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The governance of problems: puzzling, powering and participation, by Robert Hoppe *What is water? The history of a modern abstraction*, by Jamie Linton *Making the most of the water we have: the soft path approach to water management*, edited by David B. Brooks, Oliver M. Brandes and Stephen Gurman

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BOOK REVIEWS

The governance of problems: puzzling, powering and participation, by Robert Hoppe, Bristol, The Policy Press, 2010, 302 pp., ISBN 978-1847426291

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Since Lerner and Lasswell's introduction into policy sciences (Lerner and Lasswell 1951), the concept of 'problem' has been the ultimate focus of policy sciences. Textbooks on public policy analysis stress the key role of problem definition for later steps of analysis such as choosing among possible solutions: 'policy analysts fail more often because they formulate the wrong problem than because they choose the wrong solution' (Dunn 1988, p. 720). In this sense, problem formulation takes priority over other phases of public policy analysis, such as formulating alternatives and choosing among them.

Most authors, when dealing with the concept of problem and problem definition in public policy, still invoke Dery's seminal book *Problem Definition in Policy Analysis* published more than 25 years ago (Dery 1984). Despite the profound political and economic changes during the last two decades, nobody since Dery has tried to elaborate on the process of problem structuring and to incorporate it into policy studies (perhaps with the exception of Dunn 1988, 2003). Hoppe has tried to fill the gap. In comparison with Dery, however, his book has a much broader scope and takes a different approach. The core concept of Hoppe's approach – problem processing in governance systems – is analyzed from a political science, policy analytical and generic social science perspective. Both theoretical and normative questions are addressed. Hoppe thus asks, for example, not only whether 'different political cultures align with differently structured types of problems' but also whether such alignment is possible and – if so – how 'to nudge democracy towards more reflexive, deliberative and participatory modes of policy- and polity-oriented problem structuring' (pp. 45–46). The book is also deliberately multidisciplinary. It brings together insights from political science, policy studies, public administration, sociology and other disciplines. Consequently there are many topics in the book, and many – often rather diverse – ideas are presented. Obviously, such an approach always takes a risk of favoring breadth over depth. However, Hoppe, in my view, is able to present his arguments in succinct yet understandable ways.

The central thesis of the book – if there is anything 'central' in the book – is that there is a structural mismatch between problem finding and problem solving. Hoppe argues that today's political decision-making is predominantly solution-focused, giving priority to searching for solutions (in Hoppe's terminology 'problem solving') over searching, debating and evaluating competing problem representations or framings. According to Hoppe 'citizens have come to dislike the imposition of a government's well-ordered, but professionally and bureaucratically pre-structured, problem frames and top-down rule, no matter how effective and efficient in their own terms' (p. 19). Hoppe also argues that citizens

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want their governments to transform 'their ways of framing problem representations, in truly intersubjective but authoritative public definitions of policy problems' (p. 19). As a consequence, we need 'a problem-structuring approach to governance of problems in order to maintain, or perhaps restore, sufficient congruence between problems experienced, perceived and framed by ordinary citizens, and the ways these problems are reconstructed by proximate policy makers' (p. 42).

If Hoppe is right and thinking about and debating solutions have priority over questioning, why is it so? Hoppe, very valuably, gives several mutually complementary answers, placed on different theoretical levels (individual, group, society). The priority of solutions over questions thus can be explained by grid-group cultural theory (chapter 4), institutions and policy networks theory (chapters 5–6), inadequacies of current policy analysis (chapter 7) or by the structure of the whole democratic regime (chapters 8–9). As a glue that holds together all these possible explanations, Hoppe uses a typology of policy problems. He distinguishes four types of problems. Structured problems are characterized by high degrees of certain knowledge and consensus on normative issues at stake. Moderately-structured problems come in two distinct forms, one involving problems of ends, the other problems of means. Moderately structured problems involving ends occur when there is a great deal of consent on norms, principles, ends and goals but a considerable level of uncertainty about the relevance or reliability of knowledge claims about how to bring it about. Moderately structured problems involving means arise when 'relevant and required knowledge leads to high levels of certainty, but there is ongoing dissent over the normative claims at stake' (p. 74). Finally there are unstructured problems where both the knowledge base and norms and values at stake remain hotly contested. Hoppe goes to show how these different types of problems are connected to political institutions and actors (and their beliefs and values). For instance, he suggests that policy-makers with a hierarchist cultural background exhibit the tendency to frame and define policy problems as structured. Though Hoppe's typology of problems has been inspired by the classical work of Thompson and Tuden (1959) and has been developed in his earlier works (Hisschemöller and Hoppe 1996), it is only in this book that the typology is made a central and far-reaching theoretical tool.

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What are the implications for policy analysis? According to Hoppe, styles of policy analysis should be turned into reflective heuristics for applying Dunn's rule of congruence. This, I believe, is the most tenuous aspect of the book. In contrast to Dunn, Hoppe does not describe any methodological tools that can be used for problem structuring. How exactly can policy analysts help frame problems in a more deliberative way? How can they ensure that all perspectives are included? Together with methodological questions, the concept of problem itself would call for further elaboration. What exactly counts as 'problem definition' by particular policy actors? What they have in their minds? What they express privately or only official claims? What if these forms differ?

Despite the fact that we are left with such questions, it is not fair to expect everything from a single volume, and it seems alright that the book should leave some space for discussion and future addition. There are many reasons why *The Governance of Problems* should be read by both policy scholars and analysts. True, the complexity of the book and number of topics discussed make reading the book a sometimes rather demanding exercise. Even advanced readers may, at times, be unfamiliar with the concepts used by Hoppe, which include ones drawn from diverse strands of literature as well as ones coined by Hoppe himself. Although his way of connecting usually isolated concepts may require significant intellectual effort, the gain is eventually greatly rewarding.

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What is water? The history of a modern abstraction, by Jamie Linton, Vancouver, BC, University of British Columbia Press, 2009, 333 pp., ISBN 978-0774817011

One might expect a book entitled *What is Water?* to begin by explaining that water is an odorless, colorless liquid, and so on. Instead, Jamie Linton begins with a provocative statement: 'Water is what we make of it' (p. 3). Perhaps at that point, the reader will go back to look at the cover and notice the subtitle: *The History of a Modern Abstraction*. Clearly, Linton has more on his mind than a description of water's properties. He wants us to think about the developing global water crisis, or, more specifically, how we got to a point where we are facing a crisis. And the reader will find the answer in the way we view water when making choices about how to use it. Linton emphasizes that today's normative way of thinking about water – 'modern water' – is a relatively recent development. Other ways of thinking are not just possible but very relevant to policy design. Indeed, those other ways may be essential if human beings are to live comfortably and sustainably with water into the future.

Water may be a physical substance with particular properties, but, for most purposes outside the laboratory, its nature is 'complicated by the fact that in every instance, water bears the traces of its social relations, conditions, and potential' (p. 7). Modern water tries hard to ignore this fact, and, to some, that is its great virtue, for this way of understanding water permits broad generalizations that are independent of ecological, cultural and social factors. But to Linton, and no doubt a legion of others who have had doubts about it, this reductionist concept of water is the source of many of the problems we face today. As Linton writes (p. 50):

> The more we consider how ecosystems function, how the social outcomes derived from water and water services are uneven, and how people in different places and circumstances relate differently to water, the more difficult it becomes to sustain any simple, positive identity for water, whether as commodity, resource, public good, or chemical compound.

Linton develops his argument with 12 closely argued chapters arranged in four parts: 'Introduction'; 'The History of Modern Water'; 'The Constitutional Crisis of Modern Water'; and 'What Becomes of Water'. Those who want to know only the basis of Linton's thesis and its implications for water policy could get away with reading only the first and last chapters – respectively, 'The Things We Make of Water' and 'Hydrolectics'. By the term 'hydrolectics' Linton means 'a practice of social hydrology' (p. 223) which he explains as a way of conceiving water more as a process than as a material substance. The arguments presented in Part 2 about the history of modern water are, however, so far reaching and so fundamental to what follows that it would be a pity for anyone to miss them. Notably, the two chapters that focus on the hydrologic cycle show its development from vague references in writings by the early Greeks and Romans to its re-creation in the 1930s as the very model of the abstraction of water from its cultural context and as the symbol of the arrival of scientific hydrology. Our growing ability to quantify was the main tool permitting, as well as the main force promoting, the creation of modern water.

Linton does not deplore quantification – he clearly recognizes the advances it has permitted – but he does deplore the tendency to make scientific hydrology (coupled, he might have added, with neo-classical economics) the sole criterion for how water is and should be used. For example, Linton notes that the hydrologic cycle, as depicted in literally dozens of geography and natural resource text books and encyclopedias, has a distinctly northern temperate climate bias. More broadly, he asserts, 'The dominant (Western) apprehension of deserts and arid lands as barren, poor, uncivilized places that must be hydraulically re-engineered in order to be made civilized has been a motivating factor, or pretext, behind the colonial and neo-colonial materialization of modern water on several continents' (p. 123). He goes on to illustrate those effects, first in the western United States and then across the globe.

In the final chapter on 'hydrolectics', Linton allows himself to speculate as to how we might act if modern water lost its hegemonic role as the dominant way to conceptualize water: 'Water problems are never just water problems; to imagine them in such a way is to deprive ourselves of the potential that exists in the water process . . . Water is therefore conceived not as a self-identical object but as a process whose identity is formed in social relations' (p. 224). Beginning from that perspective, Linton indicates that the presence of *E. Coli* in the drinking water of both an impoverished First Nations community in northern Canada and a relatively well-off farming community in southern Canada stems in significant part from treating water exclusively as an object rather than as part of our social relationships. Linton will be joined by many local leaders and water activists when he goes on to say that we will always be vulnerable to such problems until those who are going to drink the water 'gain a greater measure of power and control over the means by which water comes into their lives' (p. 227).

Extending his reach, Linton goes on to challenge the tendency to define water crises as problems of inadequate supply, an approach that he correctly says is mainly attractive to those who want either to build dams or to sell water in bottles. The alternative is to frame water with a broader concept that he calls the hydrosocial cycle, which involves both physical and social processes. Finally, he suggests ways in which we can practice hydrolectics. For example, in contrast to many environmental activists, he praises the Dublin Principles[1] – but only if all of the principles, including those on wide participation in making water policy and on the role of women, receive as much attention as the principle about water having economic value. He also asks us to seek opportunities to manage water

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locally, and to consider adopting water soft paths for future water management (*cf*. Brandes and Brooks 2007, Brooks *et al*. 2009).

The book is not without its flaws. Economists will no doubt find some of the statements about water pricing over-stated, and physicists are apt to find some of the statements about the properties of water under-stated. Most of the defects that Linton finds with modern water as a concept have been identified by others. No matter. Changes in the way Linton presents those aspects of his argument would not change his broader conclusions, and he is careful to give credit to those who anticipated portions of the material he has brought together in this book.

A more serious criticism of the book is the relatively heavy reading that is required for many of its nearly 250 pages of text. One finds more than a few traces of its origin as Linton's PhD dissertation at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. The argument tends to be over-proven, with more citations and longer explanations than are really needed. The unhappy result is that the book will lose some readers who are not willing to work through the sometimes difficult argument. Perhaps in the near future the author will prepare a more succinct version aimed at helping water practitioners understand why re-conceptualizing water may be necessary to identify better approaches for our increasingly serious and complex water problems.

Despite these relatively minor defects, Linton has prepared a strong case to support his argument that, indeed, water *is* what we make of it, that we rely far too much on our modern view of water, and, perhaps worst of all, that too few of those working with water recognize that 'modern water' is an inadequate basis for decisions about how we should manage water (or, as he would prefer, how we should manage ourselves). Linton's message needs to be taken seriously by anyone for whom water is something more than so many molecules of H_2O. Again citing Linton's words: 'we cannot have knowledge of water except in relation to our own circumstances and modes of knowing. *In every case, it is the relation that defines the essence of what water is*' (p. 223, emphasis added). It is a message that should be incorporated into both introductory and advanced courses in a number of disciplines dealing not only with water but with all natural resources.

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Note

1. The Dublin Principles emerged from the International Conference on Water and the Environment (1992) that was held in preparation for the Earth Summit. One principle emphasized that water has an economic value in all of its human uses, and this is the principle that has received most attention. However, other principles emphasized that water is essential to the health of our ecosystems, that in many countries women play a particularly important role in the management of water, and that everywhere active participation is needed to promote good governance.

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Making the most of the water we have: the soft path approach to water management, edited by David B. Brooks, Oliver M. Brandes and Stephen Gurman, London, Earthscan, 2009, 273 pp., ISBN 978-1-84407-754-0

Few imagine that sustainability can be achieved in a short time. It is a multi-dimensional task and that is going to take many decades to achieve. Indeed, even the word achieve may be inappropriate: sustainability is more a process of becoming less unsustainable – sustainability itself may never be fully achieved.

Nonetheless there is a tool applicable to many dimensions of sustainability and the book under review here applies that tool to the management and use of fresh water. That tool is soft path planning. Amory Lovins coined the phrase 'soft path' in the mid-1970s with regard to energy. Here it is adapted to another urgent aspect of sustainability.

Had the world gotten on that energy soft path in 1976, and stayed on it, many of today's problems might have been more easily handled. Instead, in North America we got on (or near to on) the energy soft path during the early 1980s, with high energy prices forcing people to buy fuel efficient vehicles, to drive less, to insulate their homes and, to a lesser extent, to experiment with renewable energy sources. The result was a significant decrease in energy demand followed by a drop in oil prices in the mid-1980s. As prices fell we veered sharply off the soft path and by the 1990s were snapping up SUVs and mega-houses.

Sustainability as a *long-term* project languished until the reality of climate change began to sink in. It is now becoming more and more obvious that we are facing a wide array of limits: energy, water, natural habitat and fisheries to name a few. The importance of this book is that it applies the concept of the soft path to another vital resource and does so in a contemporary context of concern regarding climate change and habitat loss, both of which make the water soft path an essential policy undertaking.

With 18 chapters written by 24 authors, *Making the Most of the Water We Have* lays out the key ingredients of a water soft path (WSP) in plain language. It makes its case with some really fine writing, especially in the first four chapters. The ingredients of the WSP include setting long term targets for reduced water use and increased set-asides for habitat and climate change contingencies and working backwards (backcasting) to establish what needs to be done (and when) to achieve those goals. What needs to be done is to change industrial, agricultural and household practices – getting the same essential, life-sustaining tasks done with less water.

The real achievement of this book is that it offers details regarding soft path water planning possibilities for rich nations and poor nations alike. Individual chapters in the book look at Canada and the United States where at the national scale water supplies are relatively abundant and also examine South Africa, India, Europe and England, as well as north Africa and the Middle East and Australia where fresh water supplies are severely constrained.

There are also separate chapters that consider the WSP at different scales: urban, watershed and provincial. Most of these chapters are data rich and include extensive quantification in terms of where water is used and the extent to which that use can be reduced without significant losses of industrial or agricultural output or personal comfort.

This is not to say that a water soft path does not imply significant change, just as an energy soft path would. That change includes, for example, universal water metering and full-cost pricing. It might well also include water use standards for household appliances, water re-use in industry and the delivery of irrigation water to plants rather than to whole fields or rows. It could well include changing crop patterns or the decline of water-rich

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resource extraction and processing in water poor locations. At every level and in virtually every location, water use planning, it is argued, will need to shift from expanding delivery systems to meet demand (as if that demand were fixed by destiny and unalterable need) to managing demand and protecting the capacity for the eco-hydrological services that fresh water provides.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of the book is that, as Oliver Brandes puts it in Chapter 5, the water soft path is about taking precaution and uncertainty seriously. That is something we now can only wish we had done continuously with regard to energy from the 1970s forward until today. Given the likelihood that rainfall patterns will change as our climate changes in some locations, we will need to set aside more and more water to allow a wide variety of animal and plant species to survive and adapt. Fortunately, as *Making the Most of the Water We Have* shows, many municipalities and nations are beginning to take the idea of a water soft path seriously. This time we will need to stay on the path and this volume goes a long way toward showing us how to do just that.

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