

Outline for Paper: “Sovereignty, the Hydrosphere, and the Modern Cosmopolis”

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I. Framing the History of the Hydrosphere in the History of Sovereignty

A. The Universal and the Particular: Sovereignty’s “Inner Conflict”

B. Nature and Political Legitimacy in the “Modern Cosmopolis”

This introductory section will focus on the importance of embedding the “terrestrial” history of the hydrosphere in the longer history of sovereign authority. As this is a large, encompassing (and much debated) concept, this section will be somewhat schematic. The main argument is that sovereignty (a term here used loosely to signify a vision of power as both enacted within the bounds of specific political configurations and imagined within legitimizing frameworks of ideas) has generally been defined historically in terms of the simultaneous engagement by states with the universal and the particular—and by the negotiation of the inescapable conflicts between the two. This is what the Sanskritist, J. C. Heesterman called the “inner conflict of tradition” in Indian kingship, an imperative, in effect, for a ruler be embedded in the distinctive particularities of the kingdom that he rules, with all its inevitable internal conflicts, and yet, at the same time, to stand above and apart from these politics, projecting an engagement with forms of (what we might call “enchanted”) power transcending this political world. This sovereign structure can be found in varying forms throughout the history of the subcontinent (and elsewhere as well).

To capture this, and to suggest how this structure provides a critical backdrop for understanding modern conceptions of sovereignty (and of the hydrosphere), I make use of Sheldon Pollock’s concept of a “cosmopolis,” an overarching structure of cosmic forces that was used to frame the legitimacy of particularized structures of political power within the large world of Sanskrit-influenced culture in the premodern era. Hinging on the framing of particularized power within large universalizing frameworks of cosmic power, this structure of legitimation, though radically changed in substantive content, arguably shaped modern ideas of sovereignty (and their relation to the hydrosphere) as well. Progressive adaptation to scientifically understood energy flows provided the frame within which the sovereign power of 19th c. empires was largely legitimized. But here too we encounter sovereignty’s “inner conflict.” Legitimate sovereignty within this “modern cosmopolis” depended on the need to adapt the power of reason (as a human opening to the cosmos) to the realities of politics in varied particularized contexts (including those imagined to be less “advanced” along the path of “reasoned” human development). It was this tension that shaped the distinctive structure of power and inequality in modern international law – which, in turn hinged on the conflict between sovereignty’s “enchanted” and “mundane” components.

II. The Power and Limitations of Water’s “Enchantment”

A. Weber and “Disenchantment”

B. The Ambiguous Enchantment of Science and the Hydrological Cycle

This framework, I would argue, helps us to understand the history of water within the structure of the European-dominated international order in the 19th and 20th centuries. Water flow was simultaneously a manifestation of the larger sources of energy that drove the cosmos and a critical arena of conflict and

cooperation in local politics. State dealings with water thus manifested with particularly clarity the ways that negotiated relationships between the universal and the particular played out in the actual operation of sovereign power and legitimacy in the “modern cosmopolis.”

This section will look simultaneously at the structural continuities and substantive changes marking projects of colonial water control in the modern era. The substantive shift defining the “modern cosmopolis” was perhaps best indexed by Max Weber’s vision of an increasingly “disenchanted” world, a sign of the displacement (or reconfiguration) of religion in a new vision of the cosmos as driven by “objectively” knowable physical laws. The shift that this entailed can be tracked in the emergence of what Jamie Linton calls “modern water,” that is, water as a substance subject to—and defined by—universal physical laws. In terms of the history of the hydrosphere, this manifested in new visions of the “hydrological cycle,” fully knowable in terms of the “scientific” mapping of the seemingly opposing energy sources (heat and gravity) moving water’s flows both vertically and horizontally in ways that could be tapped for productive uses. But in its relationship to sovereignty what was most critical was that this “disenchantment” of water (and nature) was critically matched by a new “enchantment” of human reason as the key to water’s control within a new sovereign order. **It was to the autonomous human capacity to understand and make use of water flows, an agenda linking engineers and the state, that the sovereign structure of the “modern cosmopolis” appealed.** But the relationship of this alliance to the structuring of water use through local politics remained a source of deep tension, however much “modern” sovereignty laid claim to mobilize human “reason” (through law, bureaucracy and social science) for the “management” of society as much as the forces of nature. This was a conflict particularly marked in colonial contexts, where the tension between the universal and the particular, between the political and to extrapolitical, remained central to the meaning of the meaning of the “modern cosmopolis.”

III. The Politics of Colonial Power in Relationship to Water Control: Negotiating the Political and the Extrapolitical in the Indus Basin

A. Case Study One: Science, Politics and the Imagining of the River Basin

- 1. The Language of Engineering and the “Enclosure” of the Hydraulic Environment**
- 2. The Universal and the Particular in the Punjab Canal Colonies**

B. Case Study Two: The Partition of India and the River Basin

- 1. The Language of the Nation and the “Reconstruction” of the Hydraulic Environment**
- 2. Political and the Extrapolitical as the story of Water meets the Nation**

The paper will relatively briefly examine how this “inner tension” of sovereignty played out within the structure of British water control in the Indus basin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The focus will be on case studies defined by two distinctive moments. The first moment was that of the great hydraulic transformation marked by the establishment of Punjab’s canal colonies, one of the largest hydraulic transformations of the modern era. This case study will focus in particular on the universalism of the language of hydraulic engineering, and its relationship to the “enchantment” of reason and science marking the “modern cosmopolis.” This represented a powerful element in claims to British colonial sovereignty in the region, but it was also bound up with the ongoing “inner tensions” of

sovereignty defining the efforts of the state to define its rule with respect to the particularities of politics as well. The second case study will focus on the moment of India's partition in 1947, when the river basin was divided by the national boundary line drawn to separate the two new "nations" of India and Pakistan. Here, the concept of the "nation" itself was dramatically caught up in the tensions between the universal and the particular defined the "modern cosmopolis" itself.