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## Imagineering Waterscapes: The Case of the Dutch Water Sector

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the imagineering of waterscapes using a cultural political economy (CPE) approach. 'Imagineering' is a portmanteau of imagining and engineering, and a 'waterscape' is taken to be a produced hydrosocial entity. On the one hand, then, imagineering waterscapes involves construing a hydrosocial imaginary based on material realities; on the other, such an imaginary itself ought to have performative and material effects. This article is primarily concerned with imagineering waterscapes at the national scale, taking the Dutch Water Sector (DWS) as a case in point. The article examines elements of the Netherlands' water history, geography, agential configurations, and the water infrastructural and conceptual inventions that serve as selectivities in the DWS imaginary. Anticipated performative effects of this DWS imaginary include gaining a competitive edge in the world market for water-related products and services and an enhanced power position in global water networks. The DWS case therefore illustrates how imagineering is simultaneously a cultural and political economic process or 'tactic', aimed at seducing prospective (business) partners into 'buying' particular hydrosocial visions and arrangements. I argue that imagineering is a strategic and potentially powerful tool in today's intensified discursive struggles about how water (crises) ought to be seen and treated. But today's focus on imagineering can also partly be explained as having replaced more coercive tactics (such as tied aid) that were once commonly used in the pursuit of Dutch water interests abroad. This is not to say that imagineering is somehow less political; our examination of this case shows how the politics of privileging and marginalising and of forgetting and remembering are engrained in the process of imagineering waterscapes.

**KEYWORDS:** Imagineering, waterscape, cultural political economy, Dutch Water Sector

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### INTRODUCTION

In September 2017, the United Kingdom Flood Partnership (UKFP) was launched. A press release of this event explains that

[a] key motivation for the launch is the need to compete with the Dutch in improving the UK's flood skills 'narrative', according to the ex-chief executive of the Environment Agency David Rooke, who has been named chair of the UKFP. He made it clear the UK is second-to-none in terms of skills and solutions but where it struggles is communicating and selling itself to the world. (UKFP, 2017)

Other quotes in the press release elaborate on this motivation:

The commercial market for the export of flood resilience services is incredible – worth billions of pounds (...). Everyone has been paddling their own boat but now is the time to come together and compete with the Dutch on an international level.

While the Dutch have a very strong narrative a lot of their solutions are localised and nuanced. The UK has a much stronger sector but needs to improve in five key areas – ideation, connectivity, leadership, technology and partnerships – all of which will be addressed by the UKFP.

The Dutch are actually very good at preventing flood events while the UK has much more practice at responding to flood events. (ibid)

These motivations for launching the UKFP set the stage for the central phenomenon this article explores: the imagineering of waterscapes. 'Imagineering' is a portmanteau of imagining and engineering, and 'waterscape' refers to "a produced hydro-social entity" (Loftus, 2007: 49). On the one hand, therefore, imagineering waterscapes incorporates a hydrosocial imaginary that can apply to a range of scales, from a river basin to a water sector subdivision (such as flood management in the UKFP's example). But imagineering goes further than the imaginary. It implies an active relationship with the materiality of waterscapes, both in terms of the existing material structures that act as a basis for the imaginary (its material representation), as well as in a performative sense whereby the imaginary itself has material effects (the imaginary's material realisation).

The notion of imagineering waterscapes is developed using a cultural political economy (CPE) approach (Sum and Jessop, 2013). CPE combines the critical study of capitalist political economy with that of semiosis, which is broadly understood as sense- and meaning-making. From a CPE perspective, we can rephrase imagineering as involving both the *construal* and the *construction* of waterscapes. Moreover, CPE directs attention to the interrelated political and economic motivations behind the process of imagineering. The above quotes illustrate the importance of both semiosis and political economy, considering the UKFP's emphasis on the flood resilience narrative (rather than on actual services) and their struggle to communicate it and sell it to the world. UKFP's preoccupation with 'the Dutch' furthermore reveals that competition in the world market for these water-related services is a key driver behind this process.

This preoccupation also suggests that the Dutch stand out in imagineering their waterscape. The article takes up this suggestion and uses the Dutch Water Sector (DWS) as a case with which to empirically unpack the notion of waterscape imagineering. The term DWS is used for national and international strategic orientation; this article focuses on the latter. The use of the DWS for international ends must be placed within the broader political economic and political ecological structures of the past decades. Processes of globalisation and neoliberalisation have given a major impetus to emerging global water governance networks and to an evolving world market for water-related products and services. An imaginary around the DWS has been progressively developed by state and non-state actors in order to help gain political influence in water governance networks and to create a competitive edge among those offering products and services. Thus, imagineering the DWS not only serves to (passively) show what it has to offer foreign water agents, but to (actively) shape hydrosocial relations and foreign waterscapes in the image of the DWS using 'made in Holland' products and services.

The article argues that gaining a position of power in networks of global water governance and a competitive position in the world market for water-related products and services indeed drives the contemporary imagineering of waterscapes. Moreover, it is argued that the 'soft tactic' of imagineering has replaced some of the 'hard tactics' (such as tied aid) that Dutch state and non-state agents once commonly used for certain hydrosocial ends. Our case therefore marks the importance of culture – or, in CPE terms, semiosis – in this process. Imagineering can be labelled a 'soft' tactic in that it seduces and nudges prospective (business) partners into buying one's ideas and products using sophisticated hydrosocial construals, thus relying more on semiotic than on 'hard' extra-semiotic means. But imagineering is no less a political process; it too privileges some hydrosocial relations, visions and agents while marginalising others.

In this paper, I first provide a conceptual framework for exploring the imagineering of waterscapes; this introduction is followed by a broad introduction to imagineering, via a detour into critical geography literatures. The paper then goes on to introduce CPE as the main approach through which the notion of imagineering waterscapes is conceptualised and explored; it then couples imagineering with the political ecological concept of waterscape. In the second part of the paper I use the Dutch Water Sector to

empirically illustrate waterscape imagineering, tackling the how and why of imagineering the DWS and the politics involved in this process. Conclusions are found in the final section.

## IMAGINEERING AND PLACE BRANDING

Imagineering combines imagination and engineering into a single word. Imagineering is often associated with Walt Disney; although the company did not invent the term, it laid claim to and popularised its use, in the 1950s even naming its creative centre 'Walt Disney Imagineering'. Today, the company talks of *imagineers* as being "the dreamers and doers who combine storytelling with the latest technologies to create immersive experiences for all Disney theme parks, resorts, attraction and cruise ships worldwide".<sup>1</sup> The term is currently widely in use, and even master's programmes in imagineering are offered.<sup>2</sup>

Critical scholars also use the term, mostly geographers who are trying to make sense of modern urban developments. Some of them have investigated the imagineering of global cities (Teo, 2003; Paul, 2004; Yeoh, 2005; Bezdecny, 2015); others have looked more broadly into the closely associated topic of place branding (Johansson, 2012; Lucarelli, 2018; Vanolo, 2018). Both these terms and literatures point at a similar process: the creation of a modern city through an imaginary of place, or place branding and the materialisation of the associated aspects in the built environment. Teo (2003: 546) defines imagineering as the "aestheticization of material objects (...) that will enhance the circulation and consumption of goods". Johansson (2012: 3611) sees place branding as "a politically constituted process which unfolds in relation to dominant discourses and symbols that are in circulation"; he asks "how existing material structures inform the process and what material consequences occur as a result". Bezdecny (2015: 325) sees imagineering as a process of manipulating reality for the benefit of already-privileged groups of people. These scholars thus approach imagineering and place branding not as an innocent and neutral process (as Walt Disney tends to do), but rather as a deeply political process.

More specifically, these definitions connect political economy with culture and materiality. Regarding political economy, imagineering is seen as a process predominantly aimed at attracting fixed and circulating capital, e.g. real estate and tourists. Imagineering is also deeply influenced by neoliberalism, with competition and the production – consumption nexus outweighing notions of social well-being, equity or public space. Culture is crucial to imagineering and place branding, in two ways. One is in the centrality of local culture and symbols to imagineering, and their use (through manipulation and/or magnification) in the service of the overall imaginary or brand. The other way in which culture is crucial is in its instrumentality as a semiotic tool used for creating place images and a suitable narrative. The meaning of materiality is also twofold here. On the one hand, existing and historical material objects and structures constitute the basis for imagineering and place branding; on the other, these processes involve intervening in the built environment in a way that is in line with the overall competitive image of a place as it is construed by imagineers.

Two aspects emphatically make imagineering and place branding a political process. First, they rely on what Archer (in Bezdecny, 2015: 332) calls nostalgia and amnesia, or "selective memory and selective forgetting" (see also Lee and Yeoh, 2004). Johansson (2012: 3611) puts it thus:

The aim of place branding is to present a sanitised, appealing image of a place, which inevitably means selecting particular elements to be included in official messages while disregarding or erasing other

<sup>1</sup> Walt Disney (2018). "Disney Inspires Next Generation of Imagineers Through Imaginations Design Competition". 1 February. *The Walt Disney Company*. [www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/disney-inspires-next-generation-imagineers-imaginations-design-competition/](http://www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/disney-inspires-next-generation-imagineers-imaginations-design-competition/) (accessed 19 September 2019)

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, "Hbo-master Imagineering", *Breda University of Applied Sciences* [www.buas.nl/landingspagina/master-imagineering](http://www.buas.nl/landingspagina/master-imagineering) (accessed 19 September 2019)

elements. The complex multiplicity of urban social life must necessarily be simplified and packaged for the sake of symbolic and economic consumption.

A place brand or imaginary therefore incorporates a superior, perhaps even utopian, version of an actually existing environment. Concealing contradictions, ambiguities and messy politics is part and parcel thereof. That said, if an imaginary is to be considered trustworthy it cannot get too disconnected from existing realities and must to some extent incorporate established and popular ideas, concepts and discourses (ibid).

Second, imagineering is a process of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, privileging and marginalising. Applied to global cities, Teo (2003: 546) argues that place imagineering is a process by which complexity, richness and diversity get reduced to "recognizable and marketable characteristics". Moreover, there is a trend of homogenisation noticeable in that all (wannabe) global cities attract similar objects and events, from large hotel chains and shopping malls to spectacles such as jazz festivals and sporting events (ibid). While such objects and events are brought forward as universal values of modernisation, Paul (2004) argues that they in fact embody a particular set of values, those of the middle and upper classes and transnational capital. This leads Bezdecny (2015: 340) to claim that imagineering contributes to uneven geographical development whereby some social groups are "systematically left out of the vision by those with command of space". Imagineering must therefore be considered a contested process, and imagineered places as sites of struggle in which the dreams and interests of some are prioritised over those of others (Teo 2003: 547).

These definitions and features of imagineering neatly fit the main principles underpinning the conceptual approach used in this paper: cultural political economy. Before applying imagineering to the notion of waterscape, therefore, the next section will briefly highlight the main assumptions and features of CPE.

## THE CULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF IMAGINEERING

This section briefly outlines how Sum and Jessop's (2013) cultural political economy approach is used to study imagineering. CPE departs from the basic insight that the world is too complex to grasp in its entirety and must be reduced by social agents in order for them to act in the world. Reducing complexity is done in two main ways. One is by sense- and meaning-making, also called semiosis. The other is by structuration, or the relative isolation of particular social relations amidst the total of possible social relations. Taken together, CPE is centrally concerned with analysing the *construing* and *constructing* of political economic processes at various scales.

CPE is committed to a Marxian critique of political economy, but diverges from orthodox Marxism in that it treats capital accumulation as tendential rather than as an objective force (ibid: x). Moreover, it uses insights from Gramsci and Foucault in its critique of ideology and domination. Power and politics are thus key to CPE; a central premise related to this is that semiosis and structuration are not neutral processes, but rather contain so-called 'selectivities' that privilege some agents over others in their strategic, intentional and unintentional practices and behaviours. Related key analytical questions – ones that will be tackled in the second part of this article – are: what selectivities prevail in a certain empirical case, who and what (ought to) benefit from them, and how are they contested.

Sum and Jessop (2013: 215-219) distinguish between four types of selectivities, namely semiotic, structural, agential and technological. The first two of these provide "asymmetrical opportunities and constraints" for strategic calculation and behaviour of social agents. Semiotic selectivity is about how such opportunities and constraints are inscribed in semiotic expressions including text, talk, discourses and visual images. Structural selectivity is about enduring opportunities and constraints that are inscribed in the very make-up or basic structure of a process or institution. Agential selectivity refers to the differences in agents' capacities to make sense of, attach meaning to, and (strategically) act based on,

the semiotic and discursive selectivities. Lastly, technological selectivity is about how, in a Foucauldian sense, object and subject positions, as well as so-called 'truth regimes', are created through social and physical technologies. Although these four types of selectivities are considered to be key, there are other types that can be used in analyses, such as spatial/temporal selectivity.

Especially relevant for the aim of this paper is the concept of the imaginary in CPE. Following Sum and Jessop (ibid: 164-165), imaginaries are "semiotic systems that frame individual subjects' lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or inform collective calculation about that world". They enable individuals and collective agents to act, i.e. to "relate to their environments, make decisions, or engage in strategic action" (ibid). The imaginary goes further than semiosis in that it is preoccupied not only with construals, but also with the construals' material support. Moreover, imaginaries have a degree of performative power, and thus play their part in constructing the world.

This CPE interpretation of the imaginary corresponds with critical scholars' interpretation of imagineering as it is summarised above; however, this article prefers using 'imagineering', rather than the 'imaginary', for two reasons. First, imagineering better captures the connections and interplay between semiotic and extra-semiotic (i.e. political economic and material) dimensions. Second, it reminds us that this is an evolutionary, tendential, and incomplete process, not something static. CPE nevertheless offers a framework and heuristic tools to study this messy process of imagineering, taking account of contemporary political economic and semiotic dynamics and possibilities. That said, if CPE is to be used for studying the imagineering of waterscapes, it needs to be brought in line with political ecology. This is what the next and final part of the conceptual exploration will do.

### **CPE OF IMAGINEERING WATERSCAPES**

This section's aim is to infuse the above reasoning with principles of political ecology, in particular those pertaining to hydrosocial politics. To start with, the concept of imagineering neatly fits a common departure point in political ecology, namely that of the metabolism between human and nonhuman nature. It was Marx (1976 [1867]: 283) who famously declared that human labour changes (nonhuman) nature, which in turn mediates and changes humans' own nature in a continuous, metabolic, socionatural process. He then added that

at the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials. (ibid)

Building on Marx' elemental insights, Smith (1984) argued that space and (nonhuman) nature is *produced* and not simply *is*. More than anything else, he argues, it is capitalism that has in previous centuries decisively structured this production of space and nature (Smith, 1984; cf. Moore, 2015). Smith's suggestion that space and nature are produced in the image of capital has been criticised for being deterministic and reductionist, for downplaying the influence of social and political struggle, and for depriving nonhuman nature of agency (Bakker and Bridge, 2006; Ekers and Prudham, 2017). Swyngedouw (2015: 27) therefore puts it more lightly, but still clearly, when he states that socionatural "metabolic circulation is increasingly subject to the socially constituted dynamics of a capitalist market economy in which the alpha and omega is the desire to circulate money as capital".

Imagineering is a metabolic process similar to what Marx suggested, that is to say between human imagination/ideals and their attempted materialisation. In line with Smith as well, imagineering involves the combined production of space and nature. The literature on urban imagineering also suggests that it is largely structured – but not dictated – by the demands of capital. It is a political economic and political ecological process which is in line with contemporary neoliberal dogmas and at the same time contested. In CPE terms, therefore, it is better to claim that imagineering has performative power. The production

of space and nature in the process of imagineering is contingent and tendential and cannot be assumed a priori.

This line of reasoning can be applied to, and specified for, water. Imagineering water requires letting go of seeing water as 'pure' nature and instead treating it as a socionatural entity. This means that social (economic, cultural, etc) processes shape water and, vice versa, that water shapes social processes in a continuous, metabolic process. The notion of the waterscape builds on this. A waterscape refers to a produced hydrosocial entity rather than a fixed entity containing water (Loftus, 2007: 49). Thus, paraphrasing Marx and Smith, humans have long tried to realise their purpose in the numerous waters around the world. Irrespective of purposes having been met or not, over time all these attempts have fundamentally altered the earth's waterways as well as global and regional hydrological cycles. This process is political in the sense that purposes imagined and realised in waters around the world invariably involve power struggles between different social forces over the question of whose purposes prevail, whose *should* prevail, who benefits and who *should* benefit. As Budds and Hinojosa (2012: 124) sum up, the notion of waterscape forces us to "explore the ways in which flows of water, power and capital converge to produce uneven socioecological arrangements over space and time, the particular characteristics of which reflect the power relations that shaped their production".

Imagineering waterscapes must thus also not be considered a neutral process; in CPE terms, this means instead engaging in the political practice of construing and constructing waterscapes. 'Construing' is an attempt at rendering waterscapes intelligible and producing a hydrosocial imaginary. This is always a highly complex and incomplete undertaking, with the complexity and incompleteness increasing in tandem with the scale at which waterscapes are construed. The greater the waterscape, the greater the variation among social agents and their ideas, nonhuman processes and objects out of which an imaginary must be produced. Imagineering large waterscapes generally requires a less fine-grained discursive, structural, agential and technological selection, which in turn increases the gap between material realities and its representation in the imaginary, and leaves more space for contestation.

Construction means projecting an imaginary onto an existing waterscape and trying to materialise (elements of) that imaginary within the waterscape. It involves engaging in ongoing global/regional/local hydrosocial processes and politics, with the projected imaginary and its selectivities necessarily coming into conflict with alternative ones. Hence imagineering, involving both the construing and constructing of waterscapes, takes place in what Li (2007: 28) calls "a witches' brew of [hydrosocial] processes, practices, and struggles".

## **ANALYTICAL FOCUS AND METHODOLOGY**

The Dutch Water Sector is used to empirically illustrate the process of imagineering waterscapes. The focus of this article is therefore on imagineering waterscapes at the national – territorial scale, and is aimed at their profiling and positioning in the international political economy and global (water) governance networks. More precisely, using the above-mentioned distinction, the focus is on construing national waterscapes for international branding purposes, which should help agents from that construed waterscape to become involved in a foreign waterscape's construction.

This focus, I argue, differs from earlier attempts at imagineering waterscapes at this scale. Swyngedouw (2015), for instance, describes and analyses at length the dramatic imagineering of the Spanish waterscape in the 20th century.<sup>3</sup> However, the greater part of his book deals with imagineering the Spanish waterscape for domestic (nationalist) ends after the country's imperial collapse at the end of the 19th century. In the final chapters, he discusses how Spanish desalination companies have increasingly looked for and seized economic opportunities outside their national borders, in a growing

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<sup>3</sup> He does not, however, use the concept of imagineering but rather of the imaginary. Nevertheless, his approach and analysis closely resemble what is meant here by imagineering waterscapes.

global market for water-related services and products. It is the seeking of international business opportunities that has an affinity with the focus of this article, although in the case of the DWS there is a far greater variety of agents involved, both state and non-state.

Thus, past imagineering of waterscapes at the national scale differs from that of the present in at least two ways. One difference has to do with the global water arena and world market for water services and products; these are structures which have rapidly developed and integrated over the recent decades of globalisation. This global-level arena provides political and economic opportunities, the seizing of which may be significantly aided by imagineering one's waterscape. A second difference relates to the very process of imagineering. The technological possibilities available to the process of imagineering have evolved rapidly in recent times, making it now a much more sophisticated process. Advanced information and communication technologies are particularly responsible for this; they are expressed, *inter alia*, in a more powerful semiotic toolkit. These aspects will be further explored in the next section, which discusses how, why and by whom the DWS is imagineered.

The empirical case outlined in the next section is based on extensive doctoral fieldwork in 2016 and 2017, and also draws on seven years of work experience (2008 to 2016) as a social researcher in the Dutch Water Sector. My PhD research examines the bilateral water aid relations between the Netherlands and Mozambique, and part of this research focuses on investigating changes in Dutch foreign aid policies and practices related to water. I used three main methods to investigate and analyse such changes. One method was (discourse) analysis of all sorts of semiotic sources; these included texts such as (water) aid policies and DWS promotion booklets, digital sources including websites such as [dutchwatersector.com](http://dutchwatersector.com), promotional videos and waterscape drawings made by digital architecture, and DWS promotion materials such as posters and giveaways.

Another method of investigation used was observation at various events where the DWS was being promoted. These included national events organised by the Netherlands Water Partnership (NWP) – which does most of the branding of the DWS – as well as conferences or sessions in which Dutch (water) policies, water aid projects or cooperation among water agents was discussed. I also observed at international events, such as the Amsterdam International Water Week conference in 2017, the 2016 edition of the Water Institute of South Africa (WISA) Biennial Conference in Durban, South Africa, and various events in Mozambique such as the Maputo International Trade Fair in 2016. I observed and listened to presentations on the DWS, participated in discussion sessions and social events, and frequented the booth where the DWS and other Dutch water organisations and businesses were being promoted. I observed these booths, talked with individuals doing the promotion and with visitors, collected promotional materials, and compared the DWS booth with those promoting the water sectors of other countries such as the UK, Denmark, Germany, Italy, and France. Field notes constitute the main source of data on these research activities.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with personnel from key agencies including the NWP, the aid department within the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BZ), embassies in Mozambique and South Africa, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and water businesses. Interviewees thus ranged from those most directly involved in promoting the DWS (from the NWP, BZ, and embassies), to those promoting elements of the DWS (e.g. from water and sanitation NGOs), to representatives of NGOs who were critically following this process.

## **IMAGINEERING THE DUTCH WATER SECTOR**

The following (empirical) part of this article uses the Dutch Water Sector as a prominent case of imagineering waterscapes at the national scale. In four subsections, I examine how and why, as well as by and for whom, the DWS is imagineered. Preceding this, however, will be a note on the origins and use of the term Dutch Water Sector (or its Dutch language equivalent).

On first examination, the term DWS may seem self-evident given that it is widely used by individuals, organisations and businesses that engage in professional or scientific water-related activities in the Netherlands. On closer examination, however, the term raises difficult questions, notably who and what is included and excluded under the DWS, and who gets to decide this. This question will yield different answers depending on who is asked; here follows my very brief interpretation.

In a general sense, we might conceive of the DWS as an ensemble of more or less structured social relations between human agents based in the Netherlands,<sup>4</sup> with water as their predominant 'boundary concept'. The DWS represents an overarching, but somewhat loose, framework subsuming various subdivisions or subsectors organised around different 'types' and 'uses' of water.<sup>5</sup> Some such subdivisions (notably water supply, and water resources and regional flood management) once encompassed hundreds or even thousands of separate public entities across the Netherlands with weak mutual social links (i.e. between water supply entities and water boards), with each such division having its own historical routines, organisational and expert cultures, and representative bodies.

In the decades after World War II a process of institutional and organisational scaling up and mergers started in the public water sector, which ended up in the current setup of only ten semi-public water supply companies and 21 public water boards. In addition to integration *within* subdivisions, social relations between them also grew stronger, as it did between (semi-)public and private water companies. The drivers of these forms of integration range from the political and the economic to the environmental and scientific. Political and economic motivators included making water supply entities more (cost-)efficient through corporatisation or by outsourcing more services to the private sector. Environmental and scientific reasons for integration included the mutual dependence of different types of water which therefore required integrated management and knowledge production. Alongside this integration, the idea of water as the overarching binding element also progressively took shape, and with it the idea of an overall water sector. But while many individuals and agents refer to the Dutch Water Sector, underlying subdivisions are still very much in existence, and their integration is an ongoing process marked by challenges and struggle.

The latter notwithstanding, the Dutch Water Sector is frequently referenced and we may distinguish between its two common types of use. First, the DWS acts as a reference point for internal strategic orientation; it is used by and for domestic agents, for instance if an event, process or insight cuts across the various water subdivisions. In this sense, the national water sector is what domestic agents make of it and it is constantly and by default in the making. The second use of DWS is quite different: its use for international ends. Irrespective of the fragile status of the DWS and its fragmented internal structure, it is construed as a brand and as a united force of water professionals and organisations ready to tackle water issues abroad. In other words, the DWS is itself the object of imagineering. This is a collaborative effort by Dutch state and non-state agents which also very much serves domestic (e.g. economic, political) interests, but is for foreign 'consumption'. It is this international use of the DWS that is the principal focus of the subsequent sections, although there are linkages with the domestic use.

I will outline the contested process of imagineering of the DWS below, in four subsections. First will be an examination of how and by whom the DWS is construed and on what material realities this construal is based, using CPE's semiotic and extra-semiotic (i.e. structural, agential and technological) selectivities. The next subsection looks at the anticipated effects of construing the DWS, which is to say its performative power. A more critical stance is taken in the final two subsections, analysing the DWS's

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<sup>4</sup> 'Human agents' typically are collective agents, legally registered in the Netherlands as a public, semi-public or non-profit organisation or as a private, for-profit company. They include ministries, provincial and municipal water departments, water boards, drinking water companies, knowledge institutes, engineering and consultancy firms, producers and suppliers of materials, and NGOs.

<sup>5</sup> Recognised subdivisions include water resources management, water supply, water technology and flood/delta management.

imagineering from a political economic perspective (the third subsection), and as a political and contested process (the fourth subsection).

### **Imagining or construing the DWS**

#### *Semiotic selectivities: the DWS 'storyline', themes and approach*

Arguably the broadest and most fundamental semiotic claim underpinning the DWS is the Netherlands as self-proclaimed 'water nation' and, in line with this, that 'the Dutch' are renowned for, and world experts in, water management writ large (Dijkshoorn et al., 2018: 4). This claim is based on two grounds in particular.

One is the combined physical, social and economic geography of the country, which serves as the 'material support' for this discursive claim. The Netherlands, (literally 'low-lying countries'), owes its name to the fact that part of its land lies beneath sea level. The country is home to the downstream sections of major rivers in Western Europe, notably the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt. The last stretches of these rivers, before and at the point of reaching the sea, constitute a (river) delta, understood in DWS-related materials as a "dynamic landform that was created by the force of rivers, waves and tides" (NWP, 2014: 9). Such a delta is simultaneously a socio-economic hub, hosting many residents and economic activities that demand protection from the possible negative impacts of water. Such protection is provided by a historically shaped and interconnected system of dikes, dams, barriers, canals, sluices and the like. It is this protected delta that above all underpins the claim that the Dutch are world experts in water management.

This claim also heavily relies on history, in particular on so-called 'recontextualisation' of historic practices and sentiments "in ways that both fit and reaffirm existing [hydro]social relations" (Bernstein in Sum and Jessop, 2013: 306). Wherever one or other variant of 'the Dutch as global water experts' is uttered, a reference to centuries-old water management practices usually follows. As one booklet on the [Dutch] Delta Approach makes clear, "Delta management is not new! It has been core business in the Netherlands for centuries" (NWP, 2014: 9). It conveys the message that the Dutch have built up a safe and highly developed region in an otherwise dangerous and unpredictable delta for centuries before modern conceptions of delta and flood management. That water is supposedly 'in the genes' of Dutch people (Bosma et al., 2014: 3) is a prominent sentiment linked with this construal. But not only delta management is rooted in history; the "story of Dutch water technology"<sup>6</sup> claims that "water treatment is just as much a part of our DNA".

The specific hydrosocial history and characteristics of present-day Netherlands are thus very important elements of branding the DWS, yet these time – space dimensions seem to be far less significant in the subjectivation of foreign waterscapes, in the framing of water problems, and in the solutions on offer in the DWS imaginary; these, rather, rely on universal and naturalistic thinking. The construal around the delta is again illustrative: foreign waterscapes are designated as 'urban deltas' in line with the Dutch delta. As a booklet on the DWS says, "urban deltas worldwide are facing the same challenges". The often-repeated challenges are population growth, urbanisation and climate change. Solutions undergo a similar discursive treatment; thus whereas "solutions for each delta may be different, the preconditions for a sustainable delta approach are the same". Following from this are the "twelve building blocks for a delta approach" or the "must haves for sustainable delta management". These include the need for innovation, an integrated approach, and the "anchoring in legislation and depolitization" (NWP, 2014: 6-12).

<sup>6</sup> See "Dutch Water Technology; Our Story", *Dutch Water Technology*. [www.dutchwatertechnology.com/our-story#where-we-come-from](http://www.dutchwatertechnology.com/our-story#where-we-come-from) (accessed 25 September 2019)

In classifying and subdividing the DWS, fields of expertise and solutions take precedence over problems and challenges. In DWS-related text and talk, problems and challenges are fairly quickly dealt with, assuming broad consensus on the types of problems and challenges, their universal manifestation, as well as what they entail. Subdividing the DWS, rather, occurs according to themes that incorporate and promise a vision or action. These can even be considered sub-imaginaries in themselves, which constitute (or sell) a narrative of change. For instance, the theme 'Enabling Delta Life' incorporates the ideal of a well-protected and highly developed low-lying urban delta; 'Water for All' incorporates the promise of universal water and sanitation; 'Dutch Water Technology' allegedly enables the provision of clean water irrespective of local conditions; 'smart Information Technologies' promises cost-efficient water management; 'Resilient Cities' points at urban, climate-proof living; and 'Water and Food' points to ways of feeding the world's population. All of these are areas in which the Dutch supposedly excel, a message that is reinforced by catchy images, infographics, multilingual videos and showcases around the world.

Cutting across these DWS themes is the processual and agential idea of unitedness, cooperation and actor all-inclusiveness. This is reflected in the preference for concepts like Public – Private Partnerships (PPP), 'Triple Helix', and the 'Golden Triangle'. These are variations on the same theme, namely intensive cooperation between public, private, non-profit and knowledge entities. Without such broad-based cooperation (the discourse goes), challenges could not be tackled appropriately (Bosma et al., 2014: 10). The branding of the DWS using national symbols reinforces this message. The DWS is linked to a broader project of branding the Netherlands under the alias of 'Holland', accompanied by a tulip as the national symbol. This brand and image are owned and managed by the Netherlands Board of Tourism & Conventions and adopted by the Dutch state for a consistent and 'positive' branding of the country abroad. The 'Holland + tulip' brand is also extensively used in the promotional material and activities of the DWS. This is further marked by the use of orange as the national colour. The slogan 'Let's work together!' accompanies this brand for the DWS and is meant to emphasise the Netherlands as 'partner for sustainable solutions' (see Figure 1 and 3).

#### *Agential selectivities: Agents behind DWS branding and 'nodal actors'*

The use of this national brand and other semiotic selectivities reveals the deep involvement of the Dutch state in imagineering the DWS. Indeed, the Dutch state is a key driver and funder of this process, as it fits well with current state policies, projects and accumulation strategies. One such project is water as a national 'top sector' (GON, 2011). This is part of a state-subsidised and innovation-stimulating programme for economic top sectors aimed at boosting export opportunities. This water top sector programme is centrally organised around technology, and comprises delta technology, maritime technology and water technology, along with an international and 'human capital' line. A Water Sector Export Index (WEX) has been developed to measure the growth and extent of water exports.

Second, water is a priority in the 'aid, trade and investment' agenda of the current and past Dutch governments (GON, 2013, 2018). This development agenda of the Netherlands seeks to tie water aid relations and programmes more closely to commercial interests and relations related to water. It traditionally focuses on water supply and sanitation and water resources management. Third, there is the International Water Ambition (IWA), a cooperation between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Infrastructure and Water Affairs and Economic Affairs. This agenda can be seen as connecting the previous two policies and profiling the Netherlands as a global water centre of expertise (GON, 2016a). The main focus of the IWA is urban deltas, although it claims to follow a 'total approach' that includes any of the above.

Figure 1: Dutch Water Sector promotion materials (Source: photo by the author).



Besides Dutch state entities, a key agent in imaginering the DWS is the Netherlands Water Partnership. This is a public – private network organisation that has some 200 fee-paying members and is also the main agent doing the branding of the DWS on behalf of, and paid by, the state. Its members are public, private and non-profit companies and organisations from all subdivisions of the DWS, and NWP helps them connect with prospective business partners or clients in foreign waterscapes.

Individual agents have also played an important role in establishing and promoting the DWS internationally. These agents have figured as 'nodal actors', who are able to "make a difference thanks to their different capacities to persuade, read particular conjunctures, displace opponents and rearticulate discourses and imaginaries in contemporary fashion" (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 204). Among them was the current king of the Netherlands, Willem Alexander, who concerned himself with global water management when still a prince. Formally attached to the United Nations, he was also widely considered an icon of the DWS.

After he became king in 2013, the government appointed Henk Ovink as the First Special Envoy for International Water Affairs for the Kingdom of the Netherlands; he is still in place in that role. His task is to "reinforce Dutch ambitions in the water domain [and to] contribute to boosting the international market position of Dutch know-how and expertise" (GON, 2015). As ambassador for the DWS he travels extensively, participating in and presenting at numerous water-related events around the world. He is also 'sherpa' to the UN/World Bank High Level Panel on Water that was launched at the 2016 World Economic Forum. In this role, he facilitates Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who is a member of the panel. Both Henk Ovink and Mark Rutte use their positions to promote the DWS in more or less overt ways and advocate universal solutions to global water problems, notably 'valuing water' (NWP, 2019; HLPW, 2018).

*Technological, spatial and structural/material selectivities: How, where, and based on what, is the DWS promoted and construed*

These individual and collective agents rely both on digital and physical spaces and means for branding and promoting the DWS. Information and communication technologies (ICT) in particular have advanced rapidly in recent decades, and these are extensively used in creating and upholding a DWS imaginary. Concretely, this means that the DWS and its subdivisions are widely propagated through various

websites.<sup>7</sup> Graphic design tools are used to exemplify and typify the DWS imaginary through images, infographics, short promotional videos, etc. Digital architecture enables the production of detailed, sophisticated 'maquettes' of what foreign waterscapes (for example an urban delta), could supposedly become if Dutch water expertise is called in (see Figure 2 on the delta master plan of Jakarta). These and other digital programmes are powerful technologies in the production of subjects, in this case waterscapes.

Figure 2. Digital maquette of the Jakarta delta master plan (source: KuiperCompagnons).



Such online spaces and digital means are crucial for imagining the DWS, but so are physical ones. Physical spaces and means are important in two ways. First, in terms of social relations, particularly important are spaces with bounded time – space dimensions where the DWS imaginary can relatively easily be upheld and promoted. These include knowledge-sharing and network events, as well as trade and exhibition fairs at the global and national levels. At some of these events a so-called 'Holland Pavilion' is present, which is coordinated by the NWP and hosts a number of Dutch water agents (see Figure 3). Digital and physical information tools are used here; meetings are held, network and cocktail events are hosted, and branded event merchandise<sup>8</sup> is handed out. Incoming and outgoing aid and trade missions are other ways of forging relationships and displaying what the DWS has to offer.

<sup>7</sup> Notably, as mentioned, [dutchwatersector.com](http://dutchwatersector.com) and [dutchwatertechnology.com](http://dutchwatertechnology.com), but also, for instance, [netherlandswaterpartnership.com](http://netherlandswaterpartnership.com), [wateralliance.nl](http://wateralliance.nl) and [watertopsector.com](http://watertopsector.com).

<sup>8</sup> An example of these branded items is buttons with the text 'Keep in touch with the Dutch' (see Figure 1).

Figure 3. Holland Pavilions at WISA conference (2016) and Aquatech Trade Exhibition A'dam (2017) (source: photos by the author).



Second, physical spaces and things in the Netherlands are important in their functioning as 'material support' for DWS claims and images. In other words, as Julier (in Johansson, 2012) puts it, DWS construals should have a "confirmation in the material circumstances to which they relate". Such material circumstances are diverse and come in many forms and sizes. On the one end are those spaces, such as the western part of the Netherlands, that serve as the material substance of abstract concepts such as the 'urban delta'. Likewise, the refurbished floodplains of the River Waal at Nijmegen serve as an example of the 'Room for the River' concept, and the Sand Motor is an example of 'Building with Nature'; on the other end are concrete technologies that are displayed and demonstrated at conferences, such as software programmes or a water treatment facility. Alternatively, material 'icons' such as the Delta Works or the Afsluitdijk dam and causeway play their part in DWS imaginering, as do contemporary ones such as the advanced wastewater treatment technology known as Nerada.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the booklet 'Water Innovations in the Netherlands' (GON, 2016b).

This section considered at some length (but still non-exhaustively) how the various CPE selectivities (i.e. some of the principal DWS-related semiotic claims and tools as well as agents, things and structures), operate in the process of construing the DWS. The section below, on the politics of imagineering the DWS, will show that these are selectivities indeed, not natural laws or indisputable facts; they can be, and are, contested. First, however, the question of how the DWS is imagineered from a 'construction' viewpoint will be addressed, and then the question of why the DWS is imagineered at all.

### The performative power of the DWS

While the former section focused on imagining or construing the DWS, this subsection focuses on the engineering or construction side of imagineering the DWS. 'Construction' means the "performative, constitutive force in the material world" (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 186) that DWS-related claims, images, agents and things (ought to) have. Shaping hydrosocial relations and waterscapes is the ultimate aim of imagineering the DWS. In other words, agents do not put so much effort into construing the DWS only to showcase it; this showcasing ought to translate into something, it should have force in the material world. Many small to medium Dutch water companies and organisations were previously operating very much on their own in other countries; a DWS network and shared brand or imaginary was meant to strengthen this force (Gast, 2008). This anticipated force has several dimensions, of which the following stand out..

First, is the economic dimension. The DWS imaginary is developed and nurtured to help build and maintain a competitive edge in the world market for water-related products and services. One intent is therefore to woo potential buyers in this world market, whether they are foreign state entities or individual capitals; they must be persuaded to 'see' and construe water in ways similar to and compatible with the DWS imaginary. Thus, foreign waterscapes are not only made subject in the process of imagineering; they need also to become subjects which are "willing and able to play their allotted roles" (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 112). The idea is that business connections can more easily be forged with willing subjects, those 'buying into' these construals. Such connections, in turn, facilitate the selling of products and services of Dutch companies and organisations.

The participation of Dutch companies in grand delta projects, such as in Jakarta, the Mekong Delta or Beira, suggests that construing the DWS indeed has performative, economic effects – notwithstanding the contestation around this participation, on which more below. What also appears to substantiate the performative effects of DWS imagineering is the above-mentioned Water Sector Export Index. To initiators and financiers (mostly state entities and network organisations), this index provides a measure against which its water-export-promoting activities can be assessed and adjusted (Partners for Water, 2004). Since the reference year 2000, the WEX states that exports have steadily increased to €7.6 billion in 2018, and that in some subsectors (water technology) they have more than doubled (Snel, 2018). But this index is also not uncontested as the large share of a few water companies is said to obscure what may in fact be limited growth in exports of the majority of (smaller) companies.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the DWS imaginary yields political leverage. Dutch state agents talk in this context about 'water diplomacy'. What they mean by this is unclear, but part of it is certainly the engagement in discursive and power struggles related to the question of how water ought to be seen, conceptualised and treated (i.e. used, distributed, regulated, etc). Such struggles have increasingly played out at the so-called global level, for example in global institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations, at events organised by global water associations, and/or in relation to global goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals. The previous section already indicated some of the collective agents and 'nodal actors' engaged in these struggles. The state has also invested in global institutions and seconded Dutch water experts to their water programmes and networks. This serves water development purposes and is used to increase opportunities for the Dutch private sector, in line with the 'aid and trade' agenda (GON,

<sup>10</sup> From an interview with an BZ employee on 24 January 2018.

2014). Interviewees point at other strategic gains, for example the extension of state power vis-à-vis other states, as well as national prestige and the use of water to open up (diplomatic) doors that would otherwise remain closed.<sup>11</sup>

Third, as alluded to above, the DWS is construed for developmental ends. DWS construals should convince other nations and regions that their water development challenges – notably the lack of access to water or the protection of the built environment against floods – can best be tackled using Dutch knowledge, products and services.

Although these might be summed up as 'human forces', there is of course a (nonhuman) materiality to all of them. As discussed above, connections to be forged involve people, 'real stuff', and physical spaces. Ultimately, however, this section is about the material realisation (as opposed to the material representation) of the DWS imaginary; whether connections are forged in the political, economic or aid domains, they should eventually lead – whether through economic trade proper or through aid – to the circulation and distribution of physical water services and products that are eventually used/'earthed' somewhere. In other words, imagineering the DWS is about leaving 'made in Holland' footprints in foreign waterscapes, for example by building a dike, implementing a technology, setting up a water management system or, more indirectly, by expert input of some sort. This is ideally done in the most environmentally friendly way possible, that is to say with low (if any) CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Having outlined the construing and constructing of the DWS, the next subsection tackles the question of why it is imagineering that is used to reach certain hydrosocial objectives, and not other technologies of power or other tactics.

### **Imagineering the DWS in the global political economy**

This subsection discusses some explanations of why Dutch state and non-state agents have progressively engaged in the tactic of imagineering the DWS. One explanation is the potential performative power of contemporary imagineering. As discussed in the previous section, imagineering is an interesting tactic in and of itself because of the material impacts stemming from the DWS imaginary and the potential or envisaged hydrosocial (economic, political, social) benefits triggered by it. Imagineering also had the potential of unifying the DWS; when it started in the late 1990s, Dutch water agents and their international activities were said to be fragmented (Gast, 2008), and imagineering the DWS was (and still is) meant to tackle such fragmentation.

A turn towards imagineering the DWS can also be explained in light of (global) political economic and political ecological changes. With regard to the former, imagineering can be seen as having partly replaced other 'harder' tactics that were used to profile Dutch organisations and businesses abroad and to make sure that they were awarded international water projects. Such tactics included tied aid in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Hoebink, 1988, 2013). During that period, cartel-like structures were used to compete for international projects, an example of which is a foundation (or 'syndicate') called Nedeco. From the 1950s onwards, Nedeco engaged in acquiring projects on behalf of Dutch engineering companies and was sponsored by the state. It minimised competition between these companies by setting prices and establishing other aspects of agreements. It proved successful in acquiring international (water) projects, which were subsequently distributed among participating companies (Luchtenbelt, 2015; Hoebink, 2010; Dierikx, 2002). Such tactics arguably rely less on semiotic means and more on extra-semiotic ones, not least of which is the exploitation of uneven power relationships. By contrast, imagineering can be considered a more subtle tactic in which semiotic means play a much more prominent role. This was precisely what was required in the late 1990s, when imagineering the DWS for international ends started in earnest.

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<sup>11</sup> From an interview with an NWP employee on 15 December 2017.

Prior to and during the 1990s, the above-mentioned coercive tactics gradually fell from favour and, finally, were formally abolished through international regulations. In their place came 'free' market mechanisms and associated procurement regulations; competitive tendering became a preferred mechanism for awarding water projects. Even though tendering processes are themselves political and are susceptible to manipulation, they do ask different strategic behaviour from sellers in the awarding of project contracts. Dutch water agents thus had to increasingly show and prove that their hydrosocial products and services were better than those of others. This is where imagineering waterscapes comes in; a technology of 'soft power' that aims to (culturally) seduce and nudge – rather than (economically) force – prospective partners into 'buying' particular hydrosocial visions and arrangements. As a project manager from a Dutch engineering company says, "delta planning is all about the art of seduction; creating a fairytale of how the future might look like in a hundred years, (...) [and] see[ing] what needs to be done to realise that dream". Dutch expertise may be called in, then, depending on the success of this persuasive approach (Lijfering, 2018). This is not to say that Dutch agents no longer engage in 'hard' tactics; however, using a tactic like tied aid has become much more difficult for Western powers such as the Dutch state, even while new powers like China now make abundant use of it.

A third explanation considers the value of imagineering waterscapes in relation to a political ecological or environmental *urgence*. Urgence is a term coined by Foucault; it constitutes "specific (and specifically problematized) challenges to social order (...) around which intellectuals (amongst others) elaborate a problem, its solution, truth regimes and social practices" (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 25, 202). Today's urgence can very broadly be summarised as the global water crisis, or more generally the environmental crisis. The mainstream narrative around water crisis denotes various kinds of water problems (see, for example, Cosgrove and Rijsberman, 2000; Sasse, 2017; WEF, 2016, 2017), notably water scarcity and floods. Climate change is arguably the greatest driver of water crises in this narrative, followed by urbanisation and population growth. These challenges (the narrative goes) are unlike challenges we have seen before; they therefore require drastic measures and out-of-the-box solutions. This typically comes down to a market-based solution,<sup>12</sup> in line with the hegemonic (albeit changing) neoliberal doctrine which is packaged in consensual, post-political (win-win) fashion.

In relation to this urgence, imagineering the DWS can be considered an effective "discursive – material fix" (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 25). In response to the various problems merged under the water crisis, it incorporates a set of easily consumable hydrosocial fixes. It is a concerted effort to not only engage in, but to try and frame and define the social construal and construction of water(scapes) in today's global and national governance networks. The message has also been picked up worldwide; a *New York Times* article, for instance, talks at length about how the Dutch see "climate change and rising seas as opportunities for, rather than drags on, its economy", and that "the world is watching" the Dutch (Kimmelman, 2017). A magazine like *strategy+business*, in an article titled "Water Experts for the World" reports on how "The Dutch turned adversity into a compelling economic opportunity" and suggests that "other countries could do the same" (van der List, 2019).

Other countries in fact do the same; in other words, the Dutch are not alone in imagineering (parts of) their national waterscape. We started out this article by referring to the United Kingdom Flood Partnership, which was launched in order to "compete with the Dutch in improving the UK's flood skills narrative" and, in doing so, to gain a bigger share of this "commercial market worth billions of pounds" (UKFP, 2017). Like the UKFP and the NWP (which does most of the DWS branding), various similar entities

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<sup>12</sup> 'Market-based solutions' here refers to such things as exposing socio-natures like water to the market-price mechanism or to the pressures of commercialisation, commodification or privatisation; another such 'solution' is to engage private finance in search of 'innovative finance' solutions.

have relatively recently been set up.<sup>13</sup> Together, these entities engage in a fictitious competition between water sectors (or subdivisions thereof) at the scale of the nation-state. The competition is 'fictitious' because these entities are not themselves agents who sell in the world market; rather, they are the forces behind state-driven and state-subsidised imagineering projects that combine the otherwise inefficient marketing efforts of individual water agents. Considering the increasing importance attached to the water crisis urgency, this type of competition and the associated projects of imagineering waterscapes may well intensify.

### **The politics of imagineering the DWS**

Imagineering is a deeply political practice. As Teo (2003: 547) posits, "With imagineering simplifying places for easy consumption, places inevitably become sites of struggle because imagineering opens up debates about whose reality is being represented/promoted/narrated and for whom".

The intent of this last section is precisely to open up this debate in terms of the imagineering of the DWS, and to unveil some of the ambiguities, contradictions and tensions hidden behind retained and 'sedimented' notions in DWS imagineering.

Above all, the construal of a united sector serving common aims must be nuanced. First, this construal contrasts with an underlying structural division of labour that is fragmented rather than united. This relates to the question of what constitutes 'the water sector'. As mentioned, the DWS is subdivided according to the various 'types' and 'uses' of water. Despite trends and steps towards integration, these subdivisions are still institutionally separate. They put forward their own particular histories and professional cultures and have their own representative bodies, publication outlets and international programmes.

Such fragmentation is not surprising, as any sector may have arbitrary, contested and shifting boundaries. It does, however, present a challenge to imagineering the DWS, as there is a constant 'risk' of subdivisions behaving contrary to the desired unity. The recent disintegration of 'Top Sector Water' into 'Top Sector Water and Maritime' proves as much; previously a subdivision of Top Sector Water, maritime-related agents apparently felt that its size, stature and economic potential warranted a separate designation. Thus, in the top sector context it is now profiled as a sector in itself, with various subsectors such as ports, shipbuilding and navy. As the DWS is represented by the NWP, so the maritime sector has its own representative body named 'Maritime by Holland'.

Second, the construal of a united sector is challenged by conflicting ideological threads running through linked but differentiated networks underpinning the DWS. Behind agential notions of 'partnership', or win-win ideas such as 'people, planet, profit', power-laden struggles ensue between these networks and agents. What is at stake here is the question of for whom, and for what, the DWS is and should be imagineered. This in turn relates to the aforementioned 'performative forces', and to which of these is backed up by whom, with what effect.

Imagineering the DWS for (domestic) economic ends, for one, finds strong support in the export- and innovation-oriented Top Sector Water and Maritime. The private sector is broadly represented in this Top Sector network and finds state backup in entities such as the Foreign Economic Relations (DGBEB) department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BZ). The (partly overlapping) network that is organised around the International Water Ambition has a broader view, but it is still very much committed to prioritising Dutch expertise. Development actors, including a large number of non-profit and public entities, are more engaged with the potential political, social and environmental impact of the DWS than the other two networks. Moreover, their view of the economic aspect is not as one-sidedly focused on

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<sup>13</sup> These include the Danish Water Forum for Denmark, the France Water Team and the French Water Partnership, the German Water Partnership, the Portuguese Water Partnership; they are examples of entities and agents which, to a lesser and greater extent, engage in imagineering the waterscapes of the nation-states they represent.

what Dutch businesses can offer, but also is concerned with what foreign waterscapes require and the potential roles of local and regional businesses. In the Netherlands, this network is supported by the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS). The DGIS is also part of the BZ, and together with DGBEB delivers input for implementing the combined aid, trade and investment agenda. But as their perspectives on development differ quite substantially, they frequently clash in specific policy processes.<sup>14</sup> That said, both are ultimately bound by government agendas and need to find consensus in line with those agendas.

A more fundamental critique on imagineering the DWS therefore comes from agents with a relative distance from these established networks, such as critical NGOs and researchers.<sup>15</sup> They draw attention to ambiguities and contradictions in the imagineering process and critically investigate projects that feature as illuminating examples. These include comprehensive 'master plans' produced by Dutch consortia in delta areas around the world, such as Jakarta, Indonesia, or in Beira, Mozambique. Such master plans are typically presented as the superior version of reality, captured in neat designs and images. They are 'master' plans since they include win-win solutions for multiple development problems. Yet, delving deeper, these actors stumble upon – and raise – all kinds of concerns, such as potential environmental damage, high financial risks, forced displacement of people and, more generally, a trend towards increased private gains and public losses (Bakker et al., 2017). According to one researcher, the 'delta' is actually a "created policy object" that masks a major investment agenda driven by The Hague (Stravens, 2018: 60). What these agents do, then, is (re)politicise and challenge objectified notions in the DWS imaginary.

These partly overlapping, but distinct, clusters of agents pursue different hydrosocial relations, visions and priorities which do not carry equal weight in the imagineering process. Current selectivities inscribed in the process of imagineering the DWS include a depoliticised understanding of water problems, an emphasis on high-tech, market-based, and win-win solutions that are in the national economic interest. This reflects the neoliberal and increasingly self-interested agendas of the current and past Dutch governments, and adheres to hydrosocial ideas and categories common in mainstream global governance networks. Such adherence makes the DWS brand more trustworthy, yet makes it harder for social groups with different hydrosocial visions to get themselves heard. It also leads to struggles, for instance, over whether and how to balance (Dutch) economic benefits against burning political issues within water diplomatic missions abroad. The NWP finds itself in the middle of this struggle: from one perspective it is seen as a development entity and from the other a business-stimulating network.<sup>16</sup>

Besides these politics of privileging and marginalising, imagineering the DWS also involves the politics of active forgetting and remembering (Lee and Yeoh, 2004). Following Johansson (2012: 3623), this can be taken to mean that "sanitised versions of the past, present and future [are presented] in order to provide the place [waterscape] with a differentiated position". As mentioned above, history features as an important selling point in DWS imagineering, as do many of the water infrastructures, technologies and concepts designed, built or tried out by Dutch agents in the Netherlands itself. Yet, in the process of imagineering, a rich, multifaceted and complex hydrosocial history in present-day Netherlands is generally reduced to a couple of notable successes and failures. The above-mentioned recontextualisation of a myriad of historic hydrosocial practices as 'delta management' is another political act that serves to sanitise the Dutch waterscape for current political economic ends.

In the process of imagineering the DWS, past and present power struggles and contradictions largely remain untold or hidden; there is minimal disclosure of the considerable social and environmental costs of many of the historical (hydraulic) interventions that have led to the esteemed delta or the present

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<sup>14</sup> This is from an interview with BZ employees on 24 January and 1 February 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Relative distance must be emphasised, since these agents, too, often engage in, or with, the mentioned networks – albeit more critically – and depend to greater and lesser degrees on financial support from the state.

<sup>16</sup> From an interview with an NWP employee on 15 December 2017.

Dutch waterscape; also expunged from the narrative are the struggles and conflicts within hydrocracies (Disco, 2002) and between them and local communities that resulted from such planned interventions (Simissen, 2009). Or consider the long trajectory of attaining universal coverage of water supply in the Netherlands; this came about through strong state involvement, major public investments and with relatively simple drinking water production technologies.<sup>17</sup> This seems at odds with the emphasis currently being placed on private sector/private finance-driven water supply developments and the use of advanced technologies.

Simplifying waterscapes is inescapable if they are to be comprehended and 'managed'. Yet, their contemporary imagineering leaves us with dubious simplifications that deserve critical analysis in order to shed light on whose interests are served better, and at the expense of whom, and why this occurs.

## CONCLUSIONS

Imagineering waterscapes is conceptualised in this article as simultaneously a cultural, a political economic and a political ecological process. This process involves the production of a waterscape imaginary that "draws on, and produces, material realities" (Johansson, 2012: 3623). A cultural political economy approach proved useful in examining the semiotic and extra-semiotic dimensions of this process, and their interplay. But while CPE focuses on the established concept of the 'imaginary', this article prefers the use of the idea of 'imagineering'. The verb, it is argued, presents it as a dynamic – rather than reified – process. Imagineering incorporates the imaginary but goes beyond it by emphasising the performative power of imagineering. This preference also stems from the field of political ecology: imagineering captures the metabolic, sociomaterial character of this process better than does the imaginary.

The Dutch Water Sector served as an exemplary case of imagineering waterscapes at the scale of the national – territorial state, given the effort put into the process by state and non-state actors and the strength attributed to it by others such as the UKFP. CPE was first used to examine the discursive, agential, technological and structural selectivities inscribed in the process of construing the DWS. Indeed, no effort is spared to remind one of the principal discursive claim in the DWS imaginary: the Netherlands as the quintessential 'water nation'. Whatever the 'type' or 'use' of water, it is allegedly in the DNA of the Dutch. Dutch water expertise (so the narrative goes) is available and trustworthy given the knowledge built up over centuries; infrastructural and technological feats function as material representations of this accumulated expertise. This core message appears in all the DWS subdivisions, whether water technology, delta management, water supply or any other type of water management. Digital tools, online spaces, physical places such as water events, and nodal actors are extensively used to boost and convey the message.

Our attention then shifted to the performative and material forces that imagineering the DWS (ought to) set in motion. The DWS imaginary is developed primarily with the purposes of creating a competitive position in the world market for water-related products and services, influencing debates on how water ought to be seen and treated, and materialising/institutionalising 'made in Holland' hydrosocial services and products in foreign waterscapes. Various sources, including the UKFP (as quoted in the introduction), suggest that the DWS imaginary has impact. On the one hand, this can be explained by the branding of the DWS as a sanitised waterscape, making it appear unique and authentic; on the other hand, the DWS imaginary – with its depoliticised, consensual and neoliberal perspectives on water problems and solutions – adheres to dominant thinking and categories in mainstream water networks. This adds to the trustworthiness of the DWS imaginary.

A CPE analysis tackles not only the questions of how imagineering is done, what it entails, who is involved, and its performative powers; it also addresses the question of why it is done. This article

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<sup>17</sup> The process, even so, started with private investors and companies in Amsterdam.

mobilises two main explanations for why the DWS is subject to increased imagineering since the late 1990s. From a political ecological viewpoint, imagineering can be regarded a strategic and effective tool for positioning the DWS as a 'partner' in the tackling of water crises; this is an objective that has become increasingly central to global economic and water governance networks such as the World Economic Forum and the World Water Council. From a political economic angle, the article suggests that imagineering replaced some of the more coercive tactics (such as tied aid) which the Dutch state can no longer use, or no longer wants to use, to the extent that it has done in the past. Instead, imagineering relies more on seducing prospective partners into particular hydrosocial arrangements. This is a tactic in which semiotic means arguably play a bigger role than they do in coercive tactics.

But this does not make imagineering less political. The article argues that the politics of privileging and marginalising and those of forgetting and remembering are firmly at work in the process of imagineering the DWS. Selectively forgetting and remembering results in the already-mentioned 'sanitising' of the Dutch waterscape, presenting it as an emblem of progressive modernisation and downplaying the numerous power struggles of past and present hydrosocial developments. The political use of privileging and marginalising produces an environment where the selectivities and, indeed, the sedimented notions in imagineering the DWS favour some agents and some hydrosocial visions and ideas over others. This is not uncontested, however; behind the cloak of a united water sector a struggle continues over the question of in whose interest the DWS is, and should be, imagineered.

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