Book Reviews

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Received: 21 March 2011 / Accepted: 21 March 2011 / Published online: 2 April 2011
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Jamie Linton: What is water. The history of a modern abstraction. UBC Press, Vancouver-Toronto, 2010, ISBN 9780774817011, 333 pp (with Index)

Steven Solomon: Water. The epic struggle for wealth, power, and civilization. Harper, New York, 2010, ISBN 9780060548308, 596 pp (with Index)

Two recent books, one written by geographer Jamie Linton and one by journalist Steven Solomon, make two issues very clear. First, water history is a field practiced not only by historians. Second, water history can be closely linked to the world of politics. Whether there is a connection between these two issues remains an open question, but the authors of these two books do make a direct connection between current water issues—which I would call “political”—and the history of water. Both authors claim that the water crisis of today can be—needs to be—explained in relation to global water history.

Linton seeks to explore the social nature of water as “every instance of water that has significance for us is saturated with the ideas, meanings, values, and potentials that we have conferred upon it.” (p. 5). For Linton, society and water make each other, and the process changes both of them. Specifically, he wants to situate the idea of water within Western thought, which he calls “modern water.” This type of water is basically similar to what I have called “water as a neutral entity,” which can be managed at will, in isolation of ecology or culture, and unrelated to history. Linton argues that the current water crisis is not a water crisis in general, but a crisis of “modern water.”

In chapter two, “Relational Dialectics: Putting Things in Fluid Terms,” Linton builds upon the work of David Harvey and Erik Swyngedouw to show how a relational-dialectical approach “provides a useful way of seeing that there is a great deal of ourselves to be found in water” (p. 43). I must confess he lost me in this chapter, which I found highly abstract and full with terms not made very concrete. He makes clear that the Western ideas about water are as much indigenous as those ideas the Western sciences would typically label with such a term. Droughts are as much a social phenomenon as a natural one. I could

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not help feeling that the first three chapters were just a very long introduction to the fourth chapter, where the book really began for me.

In chapter four, “From Premodern Waters to Modern Water,” Linton uses an article by Christopher Hamlin published in the journal *Water Policy* (2000) to discuss the process by which societies changed their perception from “waters”—which connoted different meanings associated to water, including social values—to simply “water”—referring to a neutral substance with chemical and physical properties. The development of Western sciences basically runs parallel with this shift from waters to water. The discussion clearly shows that while Western science may claim that it is not social, as it studies the neutral material world, in practice—and as most histories of science demonstrate—science is a social activity.

In chapters five to seven, this rather general idea is used to study the real core of the book, the hydrological cycle. As with any scientific “invention,” the hydrological cycle as currently known and applied by hydrologists turns out to be a human construction. Linton shows that hydrologists in the twentieth century tried their best to discover early traces of the hydrological cycle in ancient texts, so as to show that the hydrological cycle already existed outside humans and was just there for humans to discover. It becomes perfectly clear that the hydrological cycle as constructed by those same twentieth century scientists and engineers reflected their own ideas and goals, and that with hindsight many ideas from the past could be framed to support the current political and scientific context.

As Linton is very aware of the danger of this retro-fitting, it is fascinating to see that in chapter eight, “Culmination: Global Water,” he basically makes a similar move when he discusses the historical context of “global water,” which he argues is the quantification of the world’s water. In this chapter, even more than in the other parts of the book, Linton struggles with history and its distinctive meanings. History appears as a stream of events—some purposeful—by humans with intended and unintended consequences on higher societal levels; history also pops up as the description of what happened before. Occasionally, history seems to be something inevitable, as something that had to happen. Obviously, Linton is aware of history being more than description or inevitable, but he does struggle with the different categories.

In chapters nine to twelve, the political activist Linton takes over. Please do not misunderstand me. His conclusion that “modern water is as deeply embedded in the social fabric of modern Western culture as the tanks of southern India or the water temples of Bali are embedded in those cultures” (p. 181) is perfectly in order. Latour would definitely agree! Furthermore, it is not that strange to conclude that separating the material aspects of water—in terms of quantity or quality—from the social aspects of water—in terms of use or values—is not really fruitful. Linton rightly argues that reasoning along the lines that the natural water balance of a country is “wrong” is nonsensical. Indeed, water is a political matter. And indeed, framing water problems in neutral quantitative and qualitative terms is a political matter too.

With that in mind, it is reasonable that Linton wants to criticize the move towards defining water as an economic good, as a neutral element that can be traded freely. Not because water cannot be traded—thinking that would be another simplification—but because the simplicity of the argument appears to rest on a specific conceptualization of water in its social environment. The final chapter is indeed a claim to improve our understanding of water as a social phenomenon. As in chapter two, Linton uses big words—namely “hydrolectics,” his version of dialectics. But in the end it seems that the big words stand in the way of the very simple and perfectly acceptable message: water is never neutral stuff. Water is power.

Steven Solomon would agree with this statement. His book *Water: The epic struggle for wealth, power, and civilization* is a narrative of how “leading civilizations have been those that transcended their natural water obstacles to unlock and leverage the often hidden benefits of the planet’s most indispensable resource.” (p. 14) This statement alludes to some of the book’s problems. If we follow Linton and argue that water and society are mutual constituting elements and cannot be understood in isolation from each other, it is rather difficult to speak of “natural water obstacles.” Obstacles tend to depend on what humans value as important or not. “Hidden benefits” give water some kind of power of its own, independent from humans. Although I would certainly defend the position that water exists without humans, I do not think one could argue that water has hidden benefits of its own. Humans define benefits.

In a way, Solomon is—and presumably wants to be—the Jared Diamond of water history. He claims to present the overview of how human societies have dealt with water problems, how these societies succeeded and failed, and what we can learn from their experiences so as to aid our own society. In a way, Solomon’s book comes pretty close to Diamond’s work: its sweeping style, its use of selected available secondary sources of case studies, its lack of detail, its contention of relevancy to modern society, and its tendency to transpose an American experience onto a global one. This approach is not really wrong either, as water has been clearly an important resource for societies from the well-known irrigation-based societies from Mesopotamia, the Nile and the Indus to the Chinese regimes based on water control for transport and food production to the massive dams in the twentieth century. Solomon adds to this traditional food-production perspective the perspective of sea trade and control of shipping, to discuss Western global power.

Being not really wrong, however, does not mean it is correct. There are some highly problematic issues with the book in terms of its historical and theoretical perspectives. The book seems to be based on a linear historical perspective across the globe, with simple systems emerging into modern ones everywhere. Problems include: the presentation of pollution as a phenomenon from the last few centuries (which it is not, for example, see Joergensen in the first issue of *Water History* in 2010); “failures” in certain periods (a highly ambivalent term as most descendants of the societies discussed in the book are still somehow present); and the continuous descriptions of “decisive roles,” “break-throughs” and similar words. All are examples of the linear ideas underpinning Solomon’s approach. Perhaps inevitable for a book of meta-history, some devils are in the details. I happen to know a little about Dutch water history, and I can assure you that the direct relation that Solomon makes between the Dutch water board system and national democracy is rather impossible. Furthermore, if one wants to write about the large man-made freshwater lake IJsselmeer—which received water from the IJssel River—one should not confuse that with the IJ, the river close to Amsterdam. Big history is fine, but details should be correct.

Despite these criticisms, a book that brings together the many ways human societies have dealt with water-related problems and that provides an overview of sources and debates is welcome. My main problem with Solomon’s book is that, like Linton, he writes history to make a political claim. In this case his political claim may be described as opposite to Linton’s, as Solomon has a clear preference for and trust in more market forces in the water sector. He does not suggest that the market should take over completely, as there is room for state regulation. Nevertheless, according to Solomon, western capitalist democracies would be better on track to desirable water management than many other—non-western and non-democratic—societies. To him, history has shown that, but to my taste Solomon himself has not.

Both books claim that one can learn from historical cases. The extent of this learning can be debated as history is comprised of a confluence of specific contexts, contingencies, and causation. Historians agree that history cannot be written with little reference to the specific historical aspects of the societies under study nor should it be premised on a simple linear trajectory. At the core of historical scholarship is a drive to show how complex things were. While the past can point us in certain directions, its lessons rarely are directly applicable to present concerns. In contrast, both Linton and Solomon seem attracted to big certainties: to them, history has shown how things went right or wrong, what to do or not to do, and what is the best way out of our current problems. I rather like to think of history as a discipline making our understanding of reality more complicated. While I appreciate both books for their effort to clarify and discuss society's historical relations with water, I think that in the end both books are not works of history, but instead political claims for a better future.

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