Political Culture in Water Governance – A Theoretical Framework

Nadine Reis

El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Demográficos, Urbanos y Ambientales (CEDUA), Mexico City;
nreis@colmex.mx

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to contribute to a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) of water governance by focusing on the role of political culture in water governance. It develops a conceptual understanding of political culture and a theoretical framework for using political culture as a concept in a CPE of water governance. Three theoretical building blocks are used. First, I use Bob Jessop's elaborations on a relational understanding of state power, which emphasises the critical role of processes of legitimacy creation for any hegemonic state project. Second, Margaret Archer's understanding of culture as 'cultural system' is used in order to conceptualise the notion of 'culture' from a critical realist perspective. By understanding 'culture' as an equivalent to the concept of 'structure', it becomes possible to evade an empiricist or statist concept of culture. Political cultures can then be defined as systems of meaning comprising propositions about political legitimacy. Third, I draw on Gabriel A. Almond's and Sidney Verba's ideas on political culture, and present three dimensions of political culture that are relevant in the analysis of water governance: system culture, process culture and policy culture. The concepts are illustrated with case study material from Vietnam and with other cases from the literature.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Political Economy, political culture, state power, state legitimacy, water governance

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to contribute to a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) of water governance by focusing on the role of political culture in water governance. The capitalist nation state is the central arena of water governance. States themselves have been primarily responsible for the exploitation of water resources; historically, water exploitation and control are closely related to processes of state-building and territorial expansion of state power (Scott, 1998; Blackbourn, 2006; Whitehead et al., 2007). The state has also been the key facilitator for the exploitation and use of water resources by other actors and, according to 'modern' standards, has been in charge of domestic water supply and sanitation. Hence, the state is the main space where (formal and informal) decisions are made over rules and regulations to 'improve' the use of water resources and the distribution of the benefits of access to them; it is where water governance takes place. The capitalist state thus occupies a central role in the human – water relationship.

Since the 1990s, 'water management' is increasingly occurring in response to global ideas on good environmental policy. Global policy ideas are spreading around the world and are in the process being contested, translated and adapted in different ways in the domestic domain (Mollinga, 2008: 13; McCann and Ward, 2012; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). The 'projects' of international organisations and nation states, as well as of civil society and social movements, play out differently in different states. Hence, questions around the interface of the cultural dimensions of statehood and water evolve around two aspects: i) the political – practical dimension of water governance (i.e. what is the role of different political cultures for water management?), and ii) the role of water itself in the constitution of the state, as a 'cultural effect' (Mitchell, 1991) (i.e. how are hegemonic state ideas brought into effect, and what is the role of water (governance) in such processes?).

Bob Jessop endeavoured to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for 'taking the cultural turn seriously' in political economy and pushing forward the intellectual project of a Cultural Political Economy (Sum and Jessop, 2013); in the process, he developed a 'strategic – relational approach' to state power (Jessop, 2008). While CPE, as developed by Sum and Jessop, focuses mostly on the political projects of post-Fordist European economies (especially the 'knowledge-based economy'), the broader theoretical agenda of CPE also offers useful insights for thinking about water governance and the state. One of Jessop's central arguments in thinking about state power is that "the production of intersubjective meaning is crucial to the description, understanding, and explanation of economic and political conduct just as it is for other types of behaviour and their emergent properties" (Jessop, 2008: 236). CPE thus explicitly engages with the role of culture in the political economy of the state. Building on, among others, the work of Gramsci, Poulantzas and Mitchell, Jessop's strategic – relational approach highlights the importance of the socially embedded nature of state power, and hence of questions of legitimacy: "[A] theory of the state can only be produced as part of a wider theory of society, and (…) this wider theory must give due recognition to the constitutive role of semiosis in organizing social order" (ibid: 7).

This paper explores how the CPE approach (and, more broadly, a critical realist conception of social theory) can be used for research on water governance by explicitly focusing on the role of political culture. It starts from the assumption that if we accept that a) the capitalist state is a key arena for understanding the water policy process, and b) culture is a constitutive aspect of statehood as the latter depends on culturally constituted legitimacy, then issues of culture and legitimacy are a dimension of water governance worth being conceptualised in more detail.

Hence, the aim of this paper is to develop a conceptual understanding and framework of the meaning and dimensions of political culture in water governance. Specifically, it aims to explore the possibility of thinking about the cultural dimension of the state – water nexus through a concept of political culture; this will be developed with reference to three theoretical building blocks that also guide the structure of this paper. The first is Jessop's elaborations on a relational understanding of state power (Jessop, 2008), which emphasises the critical role of processes of legitimacy creation for any hegemonic state project. Second, I use Archer's understanding of culture as 'cultural system' (Archer, 2005) in order to come to grips with the notion of 'culture'. By understanding 'culture' as an equivalent to the critical realist concept of 'structure', it becomes possible to evade an empiricist or statist concept of culture. I define political culture as systems of meaning comprising propositions about legitimacy. These theoretical propositions are used to draw on a third building block, Almond and Verba's (1963) ideas on 'political culture', which have been further developed and reframed by Bukovansky (2002). Finally, I present three dimensions of political cultural systems that are relevant for understanding water governance: system culture, which concerns the legitimacy of political authority; process culture, which is about legitimate behaviour in relationships between political actors; and policy culture, which evolves around questions of legitimacy in policy outcomes. The theoretical dimensions are illustrated with empirical case study material from Vietnam and additional cases from the water literature.

STATE POWER, CULTURE AND LEGITIMACY

The nation state is a key arena in and through which water governance takes place; hence, a theorisation of the state is necessary to understand how water is used and appropriated in most parts of the world. Two basic propositions of Jessop's approach to state power are central to the conceptual aims of this paper: a relational understanding of 'the state', and the significance of culture for state power.

Relational approaches to state power acknowledge the contingency of the existence of the state and its overall embeddedness in societal practices. First and foremost, this involves discarding the false dichotomy of 'state' and 'society'. The analytic separation of state and society is flawed since it is based on an essentialist understanding of the state as an object that exists independently of social practices. As pointed out by Jessop, we must not conceive of the state as a concept different from society, as "its

apparatuses and practices are materially interdependent with other institutional orders and social practices" (Jessop, 2008: 5). "[W]hile statal operations are most concentrated and condensed in the core of the state, they depend on a wide range of micro-political practices dispersed throughout society. States never achieve full closure or complete separation from society" (ibid: 9). Following Marxian and Gramscian reflections on the state, the ideational separation of state and society is viewed as a mechanism for obscuring the class relations that are the basis of the very existence of the state. The formation of the modern state is inherently linked to the development of capitalism as mode of production, and capitalist relations of production must thus be placed at the centre of any understanding of the state and state power.

The central analytical question about the state is thus not what the state is, but which social practices and strategic actions bring the state into being as an 'effect' (Mitchell, 1991). Jessop therefore suggested defining "the core of the state apparatus" as a "distinct ensemble of institutions and organizations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on a given population in the name of their 'common interest' or 'general will'" (Jessop, 2008: 9). Here, Jessop stresses the importance of culture for understanding state power. The political functions of the state are not something naturally given, but are socially acknowledged, i.e. "their precise content is constituted in and through politically relevant discourses" (Jessop, 2008: 10). The existence of the state thus depends on the meanings attached to state power, i.e. an idea of the state which is socially contingent (Abrams, 1988: 68; Englebert, 2000: 74; Mathews, 2011: 10). The main cultural dimension of statehood is a socially produced and reproduced legitimacy. Legitimacy is a necessary cultural requirement of state practices, one that requires continuous production and reproduction (Habermas, 1989; Evans, 1995). Since the precise content of the political functions of the state is constituted in and through discourses, the forms in which legitimacy is institutionalised and expressed vary depending on the social context (Jessop, 2008: 9).

The state is thus likely to take on different forms under differing social contexts, with the cultural dimension of legitimacy creation playing a crucial role. The state – water relationship therefore differs from state to state not only according to the specificity of class relations, the role of water resources in the control of territory, and the material basis of the economy; it also differs according to the different ways in which legitimacy is created and reproduced in social practices and according to how these modes of legitimacy creation evolve and change over time. Legitimacy creation is thus the most important aspect of political culture. The following section draws on political culture theory as developed by Almond and Verba (1963), and recasts their approach applying a critical realist understanding of culture.

POLITICAL CULTURE AS EMERGENT SYSTEM OF MEANING

Political culture theory goes back to the work of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, who presented their theoretical concept based on empirical studies of political cultures in five countries in 1963 (Almond and Verba, 1963). Their approach was not broadly received, particularly due to the critique of culturalism (Almond, 1989: 28-30). Almond and Verba apply a narrow, positivist conception of culture, which is reflected in their quantitative methodology. However, political culture is normally not consciously reflected by interviewees and is therefore almost impossible to capture in surveys investigating attitudes (Rohe, 1990: 331). The question is how political culture can be systematically theorised in order to be useful and adequate for a scientific explanation of the social world and its relation to water governance.

Culture as cultural system

Critical realism claims that human as well as nonhuman structures exist independently of human perceptions or awareness of them and that they are of causal significance for the social world. Social structures are always consequences of antecedent human practices, hence, are (re-)produced only in human practices. Actors are not necessarily conscious of causally powerful structures; in fact, the

identification of causal relationships that are not readily recognisable by means of direct observation or inquiry is precisely the scientific effort.

Structures possess causal force and dispositions, which can potentially affect practices. Whether they *cause* events or not is dependent on context, that is, on the presence of other counteractive mechanisms (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998: 9). Hence, scientific documentation of causality is not based on the regular appearance of specific events, but rather on the determination of the characteristics and potency of research objects. "[A] causal claim is not about a regularity between separate things or events but about what an object is like and what it can do and only derivatively what it will do in any particular situation" (Sayer, 1992: 105).

The identification of causal relationships is not only about their mere assertion. A typical example of the mere assertion of the power of structures is a form of policy analysis that concludes that 'lack of political will' is responsible for a gap between policy aims and outcomes (Clay and Schaffer, 1984: 2; Grindle and Thomas, 1991: 123). The scientific task must be to document *how* certain causalities work. The mode of inference is thus neither deduction nor induction, but retroduction; the aim of social science is to identify mechanisms that produce certain phenomena or events (Sayer, 1992: 106). Retroduction involves the isolation of the conditions necessary for the existence of an event. 'Real' is thus not what is empirically perceptible, but what has real effects: "what does not exist cannot exert force" (Peet 2002, 331). Hence, according to a critical realist philosophy of science, culture is something that is in principle real, and as a concept is also necessary for the explanation of the social world.

How can 'culture' be systematically abstracted so that cultural objects can be determined as being causative for certain events? Critical realist approaches suggest the conceptualising of culture not as a unified and immutable object, but as structure. Like material structures, cultural structures work through conditioning practice (Bukovansky, 2002: 30). In critical realism, structure is understood as a set of internally related elements (practices or objects) (Sayer, 1992: 92). Structures can be identified through asking questions about the kind of relationships between elements in a complex reality: "What does the existence of this object (in this form) presuppose? Can it exist on its own as such? If not what else must be present? What is it about the object that makes it do such and such?" (ibid: 91). For example, the relationship between landlord and tenant requires the existence of private property and surplus value (ibid: 92). Structures exist on various levels. "Contrary to a common assumption, structures include not only big social objects such as the international division of labour but small ones at the interpersonal and personal levels (e.g. conceptual structures) and still smaller non-social ones at the neurological level and beyond" (ibid). The identification of structures is key, because they condition social interaction through possessing emergent properties. (Emergent properties result from the structure of objects, that is, they are not reducible to the properties of the individual elements of the structure.) Put simply, emergence refers to the insight that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.[1] Taken this way, the strategies of social actors only exists in relation to structures:

> From a strategic – relational perspective, freedom only exists in relation to specific institutions and structures. These have usually emerged and been stabilised over many years and are themselves the products of past strategies, but have at some point become relatively intransitive and difficult to change. Strategies, in other words, are not simply selective (in that they involve a decision which includes and excludes), but also structurally inscribed: due to the historical layering of the material effects of previous strategies, current strategies will tendentially reinforce some forms of action and discourage others. (van Heur, 2010: 426).

Cultural structures can be abstracted by conceptualising them as emergent systems of meaning. As with material structures, cultural structures are emergent, which is to say they arise from social interactions

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[1] The concept of emergence stems from antique philosophy and is used in different systems theories of the natural and social sciences. On the concept of emergence in critical realism, see van Heur, 2010: 424-426.

and being operative in them (Archer, 2005: 24). Following Archer, culture is defined as "referring to all *intelligibilia*, that is to any item that has the dispositional ability to be understood by someone" (ibid). Culture can thus be abstracted and become part of the explanation of the social world by identifying a cultural system as "a corpus of ideas, known or available in a society at a given moment" (ibid). As with all structures, cultural systems possess emergent properties:

> At any moment, the [cultural system] is the product of historical S-C [socio-cultural] interaction, but having emerged (cultural emergence being a continuous process) then *qua* product, it has properties but also powers of its own kind. Like structure, some of its most important causal powers are those of constraints and enablements (Archer, 2005: 25).

Political culture

By conceptualising culture as cultural system, it becomes a usable concept for the analysis of the social world and water governance. Culture is not an immutable 'thing' in the sense of there being something like *the* political culture of a state, actors in region x, etc.; rather, water governance possesses a cultural dimension that can be grasped with a critical realist conceptualisation of political culture. How can we define political culture for a CPE of water governance?

In reference to Almond (1956), Pye defines political culture as "attitudes towards power" (Pye, 1985: 18). However, the term 'attitudes' is problematic in that it usually involves a positivist understanding of science, and a misconception of culture as being what is empirically observable through survey methods. As specified above, political culture must be located at the structural level of the social world. Studying political culture in international relations, Bukovansky therefore suggests conceiving of political culture as

> that set of implicit or explicit propositions that is shared by the major actors in the system, about the nature of legitimate political authority, state identity, and political power, and the rules and norms derived from these propositions that pertain to (…) relations within the system. In other words, we should use the term 'culture' to refer to the shared knowledge of rules and norms that (…) is constitutive of the structure of the international system (Bukovansky, 2002: 2).

I propose an analogous conceptualisation of political culture for theorising the cultural dimensions of water governance. Building on an understanding of culture as cultural system, political culture can be understood as "emergent systems of meaning comprising propositions about political legitimacy"*.* The following section elaborates a typology of these systems of meaning as they pertain to the governance of water.

POLITICAL CULTURE IN WATER GOVERNANCE

I suggest distinguishing three dimensions of political culture in water governance. Here I follow Almond's approach (Almond, 1989: 28), but present a more elaborated conceptualisation of the three dimensions and their role in water governance. In line with a critical realist understanding of culture, the dimensions are understood as sets of ideas and meanings that are potentially operative in causing situative logics in water governance. The dimensions are illustrated with material from a 2008/2009 case study of policy practices in the water supply and sanitation sector in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta,[2] as well as further cases from the literature.

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[2] The study investigated decision-making processes in rural water supply and sanitation in the Mekong Delta; it used semi-structured interviews and participatory mapping with government officials, households and donor agencies, as well as government documents and statistical data. The full study was published in Reis (2012).

System culture: The 'state effect' of policy practices

System culture refers to social imaginaries and ideas of the state that legitimise particular forms of political authority. According to Charles Taylor, a 'social imaginary' is defined as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor, 2004: 23). The social imaginary can thus be understood as a cultural system comprising the way(s) in which humans are imagined as social beings. Social imaginaries differ historically and in different societies and are closely related to ideas of the state and the legitimacy of political authority. Taylor argues that the social imaginary of Western societies started its 'long march' in the European Renaissance and, over the centuries, turned from an elite idea into the common way in which ordinary people imagine their social surroundings (Taylor, 2004: 32-34). The core of this idea is that human beings form societies as free and equal individuals for their mutual benefit (ibid: 4). The presumption of equality fundamentally distinguished this social imaginary from one earlier in European history, where relations of hierarchical differentiation and complementarity were seen as the 'proper order of things' (ibid: 11).[3] In Western societies, political authority is thus generally seen as legitimate when allowed by the will of 'free and equal individuals'.

In water governance, social imaginaries and ideas of the state are relevant because often there are gaps between the aims and the actual outcomes of policy that must be understood in relation to the performative work involved in states (re)producing system culture. Rather than actual problem-solving around water issues, the performance of bureaucratic acts often plays an important role for the cultural dimension of state power as states gain legitimacy through them.

This is illustrated by a case study on decision-making in domestic water supply policy in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta, where access to clean water and sanitation is problematic for a large part of the population (Reis and Mollinga, 2015). As settlements in the Mekong Delta are commonly located along the extensive network of rivers and canals, people traditionally directly access the abundant surface water resources for their domestic use; however, using surface water has become a health problem due to increasing water pollution. A large and steadily growing water bureaucracy exists in the state apparatus, with the purported aim of solving the water supply problem of the rural population. Research on policy processes in domestic water supply found that system culture was a powerful cause of the way in which water policies were implemented, and played an important role in constituting the state as a 'cultural effect' (Mitchell, 1991). In Vietnam, political order is controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). The political system is rooted in the tradition of a socialist state that owns and plans production processes. According to the information presented by government officials on the different administrative levels of the state apparatus, decision-making in water supply took place in an extensive formal bureaucratic – administrative process that was driven by the needs and demands of the local population. They stated that planning for rural water supply was carried out through ten-year, five-year and yearly plans involving a system of bottom-up reporting of demands and top-down decision-making, with the involvement of numerous agencies on all four administrative levels (commune, district, province and national government). They further stated that for defining short, medium or long-term planning targets, the state apparatus collected detailed numbers about socio-economic development in all parts of the country, which meant that local authorities submitted data to higher authorities, for instance the number of households having access to different sources of domestic water supply; provincial and national authorities allegedly based decision-making on these numbers.

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[3] Obviously, the identification of a social imaginary through abstraction does not imply that this cultural system is equivalent to existing material reality; that is, in the case of Taylor's Western social imaginary, the implication is not that there *are* no social hierarchies and structural inequalities in Western societies conditioned by class, race and gender. It merely refers to the fact that the *idea* of a society made up of free and equal individuals is a powerful cultural system, which societies do not only use for their self-description, but which also shapes selectivities and practices in society.

In actual fact, policy implementation on water supply was detached from the bureaucratic – administrative process and the statistical data on the needs of the population. Field research showed that neither the choice of technology (small water supply stations using groundwater) nor the choice of location for the construction of new water supply stations was decided based on the formal planning procedure; rather, the choice of technology and its implementation was guided by the business interests of local political elites.

Nevertheless, even if the extensive bureaucratic policy practices did not generate material policy outcomes, and thus seemed to be without purpose, they played an important role with regard to the cultural dimension of statehood: they helped to reproduce the system culture of state power, namely that the VCP elite acted legitimately in the interest of all people. Hence, rather than being responsible for the outcome of water supply policies, the formal state practices served to reproduce the legitimacy of the patriarchal socialist Vietnamese state, which culminated in the idea of a Socialist Party that acts on behalf of 'the People'. The case shows that water policy practices are not necessarily about water per se, but may primarily serve the reproduction of structures of meaning attached to particular forms of state power. The role of formal structure and formalised planning for legitimacy creation was discussed more broadly in sociological literature on the global culture of rationalisation (Drori et al., 2006; Krücken and Drori, 2009), which is not only relevant to water policy in the state, but also to the policies and practices of other actors in water governance such as international organisations and donor agencies.[4]

In sum, when studying water governance and the role of the state, it is important to contemplate that the state has a need to legitimise itself through 'acting like a state', and that water bureaucracies are spaces where different system cultures and associated ideas of the state can be put into effect. For instance, in a study on agrarian reform in Mexico, Nuijten argued that one of the key methods of legitimacy creation in the Mexican state apparatus is the generation of hope, which is

> based on the fact that the bureaucracy offers endless openings, and that officials are always willing to initiate procedures. The bureaucracy as a hope-generating machine gives the message that everything is possible, that cases are never closed and that things will be different from now on. The bureaucracy never says no and creates great expectations (Nuijten, 2003: 196-198).

Hence, one of the ways in which political culture is pertinent to water governance is how practices of policymaking contribute to the (re)production of historically specific state ideas.

Process culture: Legitimacy in actor relationships

Process culture concerns the systems of meanings and values coming into effect in the relationships between actors within the state bureaucracy and in state-society interactions. It comprises ideas of the role of the self and other actors in politics, allocating legitimacy to the roles of certain actors and legitimising the norms and rules of political agency and behaviour that affect the process of policymaking. This includes ideas on the role of the individual in the political system, and ideas on interaction between the state bureaucracy and citizens. This in particular relates to principles of moral behaviour between actors, which can be powerful determinants of how water policy takes shape.

In Vietnam, process culture becomes manifest in the way in which citizens engage legitimately as political actors, that is, the systems of meaning and values that underpin the practice of active citizenship. A key element of Vietnamese political culture is its reference to both Confucian and Marxist – Leninist ideas of political power and authority. Traditional Vietnamese society and its political system were based on Confucian political philosophy, which employed the patriarchal family as the model for the political system and did not concede any political or civil rights to citizens. In that context, a hierarchically structured society was traditionally believed to represent "the intrinsic structure of the universe"

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[4] See Reis (2016) for a discussion of how the culture of rationalisation creates legitimacy for both the Vietnamese state and international donor agencies active in the water sector.

(Jamieson, 1993: 16), which is why only social relationships that follow this natural order "will produce social harmony, creating happy and prosperous families, villages and nations" (ibid: 12). In the course of the Vietnamese revolution, these ideas merged with the canon of Marxist-Leninist thought, which based equal legitimate political authority on the "enlightenment" of an elite (Porter, 1993: 7-9). In this cultural context, civil society cannot be understood as emerging from a public sphere, separate from the state and consisting of private persons that judge the actions of the government, as it has been understood in the Western context (Habermas, 1989: 30; Taylor, 2004: 87).

This insight is important for understanding the way in which policy in the water supply and sanitation sector is carried out in Vietnam. At the end of the 1990s, in order to supply rural areas in the Mekong Delta with clean domestic water, authorities began to install water supply stations with piped networks (Reis, 2012: 74-76). The operation and management of the water supply stations depends on an active civil society, which is grounded in a moral imperative of devoting oneself to the well-being and harmony of the societal whole (Reis, 2013: 85). The stations are usually constructed on the land of private households willing to both provide a section of their backyard and take over the management of the station and piped water supply in the area served by the station. However, the station managers are not state employees, but receive only a small monthly allowance as a symbolic compensation for their work. Their tasks include maintaining the station and tubes, washing the water tanks, collecting water fees from households, implementing minor repairs and installing new household connections. Interviewed station managers represented their work as a personal commitment to society, emphasising their ambition to "serve the people". A concept frequently used when it comes to active citizenship in Vietnam is "high social spirit", which is necessary for the individual to be a "good citizen" and for the hamlet to receive the status of a "good hamlet" (ấp văn hóa). Since the 1990s, the government has increasingly encouraged the establishment of community-based organisations for the provision of all kinds of public services that it is unable or unwilling to provide (CIEM and FES, 2006: 19-21); for the case of irrigation management, see Waibel and Benedikter, 2013). In the case of rural water supply, the proper operation of the system, including domestic water quality, is to a significant extent based on the 'high social spirit' of the station managers. The quality of public service provision effectively depends on a process culture, which defines the role of citizens in relation to the moral obligation of individuals to contribute to social harmony. In turn, the everyday practices of active citizenship produce and reproduce the legitimacy of an idea of state and society that places the individual in the service of the collective.

While bureaucratic rationality is often an important practice through which states gain legitimacy and thus reproduce system culture, elements of process culture may be responsible for formal ways for decision-making to be sidestepped or undermined. For instance, Lomnitz-Adler (1992), in the context of the Mexican state, discusses how informal principles of friendship, kinship and personal loyalty both coexist and conflict with formal bureaucratic rationality; the reference frame for 'legitimate' actions of government officials often lies in the informal sphere rather than in the formal sphere. Hence, water governance must not only be analysed with a view on system culture, but must also consider how individual actors in the state and actors interacting with the state gain legitimacy through these relationships.

Policy culture: Legitimacy and policy outcomes

Hendriks (1999: 35) defines policy culture as "values, norms and customs that are exhibited in public policy regarding a specific subject". Policy culture focuses on "enduring patterns of preferences and aspirations (…) and on patterns of behaviour that go with them. It therefore concerns the culture in intended as well as realised policy" (ibid). Policy culture is thus relevant at the 'output side' of legitimacy creation, i.e. the outcomes of water governance with respect to the kinds of performance or delivery that are culturally valued in a society (cf. Scharpf, 2001). This dimension of political culture has been most prominently studied in the water literature and often revolves around the role of discourses of modernity for state water policies. In particular, throughout the 20th century large-scale water infrastructure was

implemented by state 'hydrocracies' with reference to legitimising narratives such as development, progress and modernity, contributing to state-building and the control over territory (see for instance Worster, 1985; Miller, 2003; Swyngedouw, 2007; Wester et al., 2009; Nilsson, 2016).

In the Vietnam case study, the role of policy culture can be exemplified by the case of the implementation of a microcredit programme for water and sanitation (Reis and Mollinga, 2012). In the Mekong Delta, people traditionally use fishpond or river toilets. A fishpond toilet consists of two planks that are installed above the fishpond that rural households usually have near their house. Part of the waste serves as fish fodder, while the water of fishponds is regularly exchanged by releasing it into nearby rivers or canals. If the household has no fishpond, the excreta are directly disposed into the river or canal. This traditional sanitation model presents a health risk as people use the river water for various domestic purposes and also as drinking water. The Vietnamese government, in cooperation with international donors, established a microcredit programme through which rural households could take on a subsidised microloan to construct a hygienic latrine. Four types of hygienic latrine were designed by government agencies and presented to rural households. Of these, three were rather cheap (about €20-25), while one, the septic tank latrine, which is commonly used in urban areas, was relatively costly (€180-260). In the course of the implementation of the programme, it became evident that the policy did not have the intended outcome of replacing the traditional fishpond toilets. Instead, microloans were exclusively used by the wealthier households to construct the most expensive hygienic latrine model, namely septic tank latrines. This was because, first, though informed about cheap hygienic latrine models, people did not see any benefit in constructing one of these models as compared to the traditional fishpond toilet. Second, research showed that a cultural idea of 'modernity' was the major incentive for rural households regarding the construction of a new latrine. Most people did not see their sanitary situation as problematic, but liked the idea of having a 'modern' (i.e. septic tank) latrine. In effect, the major share of the budget of the programme was used for the construction of septic tank latrines, which only wealthier households could afford. However, they constructed the latrine not primarily for hygienic reasons, but as a status symbol. This was illustrated by the term 'beautiful latrine', which interviewees used to describe their new toilets, and by the pride with which they presented them. Moreover, many of these households still continued to use their fishpond latrines. In summary, the cultural value of the traditional fishpond toilet, and the idea of 'modernity', played a key role in how sanitation policy was effectively implemented on the ground.

While the three dimensions – system culture, process culture and policy culture – build on each other at first glance, their mutual relationship cannot be generalised on a theoretical basis. For example, a certain understanding of the legitimate role of civil society actors in Vietnam is closely related to the dominant system culture, which comprises a certain social imaginary and idea of the state. However, it varies which ideas or values are at work shaping the outcomes of water policies and how these relate to other dimensions of political culture. One of the questions relating to political culture in water governance is whether political cultures are converging globally around ideas of the neoliberal state; a related question is that of where fractures of neoliberal imaginations are visible at the level of policy culture – for example, in the contestation of 'technological fixes' as visions of progress and modernity – and where fractures may be visible at the level of process and system culture. For instance, one element of the neoliberal state ideology is a new process culture in water governance, one where citizens solve their problems on their own or through non-governmental organisations, while adhering to a market logic (Assies, 2010: 60); related to this idea is a social imaginary of 'free', 'equal' and 'self-responsible' individuals. Following this idea, states have recognised community-based or indigenous organisations that can be reconstructed after a neoliberal image and can neatly fit 'modern' models of water law; those with more radical demands for restoring community-based political practices, power and resource redistribution can, in the process, be discredited (Boelens et al., 2010). This underlines the fact that local struggles for environmental justice do not (and cannot) only challenge water policy at the level of policy culture, but must do so more fundamentally at the level of process and system culture.

CONCLUSION

This paper shows how political culture can be incorporated into a Cultural Political Economy framework, and presents examples of how political culture is relevant in water governance. The advantage of a critical realist conceptualisation of political culture is, first, that it prevents a static, essentialist view of culture. As a structural condition, cultural systems exercise their own powers because they engender specific mechanisms that enable or constrain the variation, selection and retention of social practices (Jessop, 2008: 239). People become carriers of political culture as their behaviour is formed by processes of socialisation, in particular cultural and cumulative social learning (cf. Eckstein, 1988: 792); however, culture, understood as a cultural system, is always (re-)produced in social practices and therefore alterable.

Second, the value of CPE lies in the acknowledgement of the co-constitution of the social world by both discursive and material structures. This means that the reproduction of political culture co-depends on material structures and the interests associated with them.

> CPE is not only concerned with how texts produce meaning and thereby help to generate social structure but also how such production is constrained by emergent, non-semiotic features of social structure as well as by inherently semiotic factors. Although every social practice is semiotic (insofar as practices entail meaning), no social practice is reducible to semiosis. Semiosis is never a purely intra-semiotic matter without external reference and involves more than the play of differences among networks of signs. It cannot be understood without identifying and exploring the extra-semiotic conditions that make semiosis possible and secure its effectivity (Jessop, 2008: 236).

This means that there may be many ideas and interests conditioning water governance, but that the dominant political culture(s) will favour some interests and practices over others. Hence, some of the most important questions for research relate to how cultural and material dimensions of water governance condition each other, and where and how political culture can be used strategically in order to contest and promote changes in the material-structural domain of water governance.

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