

Review Essays | Ensayos de Reseña

Critical Perspectives on Water Governance in Latin America

Book Review Essay by Emilie Dupuits

- *Grassroots Global Governance: Local Watershed Management Experiments and the Evolution of Sustainable Development*, Edited by Craig Kauffman, Oxford University Press, 2016.
- *Water Justice*, Edited by Rutgerd Boelens, Tom Perreault and Jeroen Vos, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- *Drip Irrigation for Agriculture. Untold Stories of Efficiency, Innovation and Development*, Edited by Jean-Philippe Venot, Marcel Kuper and Margreet Zwarteveen, Routledge, 2018.

Despite the absence of a formalised international regime on water governance, several global norms and paradigms on the subject of governing water resources have emerged. For instance, the 1992 Dublin Principles that define water as an economic resource, Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) or the Human Right to Water recognised by the United Nations (UN) in 2010. Various authors have nevertheless pointed out the normative limitations of these paradigms, which are mainly defined by international experts, states and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and leave aside the most affected and vulnerable people (see for example Bréthaut and Schweizer, 2018).

The three books presented in this essay provide a critical perspective on different issues and challenges related to water governance. While the first book focuses on a specific case study in Ecuador discussing Integrated Watershed Management (IWM), the other two draw on several different cases in Latin America, Africa and Asia in order to discuss the construction and challenges of water justice and drip irrigation (a technology allowing micro-irrigation

through closed pipe systems). All books take as a starting point the production of global norms and policies by international experts and states and their impacts on the ground for grassroots actors. As a result, they enlighten the travelling processes of these norms and discourses across jurisdictional and geographical scales. The Latin American cases moreover reveal the power of resistance and organised movements in this specific region.

Finally, the authors of these books all mobilise empirical and grounded methodological approaches to critically analyse the production and impacts of global norms on water governance. This position is increasingly adopted by authors involved in action-oriented research or participatory methods (see for example Vila Benites and Bonelli, 2018).

Unpacking global discourses and norms on water governance

In *Grassroots Global Governance: Local Watershed Management Experiments and the Evolution of Sustainable Development*, Craig Kauffman provides an analysis of the ways global norms travel toward the local scale and are more or less successfully adapted to the local realities. He highlights the particular role of network activation strategies – such as counter-framing, local knowledge community, community-based participatory research, or linking institutions – in the transfer and adaptation of global norms on the ground. He also explains how global norms may be transformed by these local experiments, producing a new norm-building cycle. The author refers to these processes by using the concept of grassroots global governance, considering ‘the grassroots level as a distinct, but no less important, terrain where global governance is constructed’ (p.6). He identifies three main phases in this process, centred around the questions: why do policy ideas diffuse in national contexts?; then, how they are institutionalised in local contexts?; and finally, what is the evolution of global ideas? He particularly highlights the role of transnational governance networks.

Kauffman’s analysis focuses on the global norm of Integrated Watershed Management (IWM), which emerged after the 1992 Rio Conference and the declaration made by the Global Water Partnership in 2000 gathering states, intergovernmental organisations (IOs), NGOs and international experts. As specified by the author, ‘IWM is the process of coordinating the conservation, management, and development of water, land, and related natural resources across sectors (e.g., agriculture, hydropower, water supply, mining, tourism, as well as conservation of forests, soil, and biodiversity) within a given watershed in order to maximize the resultant economic and social benefits in an equitable manner while ensuring the sustainability of related ecosystems’ (p.9).

From the comparative analysis of six case studies, Kauffman examines the challenges of IWM implementation in the Ecuadorian Andes and the emergence of local experiments leading to its reframing and adaptation. Indeed, due to local suspicions and disagreements, especially from part of the indigenous communities, the IWM norm has been reoriented toward alternative watershed

conservation funding practices such as voluntary contributions and collective payments. Drawing on these local politics, the author explains how local actors have been able to scale-up their own vision of water management linked to the idea of the Rights of Nature. The Rights of Nature have been formally recognised in the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador, and are partly based on the Kichwa concept of *Sumak Kawsay*, or *Buen Vivir*, standing for the harmony between human beings and the Earth. The Rights of Nature framework is actually challenging the global paradigm of sustainable development promoted by the UN and most of international development experts.

Water Justice, edited by Rutgerd Boelens, Tom Perreault and Jeroen Vos, offers a collection of works focused on water justice movements and battles all over the world, mainly based on political ecology approaches. The main objective of the book is to reflect on and provide conceptual tools and solutions to remedy both the material and social water injustices that often affect the poorest populations. The book intends to analyse the recent changes in policies related to water justice, focusing for example on water saving and conservation beyond mega-hydraulic infrastructures, and on the shifts in accountability. Moreover, the authors specify the adoption of a critical approach on water governance norms and discourses, specifying that ‘the book calls attention to how power and politics also significantly work through more invisible norms and rules that present themselves as naturally or technically ordered’ (p.2).

The authors provide an interesting clarification on the distinct theoretical approaches on justice. The two first approaches of justice are based on a liberal, universalistic and individualistic concept (positivist and Western orientation) on the one hand, and a social and distributive notion that disregards the roots of discriminations (social, cultural, symbolic or institutional), on the other hand. The authors’ objective is to focus on relational justice clarifying how ‘such critical, grounded justice perspectives must understand how diverse people see and define justice within a specific context, history and time’ (p.5). Moreover, they differentiate water justice from water security, the last one being a global paradigm that has emerged to promote the resource access, quantity and quality without much consideration to political and social concerns.

The book offers a panorama of different cases in Latin America, Africa and Asia focusing on the ‘multiple layers of water injustices’ (p.2). They identify four different domains of justice struggles related to recognition, participation, distribution and socio-ecological aspects. Most of the chapters deal with open conflicts involving states, private companies and civil society groups on issues such as water-grabbing, agribusiness, extractive industries, hydro-power and mega-hydraulic development, rural-urban transfers and intra-urban inequalities, and privatisation. Some chapters however also analyse more invisible and daily power struggles, related for example to the formalisation of water rights, the implementation of payment for environmental services programs, or the imposition of rationality and efficiency standards. Finally, some works also

analyse the grassroots accommodation with water control and injustices as a strategy to gain interests and power.

In *Drip Irrigation for Agriculture. Untold Stories of Efficiency, Innovation and Development*, authors Jean-Philippe Venot, Marcel Kuper and Margreet Zwarteveen try to answer why, despite its failures and disappointments on the ground, the global discourse on drip irrigation continues to focus on its promises, presenting it as a best practice for agriculture modernisation, water saving and poverty reduction. Drip irrigation is a technology that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s during the so-called green revolution and is mainly promoted by international development experts and engineers. The book aims at identifying and analysing the untold stories of drip irrigation with an empirical and grounded approach of the global narratives, discourses and success stories.

The book starts with three introductory chapters that present a historical construction of the worldwide success story of drip irrigation; the theoretical lenses used to analyse the network and materiality of drip irrigation; and the technical responses mobilised to tackle its limitations on the field. The authors highlight the lack of critical analysis in the existing literature on drip irrigation, asking what it really does and for whom? Venot, Kuper and Zwarteveen explain how ‘the enthusiasm that surrounds drip irrigation as a technology is primarily based on a theoretical construct, that of its ‘potential’ and ‘promises’, rather than on what it achieves and does in farmers’ fields or river basins’ (p.13). Therefore, their aim is to focus on farmers’ everyday practices, highlighting the importance of context and practice-based understandings, and their complexity beyond meta-policy narratives of efficiency, innovation and development. The authors explain how ‘the book extends its analysis beyond engineering and hydraulics to understand drip irrigation as a sociotechnical phenomenon that not just changes the way water is supplied to crops but also transforms agricultural production systems and even how society is organized – sometimes in unexpected ways’ (p.4).

The analytical chapters are organised in four sections that present cases from Latin America, Africa and Asia. The first three sections are structured around three main discourses on drip irrigation built among development professionals: water savings and efficiency, the modernisation of agriculture, and poverty alleviation and development. Firstly, the authors focus on the ambiguities of drip irrigation as a conservation solution due to the differing contexts and scales of savings. Then, they analyse how the productivity frame considers farmers as *homo economicus*, disregarding cultural or social aspects. The third section points out how the development and poverty reduction narrative only considers the potential of the small farmers to become entrepreneurs, ignoring wider political and structural inequalities. The Latin American case studies, in Peru, Chile and Mexico, provide interesting examples of cases where drip irrigation has not been adopted by farmers, denouncing the creation of the water crisis benefitting agribusiness elites and capital. Finally, the last section dis-

cusses the local adaptations and interpretations of drip irrigation, highlighting how it ‘is not a standardized technological package, but is re-engineered by farmers, local craftsmen and engineers to fit specific bio-physical and socio-economic requirements’ (p.11).

Achievements and remaining challenges

Taken together the three books clearly highlight the scalar and power dynamics behind the construction of global norms and discourses on water governance by focusing on three different major issues related to watershed management, water justice politics and drip irrigation technology. Common challenges discussed by the authors are the knowledge battles between different modes of development that oppose the modernisation ideal that considers water as a bio-physical resource, and more socio-territorial concerns of water justice. They all point out how certain norms and discourses are reproduced despite their limitations and critics on the ground in order to maintain the same accumulation and neoliberal logics of production and development. All the authors combine the study of actors’ networks and discursive processes revealing the power dynamics and framing processes at stake, as well as the role of advocacy coalitions. Moreover, they seek to go beyond the study of conflict and resistance to focus on more subtle knowledge battles as to understand what are the innovations, appropriations and bricolage produced on the ground.

The three books also provide an interesting historical perspective on the emergence of the global paradigms on water resources and the resulting conflicts or tensions. While drip irrigation emerged in the context of the green revolution in the 1960s, IWM and water security were created after the 1992 Rio Summit promoting sustainable development. These norms are inscribed into the context of (neo)extractivism, particularly anchored in the Latin American continent (see for example De Castro et al., 2016, and Alimonda et al., 2018). Adopting this historical approach helps showing how some best solutions are defended at the global scale, hiding the concrete political and historical factors surrounding the water and development crisis.

Nevertheless, crucial questions remain unanswered, in particular regarding the dynamics and scalar connections of grassroots actors’ battles and conflicts in water governance. Far from being ordinary people (Kauffman, in *Grassroots Global Governance*), grassroots global governors or international grassroots leaders can also hide elite capture and exclusion processes inside their category of civil society. Moreover, Boelens, Perreault and Vos clearly state that ‘all our authors [...] expressly engage and identify with those groups in society that have the least rights and power over water access and decision-making. They all aim to support their water security struggles’ (p.23). While action-oriented research is a necessary and valuable method to critically study water justice battles, there is also a risk to systematically oppose the same categories of actors. Rather, the critical perspective on water governance could benefit from

deeper analysis on the (re)production of water injustices among grassroots actors.

Another approach that would complement the findings of these books would be to study the international dynamics and power struggles beyond the grounded focus. For example, while IWM has been adapted to the local scale in the Ecuadorian highlands and the Rights of Nature have been scaled-up and recognised at the global scale (Kauffman, in *Grassroots Global Governance*), what are the resulting challenges of the standardisation of these rights that could lead to similar processes of disconnection and commensuration? Moreover, while the local implications of the global discourse on drip irrigation have been demonstrated (Venot, Kuper and Zwarteveen, in *Drip Irrigation*), one can ask if there is any case of learning and change in the discourse of international development experts promoting this technology? And are there small farmers who have been able to scale-up alternative norms and framings based on their own irrigation practices in order to challenge the dominant discourse on drip irrigation? The contributions reviewed in this essay certainly form a steady base from where to answer these challenging empirical, theoretical and methodological issues. All three books, *Grassroots Global Governance*, *Water Justice* and *Drip Irrigation for Agriculture*, help to answer important questions and advance our understanding of water governance in Latin America from critical lenses.

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