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Out of the Mainstream: Water Rights, Politics and Identity

Edited by Rutgerd Boelens, David Getches, and Armando Guevara Gil. London, United Kingdom: Earthscan, 2010. xvii + 366 pp. £ 65.00, US$ 99.95. ISBN 978-1-844-07676-5.

> *Against all odds, people employ their hybrid water rights systems, cultures and hydro-political networks, dynamically challenging the mainstream power and politics.*
> (Out of the Mainstream, *book cover*)

Out of the Mainstream: Water Rights, Politics and Identity reflects on the evolution of indigenous water rights in the Andes, providing a study, not only of the political and social struggles reflected in "modern" water management, but also of the theoretical underpinnings—and limitations—of current water management models. *Out of the Mainstream* is an edited volume composed of 17 chapters organized in 4 parts, including substantive contributions in the overview, introductory, and concluding chapters written by the editors, who have been heavily involved in the development of indigenous rights in the Andes. The book is focused on water resources practice in Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru, with contributions from a range of disciplinary expertise (including engineering, law, geography, political science, philosophy, and development studies, among others). Through multidisciplinary contributions that include theoretical and applied research analyses, the book contributes to our understanding of the broader implications of water management and advances the case of indigenous Andean communities.

The work acknowledges support and inputs from 2 international action and research networks—the Water Law and Indigenous Rights (WALIR) program and Concertación—which are combining their efforts in Justicia Hídrica, a new initiative that will study and promote fairness in resource access and allocation. This action-based research is at the heart of the collected work, and helps to explain the repeated call for challenging the status quo in the Andean region, using multiple legal and extra-legal strategies to defend "their margins for autonomous action … [so that] their aims and struggles go beyond just getting their local water rules and management systems incorporated within state law and encompass a transformative and emancipating recognition of their rights and livelihoods" (p 338). In short, the authors raise questions "about the relevance and significance of political, legal and scientific arguments wielded by states to justify their water laws" and identify "a major mismatch between current water laws and policies in the Andean countries and the contexts that they aim to regulate" (p 337).

How have the authors arrived at these provocative conclusions?

Part I, composed of 4 chapters, provides an introduction to water rights, power, identity, and social struggle, covering issues related to the politics of identity, neoliberal "utopian" ideals, multiculturalism, and gender politics in expert thinking. This section provides a theoretical introduction to the major intellectual paradigms of water management and contextualizes the empirical research from the region through a postcolonial critique. It succeeds in highlighting the uncritical acceptance of water management regimes and their assumptions, regardless of whether they are relevant to indigenous struggles within the Andean context. Its most powerful contribution is in connecting the imposed neoliberal and social policies of the region to the mismatch of current water management practices in the Andes.

Part II, "Politics of Identity and Andean Livelihoods," contains 3 chapters that explore how water struggles have shaped and defined Andean indigenous movements. This section reflects on how indigenous movements have evolved over time and how customary modes of water use have been constrained by labels such as "traditional"; it also broadens the concept of sustainable livelihoods beyond irrigation and economic value. In particular, Chapter 6 attempts to challenge narrow conceptions of indigenous worldviews, relationships to water, and social organization in existing water management regimes. Overall, this section presents an interesting study of the limitations of "modern" thinking, which can often decontextualize indigenous experiences by promoting its own neutrality and rationality.

Part III focuses on water rights and conflicts and examines national water laws within 5 practice-based case studies. This section presents a diverse range of empirical examples at the interface between indigenous modes of water management and water laws. The case studies highlight how codified law often obscures existing water management systems in favor of developing individual rights.

Part IV, "Social Mobilization and Grassroots Strategies for Water Rights," presents possible strategies for advancing water rights for Andean communities, covering a broad range of options, including international law, political mobilization, capacity building, and reclaiming traditional territories. This section illustrates the need, not only for legal reform, but also for conceptually challenging political decision-making.

Out of the Mainstream presents persuasive evidence of the decontextualized nature of model-based water management and asks the reader to consider the limitations of focusing purely on "expert scientific knowledge" and law in water management. Its strength—combining diverse dis-

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ciplinary perspectives to tackle a regional water management challenge—is also its possible weakness. Although the book identifies conceptual problems in framing indigenous worldviews and uses of water according to neoliberal agendas, it fails to provide a theoretical framework for moving forward. Some contributions provide hints: concepts such as legal pluralism and intercultural dialogue are given passing mention in an attempt to promote the equal acceptance of indigenous worldviews, practices, and knowledge. What is missing, however, is a stronger focus on workable alternatives that would present a better case to those who do accept indigenous claims for water rights. For example, how should legal pluralism be achieved? What would be an acceptable compromise to the indigenous communities who feel that their views have been marginalized? Nevertheless, the central argument of the book remains compelling: "water management involves fundamental political choices and power issues that need to be confronted directly" (p 336).

By focusing on the power and identity dimensions of water management in the Andes, *Out of the Mainstream* challenges the conventional neutrality of water science and technologies (and their subsequent reflection in water laws). The adverse impacts of climate change are linked globally through water, with international institutions demanding universalistic reforms in exchange for financial aid or investment. However, within this global environment, it is essential to remain focused on regional practice and the context in which it is situated. Invariably, this is the broader lesson to be learned from *Out of the Mainstream* as the global community faces the increasingly complex challenges of managing the world's natural resources, especially one of its most precious—water.

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