Chandra Mukerji: Impossible engineering. Technology and territoriality on the Canal du Midi

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I have always been fascinated by canals. Whenever I have the opportunity, which is usually during holidays, I visit canals and their remarkable features like locks, aqueducts, or sluices. Looking at these lines and structures in the landscape, one cannot but wonder about the people building them, empowered by them or simply influenced by them. I have seen many canals and their monuments, for example in the United Kingdom (the great locks at Devizes or the impressive aqueduct at Llangollen), Spain (the locks in the Canal de Castilla), and in France (the small, but really nice Canal de Lalinde).

I like to read about canals, but I love to see and experience them within their landscape, with their material properties, and foremost with flowing water. Well, Chandra Mukerji made me see and experience the Canal du Midi in the Languedoc, Southern France with her recent book. She writes the book as if you are present, at the construction site, at the political negotiations, when things go right, and when they went wrong. A fascinating story. And an important one, as the book discusses in detail how these large-scale projects are related to issues of power, knowledge, and money.

The Canal de Midi was built at the end of the seventeenth century, its' official opening was in 1680. It was an immense operation to link the Mediterranean Sea and the Garonne River and with that to the Atlantic. The canal would allow quick movement of the French army as well as stimulate commercial transportation. It could only be realized because strong individuals were pushing and supporting it: Pierre-Paul Riquet, with his ambition to build the canal and earn great wealth, power, and recognition; Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the French minister of both the treasury and the navy; and Louis XIV himself. For these men, and the many others who were related to the canal, struggling with the canal and each other was worth it as it should result in stronger social positions, each in their own way.

The book is about these struggles and how they should be understood. In her analysis, Mukerji employs and stresses two different ways to exercise power, and uses different terms for these. She speaks of personal versus impersonal rule, patronage versus stewardship, the power of the King versus political territoriality. In my own words, she discusses how the Canal du Midi as an enterprise should not be understood as the expression

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of power of the King, but as the expression of the larger State. Obviously, in seventeenth century France it was rather difficult to distinguish between king and state. What happened with the Canal du Midi, Mukerji argues, is that the project was not only a project to strengthen the power of the king over a region which did not necessarily accept all the rule of the king, but that the project was also aiming for a better France. In her own words, “[s]tewardship was logistical power serving the common good”. Louis XIV used strategies, the builders of the Canal du Midi employed logistics.

In a detailed and fascinating narrative of people negotiating about almost anything, including money, routes, responsibilities, and technologies, the story of the Canal du Midi unfolds. We discover how the personal relations between Riquet and Colbert changed over time, how the different social positions of the two are important aspects to include in the analysis. We also learn about what exactly was impossible about the engineering aspects of the canal, with its height differences, absent water sources, and unwilling sediments. We also learn that the engineering was not impossible after all, but that several initial approaches selected by the engineers from the North were not applicable within the material conditions of the South. One of the interesting aspects in the story is that knowledge and skills of social groups usually not associated with large infrastructural works, including illiterate peasants and women workers, apparently were deliberately included in design decisions.

This detailed narrative, however, does also show that the distinction between personal and impersonal is rather thin. Without the personal interest of a person like Riquet, the canal story would have been different. Riquet might have been inspired by the common good, but his personal wealth was certainly his inspiration too. In the period the canal was built, Louis XIV embarked on a project with definite personal power aspects: he invaded the Netherlands in 1672 to teach the Dutch a lesson. The war efforts of the king were even threats to the continuation of the canal project. The relative sharp distinction Mukerji draws between formal knowledge of the engineers and informal skills and expertise of the female workers from the Pyrenees, Mukerji’s “New-Romans” appears to be somewhat more fluid and open for further debate. First of all, as the engineers themselves disagreed one formal engineering knowledge may not have existed, and second I find it hard to see people from the seventeenth century as the direct descendants from Rome as Mukerji sees them. I would not as easily as she does define every little sluice or sediment trap as inheritance of Rome.

Ok, I am a little disturbed with the apparent sharp distinctions Mukerji occasionally draws between different categories. However, these distinctions may be needed in a story as rich as the Canal du Midi. This canal project is one big, complex, and fascinating narrative with many related story lines of power, knowledge, societal status, and social groups, within a material world with its own influence on the story. The book is an important example of the potential of detailed historical work within a larger-scale perspective of social change. Mukerji shows how individuals, social structures, and material context interact, in a continuous process of structuration. A great read...

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