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WATERSCAPES AND POWER: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF WATER

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Abstract

Water is commonly treated as a natural resource to be allocated efficiently among competing uses, a matter for engineers and economists. This paper takes a different view, drawing on the political ecology of water to argue that flows of water are also flows of power, and that the landscapes water makes, the waterscapes, are shaped as much by social relations as by hydrology. It develops the idea of the hydro-social cycle, in which water and society are understood to produce one another, so that the circulation of water through a city or a countryside both reflects and reinforces the distribution of wealth and power within it. Illustrated by the way urban expansion appropriates the water of its rural surroundings, the paper shows how the control of water becomes an instrument of social power, and how apparently technical decisions about water, where to build, whom to supply, what to charge, are in fact distributive decisions with winners and losers. It argues that treating water as a purely technical matter obscures this political content, and that a political ecology of water is necessary to see, and to contest, the power that water carries.

Keywords: *political ecology; hydro-social cycle; waterscape; power; urbanization of water*

1. Introduction

In the standard account, water is a resource and water management a technical problem: given so much water and so many competing demands, the task is to allocate the one among the other as efficiently as possible. This account is not wrong, but it is radically incomplete, for it leaves out the question of power. Who decides how water is allocated, who benefits from the allocation, and who is left dry, are not technical questions, and the apparatus of efficient allocation cannot answer them. This paper approaches water from the standpoint of political ecology, which insists that the circulation of water is bound up with the circulation of power, and argues that only from this standpoint can the distributive politics of water be seen.

The paper first introduces the idea of the hydro-social cycle, then develops the notion of the waterscape as a product of social relations, then illustrates the argument through the appropriation of water by the expanding city, and finally considers what a political ecology of

water reveals that the technical account conceals. The discussion is conceptual, drawing on the political-ecology scholarship on water.

2. The hydro-social cycle

The point of departure for a political ecology of water is the claim that water and society are not separate domains, one natural and one social, but are produced together through what has been called the hydro-social cycle (Swyngedouw, 2009). In the familiar hydrological cycle, water circulates through evaporation, precipitation, and runoff, driven by physical forces. The hydro-social cycle adds that, in any inhabited landscape, this circulation is thoroughly shaped by human action and social relations: dams and canals redirect it, pumps and pipes accelerate it, pollution alters it, and decisions about who may use it and on what terms govern its distribution. Water, in circulating, carries with it the social relations that shape its flow, so that to study the movement of water is to study the society through which it moves. The hydro-social cycle thus dissolves the supposed boundary between the natural resource and its social management, and reveals water as a thing through which society continually makes and remakes itself (Swyngedouw, 2009).

3. The waterscape as a social product

From this starting point follows the idea of the waterscape: the visible landscape of water, its reservoirs and channels, its supplied neighbourhoods and its dry ones, understood as a product of social relations rather than of hydrology alone. The urbanization of water, the process by which a growing city captures, channels, and distributes water to sustain itself, offers the clearest illustration. The shape a city's waterscape takes, which districts receive reliable piped supply and which rely on wells and vendors, where the reservoirs sit and whose land they flood, how the cost of water falls across rich and poor, is determined not by the water itself but by the configuration of social and economic power that directs its flow (Swyngedouw, 2004). The waterscape is, in this sense, frozen social power: the distribution of water across the landscape is a map of the distribution of power within the society, and changes in the one track changes in the other. To read a waterscape politically is therefore to read the society that produced it.

4. The appropriation of water by the city

The political content of water becomes especially visible where the expanding city reaches beyond its own territory for the water it needs, appropriating the water of its rural surroundings. As a city grows, its demand outstrips its local supply, and it secures more water by drawing on the countryside around it, acquiring land and its water, sinking deeper wells, and diverting surface flows toward the urban core. This appropriation is a transfer of water, and therefore of a vital resource, from the rural periphery to the urban centre, and it is mediated by the unequal power of the two: the city, with its wealth and political weight, is able to claim the water of villages whose residents, especially the poorer among them, have little standing to resist (Narain, 2009). What appears, in the technical account, as the efficient reallocation of water to its highest-value use is, in the political-ecology account, the exercise of urban power over a rural hinterland, with identifiable winners in the city and losers in the villages left with less. The flow of water from periphery to centre is thus a flow of power, and the waterscape that results is a monument to it (Narain, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2004).

5. What the technical account conceals

The value of a political ecology of water lies in what it reveals that the technical account conceals. By treating water as a resource to be efficiently allocated, the technical account presents distributive decisions, decisions that make some better off and others worse off, as neutral optimisations, and in doing so it removes them from political contest. The decision to supply one district and not another, to price water in a way that burdens the poor, to let a city claim a village's wells, is rendered a matter of engineering and economics rather than of justice, and those disadvantaged by it are given no language in which to object. A political ecology of water restores that language. By insisting that water carries power and that waterscapes are social products, it makes visible the winners and losers of water decisions, reframes technical choices as distributive ones, and thereby opens them to the political scrutiny and contest from which the technical framing had sealed them off (Swyngedouw, 2009; Narain, 2009). Seeing water politically is the precondition for governing it justly.

6. Conclusion

Water is not only a resource to be allocated but a carrier of social power, and the landscapes it makes are shaped by the relations of the societies through which it flows. The hydro-social cycle reveals water and society as mutually constituted; the waterscape is the visible product of that constitution; and the appropriation of rural water by the expanding city shows the flow of water to be a flow of power with winners and losers. The technical account of water, for all its uses, conceals this political content, presenting distributive choices as neutral optimisations and placing them beyond contest. A political ecology of water is necessary to see the power that water carries and to subject the decisions that direct it to the scrutiny they deserve. Water, in the end, is too political to be left to a purely technical understanding.

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