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Collective symbolic capital and sustainability: Governing fishing communities in a knowledge economy



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ABSTRACT

The sustainable management of shared fishery resources remains a research concern despite the theoretical advances of recent decades. In the context of globalization, governance of fisheries resources cannot be conceived aside from a general restructuring of the value chain and without taking into account the evolution of the standard of living of fishing communities. This paper argues that in knowledge-based economies, value creation is based on proper management of the friction between material and immaterial vectors associated with the activity of fisheries. The case study of the shellfish community of Carril in northwestern Spain is presented and analyzed, setting out potential labeling alternatives to empower local producers.

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1. Introduction

Academic debates on fisheries management have intensified in recent decades as a result of the failure of the formulas implemented during the second half of the twentieth century to address the overexploitation of common resources [22,25,32]. Today, technological change, the increasing role of the expert systems based on natural sciences, and the globalization of markets generate highly complex and intensely changing scenarios that quickly render obsolete the different forms of governance used to avoid the 'dynamics of collapse' [31,35,40]. After the failure of traditional governance schemes based on an ontology that privileged the role of the fishers who competed individually in the exploitation of open-access common resources [9,46], alternative approaches highlight the role of ecosystems [28,47]. Thus, the Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management perspective focuses on the relations between fishing practices and marine ecosystems [21,39,52]. In turn, Local Ecological Knowledge deems fundamental to shed light on situated and local knowledge to overcome the idealization of scientific knowledge [3,29,34,47]. As a result of globalization and rapid technological changes, the Globalized Harvesting Knowledge approach underlines the key role of exogenous actors in shaping local fisheries [32].

In this context, it is useful to adopt an inherently political and phronetic approach to fisheries management, emphasizing the complex power and social relations involved in the choices, values, concerns and goals sustained by different social actors [14,22,24]. The phronetic perspective acknowledges the relevance of natural sciences in fisheries management, but considers the socio-political context of equal relevance in the attempt to reach more democratic models of fisheries management. To address this issue, the case study connects the problem of the overexploitation of fishing resources with the new challenges posed by the need of local communities to more successfully insert themselves into global value chains [15,18]. In this regard, recent works point to novel analytic frameworks that incorporate comparative studies of the strategies of value generation developed by rural communities in their search for sustainability (e.g., [36]). These works underscore the need to establish symbolic connections between consumers and producers [13].

In a knowledge economy, the differential value of local production stems from their immaterial values, which are the result of the historical evolution of common experiences, ideas and practices of production and live. This differential character of local products can become a form of collective symbolic capital that provides added value to the material processes of production. The concept of symbolic capital was developed by Bourdieu [4] to describe the immaterial and non-economic values connected to an individual or social group. Symbolic capital is historically and culturally contingent, and can be acquired, exchanged and converted into other types of capital. Harvey [12] extends the concept

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of symbolic capital to places rather than to social groups, accounting for the mechanisms through which certain marks of distinction generate collective symbolic capital attached to territories, cities or places.

From this standpoint, the creation of value is increasingly linked to the capacity of communities to manage their collective symbolic capital in ways that do not threaten the long-term sustainability of fishing resources. However, the right management of this process of value generation demands communities to develop new capabilities, since it requires the implementation of complex and dynamic strategies to manage the friction between collective material values (marine ecosystem, aquaculture plots or technical equipment) and collective immaterial values (local know-how, collective action or marketing strategies). If local communities fail to do so, the most common scenario in a neoliberal context is the capture of collective symbolic capital by exogenous actors, a situation that usually derives in the disempowerment of local communities and the gradual depletion of material resources.

These issues are explored through the case of a community of shellfish gatherers in Carril (Galicia, Spain). Here, the expropriation of the collective symbolic capital by local bourgeoisies and transnational corporations has led to the deterioration of the collective material resources. The rentier strategies implemented by different actors such as purifying companies, wholesaler traders and commercial distributors, allow them to capture increasing shares of the added value associated to the collective symbolic capital of Carril shellfish. In the attempt to offset the devaluation of their income and achieve higher yields, local aquaculturists intensify shellfish production and replace native species by foreign ones, thus threatening the long-term sustainability of the material collective resources and lowering the quality of the product.

To analyze this process, a research methodology was tailored to the particularities of the case study of Carril. The social science methodology employed combines quantitative and qualitative methods and the different analytic perspectives of an economist and an anthropologist. First, statistics on prices and productivity were elaborated and analyzed. Then, a total of ten structured interviews were carried out with key social actors in the shellfish economy of Carril including local aquaculturists, representatives of professional trade unions and the regional administration, entrepreneurs in the businesses of marketing, hatchery and purification, and biologists. Since 2012, a long-term follow up of the phenomenon in journals and official reports has been performed, analyzing the transformations in the legislative framework concerning fisheries in Carril and broadly in the region of Galicia.

2. Knowledge economy, collective symbolic capital and labeling

For Rullani [43], the value of knowledge and, extensively, of collective symbolic capital is derived from the virtuous assemblage of three drivers. First, there is a value derived from the capacities of consumers to interpret the meanings, symbols, and knowledge incorporated into material production. Second, values increase depending on the capacities of diffusion and propagation of these meanings in the social sphere. The third driver concerns the distribution of value among the different stakeholders who participate in production in one way or another. In a knowledge economy, it is equally important to understand the material processes of production and the processes whereby immaterial values or collective symbolic capital can be co-opted or expropriated by different social actors in the value chain. In this context, the governance of common material resources is closely related to the management of the collective symbolic capital that results from the reputation of local products, knowledge, and practices among end consumers.

According to the proponents of the cultural political economy [16,45], ensuring the reproduction of the social life of local communities requires combining the interest of classic political economy on issues of value, exchange, distribution, and power [17], with the main concerns of the cultural turn, including the social construction of value, knowledge, identity, and culture [7].

The processes of cultural differentiation related with local practices, knowledge, and heritage allow for the accumulation of collective symbolic capital because they provide meaning to material production. In the search for novel vectors of valorization, post-industrial capitalism incorporates these differential ways of life to capture surplus value in manifold ways through its 'cultural circuits' [48]. From a territorial vision of rural development, Ray describes this process as the emergence of a "culture economy," which "can be understood as strategies to transform local knowledge into resources available for the local territory, i.e., the recognition (or construction) and valorization of local knowledge" ([42], p. 9). This implies that the management of any material product in a post-industrial economy should focus on the "friction between the free reproducibility of knowledge and the non-reproducibility of the material" ([38], p. 296). As Pasquinelli points out, there is a "profound asymmetry between the cultural domain and the material economy: value is accumulated on the immaterial level but the profits are made on the material one" ([37], pp. 150–151). To preserve and reappropriate collective symbolic capital requires understanding that "the modern commodity is simply double, since two main dimensions can be recognized: the dimension of profit (value produced by individual work) and the dimension of rent (value produced by collective desire)" ([37], p. 139). Thus, profit is made in the vector of material production, which is subject to technical and environmental constraints, but the rent that can be extracted from the product derives from exogenous, symbolic, and dynamic qualities, whose marginal costs tend to zero.

Therefore, the situation of aquaculturist communities would probably improve with the implementation of some kind of place-based enclosure over the material common resource in combination with a greater legal ability to protect the revenues provided by collective symbolic capital, such as geographic certification programs or protected denominations of origin [20,49]. In fact, the consolidation of these distinction marks requires the existence of an institution—public, private, or common—that can monitor and punish noncompliance, and sponsor increased expertise inputs, the codification of local practices, and the transformation of local knowledge into a form of 'property' [30]. However, critics of programs of certification and labeling argue that the implementation of these strategies have paradoxically strengthened neoliberal practices and social actors [10,27,33]. These authors also question the ability of these strategies to effectively protect and preserve the collective symbolic capital of local communities [10].

As Ray points out, the strategy of enclosing the material commons to increase the chances for appropriating immaterial rents is just "one mechanism potentially available to localities" ([42], p. 15). Nonetheless, it would be necessary to adopt appropriate strategies for modulating the friction between material and immaterial vectors that would not only protect, but also strengthen and render more dynamic the management of collective symbolic capital in a context of globalization and technological change. In the field of agri-food products, it is clear how the enclosure of material resources leads to different dynamics of rent appropriation depending on how the enclosure of the material is assembled with the collective symbolic capital available at each location. Thus, there are different ways of establishing symbolic connections with historic traditions and cultural heritage, the local varieties of a specific product, environmental conditions, social activities, fairs and feasts, etc. That is, it is not enough to enclose the common material resource to ensure control over the stable rents provided by the legal security provided by a labeling

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