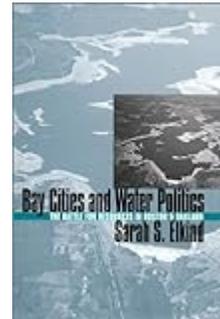


Sarah S. Elkind. *Bay Cities and Water Politics: The Battle for Resources in Boston and Oakland.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. viii + 246. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0907-9.



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Published on H-Urban (December, 1999)

A Review of *Bay Cities and Water Politics: The Battle for Resources in*

In *Bay Cities and Water Politics: The Battle for Resources in Boston and Oakland*, Sarah Elkind vividly portrays how the evolution of waterworks involved the transformation of urban politics and the natural surroundings of Boston and Oakland. She aptly demonstrates how water pollution and scarcity are not new, but instead, have been a topic of public discourse from the early 1800s and onward. Her central thesis is that physical conditions and public reactions to these conditions transform urban services, the concept of public responsibility, and the relationship among cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Elkind provides a unique and much needed comparative approach that highlights the differences between water politics in the Eastern United States and the Western United States, looks holistically at water supply and water pollution, and demonstrates how water politics were central to urban reform. Historians and sociologists have provided writings about the conflicts and politics associated with water scarcity in the west.[1] The history of water pollution and its role in urban politics is less often told, as is the more general role of water in politics of the eastern United States.[2]

Sarah S. Elkind became interested in the relationship between politics, water pollution, and water scarcity while working at the Boston Harbor Islands State Park in the mid-1980s. At that time, Boston Harbor was severely polluted and the Boston Harbor Cleanup garnered national attention. During the 1988 United States presidential campaign, then Vice President Bush aired a campaign ad that claimed the harbor was the most polluted in the country and that then presidential candidate Dukakis was responsible for not taking care of cleaning the harbor when he served as governor of Massachusetts. Sarah Elkind is now an assistant professor of environmental history at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Elkind's choice to study Boston's water use and management history stemmed from her personal connection to Boston as well as to the unique history of Boston's politics in dealing with water. Her choice to study and compare Oakland with Boston is less evident, and as she indicates in the introduction, rather arbitrary. Oakland makes an interesting point of comparison because of its vastly different social, cultural, political, and environmental characteristics than Boston. However, comparing two cities with equal regional influence may have

strengthened the comparative dimension of her work. Because Oakland lies within the shadows of San Francisco, it resembled a suburb as opposed to a central city like Boston. Oakland did not have the same power in determining regional politics as Boston.

The book is well organized and very accessible. Each chapter chronicles the growing expansion of public power in relation to water supply and disposal. Elkind explores the underlying tensions between excessive government growth and the prevention of water shortages and water pollution. These conflicts pitted city governments against suburbs and rural interests as well as local government against private industry. In both locations growing environmental crises coupled with the inability of municipal government to solve these crises led to the development of regionalism in the form of special districts. Ironically, rather than solving environmental problems, the shift towards regionalism simply expanded environmental impacts of urbanization to greater distances.

In the first chapter, Elkind compares the public service tradition in Boston with the private service tradition that prevailed in Oakland and the surrounding East Bay area. Her basic premise is that in both locations unprofitable services were defined as public and profitable services, as private. Ample water supplies in Boston limited the potential for private water development. As a result, in Boston the possibility of improved sewerage and other services provided a major incentive for incorporation. Water scarcity in East Bay made water supply a lucrative industry and consequently, private utility companies provided water supply and public services took care of waste disposal. The strength of this chapter resides in Elkind's analysis of the moral-environmental theory and how class issues shaped public discourse and policy about pollution. According to this theory, disease, dirt, and vice all were at the root of poverty. She demonstrates how pollution was defined as a public problem according to this theory and that sewerage improvements represented acts of social engineering (i.e., reducing poverty).

The second chapter builds upon the strengths of the first chapter. Elkind points out the ironic result of improvements in services leading to increased demand and more severe environmental problems. The municipal governments in Boston and East Bay were faced with the challenge of seeking solutions to these environmental crises that now extended beyond the borders of their cities. In East Bay the situation was even more complex than that due to the control of water sources by private

utility companies. Reform efforts in Boston focused on the influence of machine politics on local government. In East Bay, Progressive's dominated reform politics and they targeted railroad and private utilities as the major source of political corruption.

Chapter three analyzes the move towards regionalism in Boston and Chapter four, the transition toward regionalism in Oakland. In both cases regionalism emerged after municipal efforts of cooperation failed. In Boston during the 1880s and 1890s, the promise of improved services and employment opportunities for construction appealed to voters and the formation of an apolitical agency appealed to political reformers concerned about corruption in city politics. In East Bay the move toward regionalism was much later and took place in the early 1900s. Anti-water utilities sentiments fueled the move towards regionalism, but first obstacles, including powerful utility companies, a lack of a viable water source, and opposition to taxes and government growth, had to be overcome. The move toward regionalism came at the expense of rural communities and interests.

Elkind concludes that regionalism did not try to solve environmental problems, but merely postponed them by dumping pollution deeper out at sea and drawing water from more distant sources. She notes a shift in recent years towards water conservation and water clean-up, but these efforts have been hampered by the unresponsiveness of the regional agencies originally chartered to solve water problems. Today new super-regional agencies are becoming more prevalent. Elkind warns that further centralization may be logical from an ecological perspective, but could be problematic if it further delays communities from facing real limits on continued growth.

The major shortcomings, of an otherwise very well written and interesting book, revolve around the lack of information that would have put her argument into a broader context and ultimately strengthened it. Elkind does not provide a very extensive introduction to the cultural, social, demographic, economic, and political background of Boston or Oakland. She mentions, for example, that public traditions of public enterprise permitted government action in Boston (p. 11), but she does not explain what these public traditions were or how they originated. The debates over water represented one dimension of urban reform efforts. It would have been helpful to have more information on the other dimensions of the public discourse on urban reform. At times it was difficult to assess whether public policy pertaining

to water led reform efforts, or if these policy initiatives were made possible by reforms aimed at solving other problems. While Elkind spends considerable time discussing the relationship between local politics and the move toward regionalism, she gives less attention to the role of state and national discourse and policy development, even though state and federal laws influenced local water use and management decisions. Elaborating more on the relationship between local, state, and federal government would have helped situate regionalism in a broader political context.

A major strength of this book is that it demonstrates both the complexity of water issues and the historical context from which current water debates have emerged. As an environmental sociologist, I found this approach especially useful. It contrasts much of the work in environmental sociology, which does not give adequate attention to the historical dimensions of environmental issues. Elkind demonstrates how environmental issues have played an important role in public discourse for quite sometime. This book especially provides a historical preface to current environmental justice debates, which are focused on issues of class, race, and the distribution of environmental risks. Her analysis illustrates the interplay of class, politics, and public discourse over environmental issues. Elkind also did an excellent job of balancing ecological and social causes of change without being overly ecologically deterministic or relying too extensively on a social construction perspective.

Although focused on water issues, the central thesis of this book raises critical issues about the relationship between ecology, democracy, and urban growth. Can

government agencies engage in long-term environmental management, but at the same time remain responsive to the public? What types of agencies will facilitate this process? Elkind demonstrates the limitations of regionalism and raises the question of what other types of institutions will be more appropriate to address environmental issues that cross political, social, and cultural boundaries. *Bay Cities and Water Politics* makes an important contribution to environmental history. The book will appeal to a wide variety of audiences including sociologists, geographers, historians, environmental scientists, and political scientists. Individuals with an interest in urban planning, urban growth, political reform, and water management will benefit greatly from this book.

Notes

[1]. For example, Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking Press, 1986). John Walton, *Western Times and Water Wars: State, Culture, and Rebellion in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

[2]. Martin Melosi provides one exception. He has written extensively on the role of pollution in urban reform. For example, see Martin Melosi, *Pollution and Reform in American Cities, 1870-1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).

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Citation: Andrew H. Raedeke. Review of Elkind, Sarah S., *Bay Cities and Water Politics: The Battle for Resources in Boston and Oakland*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. December, 1999.

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