

**Barnes, Jessica. 2014. *Cultivating the Nile: The Everyday Politics of Water in Egypt (New Ecologies for the Twenty-First Century Series)*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. xiv + 230 pp. Pb.: \$23.95. ISBN: 9780822357568.**

Jessica Barnes traces the movements and flows of water in Egypt, in a multi-scalar analysis which draws heavily on insights from political ecology and science and technology studies. Her approach is ethnographic, giving detailed and colourful descriptions of specific encounters she had with various officials and agricultural workers involved in a range of institutions, from the Egyptian Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation, international donors' projects, local farmers and larger farms. Her focus is on how quotidian practices and "technical" decisions may affect what amount of water is present in various locations. Barnes asserts that Egypt's water resources are not a given but are made through daily practices of accessing, monitoring and manipulating the flow of water, writing in a paradigm that does not separate nature from practices, and speaking to debates over knowledge practices and networks taking place in science and technology studies. She builds her argument using metaphors of blocking, releasing, and diverting flows, appropriate and beautiful metaphors which resonate throughout the various chapters. Rather than asking how a country might best manage the resources it has, the question she tackles is how these resources (in this case, water in Egypt) came into being, and how the specific properties of water affects its distribution and what she terms 'the production of scarcity.'

In the first chapter, she introduces important details concerning the context in which she worked, the importance of and aspects of the organisation of water management in Egypt, and offers a broad introduction to her approach.

The second chapter develops her arguments concerning the production of scarcity through following actions at various points during the irrigation process in turn, examining how 'the root of this scarcity lies in the particular constellation of technical apparatus and decision making that determine the flow and also the lack of flow in each time and place' (p. 40). She charts a variety of actions, from farmers' accessing water out of turn, the impact of informal expansion or inaccurate state records, and the impact of water diversions, as well as decisions made at ministry level concerning how water should be distributed.

The third chapter focuses on water user associations and participative discourse on a variety of different levels, exploring the meanings such discourses hold for different actors, including farmers' first engagements with officials working on such projects, as well as water specialists employed by international organisations, consultants and ministry officials.

The fourth chapter deals with land reclamation, and includes a particularly interesting argument that builds on Marx's concepts of primitive accumulation and Harvey's accumulation by dispossession. She argues that in the context of desert reclamation – primarily state land put to little use – reclamation relies on a process of "water" dispossession, as in reclaiming land, they are dispossessing others of the possibility of "cultivating" their land by restricting their water supply. In contrast to

Harvey however, Barnes does not view this process of accumulation through desert reclamation as necessarily tied to capitalism.

The fifth chapter focuses on drainage, analysing the locations in the system of flows in which water is overabundant, before moving full circle and re-examining the central arguments of the book in the final chapter, and their implications. She argues that, rather than directly generating new or perhaps better policy, her work might change how various actors including policy makers, academics, development practitioners and water users engage and think about water. In short, rather than taking existing statistics at face value regarding existing water resources, such groups might focus on the ontological question of what water *is*, how it came into being, and instead seek to chart the micro-processes of human and non-human actors – political with a small “p” – which result in “scarcity”.

What is lacking is a detailed discussion of how global circuits of value influence human drives, in different ways in different places, which shape consumption, and in turn, production and the network of flows under consideration: an anthropological approach that might be termed an “everyday geopolitics” rather than “everyday politics” of water, with perhaps a postscript discussing the emerging impact of the so-called “Arab Spring” on the management of water and production of scarcity in detail.

The book’s strength lies in conveying a strong sense of location, through careful and detailed descriptions of specific encounters, including the different parts of the network of flows in which various political actors are implicated. The multi-scalar approach, consisting of many encounters describing one-off meetings or short-term engagements with farmers and various officials, loses something anthropologically; there is little sense of building up close relationships through which a story is told. Yet what is perhaps lost anthropologically is most definitely a gain from a geographical/environmental studies perspective, in enabling a detailed description of a rich network across many levels, a description that will be of great use to a wider audience interested in environmental studies and/or the political context in which she worked.

ANDREW HODGES  
*Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research (Croatia)*