The Social Construction of the Ocean

The author presents a history of the uses, regulations, and representations of the world-ocean, from approximately 1450 until the present. This history is told through a “territorial political economy” lens, borrowing from world-systems theory, economic-geographic studies of the spatiality of capitalism, political-geographic work on the history of territoriality, and post-structural work on social conflict in the production of space. Just as the modern era has been characterized by a dynamic and contested spatiality on land, so has it been characterized by a conflicting set of spatial functions and priorities at sea. Evidence is marshaled from legal texts, literary and artistic creations, cartographic representations, advertisements, commercial and military history, and policy debates. The book concludes by considering how lessons learned from the history of the ocean may be applied to emerging spaces, such as cyberspace, where there is a similarly problematic “fit” between social processes and the institutions of state governance.

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It is perhaps expected that every book reflecting upon the meaning of the sea will begin with a pithy quote from Melville. As one might gather from the frequent references throughout this book, I am a greater fan of Verne. Indeed, I would like to think that Captain Nemo's continuing vacillation between stubborn independence and selfless communitarianism better reflects both my personality and the process of writing this book than does the tortured angst of Captain Ahab. Nonetheless, like Ishmael in Moby Dick, I still am not exactly certain how it was that my intellectual journey took me to the sea. I sometimes wake in the morning to find a book of maritime art or The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea by my side, not quite sure how I arrived at this point from my initial plans to study urban planning politics and development theory. I can only hope that this book is more coherent than the path by which it was conceived.

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