

# H-Net Reviews

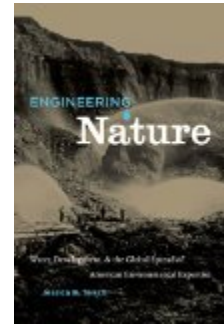
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jessica B. Teisch. *Engineering Nature: Water, Development, and the Global Spread of American Environmental Expertise*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 260 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3443-5; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7176-8.

Reviewed by Maurits Ertsen

Published on H-Environment (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Dolly Jørgensen



## The Nature of Confusion

*Engineering Nature* is confusing, at least to me. Dealing with a topic close to my own research—the ways water engineers have shaped the world within an international network of people and regional approaches—the book does have some value. It focuses on Californian irrigation and mining projects and traces the engineers working on these projects as they moved across the globe to work in Australia, South Africa, and Palestine. In addition, India features in the first chapter, as the source of inspiration for the Californian engineers. The stories of these engineers and their ideas are interesting and worthwhile to read. All the necessary ingredients one wants are in here: the political agenda closely linked to technological projects, the ideas on what society should look like and how it should behave, the environmental assumptions these engineers make, and the way the environment strikes back. Furthermore, Jessica B. Teisch provides a much-needed U.S. perspective on the international network of colonial and postcolonial development projects. It is often assumed that the United States dominated the international development agenda in the second half of the twentieth century, but even if we accept this assumption we still need to know how American engineers and others have shaped this dominance, in what ways, and with what outcomes. Teisch gives us parts of this puzzle.

Nevertheless, I am confused. Some aspects of the book make me question whether I like it or not. Let me start with a simple issue. The book's title may be re-

garded as a slight overstatement, as the “global spread” may be rephrased as “some countries and American engineers.” India may have served as a source of inspiration for the Californian engineers, but it also did so for the Dutch colonial engineers in the Netherlands East Indies. In turn, in the early twentieth century California served as the model for French irrigation engineers in northern Africa. Interesting as the countries discussed by Teisch may be, it is rather impossible to reserve the word “global” for this particular selection. It is not clear why she selected these three countries—one presumes because the material allowed writing about them, which is a perfectly good reason, but more discussion of why this set of case studies was selected and how they relate to the larger body of literature on engineers, colonialism, and development aid would have been helpful.

Another—and more serious—disturbing feature of the book is the way the author treats the issue of “development,” especially in relation to the historical discipline. Although she is never explicitly clear about it, Teisch seems to believe that she knows what “good development” is and can judge past actions against her own criteria. Quite often in the book, she makes references to people being “right,” even “fundamental truths” (pp. 183, 187). Take quotes like “Deakin’s observation pointed to the truth” or “these limitations suggested a more serious flaw in India’s hydraulic regime: the lack of partnership between water users and the state” (pp. 20, 33). I cannot help to think that these sentences represent the ideas

of the author, and do not come from historical sources directly. Teisch even goes so far as stating that “we now have the historical perspective to understand that this vision was flawed in ways that most of its advocates failed to acknowledge at the time” (p. 180). What (apparently uncontested) knowledge would that be? And when some historical actors did see those “flaws,” does that not turn the whole argument that we have the knowledge now upside down? I would prefer a story explaining why expectations of actors did not materialize and how their ideas of development clashed with other ideas, without the author including too many lessons—whether hidden or explicit—from our own time.

Finally, the strength of the book—its U.S. perspective—

turns out to be also a potential weakness. The source material the book draws from is a little one-sided. The material is mainly produced by the same American engineers who are studied. Obviously, in a way this is hard to avoid. It is well known that history uses the ample material of the winners more than the losers’ fragments, and this is even more so in colonial—and the related development—histories. The development elites keep the records, not the peasant target population. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether India as a source of inspiration for American engineers can be properly discussed with only—somewhat dated—secondary sources and a few documents of these engineers themselves. I would say it would be difficult, but then again, I did say I am confused.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

**Citation:** Maurits Ertsen. Review of Teisch, Jessica B., *Engineering Nature: Water, Development, and the Global Spread of American Environmental Expertise*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33086>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.