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Book Reviews

Precious Commodity: Providing Water for America's Cities

By Martin V. Melosi

(Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011)

Pp. 304, \$27.95 (Paperback).

For over a century, Americans have expected that when they turn on the tap in the kitchen or bathroom, clear, fresh, potable water will come out at any time, at a reasonable price, set by local government. But this universal, continuous and cheap supply has not always been available, and may not persist into the near future. In *Precious Commodity*, the historian Martin V. Melosi reminds us that “water corporatism certainly is on the rise internationally, and the loss of local control over water management and even water supplies is increasingly daunting” (195). Using the archive of political history, Melosi shows the reader how municipal water systems in the United States have been shaped by various social, economic, and legal imperatives over the past century, to give context for the likely changes in water management and supply.

In this volume, a compilation of previously published book chapters, and conference papers, Melosi describes the historical precedents for where water in American cities comes from; who controls it, from watershed to tap; and how the politics of that system have shaped Americans’ understanding of their relationship to this vital resource. This book is not about hydrology; rather, it deals in trends regarding control over resources. Melosi describes his work as giving “primary attention to the role of local, state, and national management of water resources, to approach questions of privatizing water supplies in the past and present, and also to confront issues related to water pollution and questions of health” (xii–xiv).

The first half of *Precious Commodity* offers an overview of some of the main sites of historical conflicts over water: the history of river and riparian (riverside) property rights in the United States; the rise of public health through municipal investment in wastewater treatment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the development of public waterworks at the scale of the city throughout the twentieth century; and the federal dam-building project, and its environmental impacts. For the author, these seemingly disparate challenges of water policy and management foreground larger questions of water as an exceptional resource: its constant flow, and its tendency—quite literally—to absorb the materials in its surroundings. “At the heart of the question of water rights is property rights, and while the two are intertwined, the history of water has been a story as much about use as about ownership” (2). As such, Melosi describes how different kinds of political entities—from early municipal governments in the nineteenth century to the federal state—have gained or lost power as they dictated water policy.

In chapters five, six and seven—the strongest section of the book—the author zooms in on specific examples, demonstrating how conflicts over water have worked out on the ground. Chapter Five, “Private Water,” examines San Jose, California’s long-standing private water system in detail, against the more-common municipal control. Here, Melosi analyzes all of the pieces that make this system successful, noting that “in San Jose, . . . the company—wittingly or unwittingly—was becoming integrated into a water system not totally dependent on a single entity, public or private” (120). By tackling this historically anomalous example in all its complexity, Melosi deftly demonstrates that a strong and competent private provider of water has been so successful because of heavy local state regulation and integration of services through powerful oversight.

In the next two chapters, Melosi examines the influence of industry—particularly oil and shipping—on regional water systems in and around the Buffalo Bayou of Houston, Texas. Here, Melosi puts the industrial influence on municipal water policy in conversation with various challenges and solutions of water treatment, including “the development of activated sludge water treatment facilities” (130) and the debates over sourcing municipal water primarily from surface or underground water sources. The author also walks us through the ways in which economic growth can outpace municipal plans; in this case “the transformation of Houston’s water and wastewater systems from local concerns to regional issues was a dramatic reflection of how the city was changing since its modest beginnings in the nineteenth century” (180).

The strength of these middle chapters is the specificity in time and place, mobilized to illustrate what different styles of control, regulation, and oversight look like empirically. Taken together, they provide a powerful chronicle of the challenges of water service provision in their historical context. Commendably, the author stays away from easy black and white oppositions, in which a long-lasting and benevolent state cares for its citizens against the profit imperative of corporations. He is willing to dive into the anomalous example, or parse different kinds and levels of state control.

The final chapters deal with privatization and contemporary questions of control. Here, we read about how the growing corporatization of water systems is playing out around the world, particularly in the form of multinational corporations that have taken over or set up municipal water systems in places ranging from the global south to North American towns. Again, the author encourages us to be critical readers of this issue:

Therefore, *crisis* is a loaded term that has to be used clearly and accurately. While shortages of fresh water have become more common, in many cases the question also has to do with unsustainable practices that deplete water supplies faster than they are replenished. (185)

Corporate control of water is certainly a sticky issue, but not the only one, and we need a holistic stance.

While the individual chapters in this book cover a wide range of topics, with plenty of interesting factual content, the main thrust of *Precious Commodity* remains unclear. The subtitle—*Providing Water for America’s Cities*—suggests that this book will largely discuss the water that is piped in through a labyrinthine system of reservoirs, rivers, and aquifers through aqueducts, treatment plants, and myriad branching pipes into American homes and industries. Instead, the topic seems stretched at times to make room for chapters on waterway navigation

and hydroelectric dams. “This book provides historical perspective on public and private responsibility for water as a resource, be it water supplies for drinking and washing, river and dam development, or water as an urban artery” (197). It isn’t that these issues aren’t important or interrelated. But the theoretical links between vital drinking water and sanitation systems, and water for transport and industry, could use a more robust connection.

While the content of each chapter is thick with examples, questions of terminology that seem fairly important to this topic—particularly the multiple meanings of “public” or “commodity”—demand greater clarity. Consider a passage like this:

Big dams are indeed the most graphic symbol of a program that proclaims water as a public resource. Not only are the largest and most significant dams public ventures, but their construction, use, and possible dismantling have been and continue to be the subject of public regulation, public policy, and public concern. (79)

Here, the term “public” is used at least three different ways, to mean “state regulated,” “state owned,” and “popularly discussed.” The combination of these various meanings in one sentence does not “proclaim” the public-ness of water as a resource; rather, it confuses it. If the author wants to distinguish between forms of state and corporate control with precision, then a consistent notion of “public” must be articulated throughout.

Similarly, the meaning of “commodity” shifts, disrupting the specificity of the word. Melosi first uses it to mean “a resource—to be bought and sold” (xii), opposed it to “a public good” (xiii), but also declares, “water is a commodity whether it is managed and/or allocated by government or by a private business—or anything in between” (xiii). Towards the end of the book, he argues that “privatizing water systems is nothing more than giving in to the idea that water is a commodity to be bought and sold ...” (181–2) but turns around pages later to say that “the real issue is not that water is now being commodified, but rather who is doing the commodifying. Water will always be an economic good whoever manages it” (188). So is it putting a price on water that makes it a commodity? Does water become a commodity when it is drawn into centralized systems of distribution, or when particular kinds of private actors enter into control? These definitions must be at the heart of this kind of analysis.

Water provision and wastewater disposal are challenges to human populations everywhere, whatever sort of arrangements prevail. The health of communities is dependent upon this primary infrastructural task. Melosi has done years of research on various water-based issues, and here he gives the reader a taste of the many different challenges that water management poses, both in terms of state administrative structures and our understanding of collective resources. The reader will find a sampling of many topics here, a lot of good places to start in tackling this broad topic.

Reviewed by Naomi Adiv © 2012

Notes on Contributor

Naomi Adiv holds a BA in Peace and Conflict Studies from UC-Berkeley, and an MS in Community Development from UC-Davis. She is currently conducting ethnographic and archival research on public swimming pools in New York City for

her PhD dissertation at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She teaches a course, Geography of Public Space, at Hunter College.

Metropolitan Natures: Environmental Histories of Montreal

Edited by Stéphane Castonguay and Michèle Degenais
(Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011)
Pp. 336, \$42 (Hardcover).

Metropolitan Natures: Environmental Histories of Montreal explores the urban environmental history of the city of Montreal and the surrounding region, the St Lawrence Valley in the Canadian province, Quebec. Located at the confluence of two rivers and surrounded by a fertile valley, Montreal was uniquely positioned to become a transportation hub for overseas shipment and railway development to access the interior of Canada. Stéphane Castonguay and Michèle Degenais edited this collection of 14 chapters that focus on how Montreal's unique physical location and the resources nearby influenced the city's environmental, economic, political, and social development. The book does so in three sub-sections, focusing on three periods following European colonization of the area. In doing so, these sections first follow the settlers' desire to separate themselves from their new surroundings, then follows the subsequent activities aimed at exploring, exploiting, and finally, conserving the land of the St Lawrence Valley.

In four chapters, Colin Coates, Victoria Dickenson, Nicolas Kenny, and Magda Fahrni discuss the first theme: urban cultures and representations. Coates writes about the experiences of settlers arriving from France with plans for state-supported urbanization, conceptions of the city, and how the settler-created world representations influenced the initial development of the city. Dickenson discusses the importance of the river and the mountains: the most prominent features of the landscape, in developing a sense of what settlers felt as they arrived and how that conception of the space has changed through the years. Connecting to Dickenson's discussion, Kenny discusses experiences of the landscape from the viewpoint of industrialists and elites in relation to their power over the organization and formation of the city. With industrialization came unhealthy living conditions for urban dwellers. Fahrni finishes the section by discussing the relationship of industrialization to urban health concerns and their connections to the flu epidemic of the 1910s. This epidemic raised awareness of health problems and instigated city planning development with human health concerns in mind.

In six chapters, Dany Fougères, Michèle Degenais, Susan Ross, Christopher Boone, Sherry Olson, and Claire Poitras focus on the second theme: socio-technical systems and urban infrastructures. This section focuses on how the physical make-up of the area influenced the development of public works to serve the city and the transition from a dense city to one that was connected by these networked services. Four of these chapters discuss several aspects of the city's relationship to water. Fougères describes how public projects developed to control water, including canal development and street leveling, affected the city's development. Degenais considers the planning process aimed at reducing runoff and water stagnation by capturing water upstream for the city's use.