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The Right to Water: Politics, Governance and Social Struggles

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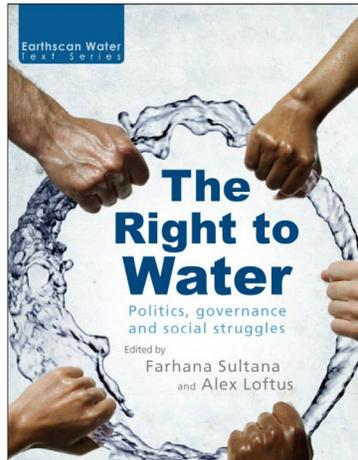
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The Right to Water: Politics, Governance and Social Struggles

Farhana Sultana and Alex Loftus, eds. London: Earthscan/Routledge, 2012. xvii and 262 pp., figures, tables, index. \$53.95 paper (ISBN 978-1-84971-359-7); \$145.00 cloth (ISBN 978-1-84971-360-3).

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social issues. Given the editors and the topic, it makes sense that some of the contributors are geographers, but many are not. Perspectives of sociologists, lawyers, political economists, and anthropologists are included to nice effect as well, at times within chapters that integrate disciplinary perspectives.

There is much to appreciate in this book. The editors have asked contributors to respond to an article by Karen Bakker, originally published in 2007 in *Antipode* and republished (with a postscript) as chapter 2, “Commons versus Commodities: Debating the

Human Right to Water.” Bakker argues that “human rights are individualistic, anthropocentric, state-centric and compatible with private sector provision of water supply; and as such, a limited strategy for those seeking to refute water privatization” (p. 35). Thus she favors a commons approach to water governance. Framing the book around Bakker’s main arguments works reasonably well in providing a degree of coherence among the diversity of ideas, arguments, and places covered. The collection is also quite extensive in its coverage, with broadly theoretical contributions making up the first third of the book, followed by chapters that are more specific in where they are situated and what they address.

There is not much overlap or unnecessary redundancy between chapters, but not all are equally valuable or readable. Of the theoretical contributions, Chad Staddon, Thomas Appleby, and Evadne Grant’s chapter on geographico-legal perspectives stands out. In discussing legal principles and international policies associated with the right to water, this chapter reflects the ideas of both disciplines about the right to water and integrates these unusually well for a jointly authored contribution. Jeremy

Scholarship on water governance is (finally) coming into its own. For example, John Agnew’s presidential address at the 2010 Association of American Geographers conference highlighted “how politics is at work around the world in managing water problems” along with “the challenges that water problems pose for politics” (Agnew 2011, 463). As well, books are being published on all manner of studies on water governance and new journals have emerged in recent years as well, including *Water Alternatives*, *Water Policy*, and *Water History*. The work emerging is frequently interdisciplinary and themed in the sense that it focuses on a specific issue or challenge in water governance.

The Right to Water: Politics, Governance and Social Struggles, a collection edited by Farhana Sultana and Alex Loftus, is one such a book. International in its authorship, ambitious in its scope, the book’s goal is to examine the right to water as it has emerged both in global discourse and in various places around the world during the past decade. A water right that sanctions specific water uses or users, it is explained, is not the same thing as the right to water, which is associated with an enforceable human right for water, one that has a political presence and is often attached to struggles over governance and other

Schmidt's chapter 6 is also notable in providing an insightful examination of the linkages between water scarcity and security and how these connect to the notion of community water governance.

Several of the specific chapters are noteworthy for being significant descriptively, rather than primarily analytical. Chapter 7 by Jacinta Ruru has a lawyer's perspective on water and identity for the Maori of New Zealand/Aotearoa. Of note, this is the only chapter dedicated to an important aspect of human rights and water—indigenous rights to water. In chapter 11, Cristy Clark addresses the significant case of South Africa through an analysis of the Mazibuko case, arguing that the right to water should focus on participation. Although I do not share her uncritical embrace of participatory governance, Clark poses a significant argument about how to interpret the right to water, particularly as it relates to the potential for litigation as a form of social participation.

Some of the chapters tackle both analysis and case studies handily. Ilaria Giglioli's chapter 9 provides good material on another significant right to water issue, collective right to water, in this case for Palestinians vis-à-vis Israeli administrative water decision making. In addition to analyzing collective as opposed to individual rights, this chapter tackles the significant, but oft overlooked, role of international funders. Katharine Meehan provides an excellent chapter 10 that asks fascinating questions about dimensions of informal and illegal water use. Invoking Foucault on punishment and "wrongs," she "muddies the analytics of rights" to water and nicely complicates the rights dialogue through an examination of rainwater harvesting and greywater reuse in Mexico and the United States. Krista Bywater, in chapter 13, takes on the antiprivatization movement for water in two cases in India where they were successful. She effectively brings in Foran's notion of political cultures of opposition (PCOs) in arguing that the human right to water cannot be dismissed and remains relevant. Bywater also provides a significant analysis of activist dynamics in India, looking at why these cases arose where and when they did. Rocio Buastamante, Carlos Crespo, and Anna Maria Walnycki authored the complex but conceptually rich chapter 14, which probes into what happens in the wake of the state—in this case, Bolivia—granting the right to water. This chapter is distinguished by contemplating the connections between water rights and rights to water, by looking closely at the fundamental contradictions in the state's role, and by covering water practices as communities develop them.

The best chapter is last. Chapter 15 by Verónica Perera is a well written, personal, and scholarly account of water

activism and social mobilization in Colombia during 2010. Perera explains why—in the Colombian context of water activism—the rights to water dialogue was adopted and deployed in the first-ever national referendum and how this came to link Colombian water activism with the broader Latin American struggles around water issues. With fascinating comparisons to Uruguay and Bolivia, the chapter covers specific mechanics of how mobilization operated and the motivation behind it. There is a great discussion about the linkage of water activism to activism focused on developing and promoting a "territorial imagination" among black peasants in Colombia's Pacific coastal region. Perera also employs Arturo Escobar's ideas in addressing the struggle for development in poor Pacific communities and how activists for the right to water used this to "nourish" other dialogues about their communities, territories, identities, and autonomy. As Perera explains, "In Colombia, where grassroots movements and leaders are terrorized, the referendum on the human right to water became a tool for network building, and a resource to nurture a socio-environmental imagination that challenges development based on global capital, extractive industries and the terror of the armed struggle" (p. 253).

The book is not without flaws. The foreword by Maude Barlow reads like an endorsement for fellow activists, who ironically are not likely the book's primary audience, because some writing is uncomfortably and unnecessarily obtuse. Moreover, there seems to be a degree of insularity among most of the chapters in terms of their use of similar sources; for the most part, many contributors have missed significant work on the topic of commons, water rights, and water law that would greatly enrich some of these dialogues. Finally, one of the key arguments against the notion of commons and the right to water put forth by Bakker in chapter 2 seems to be conspicuously absent. Where is the sense that water users, including communities, not only compete with one another for water, often on unequal terms, but also compete to legitimate their own form of water logic? In other words, why idealize the commons?

Despite these flaws, I recommend the book not only to those interested in water governance, but to those interested in development studies and the nexus of political and cultural geography. A few of the chapters will be of interest to those keen on understanding the changing role of the state (chapters 5, 7, and 9), other chapters will appeal to those interested in analyses of social activism (chapters 10, 13, and 15), and still others will appeal to those interested in identity and the environment (chapters 7 and 9).

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