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Richard Flanagan (2021) *Toxic: The Rotting Underbelly of the Tasmanian Salmon Industry*. Sydney: Penguin Random House; 224 pp., ISBN 978176104437, AUD24.99

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Like a good thriller, Richard Flanagan's *Toxic* (2021) is set on a faraway scenic island called Tasmania, south of mainland Australia. Everyday life appears to be idyllic, even peaceful and harmonious, where 'everyone felt it was one of those special, magical places, . . . [where] Penguins nested under our shack' (pp. 3–4). And there are the usual ingredients an engaging thriller needs to be a page-turner. There are decent local residents, farmers, artists and small business owners who want to live and let live; communities and scientists who argue and research to improve and protect their local way of life, their environment and livelihoods. The author is one of them. And there is the dubious, semi-corrupt, illegal, in short, toxic corporate network of 'bullying, grossly inadequate regulation and questionable political influence' (p. 10) which the subtitle of the book refers to as *The Rotting Underbelly of the Tasmanian Salmon Industry*.

With that said, the arc of suspense is drawn. Our story spans a good 30 years and several 'murders' quietly occur for which – mysteriously? – no one is responsible. The victims? Nature in the form of Tasmania's clean, green and healthy environment; civil society, encompassing the political rights of ordinary citizens and their trust in politics. The culprits? Governments that put corporate profits before public interests, and capitalist greed that comes in the shape of an 'industry parading as clean, green and healthy'; an industry bent on 'the exact opposite' – namely, 'environmental destruction . . . in service of producing a highly artificial but profitable protein' (p. 10): salmon!

What Flanagan's *Toxic* reveals is the paradoxical nature of global supply chain capitalism. These paradoxes are the result of 30 or more years of neoliberal politics, of gradual deregulation and privatisation. How the Tasmanian salmon industry operates is symptomatic of global supply chain capitalism and how it not only reaches but oversteps the world's social, technological and certainly ecological limits. *Toxic* is about the local manifestations of those global capitalist paradoxes.

A paradox can be described as a situation where the very attempt to realise a goal creates conditions that prevent us from ever reaching it. The objective is to improve a situation, maximise an outcome, minimise costs or increase a benefit, leading to an opposite result: namely, its depreciation and deterioration. Flanagan points out the fundamental paradox on which the Tasmanian salmon industry rests: 'a fish that cannot live in our waters lives in our waters' (p. 187).

Ignoring the fact that salmon cannot naturally survive in the Tasmanian environment, the Tasmanian government decided in 1985 to establish Saltas (Salmon Enterprise of Tasmania) as Tasmania's first salmon-producing company (p. 148). Saltas became Tassal, a company which now majority owns Saltas together with Huon Aquaculture and Petuna, the three main salmon producers in Tasmania. With this move, the Tasmanian government used its political power to sustain an economic project that is ecologically unsustainable. This political creation of a market where natural resources become mere commodities that would – over the course of 30-odd years – be increasingly beyond public control and environmentally unsustainable is a prime example of 'neoliberalisation' (see e.g. Harvey, 2005: 70): public and democratic processes are weakened and subvert themselves to a point where senior bureaucrats feel helpless when faced by corporate power. Flanagan defines the issue when he writes that 'rule breakers had through an incomprehensible metamorphosis become rule makers, and the new rules seemed made not by parliament but by a profit-and-loss ledger' (p. 5). He then goes on to make this incomprehensible metamorphosis comprehensible.

When the public complained about the bad taste and smell of Hobart's drinking water, the Environment Protection Authority spent millions of the public's money while neither the political nor the corporate players were held accountable for the damage caused to the environment. Similarly, when the Marine Farming Planning Review Panel for the first time in its history 'refused a plan by Tassal for the expansion of a fish farm' (p. 25), a recalcitrant panelist was simply replaced. Soon after, the panel's powers to approve fish farms were simply transferred to the minister. From here on, 'the panel existed merely as window dressing' (p. 40). This is reminiscent of what Levitsky and Ziblatt describe as the incremental erosion of democracy by government: 'Each individual step seems minor . . . Indeed, government moves to subvert democracy frequently enjoy a veneer of legality: They are approved by parliament' (2018: 77). Beyond the hollowing out of public and political processes, ordinary citizens are threatened, bullied, intimidated and silenced with money so they would not speak out against the salmon industry. 'The real story', Flanagan concludes, 'is one of a failure of governance' (pp. 151–52).

As a food product, salmon is perceived as a natural and healthy source of omega-3 oils owing to a diet of wild fish. To keep this nutritional value as a selling point when kept in captivity, 'Tasmanian salmon . . . were largely fed on anchovy-based fishmeal and fish oil imported from Peru' (p. 46). To produce more salmon in Tasmania, the mass production of anchovy-based fishmeal in Peru leaves Peruvians in poverty, their children sick and their environment badly damaged. Better food here, depleted life chances there. The branding of Tasmanian salmon as local, clean, green and healthy is part of the dirty ethics of a global supply chain. How paradoxical and unsustainable that chain is becomes clear from Tassal's claim that 'it uses 1.73 kilograms of wild fish to make one kilogram of salmon. In other words, a lot more protein to produce a lot less' (p. 47). Moreover, to import the fish feed, ethoxyquin, a banned food additive, is mixed in. The result is 'unpalatable grey flesh that industrially produced salmon has' and which needs to be fed 'a synthetic red dye' to make it 'look like wild fish' (pp. 64–65), not to forget the 'abuse of antibiotics' to make the salmon survive deteriorating conditions in which it naturally could not survive. But, 'the only problem the Tasmanian salmon industry had with fishmeal was cost' (p. 52). To reduce costs, Tasmanian salmon was

increasingly fed ‘remnants of slaughtered cows, sheep and chickens’ and ‘high-protein vegetable matter such as lupin, wheat, canola and soy’ (p. 53), all of which are sourced through equally paradoxical global supply chains, resulting in incongruous yet interrelated issues of extreme economic, social and environmental precarities (p. 56). All the while, the consumer of salmon is not told that with those changes in the salmon’s diet, ‘the level of omega 3 oils in salmon decrease by between 30 to 50 per cent’ (p. 62). This is ecological and social unsustainability par excellence and the multitude of paradoxical issues involved in every link in the global supply chain is staggering.

It is a defining feature of industrialisation to turn small-scale production into large-scale mass production. The mass production of food, particularly when it involves animals, can be exceptionally cruel. Amongst the cruelties involved in the industrial production of salmon are processes like ‘bathing’ on giant factory ships where ‘salmon would be mechanically vacuumed from their nets into bladders, flushed there in a soup of freshwater that killed the saltwater amoeba, vacuumed up again and pumped back into their saltwater pens’ (p. 103). Similarly, a process called ‘venturation’ is used to oxygenate the increasingly warmer water in which salmon cannot survive. There is the example of seals and white pointer sharks which are kept away from the salmon with so-called ‘seal crackers’ or seal bombs which literally blow up seals and also affect other wildlife such as dolphins and whales (p. 92). All of this, so it is sometimes argued, is the price we have to pay for the creation of jobs. But just like the clean, green and healthy image of the Tasmanian salmon industry, the idea of job growth is a myth as Flanagan demonstrates. As with anything that is seriously capitalist, the equation has to be: ‘Many more fish equal more profit. But it will mean very few new jobs’ (p. 157). Just like fishmeal, jobs are a cost that is to be minimised.

In the next five to 15 years, according to Flanagan, the salmon industry as we know it will collapse. Its future lies in land-based salmon farming (2021: 186). And a land-based salmon industry is already emerging in other countries, and Australian salmon producers are also working on it. There is no doubt many benefits in this approach. The destruction of the marine ecosystems the biggest issue – can be drastically slowed down; more renewable energy can be used; production can be moved closer to the major, often urban, markets reducing the need for transportation. Altogether the carbon footprint can be reduced and salmon can be marketed as ‘local, greener and cleaner, more sustainable and more environmentally friendly’ (Flanagan 2021:183). And yet, Flanagan’s outlook seems a little simplistic since the root causes remain untouched. A land-based salmon industry, just like any other profit seeking industry, will operate on the principles of mass production and economic growth where more fish means more money. It will only be a matter of time until land-based salmon production will face questions of sustainability.

Toxic explains the paradox of how a fish that cannot live in our waters lives in our waters. It reveals what social, political and ecological damage is caused by the pursuit of profit, the complete disregard for the environment and the exploitation of animals and humans alike. But the book is not just about the issues caused by a local salmon industry. If salmon is the fish that lives in waters in which it cannot live, then capitalism is the toxic system in which human life as we know it can ultimately not be sustained unless we manage to decouple the relentless pursuit of economic growth from the unsustainable use of resources. Long before Flanagan, Marx highlighted the very issue at hand:

The 'essence' of the freshwater fish is the water of a river. But the latter ceases to be the 'essence' of the fish and is no longer a suitable medium of existence as soon as the river is made to serve industry, as soon as it is polluted by dyes and other waste products and navigated by steamboats, or as soon as its water is diverted into canals where simple drainage can deprive the fish of its medium of existence. (Marx, 1978: 168)

Flanagan's 'thriller' is not fiction. It is real, fact-based, and its plot is unfolding right now. This eye-opening piece of investigative journalism gets both better and worse as the reader begins to realise they are the co-authors of the story's as-yet-unwritten ending. The food on our plates is no longer a mere choice about what we eat, but about us as crucial links as consumers in a toxic, paradoxical and capitalist global supply chain. There is nowhere to hide from the unsustainability of this and many more industries unless we want to corroborate Marx's belief that capitalism does produce its own grave-diggers (1978: 483).

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