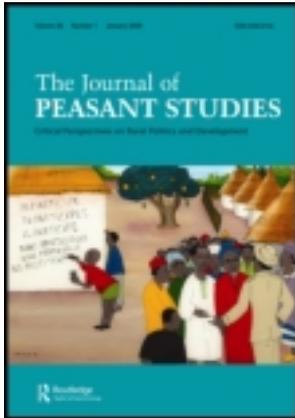


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Water, environmental security and sustainable rural development

Philip Woodhouse^a

^a Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester

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open a debate to contest meanings of sustainability while participating from the perspective of an agrarian ideal that promotes virtue ethics—this is loading the dice. Thompson's book is a subtle, brilliant and extremely interesting recipe for rehabilitating 'habits and material practices' (287). So don't just read it. Make a meal of it. Invite your friends.

P. (Trish) Glazebrook
Chair, Department of Philosophy and Religion Studies
University of North Texas
Email: tg@unt.edu
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Water, environmental security and sustainable rural development, edited by Murat Arsel and Max Spoor, Abingdon, Routledge ISS Studies in Rural Livelihoods, 2010, xiv+284 pp., £85.50 (hardcover), ISBN13: 978-0415-46161-0

Even in an age defined by narratives of environmental threats, water stands out as a natural resource associated more than most with images of crisis. The lack of access to clean water for a billion of the world's population is a recurring marker for the failure of the project of international development, and water is also implicated in narratives of resource scarcity by predictions of 'water wars'. That there is no necessary link between the two does not diminish the aggregate sense of a 'global water crisis', which has provided a rationale for the development and marketing of the skills of a 'water sector' supporting the livelihoods of environmentalists, engineers, economists and social scientists. This sectoral approach to water may be divided between 'hydro-pessimists' who see the inevitability of 'water wars' and 'hydro-optimists' who argue that water scarcity will drive rival water users to cooperate. In each case, the notion of water scarcity is defined in terms of the limits to the water resource itself. There have been rather fewer voices arguing that 'water scarcity' is determined less commonly by ecology than by human society (Mehta 2005, 2010), and it is in that context that this recent volume edited by Murat Arsel and Max Spoor is an important contribution.

The editors set out in their opening chapter to argue that water scarcity is a socially constructed and highly politicised concept, taking a position explicitly at odds with both the hydro-pessimists and hydro-optimists. In doing so, they chart their own journey from a 'scarcity' narrative that provided the title (The Last Drop?) for the conference from which this edited collection of papers is drawn. It is an analytical progression all the more remarkable because the papers are all concerned with a geographical area particularly associated with degradation of water resources. Dramatic images of ships stranded by the shrinkage of the Aral Sea, at the boundary between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are emblematic of both the huge scale and the destructive potential of water diversion projects undertaken during the Soviet era. The editors make clear that the shift in their perspective on water that accompanied the transition from conference papers to edited book has been driven by a commitment to empirical analysis. Indeed, the book comprises a series of empirical case

studies drawn from 'central Eurasia'. This is understood to encompass Iraq and Turkey in the west, and Mongolia in the east, with Afghanistan and the ex-soviet countries of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. If only on the grounds of detailed information on water resources in this geographical area, the book may be considered an important reference work. However, its more important contribution lies in its account of change in management of water resources over the past two decades, that is, in the post-Soviet period and (in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan) that of US intervention in the region.

The book is organised in three main sections, chapters 2–5 focussing on transformation of water management regimes at a local level, chapters 6–9 dealing with 'cooperation and conflict' across the many new international frontiers in the region, and chapters 10–12 concerned with the changing role of state water agencies. Originating as they do from a variety of different studies, the empirical studies are not all directly comparable. Moreover, some tend toward the descriptive, particularly where they are concerned with the organisation of transboundary water resource management. Others, however, provide outstanding examples of interdisciplinary analysis of natural resource use. In particular, the chapter by Abdullayev et al. on 'reconstruction' of irrigation management in Afghanistan and that by Ellis and Arsel on the 'restoration' of marshlands in Iraq should be required reading for anyone involved in water resource management in developing countries. In each case detailed analysis of the political economy of water use provides a basis for not only an understanding of the role of water in local socio-economic relationships, but also a critique of the rationale for official development policy. Thus, the continued functioning of irrigation systems in Afghanistan is shown to be sharply at variance with national and international development agencies' perceptions of an infrastructural and institutional void. Similarly, analysis of the long-term historical economic and demographic changes in the marshlands of southern Iraq contrasts sharply with development agencies' 'restoration' narrative that imagines them as a lost Eden unchanged for millennia before the destructive impact of Saddam Hussain following the first Gulf War. The great strength of these accounts, as also of those of Caroline Upton on wells in Mongolia's pastoral commons and Gert van Veldwisch's study of irrigation in post-soviet Uzbekistan, is not only that empirical accounts convincingly provide an understanding that official development narratives do not, but that this understanding extends to an appreciation of the highly unequal political and economic relationships within rural societies. This, as Abdullayev et al. point out, is essential if any external intervention (for example in reconstruction of irrigation infrastructure) is to achieve anything other than reinforcing existing inequalities within rural communities.

This points to two observations that are important for how we think about water, and natural resources more generally. The first is that water use, and the rules that govern it, are manifestations of social relations. As a consequence, the study of how water is used and governed may be considered a lens through which to understand relations of power within society. The second is that water use is not generally an end in itself, but a means to other economic and/or political ends. This implies that water use, notwithstanding its specific hydrological character, can only be understood in terms of the political economy of the society

in which it is embedded. This is entirely consistent with Arsel and Spoor's argument that water scarcity is socially constructed, and also with their observation in their concluding chapter that, rather than a determinant of insecurity, water may be used as a 'weapon' in conflict arising from issues unrelated to water. Despite the somewhat uneven quality of the chapters, this book is an important push towards a wider recognition of the social dimensions of water as a 'natural' resource, and a useful counter to some of the more environmental determinist tendencies within the water literature.

Philip Woodhouse

Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester

Email: phil.woodhouse@manchester.ac.uk

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Land, memory, reconstruction, and justice. Perspectives on land claims in South Africa, edited by Cheryl Walker, Anna Bohlin, Ruth Hall and Thembela Kepe, Athens, Ohio University Press/KwaZulu-Natal, 2010, 335 pp., US\$28.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-821-1927-4

As a reaction to the many expressions of discontent about the way the post-apartheid land reform programme has been implemented so far, the South African Ministry of Rural Development and Land Reform has published a new Green Paper on land reforms. The current land reform programme was introduced following the democratic transition in 1994, to address the legacy of a racially highly skewed distribution of land. In addition to a land redistribution and communal land tenure reform component, the programme also includes a restitution component, which is quite unique in the southern African region.

The basis of the restitution component is the Restitution of Land Rights Act (22 of 1994), which states that any person or community dispossessed of property after 1913 as a result of racially discriminatory laws or practices, without adequate compensation, can file a claim for restitution of the property in question. Direct descendants or deceased estates of such persons can equally lodge a claim. The year 1913 was selected as this was the year the first legal act that had a discriminatory effect on access to land, the Natives Land Act, was adopted. The deadline for submitting claims had been set at the end of 1998. Recently, however, the Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform, Gugile Nkwinti, has indicated that he is planning to ask the Cabinet to open up the process again and that he would like to allow claims based on pre-1913 dispossessions. The complexities that such an initiative would entail can be glimpsed from the book edited by Cheryl Walker, Anna Bohlin, Ruth Hall and Thembela Kepe, entitled *Land, Memory, Reconstruction, and Justice: Perspectives on Land Claims in South Africa*.