



Flows from beyond the Pyrenees. The Rhône River and Catalonia's search for water independence



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ABSTRACT

The mobilization of water has been key for the reconfiguration and modernization of the Spanish state. During the Francoist dictatorship (1939–1975), the hydro-social reengineering of Spain was central to Franco's political mission but failed to provide for subnational, regionalist aspirations which subsequently pursued their own agendas for water development. In this paper we examine the (failed) project of transferring water from the Rhône River in France to Barcelona promoted by the regional government of Catalonia as an example of using large infrastructures in order to strengthen and consolidate the role of Catalonia as a nation. While we basically concur with Swyngedouw's arguments on the relevance of water for building modern nation states we also attempt to expand the debate in at least three points. First, the implications of the Rhône project in the rescaling of water politics away from the Spanish State and closer to the European Union through the production of a new scale of water supply based not on national but on sub-national cooperation. Second, the view of nationalism that may not be as monolithic as Swyngedouw depicts for Spain but more heterogeneous and fragmented as in Catalonia, with important implications for the acceptance of the Rhône project. And finally, the idea that nation building through water development does not necessitate large scale hydraulic works but that may be achieved through smaller scale socioenvironmental projects. These arguments show that particular society-nature relationships (i.e. different approaches to the mobilization of water resources) are fundamental in the process of building political entities.

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1. Introduction

In November 2002, the Catalan Association of Engineers (*Col·legi d'Enginyers de Catalunya*) organized a public event under the title of "Water from the Alps for Catalonia". During the conference, one of the main speakers asserted that the Gulf of Lion, where the Rhône waters flow into the sea, was a mistake of Nature. Had it not existed, one of the biggest European rivers would flow into Catalan territories. To fix nature's shortcomings, the workshop discussed the details of an ambitious infrastructure project: the Languedoc-Roussillon-Catalogne (LRC) aqueduct, or the Rhône water transfer,

which was to quench Barcelona's thirst "once and for all" with French waters.¹

However, this gigantic, cross-boundary project faced a major obstacle. As an international water transfer and despite the support of regional authorities on both sides of the Pyrenees, it required a legal treaty between the French and Spanish states. For its very character, the Rhône water project necessarily challenged the national water building raised by different Spanish regimes during the 20th century, but especially symbolized in the figure of Dictator Francisco Franco. The Rhône aqueduct shared the very logic of large water infrastructures as national modernization projects – in this case, dressed with a pro-European rhetoric. The recent history of Catalan attempts to connect the region to "Europe's water reservoir" – as the Alps were pompously referred to – configure a hydraulic national project clashing with Spain's own. From its inception to its most recent trajectory, the Rhône water transfer project, championed by Catalan conservative nationalists, can be interpreted as an attempt to reconfigure the (Catalan) nation through the rescaling of

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¹ November 19, 2002, Jornada "Aigua dels Alps per a Catalunya" RiverNet http://www.rivernet.org/rhonebarcelone/eaudesalpes_cat.htm Last accessed September 7 2016.

water supply. It represents a way to secure water flows that could ease internal water conflicts through the connection with the European continent, while at the same time satisfying the regional economic elites (e.g. businesses associations) still advocating for traditional hydraulic solutions to water stress. By exploring the short history of an unsuccessful project our intention is to reconstruct the main features and actors of Catalonia's own national project with regard to water and, by looking at this specific topic, to show also the heterogeneity and fragmentation of Catalan nationalism, which are strongly reflected in ideas and positions about this precious resource.

Our contribution attempts first to link critically the work of Swyngedouw (2015) on Spanish national water politics with the research of Pritchard (2011) on the envirotechnical history of the Rhône River in France. Swyngedouw's work is fundamental for the comprehension of the "concerted discursive and physical process of cultural and material national(ist) homogenization" (Swyngedouw, 2007, p. 10) carried out in Spain during the Francoist dictatorship through hydro-social reengineering. This is important because, as we will see, the discourses of both conservative and socialist Spanish governments against the Rhône project show continuities with the central role assigned to water infrastructures in the Spanish national modernization project. Moreover, Swyngedouw has also devoted great attention to the recent water desalination schemes – against which conservative Catalan nationalists wielded the Rhône as an alternative. On the other side of the Pyrenees, Pritchard (2011) has analyzed the history of Rhône River as an envirotechnical system and illuminated the links between nation formation, nature, and technology in France, dealing briefly with the Rhône River transfer project.

Second, we also pretend to take Swyngedouw's arguments further, implying that national projects about water may not be one but many. As we will argue in the paper, water has been the terrain of different and contested projects within Catalonia that have influenced enormously the debate on the Rhône transfer. Our research, at the crossroads of political ecology and environmental history (Davis, 2009, 2015) attempts to pierce the Pyrenean mountain range to connect the work of Swyngedouw and Pritchard, who concur on their vision of envirotechnical systems as deeply historical and political but focus on the nation-state. Instead, we aim at examining the mobilization of national(ist) imaginaries connected to transboundary water management at the regional scale in the context of the opportunities created by the entrance of Spain to the European Union after 1986. In doing so, we argue that the Rhône river project appealed to the enormously powerful symbolic role of water (Agnew, 2011) to bypass the intervention of the Spanish State in Catalan affairs in ways that other critical resources also subject to international connections (e.g. electricity, gas) could not possibly follow.

The Rhône water transfer project was launched in 1995 by the Catalan conservative nationalist party, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), which governed the region between 1980 and 2003. Founded in 1978, CiU was a coalition between the liberal *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* and the Christian Democrats of *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* that lead the politics of post-Franco years in Catalonia and that was also fundamental to provide government stability in Spain. After 1995, CiU made a symbol of the Rhône water transfer, envisioning its own (Catalan) national hydraulic project that would ease the internal water conflicts of Catalonia, and guarantee the chronically uncertain supply of Barcelona once and for all. In their defense of the project, conservative Catalan nationalists emphasized the importance of strengthening European integration and the possibility of accessing European funds. However, this proposal not only found the opposition of successive Spanish governments but also failed to gather consensus in

Catalonia. The growing pro-independence left (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, ERC), together with the red-green coalition *Iniciativa per Catalunya*, fiercely opposed the project, on the grounds of unsustainability and economic nonsense.

Despite all refusals, CiU maintained the Rhône water transfer proposal in its electoral platform when it regained power in 2010 and again in the 2012 elections. Amidst the pro-independence shift in Catalan politics since 2010, and highly pressed for its historically ambivalent position on the issue of Catalonia independence from Spain, the nationalist coalition CiU broke in 2015. Today, the Rhône water transfer project has not the explicit support of any political party in the Catalan parliament and seems a rather remote possibility. But since it was first proposed, it keeps ebbing and flowing. Despite being dismissed in 2001, it immediately reappeared next year, only to be abandoned when the conservative Catalan nationalists were ousted from power in Catalonia in 2003. Despite the massive investments in desalination plants after the Socialist party came to power in Spain in 2004, the possibility of a water connection to France was again on the table during the 2007–2008 drought crisis in Barcelona. In fact, Rhône waters reached Barcelona for a few days, not because of any permanent water transfer, but thanks to the tankers shipped from Marseille. Finally, amidst the turmoil affecting Catalan politics since 2010, the project has not regained the momentum it enjoyed in the late 1990s, but some voices still refer to it periodically. Such recurrence is one more reason to examine its inception and development in this paper.

This is to our knowledge the first attempt to put together a history of how the Rhône water transfer to Catalonia project fell through. As an inquiry into recent history, our narrative relies on technical documents, parliamentary proceedings and newspaper library research. We could access relevant technical sources such as the minutes of the Catalan scientific committee that assessed the Rhône transfer project between 1998 and 1999 and gathered key testimonies of the project development. We critically use the grey literature published by the Catalan government about the project, along with the proceedings of parliamentary sessions of the Catalan and Spanish governments. We have also carried out several interviews with members of the scientific committees and politicians active during the period. Finally, we used press clippings – with special attention to the Barcelona-based newspaper *La Vanguardia*, with intimate links to the conservative Catalan nationalists and with several columnists that stood out in their support of the project.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss how theoretical approaches to infrastructural water politics have mostly departed from (and focused on) the national scale somehow missing both the emergent importance of rescaling processes granting more relevance to regions in contexts such as the European Union as well as the inner tensions within regional forces. Our narrative of the Rhône project development and comebacks is divided into four parts. First, we introduce how its inception took advantage of European frameworks of collaboration, along with the critical voices it soon raised. Second, we describe how the project was refused in 2001 by the Spanish conservative government, which gave full priority to a truly Spanish National Hydrologic Plan. Later, the defeats of both Catalan conservative nationalists and Spanish conservatives in the respective elections shelved all grand schemes of water transfers for a new doctrine based on desalination. Third, we relate the strong reappearance of the Rhône waters possibility in the context of the 2007–2008 drought in Barcelona. Lastly, we present the short-lived resurgence of the project in the public debates in the midst of the pro-independence fever manifested in Catalonia since 2010. In the concluding section, we summarize the reasons for its demise, including the deep divisions within Catalan nationalists regarding the project and also the

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