

# H-Net Reviews

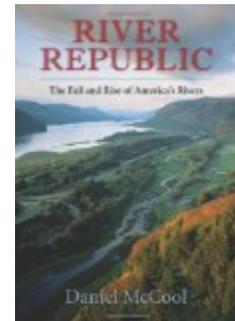
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel McCool. *River Republic: The Fall and Rise of America's Rivers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. xvi + 388 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-16130-5.

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## Water Hubris

A 2012 report from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation suggested that a 600-mile-long pipeline connecting the Missouri River to reservoirs near Denver might combat the Colorado River's diminishing flow. Providing 600,000 acre-feet of water, such a pipeline would reduce the city's draw on the beleaguered Colorado River watershed. What that would mean for shipping in the already drought-stricken and similarly declining flows of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers was another question. Meanwhile, the infrastructural challenges and financial costs of pumping so much water from around 800 feet above sea level at Leavenworth, KS to the Mile-High City boggle the mind.[1]

It's this kind of massive, costly, structurally oriented engineering of U.S. rivers that political scientist Daniel McCool describes as "water hubris" in his most recent book. *River Republic: The Fall and Rise of America's Rivers* is divided into three parts. Beginning with "The Fall," McCool provides a snapshot of river restoration and offers a brief history of both the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Part 2, "Dismemberment," attempts to explain why and how Americans have destroyed the "essence" of rivers in the United States. Cases include irrigation, hydropower, navigation, flood control, and pollution. But all is not lost. Part 3, "Resurrection," describes a growing river restoration movement across the United States and a host of increasingly popular non-extractive uses for rivers, from tourism and recreation, to urban redevelopment, to wildlife and habi-

at conservation. Research for *River Republic* included "hundreds of interviews" conducted over the course of a decade as well as visits to numerous restoration projects. McCool's primary sources consist mostly of government documents, policy reports, and newspapers from the last two to three decades.

For McCool, two main culprits are responsible for the troubled state of the nation's rivers. One, the water hubris institutionalized in both the Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation. And two, the "pork"–or politically motivated government spending–that feeds not only these two agencies, but also a whole raft of perverse subsidies preventing Americans from putting rivers to their best possible uses.

McCool describes the Army Corps and the Bureau as Oldsmobiles in a "Prius age," agencies whose original missions have become irrelevant as they've stubbornly clung to a "postwar/Cold War/American Dream/nationalistic can-do/conquer-[nature]" ethos (p. 60). McCool's treatment of these two institutions, from their histories and cultures to their science and practice, may rankle H-Environment readers for its oversimplifications and presentism. But McCool is not a historian and it may not make sense to judge him as such. *River Republic* makes some valuable contributions in revealing some persistent institutional tendencies in both the Army Corps and the Bureau, as well as one particularly egregious example of Army Corps data manipulation and

the resulting scandal that broke in 2000.

These two agencies' "irrational" manipulation of the nation's river resources isn't merely a matter of institutional culture, however. McCool argues that "pork barrel spending" has contributed profoundly to almost a century of riparian misuse. *River Republic* suggests repeatedly that such spending is at the heart of both agencies' work (pp. 43, 50, 62, 140, 169). Indeed, if it weren't for pork, McCool argues that even the Mississippi River might one day be restored and transformed into a linear, riparian national park (p. 144). Importantly, McCool expands his critique beyond the Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation to show how government subsidies for industrialized agriculture also underwrite the soil erosion and runoff that degrade American rivers. Nuanced analysis of government spending, however, is not *River Republic's* strong suit. For example, George W. Bush's farm safety net would, according to McCool, "make Stalin smile" (p. 90). Similarly, after noting how much grain shipped down U.S. rivers is destined for foreign ports, McCool asks if it makes sense for federal agricultural appropriation to "subsidize the eating habits of people in Asia" (p. 162). While *River Republic* makes an important effort to highlight the contradictions and unintended consequences of subsidies for agriculture, hydropower, navigation, and flood control, terms like "special interests" and "economically rational" get deployed far too frequently without careful definition.

In turning to riparian recovery in the United States, McCool describes several ongoing restoration projects taking place on U.S. waterways. One of the central claims of *River Republic* is that such restoration efforts frequently depend on a class of individuals McCool calls "instigators," or "average Americans" often removed from more traditional positions of power and political influence (p. 12). For McCool, these diverse concerned citizens form a new kind of civil society, the eponymous "river republic." Yet while this observation provides important insight into the mechanics of contemporary grassroots environmental politics in the United States, an almost exclusive focus on such individuals makes one wonder whether McCool's model is complete.

Meanwhile, *River Republic* does a fine job of representing the vast diversity of restoration. At first, the book is filled with comparisons around "pristine" versus degraded or "dead" rivers and it seems as if McCool is no champion of hybridity. He even goes so far as to describe the standing water at Lake Powell as a "TV-like

environment" and opines that "the lake is deep, but the experience is not" (p. 21). Yet later in the text, McCool's devotion to pure, authentic nature isn't quite so rigid. He regularly advocates restoration for recreational and scenic purposes alongside ecological and wilderness values. Likewise, preserving the picturesque buildings and homes of small towns lining the Mississippi River ranks as a serious priority for McCool.

But it gets a little confusing from there. At one point McCool describes the recession of Lake Powell due to climate change and upstream diversions. As Lake Powell lowers, upstream rapids once drowned by the reservoir are beginning to re-emerge, something McCool describes as self-restoration (p. 276). Many other environmentalists, however, might find that far more troubling than reassuring. At this point, some discussion of the many debates around stream restoration, or even environmental restoration more generally, would have been a valuable addition to the text. While McCool does a good job describing the many different ways Americans might revive and repurpose their degraded rivers, the complicated questions around the meaning and values of those practices rarely get addressed. Indeed, it's unclear what restoration, let alone "nature," might even mean for McCool personally.

Finally, although *River Republic* consistently criticizes the tradeoffs involved in riparian industrial and economic development, the tradeoffs involved in eliminating industry, dams, and shipping from rivers rarely get a hearing except, perhaps, at the very margins of McCool's anecdotes. The only sustained discussion of such tradeoffs surrounds his proposal that railroad shipping replace the majority of barging in the United States (pp. 162-164).

Peppered with colorful, decorative quotes from intellectuals and cultural figures of all stripes (Edmund Burke, H. L. Mencken, Bob Dylan, Cervantes), *River Republic* is an easy read that raises important questions about politics, money, and development along U.S. rivers while providing vibrant accounts of restoration projects all across the country.

#### Note

[1]. Felicity Barringer, "Water Piped to Denver Could Ease Stress on River," *New York Times*, December 9, 2012. Accessed December 10, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/10/science/earth/federal-plans-for-colorado-river-include-pipeline.html>.

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