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Peer reviewed

Review: *Water, Place, and Equity*

John M. Whitely, Helen Ingram, and Richard Warren Perry (Eds.)

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Whiteley, John M., Ingram, Helen, and Perry, Richard Warren (Eds). *Water, Place, and Equity*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. 318pp. ISBN 9780262232715. US\$63, cloth.

Water, Place, and Equity begins with the argument that “water will dominate world natural resource politics by the end of the twenty-first century much as oil dominated the late twentieth century” (p.1). A most precious resource to humans and non-human species alike, water is threatened by contentious developments of humankind, developments of and for neoliberal modernization, such as hydro-capitalism. *Water, Place, and Equity* does not speak directly to or call explicit attention to the so-called waterborne consequences of the growing global intrusion of neoliberalism and hydro-capitalism, per se, but these issues underpin much of the politics of water management and decision-making in focus in the diverse case studies explored in this edited volume. Human connections to water are deep and therefore water debates quickly become debates saturated by cultural, political, economic, and religious concerns. Much like the book *Water, Culture, and Power: Local Struggles in a Global Context*, edited by John M. Donahue and Barbara Rose Johnston, published a decade earlier (Island Press, 1998), *Water, Place, and Equity* argues that “Issues of equity are best explored in the context of actual cases of social interaction related to water” (p.29).

The first section of the book contains chapters showcasing a range of topics, from “moral economic” framings of water, ethics in water policy, institutional shifts and their influence on attaining water equity, border region water management, and the complex challenges of transboundary water management. The case studies presented in this section of the book operate under the premise that “water has constitutive as well as transformative powers” (p.35) and that human attachments to place and cultural identity often center on deep human-water relations.

The second set of chapters focus on the topic of “Civic Engagement and Governance,” emphasizing the ways in which political economy, especially privatization, state-industry relations, and the politics of knowledge of water management decisions, and the strengthening climate change problem figure in *global* water resource conflicts and decision-making. While the chapters explore multiple examples of water governance failures, a common political thread connecting community efforts to secure and allocate water for survival, according to the editors, is that “procedural equity requires open, transparent, accessible, and accountable decision making” (p.191).

In a chapter titled “Modernizing Mountain Water: State, Industry, and Territory,” contributor Ismael Vaccaro contends that “indeed, water management cannot be studied as a localized, clearly delimited issue. The consequences of every hydraulic policy echo over large distances. The social and ecological footprints of dams and channels encompass entire watersheds and regions. Water policies, in the long run...are not only about managing water and its associated land. They act as territorialization policies that validate natural resources appropriation and the rearrangement of both the national administrative grid and the property regimes of entire regions” (p.243). This is a critical trend in current water governance and policy and will likely grow in the years to come. Increased civic engagement in these debates, the book argues, will generate more equitable water policies for present and future generations.

The take home message of *Water, Place, and Equity* is that “Water conflict is inevitable. It cannot be avoided through any application of universal principles. Attention needs to shift to process, tools, venues, and institutions through which conflict can be dealt with while attending to equity.” I can’t remember who was quoted for saying “Whiskey is for drinking. Water is for fighting,” but this book seems to be a righteous response to this unfortunate reality. It looks into the processes that condition both water resource policy and the *hopes* that equity and fairness continue to shape future global water resource policy to ensure that water be a source of life and equity rather than a cause of conflict and violence. Once again, the economization and marketization of water in this age of neoliberalism falls short of

creating fairness in the allocation of water. *Water, Place, and Equity* aims to reverse this trend and make global water policy grounded by equity, rather than market rationalization and the mission of efficiency.

This book argues for interdisciplinarity and will be of interest to political and social scientists engaged in environmental studies and politics in general, and water policy and natural resource governance and conflict in particular.

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