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Harris LM, Jacqueline A. Goldin and Christopher Sneddon (eds.): Contemporary water governance in the global south; scarcity, marketization and participation

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The book Contemporary Water Governance in the Global South discusses hegemonic concepts in water management. Hegemonic concepts are described as ideas that become dominant within society and mould how individuals and groups perceive and interpret certain phenomena. The book focuses on three such concepts: scarcity/crisis, privatization/markets and participation. While not necessarily wrong, these concepts would oversimplify matters. They would treat water exclusively as a physical substance, neglect variety in space and time, and downplay ethical and power issues. Central questions that the book sets out to explore are what these concepts mean specifically; whose interests they serve; how they travel from the global to the local level or perhaps in the opposite direction; how they are applied in local practice and to what effect; and what the alternatives for these concepts are. The book consists of a relatively large number of introductory chapters; nine case study chapters; six reflections by activists or academics; and a concluding chapter. And all within 258 pages (excluding table of contents, index, etc.).

At first sight the book looks very interesting. It promises to discuss how power is exercised through ideas and how ideas influence water management. This should be of interest to the readers of Water History. Moreover, some of the contributions have an explicit historical character, such as chapter 7, on the emergence of a hydraulic bureaucracy in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe, between 1964 and 1972, and chapter 12, on "private water" in Zambia from 1930 to the present. Unfortunately, the book does not deliver fully on its promise.

Take for example chapter 12 on Zambia. In this chapter, Hilary Waters discusses malaria control by the copper mines in the 1930s and decision-making on the Kariba hydropower dam in the 1950s. In both cases "objective" scientific expertise was used to serve political ends—the health of the Europeans settlers and the interests of Southern Rhodesia. In addition, Waters discusses the more recent privatization of drinking water supply. She suggests that the main beneficiaries of the privatization process are the mines because neoliberal privatization might eliminate cross-subsidies from companies and,

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while emphasizing payment for water use, does not emphasize payment for water abuse, such as pollution by the mines. Unfortunately, Waters does not show that there actually was cross-subsidization and she ignores the fact that in many countries companies have to pay for pollution. She does show that involvement of the private sector in water management predates neoliberalism, but she does not discuss the theoretical implications of this.

An interesting point that Waters makes is that hegemony works through unbundling and bundling. Unbundling involves abstracting water away from social and political conditions and treating it as a substance and as a technical issue only. Bundling involves linking different ideas and approaches and selling the more controversial ideas by associating them with less controversial ideas. In fact, Waters does some bundling of her own by using the vague term "private water", which covers both different forms of private water services provision—drinking water supply and urban wastewater treatment—and private control over water resources. In this way, she is criticizing a less controversial idea, or at least an idea over which discussion is possible—private water services provision—by associating it with a very controversial idea.

Hegemonic concepts can be challenged in two different ways: by developing a fuller understanding of water management issues and by developing counter-hegemonic concepts that oversimplify as much as the hegemonic concepts they criticize but serve different interests. The aim of the book according to the introduction is the former, but many of the contributors seem to do the latter. For instance, while K'Akumu (chapter 13) clearly shows that both public and private water services provision can be problematic and discusses the conditions that have to be met for private provision to work for the poor, Shiney Vargase in her commentary (chapter 14) only discusses the shortcomings of private provision.

Another limitation of the book is that most case studies are very short and do not go into much detail. The language used is often quite abstract and terms such as "late modernity", "governmentality" and "gendering" abound. Actions and actors are often replaced by abstract factors. For instance, hegemonic concepts are said to "travel", but it is not always clear who makes them travel and how they do that.

There are important exceptions, though. Chapter 17 on the politics of gender in Egypt's water users' associations, for instance, gives interesting insights in how public participation can work out in practice, is very well written, and clearly mentions who did what. Another highlight is chapter 19 on public participation in Ghana. Chapter 2 is a clear introduction of the concept of hegemony and other chapters, such as chapter 6 on small-scale hydropower production in Turkey, have interesting points to make, even when these points are not always fully developed.

To conclude, Contemporary Water Governance in the Global South is not the first book I would recommend to someone interested in water history. Nonethelss, it contains some interesting contributions.