

Hidden theories, troubled waters: International relations, the ‘territorial trap’, and the Southern African Development Community’s transboundary waters[☆]

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Abstract

Much of the literature examining transboundary watercourses employs an implicit international relations framework. This literature, while helpful in understanding aspects of transboundary watercourses, routinely obfuscates many crucial factors. Specifically, such analyses are marked by: (i) a mis-theorization of the hegemonic structures at work, (ii) undue pessimism regarding the propensity for multi-lateral cooperation, (iii) an assumption that conflict and cooperation exist along a progressive continuum, (iv) a tenet that conflict is restricted to state competition, and thus a neglect of state collusion in violence against certain citizens, and (v) a depoliticization of ecological conditions. Bringing a geographical critique to bear on the IR framed literature illuminates such deficiencies and leads to a more grounded and holistic analysis of the politics of shared watercourses. A case study of the management of shared water resources in the Southern African Development Community is used to demonstrate, in a concrete way, what is obfuscated in the implicit IR approach and how a geographical critique is able to provide an analysis that is both more critical, and more insightful.

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Introduction

As the Cold War dissolved, a new research agenda linking security and the environment through international relations (IR) theory gained momentum. One of the research program's most durable offshoots has been a body of literature examining transboundary water systems.² Yet, while the environment and security literature has critically questioned the implications of transposing IR theories into analyses of environmental governance (e.g. Dalby, 2002), in the research on transboundary water systems these issues remain largely unaddressed. In fact, in the majority of such work the theoretical underpinnings in IR – primarily through the subfield of international organizations (IO) – are implicit and unacknowledged.

The application of international relations (IR) theories – no matter how silent – sets the framework for the development of this transboundary water literature. This is most obvious in the literature's organization around a conflict-cooperation debate, a rationalist approach to actors and 'interests', the near circumscription of actors to states, and the focus on institutions as the primary way to engender cooperation by countering states' value-maximizing rationalist tendencies (du Plessis, 2000: 19–20). Indeed, with mounting critiques of the environment and security paradigm, the international water systems literature shifted its focus from international conflict to international cooperation. Nonetheless, the implicit theoretical basis in IR and its subfield IO remains unaltered.

The purpose of this paper is to render the IR/IO theorizing in the international watercourses research explicit, and thereby subject it to critique. This implicit IR theorizing is marked by: (i) a mis-theorization of the hegemonic influences at work, (ii) undue pessimism regarding the propensity for multi-lateral cooperation, (iii) an assumption that conflict and cooperation exist along a progressive continuum, (iv) a tenet that conflict is restricted to state competition, and thus a neglect of state collusion in violence against certain citizens, and (v) a depoliticization of ecological conditions. These arguments are pursued in two sections. First, in a theoretical section, the particular aspects of IR/IO theorizing implicit in the 'water discourse' are brought forward and literature from critical geopolitics, political ecology and the social production of nature is introduced to illuminate the issues in question from different perspectives. The second section demonstrates the importance of this theoretical exercise through a case study of shared watercourses in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The SADC's various programs for managing its internationally shared watercourses offer a particularly fruitful opportunity to explore the limits of IR/IO theorizing in the water discourse and the possibilities for other theoretical approaches to transcend them. Indeed, in Barnett's (2000: 277) very strong critique of IR approaches to international water systems leading to predictions for 'water wars', it is an analysis of Southern Africa that he calls for to expose the limitations of the approach. Regional history and circumstances challenge the underlying assumptions of IR/IO theory (particularly those related to the state as actor and its apolitical approach to ecological conditions), demonstrate the undue pessimism of theoretical expectations with respect to the development of multi-lateral cooperative management structures, and demand a more nuanced approach to conflict and cooperation that can only be achieved by stepping out of the 'territorial trap'.

² The environmental conflict literature is broadly divided into two groups that find conflict stemming from: (1) a scarcity of renewable resources, or (2) an abundance of non-renewable resources leads (Le Billon, 2001: 564). Although non-renewable resources have generated an active literature, among renewables water has figured most prominently. This is true both in policy assessments of the likelihood of conflict (Diehl & Gleditsch, 2001: 6) and international relations framed research (Hauge & Ellingsen, 2001: 38).

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