

Anthropology Book Forum

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Caterina Scaramelli, *How to Make a Wetland: Water and Moral Ecology in Turkey*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2021. 240 p. ISBN 978-1-5036-1540-3.

Keywords: environmental anthropology, Turkey, infrastructure, political ecology, water, more-than-human

Wetlands are one of the biomes that have suffered most under the auspices of modernisation and development, having often been imagined as antithetical to progress as places of disease, stagnation, and illegality. Now, they are having a mild renaissance, becoming worried over and emerging as potent terrain for new struggles. In *How to Make a Wetland*, Caterina Scaramelli takes us through the histories of two Turkish wetlands, the Gediz (outside İzmir, on the Aegean; the focus of the first three chapters) and Kızılırmak (near Samsun, on the Black Sea; the focus of the latter two chapters), demonstrating how they have been continually politically, materially, and culturally remade through the moral claims of various groups.

Scaramelli's core thesis is that wetlands, as category and material environment, are not given, but made. Her explorations of both wetlands examine this making by unveiling the historical contingencies around this process, periodising the wetlands' histories to demonstrate the changing imaginaries around it; from malarial threat and developmentalist obstacle, to birders' paradises and scientific marvels, to nationally vital conservation areas. This takes us through their turbulent political lives, from swamps and marshes that were understood as desolate and dangerous geographies to be 'civilised' and rendered productive, to wetlands, presently chiefly taken as biomes whose preservation is imperative and that must be managed stringently. However, this layered history importantly tracks how in each iteration of the 'wetland,' it is not a simple and sharp transition, but a muddled one, with tools and logics repurposed from previous projects and visions (p. 14).

Scaramelli suggests moral ecology as a theoretical lens to help elucidate this (ongoing) process, using it to interrogate the "forms of ecological practice and thought in which morality—the concern with what is of value in life—is at stake" (p. 10). She argues that the root of many

people's claims and actions within these wetlands are moral, though clarifies that "moral understandings of ecology [...] are not necessarily emancipatory, inclusive, progressive, or sustainable" (p. 85); instead, it just foregrounds that people's understandings and practices are undergirded by an affective relation with elements of the wetland, complicating our understanding of scientists, farmers, birders, urbanites, and conservationists' intents and interactions within the wetland, and shows how alliances, camaraderie, and rivalries can form and fade on the basis of affective pressures. This is smoothly melded together in Scaramelli's use of 'care' as a concept, which emphasises both affect and practice, to show that different actors' projects are multiple, intersecting, and, often, contrasting (p. 121). Fundamentally, her approach hones into the fairly precise point that "moral ecological claims are connected to the imagination and control of material processes" (p. 83).

These moral claims are not made on an abstracted wetland, though; Scaramelli identifies two chief proxies for these moral conflicts: infrastructure and non-humans, in Chapter Three and Five, respectfully (although, the wetland itself is a proxy for wider nationalist discourses [p. 14]). It is in discussing these two subjects and the moral contentions around them that she most interestingly nuances and advances understandings of their roles in human politics.

With infrastructure, she contends that there is no binary to ecology and infrastructure, and that her interlocutors did not conceive of the "delta ecology outside its built infrastructure, yet they saw different connections and attributed contrasting moral salience to the changing delta" (p. 88). This is a large thrust of the work: that there is not a binary between infrastructure and ecology, but ecologies are made through infrastructure, such as dams, irrigation projects, bridges, and bike paths, and ecological interventions can be infrastructural, such as with flamingo islands and wild horses. She maintains they cannot be meaningfully divorced from one another, as infrastructures alter ecologies, becoming parts of them, and ecologies are infrastructural. This is a valuable point that advances a more nuanced understandings of disputes around infrastructure, recasting what could be flatly resisted as 'damaging' as instead more multifaceted and variably contested.

For Scaramelli animals, too, are "lively proxies for the profound questions of environmental politics" (p. 159), taking an approach that acknowledges and interrogates their participation in and imbrication with human societies, while not unduly lingering on their agency or influence. She consistently foregrounds human protagonists and how they use and invoke animals in their

moral claims, detailing how conversations about animals were actually “everyday politics extended to nonhuman animals but not fully detached from human politics” (p. 135). They are not relegated to a subordinate or overdetermined role, however, as she highlights that animal practices are not reflective of human concerns, but instead that “the valuation and governance of animals... are *intrinsic* to human politics” (p. 135, emphasis added). This is a constructive framing of nonhumans’ roles in politics: maintaining a vital and fundamental place within politics, but does not smother them by insisting they are our echo.

She positions all of this within a complex web of ecological relationships, leaning into metaphors of water and amphibiousness to emphasise the flow of and entanglements in these environments; how the “wetland itself muddles, sediments, and transforms the political” (p. 14). This can sometimes slide into an overdetermination of the landscape’s influence upon politics—is the inability for national politics to be cleanly reflected in the wetland because the wetland is particularly complicating, over other environments, or because there is nothing clear-cut to reflect? Nonetheless, the creative usage is evocative, and functions well as an aid to her exposition and theorising.

Overall, Scaramelli advances several interesting perspectives throughout the text, but could have benefitted from subjecting her concept of moral ecology to a more sustained dialogue with political ecology. Conceptually, political ecology is present, but foggily, only openly addressed in the closing pages where it is asserted that moral ecology may be an aid to political ecology’s longevity in the present era through its changed focus to moral claims (p. 170). Lacking this more substantive case, the moral ecology’s contribution is left somewhat imprecise, instead seeming more to be an advancement of political ecologies already extant emphasis on moral claims implicit in ‘politics.’

How to Make a Wetland is a fine-grained and rich ethnography of a politically and materially muddled terrain, and Scaramelli provides several compelling ideas to enrich understandings of varied people in their variable environment. It ought to be of interest to those engaged in infrastructural and environmental politics, the anthropology of water, and political ecology more widely, as well as those interested in specifically Turkey, its environment, or politics.

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