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Hydropower, Anti-Politics, and the Opening of New Political Spaces in the Eastern Himalayas

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Summary. — Hydropower has lately been advocated by a multi-scalar public–private policy nexus for marrying objectives of green growth and climate mitigation. Such discursive constructions are reminiscent of a consensual development politics, which contradicts and overlooks long-standing socio-environmental controversies surrounding large dams. Here we argue that anti-political hydropower governance also risks fueling inherent societal antagonisms, with unexpected outcomes. Drawing on qualitative empirical research in Sikkim, Northeast India, we illustrate how attempts by state and private actors to restrict contestation of hydropower projects were countered with unprecedented voice and agency of affected communities, indicating nascent processes of politicization and democratization "from below".

Key words — large dams, water conflicts, environmental governance, depoliticization, India, Asia

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary processes of environmental governance exemplify the narrow techno-economic rationality that has long shaped development policy and practice (Escobar, 1999; Goldman, 2001; Harriss, 2002; Li, 2007). The neoliberal ideologies that often drive environmental governance deliberately sideline questions of complex, context-specific human–environment interactions through depoliticized and consensual governing and policy-making (Büscher, 2010). The discursive construction of hydropower development as a green growth strategy (World Bank, 2014), and the subsequent come-back of large dams in developing and newly dominant economies (Cole, Elliott, & Strobl, 2014; Pittock, 2010) are particularly characteristic of such consensual politics of development.

In 2000, the World Commission on Dams' (WCD, 2000) critical appraisal of "large-dams-as-usual" as being environmentally unsustainable and socially unethical, marked a low-point for the global dam industry (McCully, 2001, p. xvi). The World Bank had already substantially reduced its lending for dam construction during the 1990s. Intense North–South civil society advocacy on the socio-environmental costs of large dams had pressured the world's foremost traditional financier of mega-water-infrastructure to withdraw from controversial dam projects such as the Sardar Sarovar Project in the Indian Narmada valley (Khagram, 2004), or Arun III in Nepal (Rest, 2012). Yet, within the past decade, controversial dam projects have again featured prominently in development planning, including on the World Bank's funding agenda (Cole *et al.*, 2014; Pittock, 2010). According to Rachel Kyte, the bank's vice president for sustainable development, "the earlier move out of hydro 'was the wrong message.... That was then. This is now. We are back'" (Schneider, 2013).

This global hydropower boom is facilitated by a broad multi-scalar policy consensus among donors, national and regional governments, dam-builders and large green groups, bringing together interests of green growth, private capital accumulation, and climate mitigation (Ahlers *et al.*, 2015; Pittock, 2010). The dominant discourse legitimizes large hydro as clean, reliable and affordable (Cole *et al.*, 2014) and positions dam development as the only "moral alternative to fossil fuel-based electricity" (Fletcher, 2010, p. 5). This consensus is institutionalized in climate finance arrangements such as the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), which enable polluting Northern parties to meet their climate commitments (EC, 2004; Haya & Parekh, 2011), and provide economic and political incentives – a clean image – to private investors (Newell, Phillips, & Purohit, 2011). By 2013, hydropower made up 26% of CDM-registered projects,[1] even though evidence on whether, and at what scale hydropower projects actually off-set carbon emissions is scarce (Erlewein & Nüsser, 2011; Haya & Parekh, 2011; Pottinger, 2008).

Both newly dominant economies like China, India, Turkey, or Brazil, as well as developing countries with hydropower potential, such as Nepal, Ethiopia, or Laos equate hydropower development with energy security, stable growth rates and modernization, and have liberalized their national energy sectors to enable private capital to boost the rate and speed of dam construction (Matthews, 2012; Moore, Dore, & Gyawali, 2010). The fact that most of the proposed sites for new dams are located in isolated, economically marginal, and poorly developed frontier regions, enables state governments to additionally position hydropower as a main source of revenue to mitigate regional development discrepancies.

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However, on the ground today's large hydro projects are no less controversial and contentious than those of previous decades. Many proposed dam sites are concentrated in ecologically and culturally diverse regions such as the Amazon, the Nile, the Mekong River, or the Himalayas, and frequently in indigenous territories (Coelho & Favaretto, 2008; Cole *et al.*, 2014; Grumbine & Pandit, 2013; Orr, Pittock, Chapagain, & Dumaresq, 2012). These riverscapes are climate vulnerable ecosystems, where dam construction is likely to exacerbate climate-related variability in water flows and biodiversity, as well as vulnerability to hydro-climatic disasters (Shah, 2013; Vagholikar & Das, 2010). As a result, accelerated hydropower development has led to a multiplication of social conflicts over diverse issues such as cost–benefit distribution, hazard risks, and indigenous sovereignty among others (Baruah, 2012; Finley-Brook & Thomas, 2011; Matthews, 2012; McCormick, 2010; Sneddon & Fox, 2008).

This "manufacture" (Herman & Chomsky, 1994) of dominant green narratives about hydropower evokes earlier discursive constructions that served to legitimize controversial dam projects in the interest of powerful actors, for example their framing as a panacea for water scarcity (Mehta, 2001). It is also reminiscent of the shortcomings of consensual development politics in other extractive industries. Larsen and Mamosso (2014, p. 62), for example, show how in Niger's mining sector development cooperation "has ignored grievances on grave environmental impacts and rampant institutional failures while a crisis discourse on desertification and food insecurity diverts attention from geopolitical interests in mineral wealth".

In this article we look at public–private hydropower development in the Eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim, Northeast India, where since 2000 the state government has proactively enabled private developers to implement a dozen large hydropower projects. To maximize the speed of dam construction, public participation in project-related decision-making has been undermined by hydro proponents through a mix of strategies we refer to as anti-politics. As a consequence, local resistance to hydropower development has been either conspicuously absent or unprecedentedly outspoken, calling for a nuanced analysis of such diverse expressions of popular political agency. The aim of this paper is to explore how high-handed anti-political maneuvering "from above" clashes with the articulation of "political voices from below". Our case study shows how the use of depoliticizing and coercive strategies to stifle dissent and to maximize the speed of dam construction served to aggravate intrinsic social antagonisms. In the absence of legitimate channels of expression this set in motion radical grassroots political processes.

The paper is structured as follows. We first give an overview of theoretical debates about anti-politics, depoliticization, and "the political" at the interface of development studies and political ecology. This is followed by an introduction to Sikkim's hydropower mission and the uneven pattern of conflict it has produced, illustrated against the backdrop of the state's political-economic history. The remaining three sections provide detailed empirical accounts of the different anti-political tactics used to pre-empt popular opposition to state-led hydropower development; new forms of politicization and popular political action that have emerged; and a theoretical discussion of how these relate to one another. The final section concludes with policy implications.

2. ANTI-POLITICS, DEPOLITICIZATION, AND "THE POLITICAL"

Ferguson (1990) coined the term "anti-politics machine" to describe the international donor-driven "development apparatus" in Lesotho, Southern Africa, which tended to re-implement development projects despite their failure. He illustrated how development planners, their discourses, and interventions overlooked complex political and structural causes of poverty, class, inefficiency and corruption, and in doing so ended up segregating development practice from deeply entrenched politics within and outside the state. Such rationalizing processes in development policy and practice allow casting political dimensions of poverty, inequity, or unemployment as "technical problems" to be addressed through interventions by "politically neutral", technical experts (Ferguson, 1990, p. 66).

Ferguson was cognizant of the "politics" of presenting development planning as an apolitical process. However, as such, he saw no deep-rooted "conspiracy" in the anti-politics machine, whose outcomes he noted to be largely unintended, and yet welcome and useful to the act of rationalization. First, because by suspending "politics" from development planning, extremely sensitive political operations could be performed, thereby extending the powers of the state administration "under cover of a neutral, technical mission to which no one can object" (Ferguson, 1990, p. 270). Second, because by depoliticizing both poverty and the state, planned development could effectively undermine any possible political challenges to the system.

Our research findings complement the work of Ferguson but also draw parallels with research conducted by several other scholars, who have challenged Ferguson's assumption about the (lack of) intentionality behind anti-politics effects – especially considering that failed interventions are readily repeated (Bending, 2003). Based on his review of conservation and development projects in Southern Africa, Büscher (2010, p. 33), for example, argued for the need to recognize the structural relations in which anti-politics as an "essential political strategy [and] intrinsic element of the wider political economy of neoliberalism" operates. Li (2007, p. 9), who analyzed the rationale and effects of rural improvement schemes in Indonesia, proposed that by "rendering technical," development planning serves to meet particular development expectations, with a deliberate objective: containing a challenge, e.g., through public mobilization, to the status quo – the dominance of particular classes or groups.

Another theoretical debate, which is relevant for the case of Sikkim, questions the unidirectional, top-down, hegemonic operation of the anti-politics machine (Nustad, 2001), pointing to its flip-side, and the need to understand how communities affected by development interventions may challenge or become complicit in anti-political maneuvers (Bending, 2003; Li, 2007). Thus anti-political processes can work in multiple directions, with different stakeholder groups using different anti-political strategies to legitimize their own interpretations of any given development project (Büscher, 2010).

On the one hand, as Robins (1998) reminds us, development is not necessarily perceived by its intended beneficiaries as an anti-democratic, capitalist, and imperialist agenda, as some post-development scholars may suggest. Their concerns are often "far more contextual and contingent and grounded within the more immediate and mundane contexts of their everyday lives" (Robins, 1998, p. 1679). Li (2007, p. 11) on