

David Blanchon. *L'espace hydraulique sud-africain: Le partage des eaux.* Paris: Karthala, 2009. 294 pp. EUR 26.00, paper, ISBN 978-2-8111-0175-6.



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Since the beginning of the colonial conquest until the end of apartheid, the division of space in South Africa was duplicated by an unequal distribution of water. The water resources, a prerequisite for the development of this arid country, have been appropriated by the white minority like most fertile lands and mining resources. This book analyzes the spoliation of water resources focusing on the Orange and its affluent river Vaal by retracing the South African “plumbing” system, which manipulated watercourses to the benefit of the agricultural and foremost the urban and industrial elite until 1994. It presents further the changes in water policy initiated by the new African National Congress (ANC) government after the end of apartheid.

The book is organized into seven chapters structured in three parts, which examine the dams and water transfers from three different angles. The first part presents the South African techno-natural nexus by starting to describe the fluvial system (chapter 1) and the legislative setting for the control and management of water. It

focuses on the relationship between the political changes before and since the beginning of the apartheid era and the divisions of water resources (chapter 2). Chapter 3 portrays the way the water transfers transformed the South African river system. It aims to understand why these specific forms of transformations have been built, with what rationales and with what consequences for the hydraulic South African space. Here the apartheid water regime is presented in all its extensions: the spoliation of various ethnic groups and their so-called homelands, the spoliation of riparian rights from Lesotho to Namibia, and the denial of individual access to water of the urban population in Soweto and Alexandra. The second part with chapters 4 and 5 focuses on what the author calls the “integration” of the big hydraulic scheme into local space. He shows the impact synergies of the water transfers and the big dams on the Orange River on a local scale, or even a micro-scale by choosing representative places located nearby Upington. David Blanchon analyzes in detail the water management as well as the geomor-

phological and sedimentary changes between the beginning and the end of the twentieth century as local examples of the national hydropolicies and its consequences. Beside the impressive changes, he shows the hybridation and the incapacity to distinguish on the ground what impacts are “natural” from “artificial” ones. The last two chapters 6 and 7 of the third part present the hydropolitical changes of the post-apartheid period. It depicts the establishment of the river basin as political framework, the policy design for the valorization of water, the definition of a minimum discharge for the environment, and the new approach toward water transfers and the national water scheme by the ANC government.

Epistemically, the book draws essentially on four bodies of works used by the author as heuristic models. First the concept of hydropolitics developed by Tony Allan and Anthony Turton are largely taken over to understand the political foundations of the transfer policy in South Africa. It is complemented by a political ecology approach largely inspired by authors like Donald Worster and Erik Swyngedouw and their famous work on the American West and Franco’s waterscape in Spain. Here “the notion of waterscape allows to understand the interactions between the physical processes, the material and cultural practices and the ideological constructions of the value of water. The central idea is not any more to distinguish between the socio- and the hydro-systems as two separate elements, but to consider them as manifestations of the same “techno-nature,” of which the evolution, conflicts, and geographical expressions need to be analyzed (p. 57). In this perspective and to grasp the close relationship and entanglement of the technical, political manipulation of “nature” and the biophysical processes, Blanchon draws on Bruno Latour’s concepts of hybridation and “hairy” objects to characterize this waterscape as impossible to define with clear contours and inside which the “artificial” and the “natural” are not separable. “It is an object without clear borders and without defined

essence, without a sharp separation between the core from its environment,” the author writes, quoting Latour (p. 16). Finally Blanchon uses a large body of work from physical geography to analyze his geophysical observations along the Orange River. And here lies one of the strengths of the book. Physical geographer by qualification, Blanchon mobilizes the entire range of geographical knowledge from geomorphology, landscape analysis, political ecology, and political geography combined with a sophisticated scalar perspective enabling him to grasp the complexity of the Orange-Vaal waterscape from the beginning of the manipulation until the last policy reforms underway at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The balance between these is well managed and portrays an impressive picture of the power of a society in its attempt to tame and put at its service an entire river system, which is unfortunately not well reflected in a lame sounding title. It is a book worth reading for scholars working on water issues, hydropolitics, and political ecology as it is another, surely extreme, but nevertheless representative example of a state willing to demonstrate its claimed superiority and its capacity to conquer, transform, and exploit nature.

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