



Hydropolis: Reinterpreting the *polis* in water politics



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ABSTRACT

The construction of a large dam is often a contested and controversial matter. Delicate aspects related to the dam construction business such as the resettlement of peoples, environmental impact and financial costs, can trigger popular discontent and hinder the realisation of a particular project. By advancing the notion of the *hydropolis*, a reinterpretation of Hannah Arendt (1958) definition of the *polis*, this paper will explore how ruling elites can manipulate the public opinion to politically construct a large dam as a foreign policy matter. This, it will be argued, serves to conceal the negative consequences of a dam so that issues related to its social and environmental impact are removed from the national political debate. Specifically, the case of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in Ethiopia will be used to illustrate how a large dam can become a geopolitical object grounded on the friend/enemy distinction, in the context of the longstanding geopolitical tensions in the Nile River Basin.

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Introduction

On March 25, 2015, fans were cheering as the players of Welayta Dicha (an Ethiopian Football Club based in Sodo) lifted the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (henceforth GERD) Cup, a national football tournament that they had recently won. Whilst the tournament's name might appear surprising to some, it is perhaps less so to those familiar with recent Ethiopian political developments. In 2011, when the Ethiopian government started the construction of the GERD – on paper the largest dam in Africa – it also launched a parallel campaign aimed at making of the dam a patriotic project symbolising the renaissance of the Ethiopian nation after the atrocities committed by the Derg,¹ a military-socialist junta that ruled the country from 1974 to 1991. The campaign has arguably been successful (Menga, 2016b), and the Ethiopian leadership presented the dam as a foreign policy matter, targeting Ethiopian nationals regardless of national borders or federal boundaries.

The political discourse generated by the GERD offers a good platform to illustrate that, in line with a changing and globalised world with deepening time-space compression (Harvey, 1999), the space of appearance in hydropolitics has expanded to encompass

political and administrative boundaries. By advancing the notion of the *hydropolis*, a reinterpretation of Hannah Arendt (1958) definition of the *polis*,² understood in philosophical terms as a metaphor for the space of political appearance, this article will explore how ruling elites deliberately construct a large dam as a foreign policy matter to deproblematise its environmental and societal consequences.

Through an implementation of the discursive practice of othering and the framing of an issue in antagonistic terms as a friend/enemy one, a ruling elite can remove a particular issue from the political debate pre-empting the arousal of dissent. This will be demonstrated through an analysis of recent developments in the Nile River Basin. With regards to the Ethiopian ruling elite, the paper will show that its geopolitical imagination of the *polis*, the *hydropolis*, is grounded on the friend/enemy distinction and on the consequent spatial assumption that politics takes place wherever the enemy and the friend are co-located.

In concrete terms, this practice is relevant to the Ethiopian ruling class for at least three reasons. First, and in line with the Latin metonymic *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses), framing a domestic issue as a foreign policy one can serve to distract public attention from other pressing matters. Delicate aspects related to the dam construction business such as the resettlement of peoples,

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¹ Derg is the short name for the 'Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army'.

² *Polis* is the transliteration of the Greek word πόλις, which defined the city-state, the dominant political unit in the ancient Greek world.

environmental impact and financial costs, can be concealed by a rhetoric that overemphasizes a foreign policy success, which in the case of Ethiopia is that the GERD is being built in spite of the opposition coming from Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Sudan. Second, and consequently, the prestige stemming from this endeavour can help legitimate the ruling elite and bolster popular support. Indeed, even though Ethiopia is an authoritarian regime (Abbink & Hagmann, 2013), the government needs the support of its people to ensure its survival. As Arendt (1958, p. 200) observed, power “springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse”, and thus, power, just like hydroelectricity, cannot be stored for the future but needs to be constantly generated and renewed. Third, this can help attract the significant and wealthy Ethiopian diaspora abroad, who are crucial to the funding of the GERD’s construction in their purchase of dam bonds.

Hence, this article serves two principal purposes. The first, and more general, is to reflect on politics and on how the space of appearance should be treated in critical hydropolitical studies. By doing so, it contributes to both literature on critical hydropolitics (Akhter, 2015; Harris & Alatout, 2010; Hirsch, 2016; Mustafa, 2007; Sneddon & Fox, 2006; Warner & Zeitoun, 2008), and critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Agnew, 2003, 2016; Dalby, Toal, & Routledge, 2006; Ó Tuathail, 2010). The second, and more specific purpose, is to provide an account of how the Ethiopian ruling elite has managed to frame the GERD as a foreign policy matter so that issues related to its social and environmental impact nearly disappeared from the national political debate. To illustrate how territory and society can be socially and politically constructed, the research perspective informing this article is based on discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2006), with a focus on the ruling political elite in Ethiopia and on their discourses around the GERD. As Müller (2008) eloquently illustrated, discourses (and if we are to transcend the structure/agency dualism, also practices) emerge as a central form of power in the constitution of geopolitical identities.

The sources used include both official and non-official documents. On the one hand, official documents include speeches and declarations delivered by high-level politicians at national and international summits, official statements and government documents. These documents were gathered through the following sources: the official websites of the Ethiopian Prime Minister, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the Ministry of Water Resources; archival research at the African Union Commission Library in Addis Ababa; the United Nations Bibliographic Information System; the official Facebook page of the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ethiopian Mission to the European Union in Brussels and to the United Nations in New York, and of the Ethiopian Embassy in London; the monthly publication of the Ethiopian Embassy in London, *Ethiopian News*; the government-owned website grandmillenniumdam.net³ and the website meleszenawi.org.uk. On the other hand, non-official documents consist of news reports produced by the national tightly controlled media, which serve as the mouthpiece of the government. These sources, which were scrutinised using ‘LexisNexis’ and ‘BBC Monitoring Africa – Political’, include: the English translation of the Amharic transcripts of the evening news programme from the state-owned television channel EBC (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation) and from the Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency (ERTA); reports from the pro-Ethiopian government Walta Information Centre website; and the weekly newspaper *The Reporter*. The period analysed starts in January 2010, the year before the launch of the construction of the

GERD, and ends in December 2015. Further data was collected through phone interviews carried out between January and July 2016 and field work in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa between May and June 2016. During this time, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were conducted with representatives from both the Ethiopian and the expatriate community.

The rest of this article is divided into four sections. The next section situates the paper at the intersection of the scholarship on critical geopolitics, critical hydropolitics and critical water geography, to then offer theoretical insights on the notion of the *polis* and of its reinterpretation, the *hydropolis*. The third section provides an overview of water politics in the Nile River Basin, while the fourth section connects the theory to the empirical to illustrate how the GERD was framed as a foreign policy matter by the Ethiopian ruling elite. The final section discusses how the findings of this paper can be applied to future research in the field of transboundary water relations.

On water, politics and the *polis*

Before embarking upon a discussion on politics and the *polis*, it is necessary to position this article at the intersection of the scholarship on critical geopolitics, critical hydropolitics and critical water geography. In doing so this section will highlight how spatial and geographical constructions can influence foreign policy making and prepare the ground for our exploration of the political in water politics. Critical geopolitics can indeed be defined as the study of myriad geographical assumptions and schemas that influence the making of foreign policy and world politics (Agnew, 2016). As Agnew notes, “these assumptions and schemas are seen as socially constructed by particular people in different historical–geographical circumstances and as thereby providing the basis for geopolitical rationales to social and political purposes that are anything but simple reflections of a natural geopolitical order.” (Agnew, 2016, p. 19). The early work on critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992) identified three categories involved in the production of these discursive assumptions and the consequent spatialization of international politics: i) the formal geopolitical reasoning of strategic thinkers and public intellectuals; ii) the practical geopolitical reasoning of politicians, statespersons, and journalists; and iii) the reasoning in contemporary popular culture. While these three categories are closely intertwined, Kuus (2010) observed that practical geopolitics offers a particularly effective analytical focus since it combines elements of formal geopolitical reasoning with societal elements and metaphors from popular culture. Through practical geopolitical reasoning, the intellectuals of statecraft – a notion that recalls Gramsci’s (1975) idea of the organic intellectuals⁴ – designate a world that is populated by various subjects, representations and histories often centred on binary distinctions and narratives (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). In this geopolitical imagination, discourses and ideological processes serve to construct the idea of the ‘self’, or the domestic, as juxtaposed to the ‘other’, which is often represented as a threat (Dalby, 1990). This discursive practice of othering (Gregory, 1994) can be for instance based on competing visualisations of global space (Agnew, 2003), or on temporal ideas of ‘backwardness’, such as the ones originating from colonial encounters and evident in the discursive practice of “Orientalism” (Said, 1979), or those stemming from a comparison with the self’s own past (Diez, 2010; Said, 2000).

Critical geopolitics challenges the deterministic formulations on

³ The content of this website was downloaded in full on March 27, 2015 and therefore the author can easily access it even though the website went offline a few weeks after this date, presumably in April 2015.

⁴ Gramsci (1975) ascribed to this category the intellectuals organically tied with those in power, in contrast with the traditional intellectuals, who consider themselves autonomous and independent from the dominant social group.

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