

Editors' Introduction

Throughout the summer of 2012, droughts in North America, Asia, and Africa wrecked havoc on agricultural fields, raising worldwide concern over grain shortages and rising food prices. The lack of rainfall further jeopardized water systems in many parts of the world, making access to safe drinking water one of the most contested and politically fraught endeavors for millions of people. Conversely, floods in the Philippines, Fiji, and Australia, which displaced thousands of people, underscore the impact of too much water. So while the weather conditions during the summer of 2012 might be something of an anomaly, the likelihood of future droughts and floods seems irrefutable. Indeed, climate scientists tell us that dramatic shifts in weather, either too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry, will become commonplace, creating conditions where the struggles over and control of water will emerge as one of the central political, ecological, and public health issues of the twenty-first century.

Although the scale and scope of global climate change and its impact on water systems around the world have created a set of ecological and political problems particular to our own time, they are not without historical precedent. In all its manifestations, water has been at the core of human history. It gives life as well as takes it. Disputes over ownership of and access to freshwater stretch back to the earliest days of human settlement and organized government. According to journalist Steven Solomon, the history of water has been “the epic struggle for wealth, power, and civilization.”¹

Not surprisingly, many scholars have explored water history as a way to understand the human past. This issue of *Radical History Review* is no different. Yet we seek to examine the history of water from a radical perspective.² To that end, we brought together scholars, activists, and artists to help us define what a radical history of water might look like. As a way to understand histories of power

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and inequality, we are particularly interested in exploring how people, communities, activists, and governments used, accessed, controlled, and regulated water systems.

One of the common threads running through this issue is that of a water crisis. Whether defined as too much water, too little water, or water too polluted for human consumption, the concept of “water crisis” created the context for political and environmental change. As the contributors to this issue suggest, the result of such change produced unequal results along racial, class, or gendered lines. In other words, a water crisis strengthened existing forms of power, while dislocating and marginalizing other groups.

Broad in its conception and approach, this issue places the complexity of many of the world’s water issues in historical perspective, providing a reading of the past that may help reframe how we think about one of the most significant natural resources in our world. We have included essays on waste management in India, dam building in nineteenth-century Egypt, municipal water policy in Paris, and the contested water management programs in the Ecuadorian highlands. Other contributions examine the political, economic, philosophical, and environmental implications of water in medieval Europe, recent Bolivian history, and the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

We acknowledge that this approach ignores a large part of the “water world.” Freshwater accounts for only a tiny percentage (approximately 2.75 percent) of the total water on the planet, with much of this small percentage frozen in polar ice or trapped in underground aquifers. Ocean and seawater, conversely, constitute much of the planet’s water, creating a massive undersea world that humans have yet to fully comprehend. Certainly, these large expanses of water have not been immune to human history. Yet because the struggle over freshwater has been so contested, and remains so in our own time, this issue of *Radical History Review* focuses exclusively on the history of freshwater.

The four feature articles explore the history of water from different perspectives. Stephanie Tam examines the history of sewerage in Ahmedabad, India. She describes how sewerage became a tool of modernization and technological change to solve the problem of manual scavenging by “untouchables.” But rather than dispel social divisions and hierarchies of caste in India, the public works project only transformed and reinforced them.

Similarly, Hugh McDonnell notes the significance of water—in its various permutations—for North African migrants in the Parisian suburbs. He argues that the lack of access to water in the Parisian bidonvilles, or shantytowns, not only represented hardship for North African immigrant communities but that it signified an explicit attempt by French authorities to marginalize them. For McDonnell, the failure to secure freshwater in the bidonvilles represented an injustice perpetrated by French officials.

Claire Cookson-Hills reexamines the history of the Aswan Dam to explore how the construction of the dam reshaped water policy in Egypt. She argues that the design phase of the massive dam project served to lay the hydrological underpinning of Egyptian water policy throughout the twentieth century. For Cookson-Hills, local knowledge about water and irrigation took a backseat to the technocratic aspirations of British engineers, the result of which radically transformed the Nile River basin and the human communities along its shore.

Maria Teresa Armijos examines how elite modernist approaches to water policies in Ecuador were based on racist and classist assumptions throughout the twentieth century. However, indigenous resistance to such policies, combined with populist reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, enabled rural communities to gain a degree of autonomy over local water policies with the creation of Drinking Water User Associations. With the 2009 proposals to centralize water policy under the administrative authority of the state, communities mobilized to regain autonomy and voiced their opposition to centralization and possible privatization, as was occurring in other countries around the world.

We have taken two different approaches for our Reflections essays. Our first, coauthored by Ruth A. Morgan and James L. Smith, argues that twentieth- and twenty-first-century water-related dilemmas are not recent inventions but are indeed much older than recent scholarship would suggest. Their essay encompasses a long chronology of European water traditions and shows how those traditions may be relevant to people worried about a water crisis. In the second Reflections essay, Nicole Fabricant and Kathryn Hicks reconsider the legacies of Bolivia's "water wars." They argue that the "successes" of previous social movements to ensure access to freshwater continued to be challenged by corporate privatization, global warming, and the ongoing scarcity of water in the Bolivian highlands. The question they ask is whether Bolivia's broad-based social movements can adapt to build a water management system that is just and equitable.

In *Curated Spaces*, Nicolas Lampert and Raoul Deal, two Milwaukee-area artists, examine the meaning and politics of the city recently being designated a "water capital," a term the artists contend "does little to describe the political, cultural, and economic struggles over water in Milwaukee, the Great Lakes, and beyond." In a second *Curated Spaces* essay, photographer and activist Nancy Borowick documents the political and public health impact of the water crisis in Ghana. Borowick's photographs of people from the village of Bumpata, on the shores of Lake Volta, a people "forgotten by the government," illustrate the paradox of living in a place surrounded by an abundance of water not clean enough to drink.

In *Teaching Radical History*, Robert A. Gilmer reflects on a course he designed and taught at the University of Minnesota titled "Oil and Water: The Gulf Oil Spill of 2010." Gilmer examines the challenges and opportunities in teaching the

spill from an environmental justice perspective that gives equal weight to both ecological concerns and the needs of working-class people whose livelihoods depend on the lands and waterscapes in question. Gilmer offers his ideas on how to teach contemporary history that links classroom work with the broader community.

Finally, Erik Loomis reviews some recent documentary films on the water crisis. The films under review situate water at the heart of some of the most important political debates about environmental justice, corporatization, and state power in recent history. Loomis reminds us that state and corporate efforts to privatize water systems have destabilized local communities around the world and have threatened how we think about and access water. And to conclude, Teresa Meade reflects on the life of Eric Hobsbawm, one of the most influential historians in the twentieth century and an intellectual inspiration for the group of young radical scholars who founded *Radical History Review*.

In the end, the articles and essays assembled for this issue highlight the historical significance of water. They challenge us to consider the social, political, and environmental cost and consequences of projects aimed to improve the flow and distribution of water. They also open up ways to think about our own contemporary water issues, all of which are rooted in the past but are shaped by our own political constraints and possibilities.

—David Kinkela, Teresa Meade, and Enrique Ochoa

Notes

1. Steven Solomon, *Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).
2. Certainly, we are not alone in this approach. For example, see Sarah S. Elkind, “Environmental Inequality and the Urbanization of West Coast Watersheds,” *Pacific Historical Review* 75, no. 1 (2006): 53–61; Werner Troesken, *Water, Race, and Disease* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); and Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2004).