

GLOBAL INSIGHTS

Contested Flows: Criticality in Water Policy

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Based on the Global Insights episode *Human Insecurity in a Water-Scarce World*, featuring Ken Conca, Abule Mehare and Debora Van Nijantten.

This blog looks at water security as a discourse and the policy practices that emerge from it. The construction of water as a 'resource' that can be equitably 'distributed' once 'captured' is not apolitical, and carries with it a dominant understanding of human relationships with nature. Contending that the conventional economy/ecology split is problematic, this blog pushes for radical policymaking with a focus on marginalised communities that takes into account perspectives from political ecology and ecological economics.

The challenge of knowing the environment

Modern capitalism is sustained by the hegemonic idea of an ultimate anthropocentric control over the environment. The idea of 'man'kind's domination over nature to whom a natural bounty is infinitely available only waiting to be transformed by labour is nearly universal espousing contradictions. This commandment-like idea animates a need to make the natural world 'work' through (neoliberal) economic principles, separating economics from society and the environment. By exclusively centring human agency, the active agency of the non-human world is made invisible, and the mutually constitutive role played by humans inside (and not above) the larger biogeophysical system is ignored. The trichotomization of world into distinct economic, social and environmental spheres thus perpetuates a dominant imagination of modernity, limiting much-needed radical action around environmental thought and policymaking. Hegemonic discourses can similarly be identified in mainstream water policy practice, suggesting the need for corrective action that tries to include the marginal and disempowered. Exploring such a possibility is the central theme of this piece.

Eliminating anthropocentrism seems impossible – even the apparently holistic discourse of planetary 'wellbeing' centres human survival. However, this limitation doesn't preclude progressive change altogether. If identified and accepted as just that, a limitation – centred and dominant discourses can be disturbed, leading to better policymaking and implementation. This begs the question, however: what scale and degree of change is necessary? Further, is thinking in terms of a water 'scarcity' productive or is it a totalising idea that runs against natural realities? This piece doesn't answer these questions directly, instead seeking to provoke imaginative policymaking that is open to radical thought and averse to co-option by hegemonic narratives. Rather than relying on top-down governance, a focus on communities and collective histories of marginalisation holds potential for alternate forms of thought, where access to water is not seen as an engineering-policy problem, but rather a complex of social, political and economic oppression.

In addition to anthropocentrism, action over the environmental faces another limit of human experience – cooperation. Collective action over focussed, short-term, and community-level problems is challenging enough, as evidenced by countless popular movements over human history. Now we must organise and implement collective action over diverse intersectional communities, complex issue areas, poorly defined problem-statements, and without the benefit of short-term results. A normative ideology is necessary to bridge these gaps, to adapt progressive thought to local specificities while maintaining a global conscience and shift the organising principles of collective climate action more broadly.

The success of greenwashing by multinational corporations, nation-states, NGOs, and other global governance organisations is only one example of the hope and support that nearly any superficially ‘positive’ action on a crisis can invite, often on the basis of the “something is better than nothing” argument. These discursive practices are not passive, and depoliticise highly contested sites of struggle (in access to water for instance), while allowing hegemonic interests to maintain power over the direction of ‘progressive’ action – neutralizing any radical change. This piece finds promise in the disciplines of political ecology and ecological economics, not as ideological blueprints but normative assessments that resist capitalist urges, choosing rather to maintain a critical outlook towards hegemony.

Water as ‘scarce’

The access to water has the special attribute of being a pre-requisite for immediate biological survival. Unlike most environmental issues, like rising surface temperatures and CO2 levels, that affect marginalised (often agrarian) and minority (like island-nation) communities more directly, the risk of water scarcity is posed as an immediate threat to human survival as a whole. While this distinction of an immediate/long-term is a useful analytical tool, it compartmentalises environmental challenges into discrete issues, avoiding contention with fundamentally problematic human-nature relationships. Relying on institutionalised policymaking as the primary locus of change makes these problems inherent, requiring a motivated response that understands the importance of normative positionalities. The ever-present “we aren’t doing enough” grievance can only be confronted by analysing the dominant narratives that surround water scarcity and the possible discursive alternatives towards change.

It is thus crucial to recognise problems contingent to separating the economics from ecology, and identify long-standing contradictions present in dominant modes of economic production. For instance, the assumption of the objective of infinite growth where all nation-states can pursue ever-expanding development, begs the question: if imperial colonies were central to European growth through global capitalism, what resources can post-colonial states exploit to achieve comparable growth? The answer usually lies in the intensification of national economic production processes, territorialising the periphery into the nation-state. While the periphery and its people are internal to national territory, they are still outside its empowerment, remaining marginalised and excluded. The benefits of pursuing infinite growth thus don’t trickle down, instead pooling around privileged groups, while also exploiting environmental health. Framing water as ‘scarce’ allows the nation-state to securitize water, rerouting it for the demands of ‘nation-building’, while denying agency to the people most in need of water access. This securitization further impinges on non-human agency, since water is seen as an environmental ‘resource’, to be expropriated from non-human agents in favour of (unequal) human consumption. Scarcity, while human-induced, is not a failure of water capture (think dams and tanks), but rather of social relations of production.

The securitization of water depends on a multi-faceted discursive production of power. States, corporations and individuals engage within the limited narratives of water security, hoping to secure the ability to manage access to water. In North America, the agro-industrial lobby holds significant influence over water

allocation and use, and works to maintain its domination, necessitating wasteful water usage practices. Farmers as labour are distinct from this agro-industrial lobby, where they face risks of informalisation, poor healthcare and vulnerability to climate change - signs of an exploited labour class. While intense differences do exist between forms of labour exploitation in the Global North and South, the North/South division must not preclude horizontal progressive action that challenges labour and ecological oppression beyond borders. Such redressal can be approached through radical policymaking. By drawing from and contributing to critical thought, normatively-positioned policymaking can engage with and produce effective collective action on water (and intimately-related climate) issues.

The role of policy academia

Academic policymakers/advisors enjoy a position of special privilege. Their ability to influence governments while engaging meaningfully with more-abstract academia holds the potential for producing alternatives from within dominant frameworks. The increasing recognition of profound inequality being a symptom of an unsustainable global economic system is promising. This shift could make visible the importance of normative discursive positionalities, which can then deconstruct and reconstruct narratives around water security.

To understand why mainstream policymaking despite its best intentions succumbs to the charms of the state, it is helpful to problematize policymaking's lack of engagement with their own discourse as a site of power. In other words, by framing the lack of access to water as a problem that can be solved through existing policymaking philosophies, the issue is pigeonholed into a dominant discourse. By accepting that water is a 'resource', which can be 'controlled' and thus 'distributed' in a more equitable manner – a narrative of techno-engineering is produced, avoiding socio-political and ecological discussions. Even if policy is couched in terms of ecological preservation and 'sustainability', the necessary decentring of humans as master-controllers remains untouched. Policymakers could acknowledge the politics of discourse, and intentionally move away from such narratives. The EU, for instance, has the world's most complete and coherent policy system around transboundary water access. However, attempts to include global marginalisation as an operative lens within the EU paradigm would lead to incoherence, due to its techno-engineering focus. Critical policymakers can thus step in to deconstruct the naturalized assumptions of the EU framework, moving towards a consideration of the continuum of challenges present.

For meaningful engagement with water scarcity, scarcity itself needs to be understood as politically contested. Focussing on marginalised and oppressed groups at the level of global policymaking can influence regional policy systems with similar aims. Excessive reliance on hierarchical and institutionalised governance systems can be avoided by working with communities on the ground, shifting active agency to the marginalised, and contributing to normative consensus at the global level. Such a consensus would problematize the discourse of water a 'resource' and recognise its highly-political denial and appropriation. Such denial is intersectional, and sensitivity to privilege and domination can bring in alternate discourses, like rights-based perspectives on water equity.

By understanding the problem with water in terms of political ecology and ecological economics, policy practitioners can not only contend with a broader discourse beyond the mainstream, but sharpen critical discourse within policymaking, opening possibilities for effective action within institutions. Without such critical insights and positionalities, water security discourses remain open to co-option by dominant forms of power. International law presents a great example for understanding the productive effects of institutions on broader discourse. Despite being rigid, and limited in scope and enforceability, international law has

served as precedent for domestic law when sufficient regimes were absent. By framing international law in terms of justice and the rights of the oppressed, a significant narrative shift can be encouraged.

Ecological economic suggests thinking in terms of ecological ‘flows’. Matter, energy and knowledge flows become the variables of choice – and broader epistemic shifts like thinking of agricultural production in terms of “nutritional value per gallon of water” can help change the technical discourse around agricultural production. Such changes are not apolitical, and the inherent persistence of the dominant needs is met with a radical normativity that focusses on the suppressed agency of the (dehumanised) marginal and non-human.

As with any discursive project, there remain significant challenges to inducing specific changes to narratives. However, by acknowledging the discursive production of power, policymakers can recognise alternate modes of knowledge production, that speak to not only governments and developmental authorities, but also to the needs of marginalised communities and non-human agents who face the greatest risks of water scarcity. The potential vacuousness of discourse-oriented thought can be improved upon by confronting specific challenges with an appreciation for historical contingency, like community-level water scarcity. An appreciation for narrativization and practice can thus be threaded into the pragmatism of policymaking for progressive action. This piece believes that this convergence holds the potential for exciting cross-talk between usually oppositional epistemic communities, with the broader goal of disturbing the status quo towards progressive action. In the final analysis, the environmental discourse is in dire need of radical challenge, and policy-related academia has much to contribute.



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