

Review

Liquid power: contested hydro-modernities in twentieth-century Spain by Erik Swyngedouw

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Liquid power traces the political-ecological dynamics and the emergence of networks and imaginaries that resulted in the tumultuous transformation of the Spanish hydro-social landscape throughout the 20th and early 21st century, a process that was ridden with contradictions, tensions and conflicts. The text is rich in footnotes, and draws from archival sources as well as the author's own images, figures, tables, maps and graphs, making the narrative livelier and helping the reader to get a sense of the magnitude of the ecological transformation under scrutiny. The book is theoretically and methodologically informed by political ecology, historical-geographical materialism, environmental history and Science and Technology Studies (STS). The crisis of Cuba, which signified the loss of the last Spanish colony in 1898, serves as the starting point, while another crisis, the financial crisis and social malaise exploding in 2010, marks an end to the empirical narrative.

After a succinct introduction and a theoretical and methodological chapter, Chapter 3 documents the emergence of *Regeneracionismo*, a radical imaginary brought about by a network of actors revolving around intellectuals and engineers to recast the nature of the Spanish project, unleashing a rebirth of the country. In this new imaginary, hydraulic structuralism – the massive regulation of surface waters through large infrastructures such as dams – played an essential role in forging a new geography and hence the production of new natures and territorial political scales. Chapter 4 contrasts this powerful imaginary and the promise of a hydraulic fix to redeem the fate of Spain, free of any type of contradictions, with its rather minor and discrete early material impact on the Spanish waterscape. Thus, despite *Regeneracionismo* taking hold hegemonically among the political elites in the early 20th century and having an impact on national water plans, practices remained anchored around the prior choreographies of power rooted in the traditionalist Restoration project of the late 19th century. Regenerationists, paradoxically, had to wait for the authoritarian rule of Primo de Rivera in the 1920s to see their struggle to carve out new scales to pursue their techno-modernising water imaginary, becoming materialised with the creation of river basin authorities. The fall of the authoritarian regime gave way to the Second Republic (1931–1939). During that short period of democratic rule, the national scale was privileged over the river basin, paradoxically laying the grounds for the massive reordering of the Spanish waterscape and the uncontested hegemony of hydro-structuralism under Franco's rule. Chapter 5 excavates the processes and the networks of interests behind the remaking of Spain's hydraulic techno-natural configuration from the end of the Spanish Civil War throughout the 1940s, a period characterised by a deeply nationalistic and

autarchic project. The 1950s then signalled a rescaling of the network of interests, progressively abandoning the autarchic imaginary and opening up Spain to a more liberal and internationalist geopolitical imagination. Chapter 6 concisely documents the insertion of Spain into the US-led western alliance in the context of the Cold War. The arrival of the Opus Dei technocrats welded the desire of modernising state officials with those of the national economic elites to expand the geographical scope of Franco's network of interest to the international scale. Massive international flows of capital kept alive Franco's project and in turn accelerated the reconfiguration of the hydrosocial landscape, which underwent a 'jumping of scale' from the river basin to the national scale, with the Tajo-Segura inter-river water transfer as the paradigmatic materialisation of the authoritarian regime's desire to build a nationally integrated water system. The reordering and remaking of Spain's hydraulic techno-natural configuration under Franco left an important imprint in the Spanish landscape with more than 600 dams built. Tracing the arrival of democracy in the late 1970s, Chapter 7 turns to the emergence of new issues (e.g. ecological modernisation, market environmentalism, etc.), new scales (e.g. the European Union, regional governments, etc.) and new actors (e.g. actants such as birds, wetlands, river sediments) around the hydrosocial cycle. The emergence of these new issues, scales and actors enabled the crystallisation of new socio-environmental and techno-natural projects and imaginaries, as well as the canalisation of social discontent levelled against the dominant state-led hydraulic paradigm, which remained, nonetheless, almost unaltered. The zenith of this contradictory process of erosion of the hydraulic paradigm could be observed in the national water plans drafted in the mid 1990s and early 2000s that failed to materialise a nationally integrated water grid and spurred gigantic social upheaval. Those seemingly insurmountable contradictions were to be resolved through a new techno-natural fix: desalination. Chapter 8 explores the heterogeneous, fragile, incoherent and often contradictory assemblage of actants staging the new emblematic water paradigm revolving around this technology. Swyngedouw, as other authors have critically pointed out, argues that desalination may represent a radical shift in sociotechnical configurations, socio-physical assemblages and ecological relations to ensure that 'nothing really has to change'. Swyngedouw ends up with a brilliant reflection and summary of the book in Chapter 9, opening new avenues for rethinking water-as-commons organised through democratic being-in-common.

It is clear that *Liquid power* will appeal to anyone interested in Spanish water politics and the political ecology of water management. Beyond the originality of his approach and the temporal extension of the period analysed, Swyngedouw's contribution will be particularly welcomed by Spanish scholars because of the way in which he overcomes the emotional engagement with Spanish politics, especially in what concerns regional disputes, providing what appears as the point of view of an external observer. But the book makes contributions that will extend well

beyond such an audience. First, it will contribute to debates around contemporary environmental politics in general as Swyngedouw shows how socio-ecological configurations are the product of a never-ending process of assembling, disassembling and reassembling of humans and the nonhuman world along changing social power relations, political economic projects, imaginaries and dreams. Second, the book serves as a unique contribution to scholarship on modern Spanish political economy and history through the lens of water. Third, scholars interested in modern infrastructure, especially from the perspective of Science

and Technology Studies, will find Swyngedouw's approach to technological artefacts, spanning from dams to channels and desalination plants, a vital contribution.

Liquid power represents the culmination of Erik Swyngedouw's pathbreaking work on the production of the modern Spanish waterscape. It is a must read for any scholar seeking to understand water, and hence the environment, as a political category that should be continuously subject to critical scrutiny.

Hug March
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya