

## Normal Water

Jeremy J. Schmidt. 2019. *Water. Abundance, Scarcity, and Security in the Age of Humanity*. New York University Press: New York, 320 pp, ISBN: 9781479846429

*Water* is a thought-provoking book wherein the human geographer Jeremy J. Schmidt sets out on a task to retrieve a lost philosophy that he argues is the very basis for the by now common assumption that water is a resource (p. 224) – it should be emphasized that this lost philosophy is not one the author agrees with (p. 36). This narrative is told over 230 pages of intense philosophical history in the setting of the United States of America, where, as he argues, the very idea of “Normal Water” was born, and which is the driving force behind today’s view on water as a resource. *Water* consists of nine chapters, divided in four parts that mostly follows the subtitle of the book: *Abundance, Scarcity, Security, and Rethinking the Anthropocene*. Prior to the chapters there is an introduction that sets the stage and they are followed by a conclusion rounding up the arguments of the book as well as situating them within a forward-looking Anthropocene context.

At first, it seems appropriate to define the title of this review, as it is a core concept running through the book: *Normal Water*: “a program for bringing water’s social and evolutionary possibilities into the service of liberal forms of life” (p. 4). From this definition Schmidt continues to explain that, “Initially, crafting a common way to think about water was accomplished by categorizing it as a resource. This classification is now so common that it appears natural, but in the United States water was not a ‘resource’ until 1909” (p. 4-5). But why does it matter that water is defined as a resource? And how did it end up that way? These are core questions of the book that Schmidt takes the reader along to discover and discuss – hence, I will leave them for the reader – would hate to take away the fun! However, what I found especially interesting in the book is how Schmidt illustrates the political as well as intellectual developments in the U.S. for over a decade – pointing out how the philosophy of water management became key to organize liberal ways of life first nationally, but later also as a tool for international engagement and influence (p. 71).

In the first part of the book, *Abundance*, there are three chapters. The story starts in the U.S. showing how “despite their own pretences to objectivity, water managers crafted their own myth around the belief that liberal societies are uniquely equipped to manage the vast array of social and evolutionary possibilities made available by water” (p.5).

Water management was part of separating the colonial ties to Britain, as well as of scaling up American influence internationally. In the book Schmidt illustrates how water was first defined as a resource in order to be managed so that America could rise beyond European civilization, “because mastery of water was, in fact, mastery of evolutionary abundance” (p.76).

The second part of the book, *Scarcity*, consists of two chapters that lay out the idea that the once abundant water was now becoming scarce (p. 95). This was done with the intention to promote international development and spread national American liberalism abroad. For example, in Chapter 4, Schmidt illustrates how water management travels, when David Lilienthal visited the Indus Basin, located between India and Pakistan, in 1951 in order to broker a peaceful deal between the two countries while developing water (p. 111). Dams were important as liberal powerhouses where water could be stored as a scarce resource (p. 114). But something else was needed to fully make the claim that water was a scarce resource. Namely, the factor of demand had to be included (p. 115). “As abundance was buried behind large dams, the shift to scarcity appeared to happen in short order.” That water was scarce was declared already in 1977 at the UN Conference on Water, with the “appearance of a crisis” (p. 116). However, as Schmidt illustrates, there was nothing sudden about this shift, as it could be traced back to early 1900 U.S. water management schemes. From here followed the idea of “Rational Planning,” that meant “there was enough water – but not if this scarce resource wasn’t valued correctly” (p. 132) – by valued I understand managed.

In the third part of the book, *Security*, the readers are lead to understand how Normal Water goes Global (Ch 6) with the help of the idea of “Integrated Water Resource Management” that “took hold of the sustainable development agenda when it came to water” (p. 143). IWRM became a platform that connected management and development, looking at water as an economic resource. However, things developed and IWRM fell out of favour and got exchanged for a new concept: “the Water-Energy-Food-Climate Nexus” (Ch 7). This shift takes us into the new water decade (2005-2015) and the birth of the resilience concept, as well as “blue” and “green” water (p. 168-9).

The final part of the book, *Rethinking the Anthropocene*, brings the so-far historical perspective of the book into the present. Illustrating how the “lost philosophy” now retrieved is crucial for our future-thinking in the Anthropocene, Schmidt writes: “Disrupting the naturalization of process and the social pretences that position liberal forms of life as uniquely equipped to manage geological contingencies is the political task of the Anthropocene” (p. 201). This is partly done by recognizing that water defined as a resource is now haunting us as a “premature naturalization of process” (p. 206). As one of his closing arguments Schmidt argues, “social scientists should refuse the notion that water resources is a neutral category” (p. 229).

Before closing this review, let me state the book's relevance for the *Anthropology Book Forum*, as well as note who the interested reader might be. Schmidt is well-travelled in anthropological theory and engages anthropological theoretical debates throughout the book. Moreover, many of the key protagonists of his story are in fact early anthropologists such as WJ McGee (Schmidt stresses that McGee did not want any punctuations in order to save ink), who was president of the American Anthropological Association from 1902-1912. The book does also engage, among others, Margaret Mead and Franz Boas. So, for the interested anthropological reader – there is much historical food for thought. *Water* is going to be of interest to scholars of water, international development, American history, liberalism, and not least for those interested in the Anthropocene. The book is not a light read, as it is philosophically and theoretically heavy, so I would recommend it for graduate courses and post-graduate scholars as well as for a general reader that is not a novice to the subject.

I want to add a caveat; exactly because this book is so packed with historical and philosophical knowledge it is not the easiest book to review. Not because I do not like it – I do! – but choosing what to take away from the book was difficult. Hence, readers of this review might find that many important points are left out. I do not, for example, mention: “Earth-making” (p. 45), “the People” (Ch 3), the “International Hydrological Decade” (p. 118), or the Tennessee Valley Authority (p. 118). Some gems are still hidden in this dense but important read. To end, let us ask one of the most important questions of the book, what is *Water* comprised of? According to Schmidt (p. 33), scientists cannot agree on what “water” is – so how could a simple review define such a grand question?

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