Big Dams: investigating their temporal and spatial politics in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia

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The building of large hydro-electric dams is often associated with the post-war high modernist moment, but such projects have never ceased to proliferate, particularly in the global South. Costs and benefits of these enormous projects are hotly contested: they have on the one hand stood as symbols of human ingenuity, signs of progress and 'temples' of the modern nation-state, as Nehru put it for India. On the other hand, displaced populations, environmental activists, tax payers and creditors cast serious doubts on the justification for, and means of building large dams.[1]

Investigating the spatial and temporal politics of big dams at our two-day workshop meant exploring the tension between dams as a global phenomenon, and dams as the result of conjunctions of local politics and contexts. Big dams share similarities globally in their narratives of modernity, development and progress, masculinity and in the same firms providing technical know-how. The twelve case-studies from Asia, Africa and the Middle East also presented many parallels in the all-too familiar marginalization and often problematic schemes of resettlement of displaced populations, issues of rupture and loss. The papers further highlighted very particular regional and historical contexts that shaped and shape the building of dams, such as the conjunction of middle-class Teheranis demanding electricity to satisfy consumer desires on the one hand, and the anti-Soviet motivation of U.S. support for dam-building in 1950s Iran, described by CYRUS SCHAYEGH (Princeton).

Investigating big dams proved an excellent prism to illuminate the interaction of different spatial scales: global and local, regional and transnational processes. Indeed, such dams are often flash-points of social and political critique around these relations and processes, as in ERDEM EVREN's (Berlin) description of current conflicts over planned dams in Turkey. Considering the financial ambition and spatial scale of any large dam, such frictions should not come as a surprise. The building of large dams provokes and promises transformation on an enormous scale: transforming water into electricity, deserts into fields, 'backward' peoples into 'modern citizens'. Such changes are generally envisaged as irreversible, while investors hope to generate returns over a very long period. The workshop addressed the politics and heterogeneity of such temporalities in specific panels on notions of progress, modernisation and development in contrast with the loss of 'traditional' ways of life, of ancient environmental balances, of cultural and archaeological traces of the past. ERIC DINMORE's paper (Hampden-Sydney) on the post-war Japanese Kuroyon dam demonstrated that though the notion of 'progress' was valued by all actors, this connoted very different things, opposing industrialization to the protection of the environment. JASON VERBER's (Clarksville) paper on the Cahora Bassa project in Portuguese colonial Mozambique meanwhile showed that a dam can however also be planned to guard *against* change: in this case, Mozambiquean independence. Since dam construction often spans decades, it often bridges regime change, as in the Nahr-Ibrahim concession of Mandate Lebanon described by SIMON JACKSON (New York). Although dams are often meant to celebrate a radical break with the past, KATIANA LE MENTEC (Hong Kong) describes Chinese policies around the Three Gorges Project claiming continuities: moving cities back to 'ancient capital' sites and asserting a long-standing 'culture of migration' in the region.

As in the above examples, dam studies pro-

[1] Kaushik Ghosh, „Between Global Flows and Local Dams: Indigenousness, Locality, and the Transnational Sphere in Jharkhand, India", in: Cultural Anthropology 21,4 (2006), p. 501-534; Arundhati Roy, The Greater Common Good, in: Frontline 16,11 (1999), http://www.flonnet.com/fl1611/16110040.htm (15.7.12); Thayer Scudder, The Future of Large Dams: dealing with social, environmental, institutional and political costs, London 2005.

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vide a chance to interrogate our scholarly 'politics of temporality' such as conventional periodizations, highlighting unexpected connections and discrepancies between periods usually presented as relatively homogenous, such as moments of decolonization. We further enquired into how far earlier dams provide prototypical arguments for current building projects, for example as tools of national unification. One such prototype may be the Nile dams, for which JENNIFER DERR (Harvard University) and ALIA MOSALLAM (London) compared different phases in dam-building, from British Egypt to Nasserism. We further queried what kind of political contexts and historical moments produce large dams. The particularity of a historical moment, as well as the changing nature and influence of translocal movements was demonstrated in VALERIE HÄNSCH's (Bayreuth) case-study of Manasir resistance to resettlement due to the building of the Sudanese Merowe dam, using the methods and momentum of the „Arab spring" in 2011. It became clear in the course of our discussions that one general difference between dam-building 'eras' is the constellation of the actors involved: in the mid-20th century the World Bank bankrolled many dams, while now China often takes this role, as in the case of the third Volta dam in Ghana presented by Stephan Miescher.

Our discussions on the politics of temporality led us to engage with issues of state formation, governmentality and agency, the shaping of historical subjectivities, transformation and contestation of cultural and religious frames of reference such as the notion that „no-one should make a profit from water". As highly loaded symbols of state power and as sites which incorporate specific practices of „governmentality", dam building projects bring together actors, materialities and discourses from very different spatial scales. How do and did local activists and populations interact with national and regional governments, international organizations, or globally operating companies? One major issue of contestation is the scale of social belonging invoked, e.g. 'small' and marginal communities having to sacrifice for the 'greater' national or regional good. This raises the question who exactly dams are built *for*? Struggles over these claims also draw new boundaries: in the case of one Salween dam project proposed on the Thai-Burmese border, described by VANESSA LAMB (York). Here, the environmental impact assessment attempts to write out the dam-affected regions in Thailand by scaling the dam's impact within Burma. Civil society groups meanwhile mobilize boundaries differently, in effect bringing Thailand, its borders, and the issue of impacts to Thailand „back on the map". And what of the balance of dam-building process and promised product? In some cases, as with the contemporary Roghun dam in Tajikistan (MOHIRA SUYARKULOVA, St. Andrews) the rhetoric and process of dam-building forging national unity and statehood may be as purposeful as the control of water or electricity ultimately generated.

A strong thread throughout the workshop was an inquiry into the actors involved in dam-building, and thus into subjectivities. In some cases, we find politicians fostering and feeding off dam projects, as in the case of the Ghanaian Volta dam, 'Nkrumah's baby' or the Nasserite Aswan dam. In both cases, we find large-scale social changes, such as the upward mobility of a new class of people: Ghanaian technocrats, Egyptian worker-citizens (papers by Stephan Miescher and Alia Mosallam) or new solidarities and forms of leadership, as in the case of Manasir protests in Sudan (Valerie Hänsch). These subjectivities, be they of political leaders, an Egyptian 'army' of anti-imperialist builders or technocrats are remarkably masculine: the question of the gendering of dam projects remains to be explored more fully.

The kinds of knowledge produced and articulated around dams was a further theme: the role of propaganda is already evident from the above, for example in the discourse of the Nasserite dam as a 'school' for citizens, a site of social engineering as well as a site of 'war' against imperialist agendas. But there are also epistemic communities such as transnational engineering languages that facilitate dam-building. How might these articulate with discourses of national interest, or be communicated to local workers? It is noticeable that the large scale of dam-building

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seems to foster hyperbole: multiple records, a quasi-religious or sacred *and* modern effort of asserting Man's dominion over nature. Such narratives legitimize the sacrifices by some citizens for others, as in the case of the Lebanese firm invoking 'Phoenician Power and Light'. Even as sites of techno-national glory or symbols of revolution, dams may be integrated in leisure and consumption practices. Both the Iranian and the Japanese dam discussed thus became popular tourist destinations. Our workshop thus put forward the possibility of describing and recognizing specific 'dam cultures'.

Such cultures inevitably include silences: clearly the nature and degree of citizen participation in dam planning look very different from the perspective of state archives or oral histories, for instance. The combination of a 'politics of promise' (Cyrus Schayegh) combined with technocratic expertise and the enormous temporal and spatial impact of large dams tends to occlude concrete political interests, including the huge potential for corruption in funding dams. In order to reflect critically on our relations as scholars to dam politics and activism, we invited DOROTHEA HÄRLIN of the 'Berlin Water Table' and 'Commons in Citizens Hands' (GiB) to report on water and privatization struggles in Berlin itself. Our two day conversation amply demonstrated the potential of historical and social dam studies, particularly in highlighting the actors involved, for throwing new light on embattled theoretical and political questions such as the history and nature of statehood(s) and citizenship(s), of the parallels and disjunctures to be found in colonial and post-colonial settings, and of linking different spatial scales. The question of what distinguishes dam-building from other modernizing infrastructure projects such as railways or new cities will be pursued in a second ZMO workshop on 'Roads as Routes to Modernity' on the 5th October 2012.

Conference Overview :

Panel 1: Scalarity I: Global/local interplay in 'politics of development'

Discussant: Katrin Bromber (Berlin)

Cyrus Schayegh: The Karaj Dam Affair: Post-War Consumerist Expectations, the Politics of Promise, and the Cold War in the Third World (Iran)

Jason Verber: Stopping the River without Stemming the Tide: West Germany, the Cahora Bassa Dam, and Decolonization (Mozambique)

Stephan Miescher: „Nkrumah's Baby": The Akosombo Dam and Programs of Modernization in Ghana, 1952-1966

_Panel 2: Scalarity II: Sovereignty and the impact of transnational actors

Discussant: Florian Riedler (Berlin)

Vanessa Lamb: Remaking the national border in cross-border resource development: the case of the Nu-Salween River development at the Thai-Burma border

Erdem Evren: Along and Against the Stream: Techno-Capitalist Development and the Politics of Water on the Çoruh River, Turkey

Panel 3: The Politics of Temporality

Discussant: Katharina Lange

Eric Dinmore: The Kuroyon Dam: Channeling River Water to What End? (Japan)

Katiana Le Mentec: Yunyang County and the Three Gorges Dam: The official creation of a modern county linked to its past and tradition

Simon Jackson: 'Phoenician Power and Light': the Nahr-Ibrahim Dam and the Development Politics of Mandate Lebanon

Debated projects of progress in Berlin: Discussion with Dorothea Härlin of the 'Berlin Water Table' and 'Commons in Citizens Hands' (GiB) on water and privatization.

Panel 4: Discourses and practices of governmentality

Discussant: Erdem Evren

Jennifer Derr: The Source of the Modern Nile. Environmental infrastructure, agricultural space, and the production of Egyptian citizens (1952)

Mohira Suyarkulova: The Rogun controversy: between national idea and international conflict (Tajikistan/Uzbekistan)

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Panel 5: Agency „from below“, subaltern actors

Discussant: Jeanne Féaux de la Croix

Alia Mossalam: „We are the ones who made this dam 'High'.“ A builders' history of the Aswan High-Dam

Valerie Hänsch: Practices of occupying space in the view of a self-determined future. The Merowe Dam in Northern Sudan and the struggle of the Manasir people.

Final discussion

Concluding thoughts: Katrin Bromber, Jeanne Féaux de la Croix, Katharina Lange

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