Applying hegemony and power theory to transboundary water analysis

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Abstract

This paper introduces the basic concepts of hydro-hegemony which are employed in the analysis of the contributors of this special issue. It emphasises the roles of hegemony, power and political–economy processes in shaping international transboundary water relations. Central to the analysis is Lukes’ concept of the three dimensions of power and Gramscian notions of hegemony (see S. Lukes, \textit{Power: A Radical View}, 2005). Hegemony depends on the skilful use of hard and soft forms of power, between formally equal parties such as nation states. Hydro-hegemony is hegemony active in international transboundary water settings, the analytical framework for which is laid out in detail by Zeitoun and Warner in \textit{Water Policy} vol 8 (2006, 435–460). The challenges of conceptualising the complex nexus of international water relations are also addressed. A recurring theme is that both power and political economy processes are especially effective when they operate invisibly. The approach furthermore sets the frame for exploration of improvement of the options of hegemon riparians and non-hegemon riparians alike for more principled transboundary water governance.

Keywords: Counter-hydro-hegemony; Hegemony; Power; Water conflict; Water cooperation Hydro-hegemony

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an easy entry—for a diverse readership—to the complex and constructed knowledge and the invisible processes that shape international water relations. International water relations are certainly complex. They are rarely transparent or easily quantifiable. Particularly where water is thought to be scarce, water users and political leaders take strong and often conflictual positions. They pursue policies that remedy water scarcity in the political economy beyond the water sector while sustaining an apparent confrontation over water resources. Knowledge is currency on transboundary waters, whether based on analysis by officials, scientists, or lawyers—and is always doi: 10.2166/wp.2008.203

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influenced by riparian interest. The deeper we examine transboundary water issues, the less faith we find may be put in official declarations, reports or papers.

It is usually only outsider scientists and lawyers—not involved in the contention—who take principled positions. Sadly their principles are both vague and contradictory. The suite of papers in this Special Issue on Hydro-Hegemony will show that it is the hegemon riparian that can best operate in these near-anarchic and poorly informed circumstances. Hegemon riparians have the edge in resources and power to take advantage of the absence of the rule of law at the international scale. Their knowledge-constructing capacities are pivotal in these circumstances. A potential virtue may be drawn from the power asymmetry, in that the hegemon can provide a version of order and leadership.

The main purpose of the first part of this paper is to show how social scientists grapple with the knowledge-constructing capacities of hegemon riparians. Listed as a ‘ideological hegemonic’ compliance-producing mechanism (Lustick, 2002) in Zeitoun & Warner (2006), constructed knowledge is a chief determinant of who gets what water when and how, to apply Laswell’s famous phrase. The social scientist authors of this issue seek explanations which could inform policy-making by identifying the asymmetric power relations that must be taken into account, and then contended, to bring about progress towards principled water sharing and governance. The major challenge for those attempting to enter this world is to gain access to the formal and (especially) informal processes that shape water-using outcomes. The contentious transboundary water allocation issues are often hidden because they are judged to be integral to national security and are therefore necessarily confidential. They are only readily accessible to those at the centre of power and negotiation, not to curious social scientists who must delve deeper still.

We are acutely aware of the problems faced by water scientists and economists who aim to inform discussions on equitable transboundary water resource utilisation. Unlike the social analysts, this group must grapple with two major impediments. First, monitoring the status of variable water flows and storages with any precision is very difficult indeed. Second, water scientists and economists have to engage with impossibly complex processes requiring the quantification and valuation of different types of water—surface water, groundwater and soil water—in constantly varying environmental and social circumstances. They also capture and relate to the resource-managing competence of the contending riparians—that is, to their comparative social adaptive capacities. Economists have additional challenges. Ideally they should identify and marshal all the non-water resource endowments relevant to achieving equitable utilisation—for example, endogenous water resources and other natural resource endowments.

In addition to these potentially crippling complexities both water scientists and economists face the challenges of communicating their hard won, but imprecise, knowledge into resistant international information agendas fixed by the hegemons. It will be shown that there is no contest when water professionals meet politicians and policy-makers. The former are typically poorly informed about, and very uncomfortable with, the world of uncertainty beyond probability. Politicians and policy-makers, on the other hand, are practised in the arts of living with old and new uncertainties. The professional voices from water science and economics, advising what should be done, are easily and effectively resisted. This outcome is only partly the result of the deeply embedded mindsets of water users and water policy-makers. The resistance mainly succeeds because neither an individual water user nor collective society can readily cope with more than one dynamic variable at a time. Principled water sharing requires that contending parties relate to multiple variables and indicators. They have to relate to inaccessible complexities.

The purposes identified are an additionally problematic foci of concern because the diverse readership of this issue includes both social scientists deeply immersed in the theory of politics and power relations...
and, secondly, environmental scientists and some social scientists who expect the discursive allocative politics of transboundary waters to be susceptible to their ‘rational’ values. These values include economic efficiency and the principled protection of the environmental services of water. Our readership is divided into those who have been mis-educated to look only ‘down the hole’—typically the hydrologists, economists and engineers—and those who cannot or will not look ‘down the hole’ at all—namely the social scientists. As each members of both groups, we can testify that there is a potential communication impasse.

The contributors to this issue of Water Policy make an honest attempt to communicate with both types of reader. The drafting process has already revealed that some of the basic categories and concepts used in the approach of hydro-hegemony upsets those managing—rather than conceptualising and analysing—transboundary waters. Riparians enjoying hegemonic advantages we may say from experience, do not like this to be mentioned, never mind emphasised. On the other hand, they are open to the notion, suggested by realist international relations analysis, that a leader hegemon can mediate conflict and bring about various forms of cooperation. The relevancy of the approach thus holds and, we think, allows us to understand transboundary water governance in a fresh and useful manner.

This issue’s effort is appearing after a quarter of a century during which the potential significance and the salience of transboundary waters has changed. Populations and water demands have trebled in a single lifetime. Riparian states have moved from comfortable water endowments and easy hydro-politics to seriously conflictual relations. Water resources can no longer meet national food self-sufficiency goals nor provide environmental water services in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in extensive regions of South Asia and China, and other parts of the world.

The conflictual contexts were reinforced by the intuitive self-interested adoption of the contradictory principles of upstream sovereignty and downstream integrity. Seriously worsening water-deficit economies in such regions as the Middle East and North Africa have not brought about the predicted water wars (Wolf, 2004). The virtual water explanation of the lack of armed conflict over water (Allan, 2001) shows that importing food—often at subsidised prices—frees hard-pressed politicians and governments from the environmental, economic and political stress of mobilising non-existent local water resources. Most important, it makes it unnecessary for the weaker riparian to take the expensive diplomatic and material risks—with potentially major costs—of confronting stronger riparians over shared water resources. The hydropolitical academic and practitioner community is no longer surprised to find the absence of war in cases where power asymmetry is extreme and the virtual water ‘trade’ channels are open (though we might also hope for the absence of conflict). An interesting corollary is that strong riparians find the virtual water remedy comparatively attractive in comparison with even non-violent conflict, because of the similar diplomatic and economic risks incurred in maintaining an established order.

The political economy work of virtual water ‘trade’ is twofold. First, serious water deficits have been effectively addressed. For example, in all the political economies of the Middle East and spectacularly in some economies such as that of Singapore. It is a second characteristic of virtual water, however, that is relevant to the arguments in this issue. In addition to mitigating tensions over transboundary water, the amelioration of conflict by virtual water ‘trade’ can make it seem—at least superficially—that there is no conflict at all. Politicians and the political processes in which they engage are adept in constructing the superficial as the norm. This invisible process is easy when the norm has all the virtues of being a convenient truth.
A number of the contributions in this issue take issue with this misleading perspective. They argue that armed conflict is only one form of conflict. Conflict has a number of forms and intensities (Yoffe et al., 2001). At all levels of hydro-politics individual water users contend their interests and engage in conflictual relations. Such ideas grew out of multiple seminars held by the London Water Research Group (LWRG). It became obvious to the group that it was necessary to reveal the power asymmetries and the hegemonic nature of international water relations behind the intensities of conflict. They also wanted to exemplify the numerous ways in the more powerful riparian states have sustained their privileged shares of transboundary waters. The outcomes of conflictual hydro-politics reflect both these power relations as well as the pragmatic taking of easy options. Outcomes are rarely—as yet—the outcome of principled and equitable sharing of transboundary water resources.

It is necessary to theorise those relations and to theorise hegemony and power in order to develop such ideas and processes and to communicate their consequences in the world of international water relations. The theoretical treatment here is simplified in the hope that the ideas will be accessible by being generalised in a constructive, rather than a misleading, way.

Some theoretical considerations

The theoretical framework which structures the treatment of power and international hydro-politics in this issue has been subject to a number of stresses. Politics theory and international relations theory do not stand still. Nor are they always robust and highly regarded (Buzan & Little, 2001). Social scientists deeply involved in theory recognise that they must live with the frustrations of ontology and epistemology. Practitioners not able, or more normally not willing, to get involved in this type of abstract detailed contention usually judge that energy devoted to conceptual hair-splitting is fruitless and wasteful. The authors in this issue, however, want to engage with this practitioner element of the readership to persuade them that being blind to the abstraction of power is unwise, potentially dangerous and unnecessary. Ignoring the role of power in transboundary water management and allocation would be as irrational as ignoring the role of gravity or a river bed’s friction coefficient while modelling sediment transport.

Power

Water in any case can defy gravity, flowing uphill to money and power (Reisner, 1986). In other words, those with power can mobilise resources to motivate engineers to move water from where Nature would deliver it to where a privileged social group choose to use it. The branch of social science called political ecology provides an analytical framework which predicts and confirms that access to natural resources—including water and water services—favours the powerful, who will also be rich and well connected politically (Forsyth, 2003; Swyngedouw, 2005). The same power-related interests are at work in international transboundary water relations. It must be emphasised that the environment—in this case transboundary water resources—does not have a voice unless given one by society.

The path-breaking step of application of different theoretical forms of power to transboundary water analysis was first performed by Marwa Daoudy (2005). She demonstrated how Syria and Turkey have
locked horns over the Tigris and Euphrates rivers through structural (e.g. military and economic assets, riparian position, alliances) and bargaining (e.g. strategies, issue linkage) forms of power. The utility of Lukes’ (2005a [1974]) concept of the three dimensions of power in the domain of international hydro-politics was first spotted by Ana Cascão, and subsequently developed by Jeroen Warner and the authors of this article. The ideas have since cooked somewhat, through four international workshop held by the LWRG since 2005. Whether the group as a whole has succeeded in using the three dimensions of power effectively will depend on the reception of this collection of interdisciplinary papers.

The concept of the three faces of power is one of those ideas that cannot be dislodged once it has been grasped. Political science teaches us that power is always at work, and is always contestable. While political scientists are the experts on power in the domain of science, unfortunately, they can’t agree amongst themselves what power is. Like power itself, the definition of power is ‘essentially contested’ (Evans & Newnham, 1998: 446). In this endless debate, a single accepted structuring of the features of power has still not been established. The issue may be less about what power is, however, than about what power does (Guzzini, 2005).

Power in its most recognisable form is the material capacity of one party to gain the compliance of the other. At the level of the state, power may be understood and measured in tanks and dollars. In trading blows, the state with military or economic superiority is likely to be the last one standing. Bachrat & Baratz (1962) refer to this form of power as the first face. Because of its concrete nature and enduring quality, a State’s riparian position could be considered an asset of ‘hard’ or ‘structural’ power. Several authors in this issue refer to this form as ‘structural power’, acknowledging the confusion this term may create, particularly amongst the political science community.

Lukes’ second dimension of power refers to control over the rules of the game—the power to decide where the goalposts are, and to move them at will. As a consequence, second-dimensional power decides what kind of decisions will be taken, and which ones will never even reach the agenda (non-decisions). The political nature of decisions and non-decisions was first brought to light by Bachrat & Baratz (1962), whose analysis of power is not just an account of what happened, but also what has failed to happen, and why this is so. According to Lukes, this form of power consists essentially of stripping the weaker party of the capacity to choose between compliance or non-compliance when confronted with the demands of the stronger party (Lukes 2005a [1974]: 11). Faced with no alternatives, the weaker party is stuck in a relationship within which ‘demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits . . . can be suffocated before they are even voiced’ (Bachrach and Baratz in Lukes 2005a [1974]: 22). This is not to say that demands are directly suffocated, for example, by bringing in the police to round up suspected dissenters. Rather, through the use of secret police, dissident views may be kept covered and unexpressed in the first place.

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2 A dozen alternative viewpoints, for example, are offered in the 2005 Special Issue on Power of Millenium: Journal of International Studies Volume 33, No. 3.
3 Saying a relation incorporates a power element is a political statement in itself. It opens up an established mind frame by allowing the possibility that things could be different (Guzzini, 2005). This may be precisely why those who are in power tend to dislike discussing power. After all, once a power position is acknowledged, it needs to be continually justified, and this requires more work than enjoying the position as taken-for-granted.
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Many of the authors in this issue refer to this second dimension of power as ‘bargaining power’, which may be partly analogous to Nye’s (2004) conception of ‘soft’ power. Daoudy (2008) and Cascão (2008) discuss the relevance of bargaining power to Syria and Ethiopia in face of their respective hydro-hegemons on the Tigris and Nile rivers. The relation and interaction between actors in this form of power is important—if each is legitimate in the eyes of the other, an actor that has much less of the material form of power may still retain influence over the stronger actor. The power a baby has over its parents, to use warm sentiment for cold exemplification, is derived from the baby’s beneficial position through the established rules of the game (i.e. to be picked up when crying) while the baby’s legitimacy ensures the parents’ consent.

Power has a third face, also active in the international water world of conferences and basin initiatives. We see at times the depoliticising visions of hegemonic ideas reflected at important meetings, when certain issues are put on or kept off the agenda. The hegemon employing this form of power has considerable ability to (re)write the rules of the game, to represent the world in a particular way—and find these representations accepted and reproduced by those not in power. The effect can be considerable. ‘Those in power within the institutions of the hegemonic state become the deans of world politics, the administrators, regulators and geographers of international affairs’ (O’Tuathail & Agnew, 1999: 82).

The state of affairs can become so institutionalised and ‘normalised’ that it is rarely challenged. This was most apparent with the European colonial conquests, with many of the native Caribbean or African communities accepting their very heavily subjugated place in the social order as only ‘natural’. The ability to form and control thoughts operates on the ‘anticipated reactions’ that the weaker prefer not to provoke (Lukes, 2005b: 480). An actor adept at wielding this form of power may even manage to preempt its competitor’s urges for discussion or contestation. This enables the stronger side to determine the ‘order of things’ with minimal effort, as flying a plane on auto-pilot. The ability to (re)present a state of affairs in a specific way, most crucially, is significantly more efficient than the use or threat of the first dimension of power, and has less transaction costs than the agenda-setting and skewed negotiation of bargaining power.

Steven Lukes refers to this form of power as the ‘third dimension’, referring specifically to the ‘power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things’. As this power largely involves ideas, some authors in this issue refer to this third power dimension as ‘ideational power’. Like gravity, this form of power has to be understood before it becomes readily observable. It may also be considered a second form of ‘soft’ power. In Lukes’ view, the social analyst has a social task—as it were, to act as a hegemon in the sense of ‘guide’—in order to counter this power by guiding the oppressed towards clarity. To make them conscious of their marginalised position, so that they might resist the hegemon.

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5 Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire understood this form of power well, challenging it while writing ‘I am talking of men who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement’ (in Fanon (1986 [1952])).

6 Zeitoun (2008) claims there is evidence of such unquestioned acceptance of the status quo along the Jordan River, where Israel has managed to control distribution of 90% of the water resources transboundary with Palestine as well as maintain an image of generous cooperation (e.g. Pogrund, 2007).

7 Creighton (1998a: 105) similarly refers to the ‘psychological power’ of influential individuals or institutions in water-related public participatory processes.
In brief, those actors in privileged positions may maintain or improve their lot by deploying structural power in a coercive mode. Secondly, they can use power over the bargaining process to greater effect where formal and informal institutions for negotiation exist. Thirdly, they can use their power to get those without power to believe that their predicaments are reasonable, and not worth questioning at all. Force, deals and ideas: and the greatest of the three is ideas.

The theoretical papers in this issue and those that review particular river basin hydro-politics show that all these faces of power exist. The main attribute of this threefold analytical approach is that it provides a very effective and textured method of analysis for a typical political nexus—the international transboundary waters case—where power determines what is known, what is emphasised and who prevails. The approach also heightens our awareness that it will be invisible forces and processes that will often explain outcomes.

Hydro-hegemony

Power also determines who is the hegemon. With conflict and power usefully theorised it is next possible to show how the concept of hegemony provides a means of analysing and communicating about asymmetric international power relations. The hegemon has a disproportionate capacity to coerce a weaker riparian. As the greatest form of power lies in the realm of ideas, hegemons have the option to write the agenda for all this riparian contestation. They have the ability to determine the knowledge that is included, regardless of how analysts judge the merit or legitimacy of the outcomes. Hegemons may also exclude the information derived from hydrological and economic modelling, by ensuring that any modelled information used enhances the hegemon’s case and not that of a weaker party (Fischhendler, 2008). Or they can lead the riparian states by providing the base information, ideas and context for basin-wide investment and equitable sharing of the water-related benefits.

But what do we really mean by ‘hegemons’ and ‘hydro-hegemony’? As Jeroen Warner reminds us, in Greek, a ‘hegemon’ is someone who guides the way, a torchbearer in unknown territory. ‘Dominance’ is defined as leadership buttressed by coercion. In contrast, ‘hegemony’ is leadership buttressed by authority. A successful hegemonic strategy builds cohesion and compliance by attraction rather than intimidation, but relies on an effective mix of the two. Gramsci (2003 [1935]) conceived of the term as a mix of force and consent in explaining how the ruling class in fascist Italy effectively manipulated the other classes, precluding revolution. Hegemony further differs from empire or domination in the sense that it occurs between formal equals. The US and Canada, for example, are formally equal at the UN, if vastly unequal in terms of influence over global affairs (few, if any, are concerned about Canadian cultural hegemony, for example). In this analysis, ‘hegemony’ is understood to mean preponderant influence maintained by the first amongst (formal) equals through a mix of coercion (force) and authority (consent). Warner et al. (2008) demonstrate how the more able actors may use hegemonic concepts—such as transboundary IWRM and the use of a river basin as a management unit—to decide ‘who gets to say what’, effectively setting the agenda at the exclusion of the consideration of alternatives. Hegemony is also a value-free term, despite commonly held perceptions (particularly in North America) that it is fundamentally malign. Whether the hegemon’s actions are (perceived as) benign or oppressive and restrictive depends entirely on one’s perspective. The impact of the hegemonic neo-liberal form of a globalised economy will be judged quite differently, after all, by the Wall Street trader and the sweat-shop child labourer.
As Zeitoun & Warner (2006) demonstrated, hydro-hegemony is hegemony active over water issues, hegemony on the waterfront. Power asymmetries that clearly advantage the ability to influence one riparian actor (states, in our case) over others are more common than one might imagine. The original piece developing the framework of hydro-hegemony demonstrated that the use of force/coercion (sticks) and consent/attraction (carrots) coupled with the establishment of ideas on a basin is much more determining of the outcome than international water law, water sharing ethics or riparian position. Turkey, South Africa and China are upstream hegemons; Afghanistan, Nepal and Ethiopia are upstream riparians but are not hegemons. Egypt is a downstream hegemon: Bangladesh and Mexico are downstream but are not hydro-hegemons.

But Scott (1985) reminds us that the so-called ‘weaker’ parties are not always as weak as they seem, or perceive themselves to be. Counter-hegemonic tactics and strategies form the basis of an interesting body of literature highlighting how the seemingly disadvantaged party may either level the playing field or change the rules of the game. Those advocating international water law want to balance the scales through codification of ‘equitable and reasonable’ water use, thereby redressing the potential effects of power asymmetry in order to level the playing fields. But as Woodhouse & Zeitoun (2008) demonstrate, the arm of water law is not very long, and treaty law in particular is unfortunately blinded to covert expressions of power. Daoudy (2008) further highlights the manipulation of the spirit, letter, and principles of water law by the powerful riparian on the Tigris.

Cascão (2008) has initiated the first conceptualisations of counter-hydro-hegemony, demonstrating how Ethiopia may employ bargaining power in the form of reactive or active diplomacy, strategic cooperation or the mobilisation of funding to widen its options within the Nile. Saleh (2008) shows us how Sudan could use its particular mid-stream and middle power status between Egyptian hegemonic and the Ethiopian counter-hegemonic strategies.

If power asymmetry is a fact of life, its destructive potential does not have to be. The foregoing arguments suggests that hydro-political conflict and evidence of hydro-hegemonic assertion are not universal. They occur when economies are weak and unable to adapt to water scarcity. The internal transboundary water relations of the European Union economies confirm this argument. Transboundary water relations are not seen to be intrinsically high politics (Lowi, 1993) in Europe. Nor are they constructed into high politics issues. Zeitoun (2008) has shown that hydro-hegemony can be palpable in economies where the relative strength is extremely asymmetric—for example, between Israel and Palestine. The nature of the relationship is, however, in many other cases ambiguous. Turton & Funke (2008) assert the benefits of leader hegemons, as the case of South Africa in southern Africa. Wegerich (2008) looks at the disarray resulting from contested control in the power vacuum left following the domination in post-Soviet central Asia. The onus to achieve mutual improvement falls on both parties, though is typically much more urgent for the weaker one.

8 Linking water issues to benefits ‘beyond the river’ (Sadoff & Grey, 2002) is a further counter-tactic that may change the rules of the game outright, though some analysts are sceptical that such benefits will be shared equitably if the flows themselves are not.
Political economy

So-called weaker riparians have a further option, at least in theory. A diverse economy always prevails over an natural resource-dependent economy. The impacts of power asymmetry are mainly determined by political economy processes. A diverse and strong political economy reflects the presence of social adaptive capacity. With social adaptive capacity an economy can nurture and combine its other capitals—manufactured, financial and human—to compensate for those in which it is deficient. The extreme examples of this phenomenon are the economies of Singapore, the tourist island economies of the tropical oceans and a number of highly populated neo-liberal economies in temperate Europe and East Asia. The island economies are useful as examples of how a water-stressed economy can adapt without the option of establishing water rights or even adopting a hegemonic approach. They have no such options. Meanwhile, the neo-liberal economies have become so strong and diverse economically that they do not have to become involved in hydro-political conflict. Their concerns are more to do with managing the internal conflicts that arise from the re-allocation of water back into the environment.

Concluding comments

International transboundary water relations are formidably complex. All international transboundary basins are different—even non-comparable—because water resource endowments, terrain and, even more important, institutional infrastructures are everywhere different. Most important, the nature of power relations are unique to each river basin. The challenge of analysing these relations is increased by the role of asymmetric power relations which enable hegemon riparians to coerce or to lead weaker ones.

This paper has provided an introduction to how the social science of power and hegemony theory may be useful to us for interpreting that complexity. We have proposed a framework based on Lukes’ three dimensions of power—what we refer to as structural, bargaining and ideational power (or force, deals and ideas). The contributions following in this special issue demonstrate how each form is active when it comes to transboundary water relations. The most common form of power for countering the established order is bargaining power. The most effective form of for establishing or preserving the order is ideational power. The analytical framework of hydro-hegemony of Zeitoun & Warner (2006) allows a replicable form by which to examine how different forms of power between formal equals such as riparian states in part determines those realities. The silent forms of power typically not acknowledged or observed or commented upon are uncovered in the process.

Understood along with virtual water ‘trade’, these two silent and invisible features of the political economy combine to set the contexts of transboundary setttings too frequently ignored by water practitioners and academics. The suite of papers in this issue, we hope, will demonstrate the relevancy of the approach, and inspire further thought, debate and policy on the nature and effects of power in transboundary water settings.

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