



Review Essay

Global (Mis)Governance of Regional Water Relations

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The Middle East Water Question: Hydropolitics and the Global Economy

J.A. Allan

I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2002. 382 pp.

\$45.00 hardcover, \$24.50 softcover

Reflections on Water: New Approaches to Transboundary Conflicts and Cooperation

J. Blatter and H. Ingram (eds.)

The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002. 358 pp.

\$67.00 hardcover, \$26.95 softcover

State Making and Environmental Cooperation: Linking Domestic and International Politics in Central Asia

E. Weinthal

The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002. 274 pp.

\$60.00 hardcover, \$25.00 softcover

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Introduction

The books reviewed in this essay address whether transboundary water relations are more explicable as material or social phenomena. As the volume edited by Joachim Blatter and Helen Ingram inquires, ‘How much are natural or ecological imperatives...based on objective realities and how much are they creations of the human imagination’ (p. 15)? These authors and J.A. Allan favor a constructivist approach, which locates the meaning of material resources within ideational structures (re)produced by discursive and behavioral practices.¹ Conversely, Erika Weinthal focuses more on how the materiality of Central Asia’s transboundary water resources shapes prospects for their successful management. Specifically, she holds that, in conjunction with the riparians’ heterogeneous interests and asymmetrical power, the ‘common pool resource’ (CPR) characteristics of these waters (i.e., ‘non-excludability’ of users from the benefits of consumption and ‘subtractability’ of these benefits) impede cooperation.² These approaches are not strictly dichotomous: Weinthal addresses discursive elements of conflict and cooperation, while the others account for material motivations. Moreover, all three works examine in different ways how the interplay between global forces



(e.g., multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations, and even markets) and regional actors affects the tenor of transboundary water relations.

Whether because of differential interests and power (Weinthal) or because underdevelopment restricts political space for reallocating water to sustainable uses (Allan), regional actors may not cooperate to halt environmental damage. Yet, outside intervention should identify the material and discursive underpinnings of conflict in order not to aggravate it. Cooperative environmental action may require not only side payments, but also the strengthening of 'pre-modern' and 'post-modern' meanings (Blatter and Ingram). Nonetheless, prevalence of these understandings can entrench value-oriented conflicts and 'post-modern' perspectives are often alien to regional powerbrokers and other stakeholders with conventionally 'modern' attitudes toward water use. After elucidating the disparate political meanings of transboundary water issues, this review details how the authors regard the tenability of modernist modes of cooperation. It then assesses their views on the efficacy of outside intervention in various regional water settings as well as how the works themselves intervene in the governance of water relations. The conclusion provides a direct comparison of these works and briefly evaluates their fit within the literature.

Water's Disparate Political Meanings

Social constructivist thinking pervades several of the works under review. Blatter and Ingram's case studies draw on network analysis, discourse analysis, ethnographic analysis, and social ecology to spell out why '[a]n understanding of the meaning(s) of water held by the involved actors has to be the first step in any investigation of cross-border water politics' (p. 6). Against 'modern' meanings of water as economic property, product and commodity, 'pre-' and 'post-modern' meanings embed it within 'essentialistic' security and identity concerns, emphasize natural and socially constructed limits to water's instrumental control, and imbue it with ecologically and culturally specific values (Chapter 2). Linking 'pre-modern', 'modern', and 'post-modern' ontologies to respective realist, liberal, and constructivist strands of International Relations theory, this book valorizes the latter approach. It does so not by conflating shared ideas with cooperation,³ but, as the Perry, Blatter, and Ingram chapter notes, by demonstrating that plural meanings co-exist, thereby undermining any progressivist 'claim that meanings of water are evolving...from pre- to post-modern' (p. 322).

Disfigurement of 'pre-modern' water-use cultures, environmental degradation, and water disputes tempt disapprobation of modernism. Cotton



monoculture, which not only supplanted traditionally variegated patterns of cropping in the Aral Sea river basins but also degraded the sea, entailed Moscow serving as monopsonist procurer and discursively generating a myth of this crop as ‘blood of life’ for Central Asia (Weinthal, 96–99). Maria Rosa García-Acevedo’s chapter in Blatter and Ingram highlights a 1905 engineering mistake that diverted the Colorado River ‘and completely reconfigured [native]...homelands’ (p. 61). Thus began US and Mexican histories of channeling streamflow to meet successive goals of agricultural expansion, national security (symbolized in US efforts to obtain an All-American Canal and Mexico’s later efforts to reduce salinity), and industrial production. David McDermott Hughes’s chapter finds that Zimbabwean tribal customs of demarcating and allocating land along curvilinear river boundaries conspired against white settlement, corporate silviculture, and government surveys. ‘If riverine demarcation thus set headmen against each other, it also frequently united [them]... against the state’ (p. 274).

The writers question whether state formation and market expansion have not corrupted ‘pre-modern’ meanings beyond the point of recovery. García-Acevedo and Hughes intimate that indigenous claims have been restored only within modernist parameters of water as (highly) circumscribed property. Weinthal’s account relates how Uzbekistan’s eco-nationalists and minority Karakalpaks drew international attention to the Aral Sea crisis, but, instead of pressing demands for reducing upstream cotton production, they chose to advocate Moscow’s top-down plans to divert water from Siberian rivers and the Caspian Sea. ‘Here, the Soviet legacy of relying on a ‘technical fix’ to transform and control nature...shaped the perceptions of nature within Central Asia’ (p. 147). In Allan’s political ecology perspective, Middle East water, abundant for traditional needs, was perceived — like Blatter and Ingram’s ‘pre-modern’ meaning of water — as a gift of nature or as a social entitlement. Yet, religious obligations to offer sustenance were construed to cover the provision of exponentially greater volumes of water for ‘economic and livelihood uses’ (p. 173). Middle Eastern societies have assumed that water, once engineered, is ‘similar in provenance [to]...water in the natural system’ (p. 277).

Modernist Conflict and Cooperation

Extant community-based meanings may even make conflict less tractable. Suggesting that essentialistic communities share beliefs in a specific conception of water, Blatter, Ingram, and Suzanne Lorton Levesque (in Blatter and Ingram) assert: ‘Neither perceived threats to national security nor fundamental value conflicts allow for “rational” solutions like side payments or package



deals when such actors are involved, as...illustrated in Joachim Blatter's analysis of water governance politics at Lake Constance' (p. 40). Blatter, who analyzes competition between constructions of water 'as a cultural specific good (by boaters, water sports enthusiasts, and the tourism industry) and as a natural specific good (by environmentalists, ornithologists, and bird watchers)' (pp. 91–92), argues that boat regulations correlate less with the pollution that boats actually emit than with shifting balances of institutional legitimacy among these contending 'advocacy coalitions'.⁴ 'Common pool resource' is thus a contested social understanding of Lake Constance water, related to certain users' ability to frame environmental issues in specific ways. While 'significant cross-border interdependence exists only in regard to...toxic pollution of the water' (p. 95), 'postmodern nature-based and nonmaterial concerns far outweighed the material problem of chemical pollution in determining the measures to be taken to address water quality problems' (p. 96).

Yet, other cases clarify the modernist ways in which the materiality of the interdependence of water uses (and users) can also mitigate conflict.⁵ García-Acevedo notes how construction of Colorado River water as 'product' baffled Mexico's early 20th century security calculus. While American ownership of irrigable Baja California land provoked resentment, it guaranteed the flow of water through the binational Alamo Canal (which originated and terminated in US territory). This led initial post-1917 Mexican regimes to fear that expelling US companies 'would mean the end of the access to water [for]...the Mexicali Valley' (p. 70). Paula Garb and John M. Whiteley's chapter in the same volume builds on this logic. Even during a violent 'identity war', Georgia and secessionist Abkhazia jointly operated and avoided attacking the Inguri River complex (containing a dam in Georgia and power plants in Abkhazia) because national securities required cooperative electricity production, suggesting a 'transboundary parallel to the cold war doctrine of mutually assured destruction' (p. 215).

Interdependence may thus be rooted in a resource's physical attributes or in 'intersubjectively' emergent understandings of resource-related issues. Nonetheless, it is not clear that the CPR analytic *per se* is always the most fruitful tool for studying the political ramifications of internationally shared natural resources. For instance, to show that the Syr Darya River is a CPR, Weinthal argues that the need to build new power plants makes it 'costly for Kyrgyzstan to use water exclusively for hydroelectricity in the winter' (p. 25). Yet, because Kyrgyzstan's power generation does diminish the water supply available for downstream irrigation, 'the benefits of water are clearly subtractable' (p. 26). This underscores that the benefits enjoyed by the various riparian states are *not* 'commonly' affected by each other's consumption.



Other passages detract from Weinthal's overall argument. How is our understanding enhanced by the statement that:

Even though it is feasible, in principle, to demarcate the boundaries of an international river basin, and even to restrict access to it and limit its flow through damming and water diversions, cooperation continues to be more unusual at the interstate level because no overarching authority or third party exists to enforce compliance? (p. 26)

The more cogent point would seem to be that cooperation is stymied *not* by a lack of clear boundaries and hydraulic exclusion mechanisms, but precisely by *intra*-basin divisions between parties who can limit streamflow and those for whom flow is consequently limited. Weinthal's empirical account implicitly clarifies that Kyrgyzstan's upstream subtraction of water is the *de facto* cause of downstream exclusion (i.e., if one is compelled to speak of usable streamflow as being accessible when downstream users need it the most).⁶

It is structural *asymmetries* of power and interest among resource users that motivate some to contrive a more mutually balanced interdependence through outside issue linkages.⁷ For Weinthal, *water* is the outside issue. The rupturing of Moscow's enforced exchange of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan fuel for Kyrgyzstan water led the downstreamers to seek hard currency for their oil and gas supplies, which in turn prompted energy-deficient Kyrgyzstan to increase its hydropower production. The 'water was released into a local depression, the Arnasai lowland, because of the winter freezing of the lower Syr Darya, and as a consequence the water did not reach the [Aral] sea' (p. 117), which also hampered Uzbekistan's ability to satisfy its farmers' demands for spring and summer irrigation water.

As such, contrived interdependence can intensify 'securitization' of water issues. Kathleen M. Sullivan's Foucaultian account (in Blatter and Ingram) of competition over salmon straddling the US–Canadian Pacific boundary region argues that, while national governments anchor their positions in a 'conservation' discourse, British Columbians invoke modernist 'equity' and 'nationalism' counter-discourses. They also back them with material leverage. Intercepting salmon from Washington State's rivers and mobilizing a flotilla to blockade an Alaskan ferry were means of balancing Alaska's upstream advantage 'in accessing the salmon stocks that British Columbians regard as essential to their livelihoods' (p. 180). But while a real war ironically muted Georgian and Abkhazian references to the Inguri complex's strategic value, peaceful US–Canadian relations freed both countries' news organs to indulge in 'salmon wars' rhetoric and then-British Columbian Premier Glen Clark to threaten to cancel the Vancouver Island land lease for a joint US–Canadian naval base, thus targeting 'an international cooperative military institution in an economic war over natural resources' (p. 171).



Allan extends this Foucaultian analysis to the issue of Middle Eastern water conflict. Criticizing the focus on 'watershed' relations, he argues that the region has covered its water shortage via the global political economy, 'the relevant 'hydrological' catchment for water deficit economies' (p. 19). To support this, he cites grain imports rising to 'an equivalent to about 20 percent of the region's total freshwater use by the late twentieth century' (p. 106). Yet, because the region's 'sanctioned discourse' suppresses media discussion of these 'virtual water' imports,⁸ their economic efficacy in compensating for real material scarcity paradoxically bolsters the 'myth of water self-sufficiency' (p. 216). This is a salient point, for this myth 'allows the familiar form of rhetorical conflict to continue' (p. 239). But a conflict that remains rhetorical also confounds realists' expectation that disputes will escalate into 'water wars', functionalist arguments that water issues will be de-linked from larger rivalries, enabling cooperation to proceed on technical terms, and international lawyers' belief that new treaties are necessary to preclude escalation to 'water wars'.

Outside Intervention in Complex Regional Water Games

While a central tension exists between stakeholder resource uses and outside efforts to curb environmental degradation, global-level intervention in transboundary water resource conflicts can perversely reinforce them. Differentiating 'reflexively modern' attitudes (i.e., that one should respond to the environmental externalities of water use by raising prices to cover the costs of these externalities) from cruder modern ones, Allan argues that, since MENA communities resist treating water as an economic resource, 'those constructing knowledge on the basis of economics or environmental theory have not...been able to achieve a prominent role in MENA discourses' (p. 313). Sustainable and cooperative development depends on institutional change that may not generate sufficient capital to address degradation, whether of the Black Sea (Garb and Whiteley and the Joseph F. DiMento chapter in Blatter and Ingram), the Gaza aquifer (Allan) or the Aral Sea (Weinthal), before it worsens. Thus, timely third-party inducements may be necessary. In DiMento's analysis, tourist revenues and fishing may hinge, as does international oil-pipeline funding (an assertion that is not substantiated), on combatting Black Sea pollution (pp. 252–253). These economic benefits could elevate the priority which littoral-state leaders involved in a 'two-level game' accord to water issues relative to stabilizing currency crises and ethnic conflicts (pp. 260–261).

Yet, markets, like easy lending, may induce 'moral hazard'. As Weinthal relates, oil, coal, gas, and cotton exports from post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan not only led Kyrgyzstan to increase hydro-



power production, undermining hydro-economic interdependence (pp. 186–189), but also reinforced the harmful effects of cotton monoculture on the Aral Sea's recovery. These export markets also freed independent governments from introducing new taxation systems, such that 'reciprocal relations necessary for democratic institutions to take root were not emerging' (p. 222), an observation with crucial implications for the ability of the central riparian actors, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, to play key roles in US-led global efforts to counter Islamist terrorism. Allan implies that 'virtual water' may eventually allow Middle Eastern political economies to devote more indigenous water to environmental uses. In the interim, however, the robust US and EU subsidies embedded even in WTO-era cereal imports undercut 'reflexively modern' advice on agricultural and water-sector reforms emanating from multilateral funding agencies to regional politicians (pp. 194–195).

As in the case of 'two-level institution building' examined by Weinthal, outside actors may have to direct economic incentives to improving state capacity for meaningful environmental cooperation at both the domestic and international levels. World Bank side payments (i.e., projects under its Aral Sea Basin Program aegis) increased upstream Turkmenistan's (Amu Darya) and Kyrgyzstan's (Syr Darya) interest in cooperating to mitigate an environmental crisis with severe downstream impacts in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (p. 157). However, 'constructing the Aral Sea problem [only] as a water negotiating set' (p. 184) failed to address the roots of the sea's crisis and even 'ossified stark upstream and downstream disparities among the Central Asian states' (p. 186). Seeking to lessen these disparities by promoting a 1998 Syr Darya compact, USAID 'constructed an alternative negotiating set that added the energy sector to the bargaining agenda while simultaneously subtracting the Amu Darya basin from the negotiations' (pp. 191–192). Yet, by 'helping new states cultivate a myth of state and nation making' (p. 204), including a discursive regional hegemony of Uzbek 'water and cotton culture', outside patronage and omission of agriculture from the negotiation agenda prolonged cotton overproduction.

These works also insert themselves into regional transboundary water relations. Criticizing its enlistment into states' sovereignty-enhancing and nation-building campaigns, Weinthal asserts that the international community 'caused the Central Asian states to miss the crucial period in a transition when a population may be responsive to radical change' (p. 221). Problematising the 'modern canard that territorial units (states) are the only units of reference in the [water] appropriation game' (p. 33), the Blatter and Ingram volume depicts the 'fluidity of water' as challenging 'the stable, steady-state logic of territorial governance of the nation-state' (p. 297). It also envisages that 'transboundary water governance...would exhibit the same...multiply differentiated institutional structures and relationships we see in domestic systems' (p. 338). The



state is de-centered, but not rendered irrelevant, as it has not left water's fluidity unchecked. In its pluralist aim to 'contribute to the management of transboundary water resources by...helping to build bridges between various meanings and understandings' (52), this volume also parallels Allan's professed aim to use social theory to 'draw attention to these parallel and unconnected Northern and Southern discourses' and thereby 'help those engaged in the separate...discourses to relate to each other' (p. 311).

Conclusion

Several points of direct comparison emerge from this survey. First, pervading all works, but more so in Allan and in Blatter and Ingram, is a 'post-modern' concern for understanding how social meanings influence the way in which users relate to shared water resources and behave towards each other. Yet, while Weinthal adopts a rationalist approach to analyzing the behavioral effects of water's material attributes, even she is duly cognizant of the discursive aspects of transboundary water relations. Moreover, like the Blatter and Ingram contributors, she eschews a sequentialist logic of 'post-modern' attitudes toward water supplanting the classical 'modern' ones that putatively eclipsed 'pre-modern' meanings. Conversely, Allan is more inclined to subscribe to an optimistic position that economic development, as it arguably did in Israel, *will* eventually promote Arab interests who can also assert 'reflexively modern' attitudes toward water use. Paralleling the Sullivan as well as Garb and Whiteley chapters of the Blatter and Ingram volume, this book also implies, however, that the belligerency of overall transboundary relations may correlate inversely with the motivation to provoke — or even broach the topic of — real wars over specific transboundary natural resources.

The subject of the impact of global forces on the dynamics of regional water relations finds Allan and Weinthal taking a position divergent from those of the Blatter and Ingram contributors. While the latter tend to focus on the ameliorative role of 'post-modern' IOs and NGOs in the sense of promoting not only inter-state cooperation but also restoration and representation of 'pre-modern' water-use interests, the former demur on applying a similar train of thought with respect to the influence of global *market* forces. While obviating material imperatives for real war, subsidized grain imports nonetheless convey signals that can have a deleterious impact on Middle Eastern actors' willingness to undertake crucial processes of economic liberalization in water-scarce regions. This delay may in turn retard corollary political developments that would improve the standing of civil-societal groups who support the reallocation of water to more economically efficient and environmentally friendly uses. In the Central Asian case, export markets for



the products of allocatively inefficient water uses have lessened the perceived need by powerful regional actors to implement environmental-policy and democratization reforms.

It seems clearer that ascertaining the relative contribution of material and social influences in transboundary water relations is crucial to engendering more optimal political outcomes. These should incorporate not only cooperation to achieve equitable and sustainable use of 'common pool resources', but also democratic pluralism, in order to ensure that sub-national actors hold a stake in inter-state comity. Scant evidence supports an idealist teleological depiction of international institutions as 'post-modern' actors invariably tipping power balances in water-salient regions toward pro-environment forces. Third parties with an inadequate understanding of how 'pre-modern' meanings become assimilated within 'modernist' parameters often underestimate the nature and depth of resistance from traditionally 'modern' political economies to their advice. They can even aggravate conflict and environmental degradation. By explicating these issues, the works reviewed here will be key heuristic resources for conducting more cumulative research into the foundations of effective transboundary water-governance arrangements.

Notes

- 1 For a constructivist treatment of international environmental politics, see Litfin (1994).
- 2 On the political dynamics of negotiating over these resources, see Ostrom (1990) and Barkin and Shambaugh (1999).
- 3 Any necessary linkage is decisively refuted in Adler (1997) and Wendt (1999, 251, 253–254).
- 4 The 'advocacy coalition framework' has been pioneered by Sabatier (1988) and employed in a 'post-modernist' way similar to that of Blatter's contribution by Litfin (2000).
- 5 A cognate emphasis on the cooperative influence of geographical interdependence is found in Elhance (1999).
- 6 The conceptualization of transboundary river water as a 'structural CPR' (as opposed to a 'pure CPR') seems more apt in this case. See Matthew (1999).
- 7 On analogous motivations, see Keohane and Nye (2001).
- 8 For a parallel discussion in a related area, see Rosecrance (1996).

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