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The social life of water. Berghahn Books.  
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## BOOK REVIEW

**Wagner, J.R. (Ed). 2013. The social life of water.** Berghahn Books. Print ISBN 9780857459671, eBook ISBN 9780857459664, 325 pages, \$34.95/£22.00.

(URL: [www.berghahnbooks.com/title.php?rowtag=WagnerSocial](http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title.php?rowtag=WagnerSocial))

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Like everyone else working in the water field today, I swim in an exponentially growing literature that is transdisciplinary – everything from soil type to global governance. But as an emeritus anthropologist I like to keep an eye on what my old disciplinary tribe has to say. The appearance of *The Social Life of Water*, edited by John Wagner, caught my attention and I thought it would be useful to review a book of anthropology for a general water audience and see if the former might have anything to say to the latter. The problem is, it is an edited volume – fourteen authors plus the editor's introduction – the most difficult kind of book to handle in a brief essay. It's impossible to cover it all.

Contributors represent research in many different areas of the world, though not arctic or desert biomes. All were asked to look at "how a sense of crisis informs and shapes the human relation to water in the twenty-first century". This sort of crisis-driven model is one I use as well, a tried and true anthropological premise that breakdowns in the social order are where its characteristics come to the surface and become visible. The editor's introduction does a good job of laying this out as well as other views that most of the chapters present, such as the agency of water, the requirement that humanity together with its natural context are the inseparable unit of data, and the issue of scale – how to link local dynamics with other levels of organisation where the rules are written and the resources are allocated.

I cite these premises because they are not usually part of water discourses as I have experienced in conferences. But there *will* be discussions of 'decentralisation', 'stakeholder', 'participatory management', and 'scale'. These concepts have been celebrated in the water field for some time as solutions to water management crises. The current trend seems to be a sense of disappointment that their implementation has been so difficult. The meeting ground between this book's theme of how to carefully describe and explain community action and the more 'experience distant' concepts of water discourse seems obvious. A couple of contributions at the end of the book are especially good at showing what such a meeting might look like and I will get to them in more detail in a moment.

Chapters are grouped under four headings – Commodification, Technology, Urbanisation, and Governance. The first section, on commodification, includes work by Li in the Andes, Strang in Australia and Mehta in India. In their different ways, the authors foreground the simple fact that water has many kinds of value to different populations. Water as economic commodity, seen exclusively in terms of its cash value, is never the only value, sometimes not even the most important one. Since most projects rest on cash value as the principle guideline for decision-making, stories of resistance from and negative consequences on people with more complex water value systems should not be a surprise.

The second section deals with technology, with contributions by Naguib in Palestine, Brara in Punjab, and Veeravilli in Kenya. Technology is of course a mainstay of water history with its traditional emphasis on hydrology and engineering. In these chapters technology is portrayed as an actor in the social world, an actor that doesn't only impact water. It also reorganises the human populations in whose social worlds it becomes a new agent. It changes previous social structures, sometimes dramatically, with a new presence of technical expertise and life-altering changes that run from improvement to destruction, sometimes both at the same time.

The third section focuses on urbanisation, with Osumanu in Ghana, Smith in Cambodia, and Leonard in Ireland. Here the main theme shifts to water-quality problems born of rapid growth in urban populations without the infrastructure to provide potable water. The most affected immigrants to the city are usually the poorest. The consequences for urban political economy, not to mention for those who suffer from and treat water-borne disease, provoke health crises that remain unresolved in the case studies presented here.

The final section is on governance, a theme that the editor describes in the introduction as a primary question for the book – how anthropological research might contribute to new water policy. I'll deal with this section in a little more detail since it is an area I work in. The first chapter is by Wutich and colleagues, a cross-cultural look at the concept of 'fairness' at four sites – Bolivia, Fiji, New Zealand, and the U.S. Equity of access to water is a particularly strong theme across sites, especially where governance is not transparent and democratic. They note that international agreements typically do not deal explicitly with this issue. In the next chapter, Sam and Armstrong look at the general issue of indigenous water rights. In their contribution 'privatisation' finally appears as a topic, in this case as a mechanism of development and exclusion that continues previous patterns of colonialism from the perspective of indigenous groups.

The two final chapters are probably the ones that will look most familiar to anyone who is active in water management, whatever their disciplinary background is. Bruns writes from his experience as a management consultant in Indonesia. The work of Elinor Ostrom appears as he describes the top-down versus bottom-up arguments for water management. He writes about the shift to bottom-up approaches but at the same time describes disappointment with their overall performance. He calls his own approach 'bureaucratic bricolage', that is, working out an arrangement between experts with their organisational templates and locals with their own agenda and need for financial support. The results of this improvisational mix differ from place to place, but his concept better describes how the successful cases he has worked on usually take shape.

The final chapter, by Donahue on conflict over uses of the Edwards aquifer in Texas, will be painfully familiar to water veterans. Ostrom again appears with her concept of polycentric governance. He takes us through the history, the detailed legislative and regulatory tangle, the profound stakeholder differences, and the process of developing a "sense of collective responsibility" to arrive at a settlement. The book's editor, in his introduction to this section, writes: "While the image of a boardroom full of stakeholders may not be the most striking image with which to end this volume, I believe it does honestly portray the real work that must be done around the world to resolve water crises".

For people in the water field, management or research, *The Social Life of Water* offers samples of how water crises are interpreted through the lens of an anthropological perspective. It does so by drawing on a variety of kinds of human settlements in various parts of the world. For anthropologists not in the water field, the book demonstrates how their perspective can lead to a connection with policy change and programme implementation. For anthropologists working in the water field – here I'm only speaking for myself – the book provides useful material to help the water field incorporate good social practice, research and theory into a transdisciplinary field currently interested in incorporating it into policy and management.

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