

Wagner, John R. (ed.). 2013. *The Social Life of Water*. New York, London: Bergahn Books. xii+313pp. Hb.: \$120.00/£75.00. ISBN: 9780857459664.

As an anthropologist working on the topic water, I was immediately drawn to this book and its alluring title, which led me to believe that the articles it contains have been inspired by Appadurai's seminal 1996 volume *The Social Life of Things*. As the editor, however, explains in the introduction, the contributors were not asked to adopt Appadurai's work, but were simply 'invited to describe the social meaning of water' and its relation to the various transformations in their fieldwork settings (p. 8). In his introduction, the editor nonetheless refers to a number of authors whose work he deems inspiring and useful in the context of research on human-water relations. Kirsten Hastrup's recent work on climate change, Ulrich Beck's work on risk, the aforementioned Arjun Appadurai's volume on things having social life, the work of Bruno Latour and other action theorists, and finally that of socioecological resilience theorists are all discussed in a well written and theoretical introduction that also explains the organisation of the volume under review and the main methodological approaches in the chapters.

Apart from the introduction, the volume contains 14 chapters, focusing on ethnographic data from Asia, Africa, the Americas, Australia, and the Middle East, organised around four themes: Commodification, Water and technology, Urbanisation and Governance. The themes represent the current main areas of research on water both in an academic context and in research for development and, therefore, seem to provide a logical framework for the volume. It seems that the original organising principle the editor had in mind was focused on three different sections than the four we see in the book: water scarcity issues, water quality issues and symbolic and spiritual issues. This change in the organisational system becomes evident in some of the sections, as certain chapters are not especially representative of the theme in which they are placed. Each section/theme is introduced with a short text by the editor evoking the guiding principles and a list of references to some relevant readings on the subject.

The first section, on *Commodification*, contains three chapters, looking at issues as diverse as the conflict between water used for irrigation and mining in Peru, large-scale irrigation in Australia and population displacement in large water dam projects in India. All the chapters discuss the prominent issue of unequal water rights and power relations between the dominant groups and the often disempowered "other".

The second section, *Water and technology*, appears to be less accomplished in comparison with the strong and convincing articles of the first section. The chapters that contain rich ethnographic data (some of which could be better placed under the original idea of symbolic issues of water) fail to bring any analytical conclusion, while others seem to be based on very limited fieldwork and, therefore, struggle to provide any ethnographic depth to their argument. This section unfortunately also contains rather sloppy references in some of the chapters.

The third section, on *Urbanization*, contains a very weak editorial preface, with no real mention of literature, other than the three chapters in the section. This seems surprising given the fact that anthropologists' interests in urban water-related issues have

recently been on the rise. In this section, the article by Sarah Smith on dengue fever prevention and control in Urban Cambodia is the most accomplished, with excellent ethnography and some very useful examples, for future students of water, of how to collect and organise water-related data through the categorisation of water storage types and of water-related household activities.

The final theme section, on *Governance*, provides a good, if somewhat short, editorial introduction to the concept of governance and a good selection of chapters ranging from more theoretical ones to those with a solid critique of development approaches to water management issues.

As suggested, the volume would have benefited from a somewhat stricter editorial approach, to ensure that chapters better fit the themes as well as to add to a somewhat more homogenous final volume. It also seems that some chapters did not get proper copy editing attention as they contain avoidable errors in the reference section.

Despite this criticism, I would recommend this volume to readers interested in the anthropology of water and to those who wish to teach a course on the subject for both undergraduate and graduate students. The diversity of the topics covered in the book and the methodological and theoretical issues raised, provide several excellent teachable moments not to be missed. It also testifies to the richness of topics and ways in which the social lives of water can and should be explored by anthropologists in the future.

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