

***"Fishing for a New World Order:
Migrating Tuna and Labor in the 20th Century Transimperial Indo-Pacific"***

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Abstract

When it comes to the analysis of the international process of managing fish as a global common, it is most commonly examined in the framework of international legalism. Another common approach is to frame it within Cold War rhetoric, or within the framework of U.S. imperialism. In this talk I apply a transimperial approach both in terms of space and time to understand this watershed in history, bringing to light imperial legacies and decolonization processes. I look at the globalization of the Japanese tuna industry in the twentieth century as a manifestation of the territorialization of the sea through the establishment of The Law of the Sea in 1982, and so called Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of 200 miles zones as part of Nation states. Seen through the prism of Japanese tuna fisheries, the twentieth-century remapping of the planet via the territorialization of the oceans was in no way a linear process. There was no smooth progression from empires to nation-states to a globalized planet with softening borders and no national sovereignty issues at stake – as often argued in existing literature. Tracing the political ecology of tuna fisheries has shown that humans had to follow the non-human resources they sought to extract and that the lines drawn on maps by UNCLOS could not prevent migratory species from constantly undermining the international Law of the Sea. During the first half of the twentieth century, a transimperial framework was key to determining what was considered authoritative knowledge when it came to extracting marine resources. Although the decolonization process of the century's second half created new nation-states with new ocean territories and new forms of resource nationalism, practices such as fisheries development aid, joint ventures, and technology transfers show that this was counterbalanced by enduring imperial notions and issues relating to volumetric sovereignty.