inequities as the projects hit the ground and result in reworking of socio-natural relations. This is especially so, in cases where intended recipients of payments do not have the appropriate property rights, as these then must be created in order for PES-projects to work. Although such processes may initially be about securing the right of the poor, as mentioned in section 2, this privatization opens up for many other forms of appropriation – including through the market. Furthermore, as the green-grabbing literature has shown, if this is achieved and the payments start flowing, “the distribution of value is highly skewed, with local beneficiaries receiving often vanishingly small benefits from newly commoditized, traded nature” (Fairhead et al. 2012, 247) Finally, even if local communities do not directly lose access to the resource, the PES-projects still impact hugely on control of the resource, in tune with how what is defined as conservation becomes defined not by local users, but by the PES-project implementers in order to live up to VCS-definitions and international requirements of what constitutes conservation. The underlying assumption here is that current resource-users do not know the true value of the resources and/or how to best take care of them, instead, as Igoe & Brockington put it, “According to the dominant perception, their hope lies in being brought out of nature and into the market so that they can return to nature as competent conservationists.” (2007, 442)

The lack of awareness of the broader social relations that the projects impact on is clear in Wylie et al.’s review of existing Blue Carbon projects, which is based on the implementing organisations’ own evaluations and reports. In both projects in Kenya and India, local communities have apparently benefitted from alternative livelihoods e.g. beekeeping, eco-tourism or direct payment for planting of mangroves (Wylie et al. 2016) with no considerations of prior resource control and access etc. In a project in Gulf of Nicoya, Costa Rica highlighted by Conservation International on its website: “[The Blue Carbon Project] includes education for the community, including through local schools, about the importance of healthy mangroves for climate adaptation and reducing carbon emissions.” In this manner, the communities can be taught about how the true value of mangroves is their role in fulfilling international targets and goals in UNFCCC-processes. Finally, Beymer-Farris & Basset (2012) have done work on a REDD+ project in Tanzania on mangrove forests. Here they show how aside from all of the above mentioned appropriation dynamics, the entire ‘environmental narrative’ constructed by PES-proponents, in this case WWF, that legitimate interventions with reference to environmental destruction and change arising from current users ‘invading’ and ‘destroying’ otherwise pristine mangrove areas has no basis in the actual environmental history in the area. While this will obviously vary across contexts, the narratives in Blue Carbon projects of current users being unaware of how nature should ideally be treated represents a similar ahistorical approach to complex socio-natural relations.

4 Blue growth as ocean grabbing?

What unites the above two aspects of Blue Growth is how the crisis in ocean health – fishing stocks and coastal ecosystems specifically – is driving a massive push for the implementation of market-based mechanisms as a cure-all to this crisis. Based on the neoclassical reasoning that the main crux against effectively conserving ocean resources is a lack of commodification and valuation, small-scale

actors stand to face increasing processes of accumulation by dispossession as this reasoning is translated into policy.

Where this enclosure process may have historically been driven mainly by states, the different ‘blue growth’ initiatives are based on a principle of actively bringing in the private sector through policies involving outright privatization, public-private partnerships, financialisation etc. In this process, the sole role of states is to create the appropriate enabling environment and give private sector actors a much more direct control over resources. As rather wide 4 components in the BGI’s definition of the Blue Economy suggest, the breadth of private sector actors with profit interests at stake are legion (actors in e.g. aquaculture, energy, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, tourism etc.). To the extent that actors from all of these different sectors become increasingly involved in the governance of maritime & coastal resources, where does this leave the many millions of fisher peoples across the world that currently rely on these resources for their livelihood? The following section discusses this struggle over the governance of the ocean’s resources and explains how the policy development surrounding the blue economy is increasingly driven by ‘coalitions of the willing’ – not necessarily including states. Before that, a brief introduction on the rise of multistakeholder’ism more generally, taking the World Economic Forum’s Global Redesign Initiative as a symptomatic case.

The rise of multistakeholder governance

“The sovereign state has become obsolete ... [we need] a global issue alliance.”
— Klaus Schwab, *Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, 1999*⁵

In 2009, the World Economic Forum (WEF) set out on an ambitious project to formulate a new system of global governance. After 18 months where the WEF had convened over 40 ‘Global Agenda Councils’ consisting of people from the corporate, academic, government, entertainment, religious civil society and academic worlds, a 600 page report covering everything from ocean governance, to chronic diseases and systemic financial risk was released (Gleckman 2016). Fittingly named the Global Redesign Initiative, the report set out a completely new approach to global issues, where the process of solving these was no longer to be tackled or solved by nation-states, but instead through global partnerships and alliances surrounding specific issues.

This approach of bringing in more actors into global governance processes was not new in itself. As detailed by Sogge (2014), a broad range of actors have been consulted historically in the traditional UN-based multilateral system. However, especially since the Earth Summit in Rio 1992, a shift has been taking place, whereby these diverse actors are not just consulted but actively take part in the ‘governance’. Thus, the Agenda 21 adopted at the first Rio summit states: “Governments, business and industry, including transnational corporations, should strengthen partnerships to implement the principles and criteria for sustainable development.” (quoted in Sogge 2014, 3) Two years later in 1994, the UNDP endorsed Public-Private Partnerships as a mechanism for provisioning of urban water, waste management, public transportation and energy. And from then on, the partnership between the UN and the private sector was gradually strengthened (which Kofi Annan announced in 1997 would be one of his priorities as secretary-general). In terms of the UN-system, this culminated with the approval of Resolution 66/223 ‘Towards global partnerships’ in 2011 by the General Assembly that confirms the need for private sector involvement, stresses the necessity of voluntary partnerships and that states do not “impos[e] undue rigidity in partnership agreements” (quoted in Sogge 2014, 3).

In this light, the GRI is but the latest step in a gradual process of increasing influence of non-state actors in global governance processes. The new thing is the massive scale of these proposals – as mentioned covering literally all areas of society – and the fact that these actors no longer merely play a consultative role in the multilateral process but instead propose to create a new system of multi-stakeholder *governance* totally de-coupled from existing multilateral fora. As pointed out by

⁵ <http://www.forbes.com/global/1999/1115/0223108a.html>

Gleckman of University of Massachusetts as part of an ongoing research project on the GRI, “what is ingenious and disturbing is that the WEF multi-stakeholder governance proposal does not require approval or disapproval by any intergovernmental body. Absent any intergovernmental action the informal transition to multi-stakeholder governance as a partial replacement of multilateralism can just happen.” (Gleckman 2016, 92) This shift raises important questions about who does what, who is accountable to whom and who has the responsibility for solving pressing issues? Where the multilateral UN-system provided at least some sort of balance and transparency in these questions they remain elusive in the vision proposed by the GRI.

Multistakeholder’ism in Ocean Governance

“The oceans are largely a common pool resource, and the lack of sole ownership has led to a global-scale tragedy of the commons.”

— *Global Agenda Council on Ocean Governance 2009, 499*

The rise of the Blue Growth agenda with all its underlying assumptions as well as the market-based solutions deemed conducive to it, is symptomatic of the tendency towards multistakeholder’ism. As FAO boasts in one of its recent reports sketching out the ‘history’ of its BGI that it was a key part of the ‘high-level forum’ the Global Action Summit in The Hague, Netherlands held in 2014. Similar to the stream of meetings held in 2015 referred to in the introduction, this forum brought together government representatives, private sector interests and international environmental organisations from over 80 countries with some 600 registered participants. Among these 600 participants, very few of them had a divergent opinion to the dominating frame of ‘blue growth’. For the ones that did, herein the General Secretary of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), Naseegh Jaffer, it was impossible to counter the celebratory approach to market-based solutions (p.c. 19.01.2016) and the consequent translation into policy following this summit. Both widespread reform of fisheries policies as well as the expansion of Blue Carbon figured prominently during the summit.

One month after the summit was held, the FAO, the World Bank, WWF, Conservation International, UNDF and UNEP began initial discussion on the content and format for the CFI. The subsequent process of developing the CFI has been deplored by WFFP for being a top-down process developed by an “exclusive set of people” within these six institutions and organisations with no real inclusion of representatives of small-scale fisher peoples in the development of the program. The degree of inclusion in the implementation phase in the individual countries is yet to be seen, but as the WFFP note, in response to an invitation to become part of the CFI’s steering committee: “Accepting the invitation where the content of the CFI is already clearly defined would mean legitimizing the RBF-policies [privatization] that we have spent years fighting against.” (2015a) Similarly, it is noteworthy how the advent of Blue Carbon was driven by pretty much the same set of factors, again with no real inclusion of representatives of the affected peoples. As Gleckman explains, this is key to the new multistakeholder governance processes, where “categories of stakeholders that are not as cooperative with the sponsors and those categories that will be negatively affected by the likely outcome of the MSG are generally excluded from the start of the process.” (Gleckman 2016, 99) Furthermore, in terms of the current push for Blue Carbon and the many different alliances pushing this forth (e.g. Blue Carbon Initiative, see Barbesgaard 2016 for more), they are specifically working around the existing multilateral framework as established through the UNFCCC-process, as the proposal to include Blue Carbon formally in the UNFCCC was blocked by Bolivia and Venezuela back in 2011 (Barbesgaard 2016).

These shifts at global level have real material consequences on the ground, when the solutions peddled at global scale filter down to national scale. A collaborative project between WFFP and a group of scholar activists have framed the resulting shifts in resource control and access under the rubric of ‘ocean grabbing’ defined as: “the capturing of control by powerful economic actors of crucial decision-making ... including the power to decide how and for what purposes marine resources are used, conserved and managed. As a result, these powerful actors whose main concern is making profit

are steadily gaining control of both the fisheries' resources and the benefits of their use." (TNI 2014, 3)

In response to such processes, WFFP and allies contend that international tools in the multilateral framework that hold what they call 'real solutions' to the crisis in maritime and coastal ecosystems already exist, namely the Voluntary guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of national food security as well as the Voluntary guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries. In contrast to the Blue Growth solutions, these were developed through what the FAO Director-General called a "bottom-up participatory development process". Also in contrast to the different multistakeholder governance processes arising these guidelines are specifically addressed to and the responsibility of states. When advocating for these guidelines then, the WFFP address themselves towards the states as rights-holders, through this claiming more legitimacy than the 'stakeholders' (involving the private sector, environmental NGOs and so on) pushing what WFFP and allies see as 'false solutions'. As they put it, in a recent statement denouncing Blue Carbon: "Instead of these corporate-friendly false solutions, we, the small-scale fishers, together with other small-scale food producers, have the socially and ecologically just visions and solutions to climate change. Our indigenous traditional knowledge and culture is an entire way of life that is about sustaining communities and nature, not about profit." (WFFP 2015b)

With the increasing talk of the ocean as a new frontier – these social struggles over control and access to its resources are likely to intensify.

5 Future research

This paper has looked into how under the rubric of blue growth an extensive push for commodification and marketization of maritime and coastal resources is unfolding. It has done so by sketching out some of the global policy processes unfolding and held the claims made at this level against experiences on-the-ground with such projects as uncovered in existing critical work in the field of agrarian political economy. However, there is a huge need for critical research to look into the "the complexities of empirical contexts" (Fairhead et al. 2012, 241) arising from policies related to the blue growth and the consequent issues facing small-scale fisher folk. Despite Blue Growth proponents' general claims of 'pro-poor', 'benefit-sharing' and 'win-win' opportunities of these schemes, the winners and losers are determined at the local level (Benjaminsen & Bryceson 2012) and hence, the overarching claims by the proponents need to be countered by research at this level.

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