

Book Reviews

Khagram, Sanjeev. 2004. *Dams and Development: Transnational Struggles for Water and Power*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

*Reviewed by Richard A. Matthew
University of California, Irvine*

Dams have a long, globe-spanning, and interesting history. The earliest known dam was the Saad el-Kafara, a gravity dam constructed of rock and stone some 5,000 years ago in Egypt. Highly porous to water, it apparently collapsed within a few years. A millennium later, a vast quantity of earth was piled across a river to construct the far more stable and impervious Nimrod's Dam in contemporary Iraq. In the 2nd century BC, the Romans invented concrete, perfecting the lime and gypsum cement that had been used by the Egyptians in their construction activities. By 100 AD, the Romans were using concrete successfully to build efficient and durable gravity dams. In the 13th century, the Mongols invented the arch dam, which allowed very strong dams to be constructed with far less material. Approximately 300 years ago, the Spanish refined dam design even further, introducing the buttress dam to the world, a design which employed multiple arches and other architectural features to maximize strength and stability while dramatically reducing weight.

Throughout this long history and well into the 20th century, the overwhelming majority of dams were small-scale installations that tended not to disrupt seasonal water flow or reconfigure river basins. Dams of this magnitude, "big dams" such as the Hoover Dam which was completed in 1936, are largely a mid-20th century phenomenon with a remarkable history of their own. According to Sanjeev Khagram, a faculty member at Harvard's Kennedy School, at the start of the 20th century there were only 600 big dams in the world. By 1950, the number had grown to 5,000; by the end of the century it had reached 45,000. What makes this mini-history especially interesting is that this rapid, world-changing era of big dam construction was crammed into about a forty year period. From about 1980 to 2000, big dam building declined by 75%, even as the world's needs for energy and water continued to grow. How, Khagram asks, can this "puzzling trend" (p. 8) be explained?

Khagram outlines four sorts of explanation: "technical, financial, economic, and political" (p. 8). Although he acknowledges that "technical, financial, and economic factors have clearly made big dams less attractive," he argues

that “they do not tell the whole story” (p. 9). He adopts a “constructivist analysis” to offer a political science explanation, well-summarized in the first chapter:

. . . transnationally allied nongovernmental organizations, grassroots groups, and social movements have unexpectedly altered the political economy of development. This transformation . . . has been conditioned by the global spread . . . of norms and principles in the issue-areas of environment, human rights, and indigenous peoples, among others. However, as the examination of big dam building demonstrates, these transnational structuration processes have been most successful in changing development outcomes and practices when linked to domestic actors with the ability to generate social mobilization in democratic contexts (p. 27).

Khagram’s argument—that big dam building has declined largely because transnational movements have allied with local activists in democratic countries to challenge such construction on the basis of a complex of global norms—is developed through five clearly written and well-researched chapters. Chapter 2 examines India’s big dam building initiatives during the first two decades after its independence, which coincide with the era of rapid big dam construction worldwide. The Indian experience clearly reflects an attitude towards development through capital investment in large-scale infrastructure that was predominant throughout the world in the 1950s and 1960s. This chapter mentions but does not explore what seems an important strand in explaining the “puzzling trend:” the Cold War competition to win India and other strategic Third World countries by providing development capital. In this chapter, Khagram argues that anti-dam protests were crushed during this period, laying the groundwork for his later argument that local activists would subsequently ally with transnational movements and tap into global norms to successfully undermine dam building in India in the latter two decades of the 20th century. He states that financing was never an issue for India and cites its five year plans as evidence—a source that is not entirely satisfying as five year plans are often little more than wish lists (p. 41).

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the Narmada River Valley Dam Projects, an enormous undertaking strongly supported by dam advocates that nonetheless never got off the ground. At first, Khagram attributes this inaction to the slow-moving, report-heavy, and incessant bargaining characteristic of the “political and institutional dynamics within India’s federal bureaucratic democracy” (p. 65). According to Khagram, these institutional barriers kept the Narmada projects on the drawing board for two decades, and then, in the 1980s and 1990s, local activists began to work effectively with transnational allies to ensure that the projects did not go forward—the subject of Chapter 4.

This argument could be strengthened if Khagram tackled two related issues. First, to what extent did the end of the Cold War affect the development capital available to India for projects of this magnitude? Second, and a more serious flaw throughout the book, what exactly are the environmental, human

rights and indigenous peoples norms that have played such a key role in the process he describes and analyzes? The implication seems to be that these are so obvious that they do not need to be defined. It seems, however, that norms related to dams do not really come into sharp focus until the creation of the World Commission on Dams in 1997. Norms associated with indigenous peoples are even more problematic, as many governments of the Third World have rejected the concept of indigenous people as a category. Moreover, as numerous studies and reports make clear, the government of India has not displayed much sensitivity for its indigenous peoples or much concern for human rights in other environmentally sensitive areas such as forest practices. Is it really the case that such norm-based activism was effective in stopping dam construction or is this, at least in part, a *post-hoc ergo propter hoc* analysis? Answering these two questions would add further weight to an argument that, generally speaking, is well-constructed and compelling.

In Chapter 5, Khagram bolsters his position by briefly examining four cases that reflect somewhat different political contexts and that have outcomes congruent with his argument. In the cases of Indonesia and China, social mobilization was difficult under authoritarian governments, whereas it was far more successful in democratic Brazil and quite successful in democratizing South Africa. He concludes his study in Chapter 6 with some more general observations about the linkages among grassroots activists, transnational movements, global norms, and democracy. An important issue raised here concerns the creation of the World Commission on Dams, a partnership between the World Bank and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) which was designed in some measure as a response to transnational opposition to big dam projects.

Overall, *Dams and Development* is a well-written study of what is indeed a "puzzling trend." Well-suited to undergraduate and graduate teaching, it will be of great interest to anyone interested in global environmental politics.

Cashore, Benjamin, Graeme Auld, and Deanna Newsom. 2004. *Governing through Markets: Forest Certification and Non-State Authority*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.

Reviewed by Kate O'Neill
University of California, Berkeley

Governing Through Markets, the winner of the 2005 Harold and Margaret E. Sprout Prize awarded by the Environmental Studies Section of the International Studies Association, is a rich and detailed treatment of an important new topic in the study of international environmental politics: the emergence of private, or "non-state" authority in global governance. From certification of commodities such as forest products, coffee beans and fish through the ISO14000 standards, to emissions trading schemes to combat greenhouse gas emissions, such efforts on the part of industry organizations and civil society actors such as