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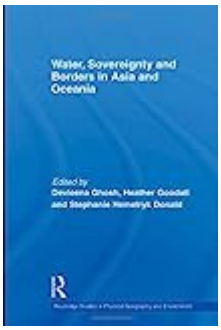

Devleena Ghosh, Heather Goodall, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, eds. *Water, Sovereignty and Borders in Asia and Oceania.* Routledge Studies in Physical Geography and Environment Series. New York: Routledge, 2009. xiii + 216 pp. $170.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-43726-4.

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Commissioned by John Broich (Case Western Reserve University)

Water, Sovereignty, and Borders in Asia and Oceania is an edited collection of thirteen essays compiled from a symposium held in Sydney in 2005. As the editors explain in the introductory chapter, the book âattempts to restore water, both fresh and salt, to its central position in human endeavor, ecology, and environmentâ (p. 1). Toward that end, the contributors strive to place human agency within the larger and less conventional network of actors like rivers and oceans. The âmoral of the story,â as the editors call it, is that the physical world is beyond humansâ capacity to unilaterally impose order onto it. Another theme running through the essays concerns the intellectual separation–part of a long European tradition, as the editors point out–of the natural, physical world (describable by science) from the world of meaning and representation. The contributors hope to blur this old distinction between the material and the idealistic by exploring the ârich, complex but unstable meanings with which water is investedâ (p. 6). Each essay starts from the premise that the unpredictable behavior of flowing water exists in constant tension with the instability of its meaning to humans.

The essays, written by scholars from a range of disciplines, reflect the disciplinary diversity of their authors. They provide a kaleidoscopic view of how water is enmeshed in daily life, with special attention to its meanings at economic, cultural, or political borders. The essays constitute an anthology of the struggles between different groups of people, and between those people with their natural surroundings, as each works to define and control their water resources in a constantly changing social and ecological environment.

Jeff Malpasâs contribution deals with the philosophical and empirical aspects of fresh water to introduce the theme of its unstable meanings and its dynamic relationships to humans. Malpas uses the concept of fluidity to engage with how people understand places, and how those understandings are constantly remade. He concludes that the indefinite nature of water–physically and culturally–allows for highly ambiguous meanings.

Two essays address the dispersed islands of Oceania. Paul DâArcy analyzes the use and significance of the ocean for Pacific Islanders. According to DâArcy, islanders have traditionally thought of the ocean as connecting their cultures across the many thousands of islands scattered throughout the South Pacific. The imposition of national borders tied to the land severed the notion of the ocean as a highway, DâArcy argues, limiting the cohesive force of the water. Turning to land,

Dirk Spennemann focuses on the freshwater oases nestled on terrestrial âlenses,â rather than the saltwater that surrounds the islands. Spennemann uses geological data from these subterranean freshwater reservoirs to reveal the damage that blind modernization has wrought on the marginal lands of the Marshall Islands.

The only author to engage specifically with Japan, Kate Barclay reviews the twentieth-century development of ideas of maritime sovereignty. She identifies imperialism, defeat in World War II and the postwar economic revival, international law, and the recent decline in Japanâs fishing industry as the major factors that influenced Japanese views of their claims to the ocean. Barclay notes the imperialist link between the fishing industry and military expansion as a particularly important moment in defining Japanâs vision of its place in the region.

Turning toward the Indian subcontinent, Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Muecke draw parallels between the ecological changes wrought by a rapidly modernizing economy and the shifting debates over the value of tradition versus modernity. Tracing the complex relationships that connect freshwater, saltwater, the land, agriculture, and cities in a dynamic ecological system, Ghosh and Muecke find that it is impossible to separate changes in one component from changes in another. The entanglement of so many variables defies simple renderings of the meaning of the water, while reinforcing the mutually dependent relationship between ecosystems and economies.

Several essays deal with river systems that span multiple national territories. Douglas Hill ventures into the disputes and international management regimes in South Asia. Border agreements (and disputes) concerning the Indus and the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river basins, Hill argues, have seeped underground as increased demands for fresh water have encouraged the use of groundwater over limited and contestable surface sources. Legal and political arrangements have not yet been able to govern the exploitation of groundwater due to the technical obstacles to measuring extraction and depletion levels, raising the specter of new battles over water in the near future. Shapan Adnan considers the political economy of water management in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna Delta, but focuses on the internal and external actors who contest water use within Bangladeshâs sovereign territory. Specifically, Adnan argues that tensions between riparian peasantry and technocratic planners arose from fundamentally different cultural views of the appropriate uses of water. As Adnan claims, the resistance of peasants to large scale flood management projects, with the help of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), was largely responsible for reforming flood control policy in Bangladesh. Michael Webber, Jon Barnett, Brian Finlayson, and Mark Wang question the problems involved in water management between political units within Chinaâs national borders. The massive engineering schemes to remake the Yellow and Yangtze rivers, especially the Three Gorges Dam, will have consequences far from the reservoirs themselves, creating obstacles to governance that, Webber and his colleagues argue, have not been fully addressed by Chinese authorities.

Three essays specifically address the neoliberal trend away from the commons and in favor of enclosure and exclusion. Philip Hirsch considers the international governance regimes of the Mekong River system, arguing that traditional conceptions of the water as a commons have dissolved somewhat under the pressures of economic development. Though legal frameworks have been enacted to preserve the common status of the Mekongâs flow, Hirsch argues that these superficial agreements hide the reality of the local level. This obfuscation, Hirsch concludes, makes legal action against de facto privatization difficult as national and international laws, in the long run, tend to support mainstream development models that favor enclosure. Janice Gray, looking at Australiaâs laws regarding water rights, traces the local arc of waterâs legal status from a commonly held good to private property. The trend toward privatization, according to Gray, has been encouraged by Australiaâs scarcity of surface water relative to the United Kingdom, the progenitor of Australiaâs laws of the commons. Tony McAvoy interrogates the consequences of water privatization for Australiaâs indigenous peoples. Unforeseen legal contradiction has emerged over water privatization in light of another body of laws that protect indigenous rights to land, though not necessarily the water that flows through it. He argues that commodification of water reflects plannersâ vision of rivers as water delivery machines, which is wholly inconsistent with any spiritual understanding.

The last two essays grapple with the problems of sovereignty and water rights within the context of internal colonialism in Australia. Sandy Toussaint demonstrates how oneâs perspective has profound implications for the meaning ascribed to bodies of water and their political representations. In the case of the Fitzroy River in western Australia, Toussaint uses an ethnographic lens to

argue that both real rivers and abstract borders can symbolize expertise, and therefore authority for those who define those symbols. Finally, Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow explore the unique site of indigenous resistance to colonialism in urban Sydney. Bodies of water, Goodall and Cadzow point out, are often sites of resistance because of their value both as natural resources and their cultural significance. The indigenous campaigns in metropolitan Sydney to protect Salt Pan Creek from industrial development, and the vibrant community life that supported those campaigns, produced a core of indigenous leadership that now plays a major role in Australian national politics.

For readers interested in an introduction to the political economy of water or ocean resources in Asia, this collection provides a useful, broad, and accessible range of case studies. Although these brief and thematically incoherent essays cannot live up to the editorsâ lofty stated task of placing water squarely back into the center of human life, they do offer a helpful collection to those already convinced of waterâs prominent place within human society, but who perhaps are unfamiliar with the regional issues with water in South Asia and the Pacific. Fans of actor-network theory will likely be sympathetic to some of the contributorsâ assertions of agency to rivers, rain, and fish. Some readers may be put off by the brevity and nostalgic-philosophical tone of some of the essays, but this detracts nothing from the more developed chapters. Scholars who are looking for more depth may ply the bibliographies of the essays, which are in all cases extensive.