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Out of the mainstream: Water rights, politics and identity.  
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## BOOK REVIEW

**Boelens, R.; Getches, D. and Guevara-Gil, A. (Eds). 2010. Out of the mainstream: Water rights, politics and identity.** London, Washington, DC: Earthscan. ISBB 978-1-84407-676-5, 368 pages, US\$99.95.

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### **Helen Ingram**

Southwest Center, University of Arizona, US; [hingram@uci.edu](mailto:hingram@uci.edu)

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This book rejects a number of shibboleths among water professionals and replaces them with advice that emphasises fairness, community, and bottom-up democracy. Rather than embracing universal recipes for water governance, the book emphasises the importance of contexts, local culture, and on-the-ground practices including the great diversity of water management repertoires. Water is revealed to be not the subject of experts but the source of power, conflicting interests and identity battles. Much touted multiculturalism will fail, the authors argue, unless there is a genuine redistribution of power and resources. Processes and forums for public participation are not sufficient if inequities among the majority and minority communities and misrepresentation of culture persist. Utopian dreams, particularly the neo-liberal variety such as that pursued in Chile, produce dysfunctional and unjust results. Sale of water through markets, individualised water rights and privatisation of water suppliers are in the mainstream thinking about water, but out of the mainstream ideas of gender equity in water matters, indigenous self-rule, autonomy and maintenance of cultural integrity are emphasised in this book.

After providing a description of the contents of this edited book, and highlighting the conclusions of some of the chapters, this review will consider the overall contribution of the book to contemporary water scholarship and discourse.

The 17 chapters of this edited book are divided into four major sections. The first section takes up issues of overarching conceptual importance and includes chapters on neo-liberalism, multiculturalism and gender as applied to water resources. The second section focuses specifically on the Andean region of Latin America. Following a chapter that surveys the historical repression of indigenous Andean peoples, two other chapters in this section examine the connection of water to land, and indigenous mobilisation. The chapter by Annelies Zoomers comes to the rather discouraging conclusion, based on her research in Southern Bolivia, that investments in land and water will not improve livelihoods, considering contemporary land fragmentation and inappropriate water management.

The third section not only delves further into Andean water laws, water rights conflicts, and community practices but also includes some comparative cases from a variety of settings. The diversity of water systems, organisational forms and local procedures in Andean nations is astonishing. Jan Hendriks observes that in face of such variety it is nothing short of inconceivable that mainstream official legal frameworks continue to promote a blanket nationwide norm or system for allocating and distributing water. Charles Wilkinson recounts the case of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe in Nevada that follows closely a narrative familiar in the Andes in which indigenous people are forced to give way to notions of development held by the dominant culture. In a wide-ranging chapter, André Hoekema concludes that indigenous peoples in many parts of the world have achieved legal recognition of

community rights to exploit local natural resources such as land, water and forests under their own rules and practices. The result is a kind of legal pluralism in which local tenurial institutions become part of the law of the land, or at least become more respected.

The fourth section of the book considers various strategies for defending and asserting indigenous and grass-roots control over water. David Getches authors a most useful chapter on the potential of international law as a means of asserting indigenous water rights. The chapter identifies six kinds of rights and illustrates various ways in which claims could be framed and international law invoked to advance them. Networking is the strategy examined in a chapter by Rutgerd Boelens, Rocío Bustamante and Tom Perreault that concludes it is important to create networks to challenge dominant policies at levels ranging from day-to-day forms of resistance to global-scale struggles.

Neo-liberalism comes in for sharp criticism from many of the chapter authors for misunderstanding the relationship of people to water, misreading people's motivations, overriding long established local practices, and leading to disastrous consequences. Complaints about turning water into a commodity, excessive preoccupation with material welfare over broader social welfare, and disregard for distributional effects of neoliberal policies can be found in many chapters. At the same time, the book escapes mere polemics. Among the most interesting findings and conclusions of the book are the potential of mixed water governance systems that encompass both the rationalised national water laws and the benefits of longstanding communal water governance that honour traditional local rules and collective community welfare. As the effectiveness of top-down water management has come under question, indigenous institutions are recognised as having valuable qualities including public trust and support. The concept of co-management in which customary and legislated law coexist is shown to be gaining traction.

While water is often portrayed as a technical and scientific subject, a major message of this book is that water, at bottom, is political. The mobilisation of grass-roots resistance movements, the creation of linkages and networks that cut across levels of government and divisions between public and private spheres are essential to protect the resource and the livelihoods of those who depend upon it. Yet, the authors of the book argue that such campaigns are not enough, even when they are victorious. Instead, the rules of the political game and the political culture in the Andean region must change. As Anthony Bebbington, Denise H. Bebbington and Jeffrey Bury state in their chapter, the cultural challenge is to get the public to demand the strengthening of institutions that are presently too weak and subservient to protect against special interests and overweening executive power. The editors of the volume conclude in the final chapter that, while politically attractive, it is important for minority communities not to settle for "recognition" rights that turn out, in the politics of implementation, to be empty promises. Formal recognition is too often merely symbolic and falls considerably short of the redistribution of power and resources necessary to reverse historical inequity.

*Out of the Mainstream...* is just that, a refreshing change of world view from the dominant professional discourse in water resources that purports to have standardised solutions to global and local water problems. This book recognises the plural meanings of water and the messy complexity of governance. Water knowledge is stretched beyond that produced by card-carrying scientists, engineers, and other scholars to include traditional and experiential understanding. The protean nature of human relationship to water is recognised as an unfolding story in which change is a constant and resistance, struggle and conflict are unavoidable.