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Abstract

Troubled Waters is a collection of essays edited by Patrick Troy, Emeritus Professor and Visiting Fellow at the Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University. The papers are contributed by a multidisciplinary group of authors, from the fields of economics, history, geography, environmental and social policy and law. As a result, the book does not present a single theoretical or methodological approach and in this regard it is refreshing. The book is published by the ANU E Press; a publisher that makes academic output from the ANU freely available from its website, as well as for purchase through print on demand. Such initiatives in publishing and research dissemination can only be celebrated.

Keywords

confronting, waters, cities, water, australia, crisis, troubled

Disciplines

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Book Review

Troubled Waters: confronting the water crisis in Australia’s cities

Patrick Troy (ed.)

2008

Canberra: ANU E Press, The Australian National University

217 pp

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Troubled Waters is a collection of essays edited by Patrick Troy, Emeritus Professor and Visiting Fellow at the Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University. The papers are contributed by a multi-disciplinary group of authors, from the fields of economics, history, geography, environmental and social policy, and law. As a result, the book does not present a single theoretical or methodological approach, and in this regard it is refreshing. The book is published by the ANU E Press; a publisher that makes academic output from the ANU freely available from its website (<http://epress.anu.edu.au>), as well as for purchase through Print on Demand. Such initiatives in publishing and research dissemination can only be celebrated.

Despite the breadth of topic and variety of perspectives of contributing authors, the book has a clear central argument: that the roots of Australia’s urban water problem are deeply historical, and are inscribed through intersecting technical, cultural, economic and political factors. Together, these factors form a path dependency in both the ways water is supplied, and the practices of water use in Australian society. Shifting institutions, attitudes and behaviours demands an approach that integrates all of these factors. This book summarises these factors in order to imagine an alternate path towards sustainable and appropriate water services for Australian cities in the future.

The context of the book is significant. Australia is a continent of low and extremely variable rainfall and river flow, and an extremely highly urbanised country. Water scarcity is a physical reality, and public awareness is acute. The authors discuss the particularities of Australian urban water, and the book uses the Australian case to argue that there is a broad sweep of factors shaping water development in any context. The book responds to the present urgency in urban water supply in Australia, and the growing tensions over water in many parts of the world. In its argument and approach it also responds to the ongoing challenge of sustainability and the proliferation of narrow sustainability projects, joining others in urging a holistic approach to water governance.

Troubled Waters is divided into eight chapters, plus a short introduction and longer conclusion from Troy. Tony Dingle’s opening chapter discusses the significance of the ‘Chadwickian solution’ to water development in Australia, and in so doing demonstrates the importance of *ideas* as well as material developments in shaping institutions and behaviour. Edwin Chadwick’s 1842 ‘solution’ to the problem of growing urban populations had two key

principles: pure piped water and water-borne sewage collection. Dingle argues that the adoption of Chadwick's solution led to path dependence in Australia; a set of technologies, infrastructure and institutions that are expensive and disruptive, and thus limit opportunities for change. Chapter 2 sharply changes tack with Peter Spearitt's detailed study of the political response to the growing water crisis in southeast Queensland. He presents a picture of unaccountable water bureaucracies, and government focus on engineering-based 'quick-fixes' to water supply, which have led to investment in a series of ill-conceived desalination plants in the region's ever-diminishing coastal open space.

Graeme Davison, in chapter 3, writes of historical influences on Australian domestic water consumption. This is an enjoyable read. The chapter is animated by characters central to domestic urban life in Australia including Pears soap, Chief cisterns, the Hoover washing machine, and the Victa Mower. In sections headed 'the pursuit of health and morality', flushing, bathing, washing, watering and wallowing, we learn of the technological and cultural context of Australian urban domestic water use, and the centrality of Chadwick's ideas. Davison argues that 'by excavating the history of these arrangements, we are better able to think about how they might be changed or improved' (page 38). Continuing the focus on domestic water, Lesley Head (chapter 4) draws on extensive empirical research into cultural practices of water use in backyard gardens in Sydney, Wollongong and Alice Springs. She argues that 'network-thinking', rather than 'nature-thinking', will best serve cities by enabling a connection between water users and the complex infrastructure of domestic supply.

Policy, institutions and governance form the focus of Steve Dovers' chapter 5. He argues that effective water governance requires consistency across all policy domains. He warns against 'hydrological determinism'—narrow urban water fixation in policy and management—emphasising instead the links between water and associated services such as energy, and between urban and rural water. He describes the reliable and abundant supply of clean, safe water in Australian cities as both an achievement and a curse. The achievement is of urban amenity, quality of life, convenience, public health. The curse is an inflexible, institutionalised system that does not encourage frugality, is hard to alter, and does not admit independence of supply or inventive use of wastewater. In chapter 6 Geoff Syme considers the concept of sustainability in urban water futures. His broad argument is that long-term planning should be driven by potential benefits to the community and how those benefits can be delivered, urging the importance of distributive and procedural justice.

In chapter 7 Janice Gray and Alex Gardner describe a paradigm shift in attitudes towards wastewater and sewage, arguing that 'unspoken water' is being re-imagined as an environmental and commercial opportunity. Their discussion addresses the legal problem of third-party (usually private) access to public-sector sewage and infrastructure. Lee Godden, in chapter 8, also considers the legal frameworks surrounding water. She argues that 'property' in water remains a contested concept, and should be regarded as a site for articulating obligations and responsibilities in relation to long-term sustainability and intergenerational equity. She suggests that social science provides a means of understanding the social and cultural values that are often excluded in water management, and that law can play a role in shaping and implementing those normative perspectives.

In his concluding chapter, Patrick Troy juxtaposes the challenges of the 19th century (addressed by Chadwick) with those of the 21st: water consumption three times higher than supply systems were designed to provide, and ecosystem stress at point of water abstraction, and extreme stress at point of waste discharge. Troy presents a suite of measures for reducing

demand, and urges that cities will be best served by paying attention first, to reshaping demand for potable water, and second, reconsidering ways that waste is managed.

The stand-alone chapters of this book combine to express the importance of social, cultural and institutional approaches to urban water supply. Most of the chapters are written in a clear and accessible style. However, their quality varies, and the intended audience for the collection is not always apparent. The implications of the work extend beyond the Australian context, but one or two chapters could make these implications more explicit. The book contains several very engaging and timely papers, which I believe will be of interest to a number of audiences; namely those concerned with urban water, with Australian history, policy and water governance, and with the role of multi-disciplinary research in understanding how societies are shaped by intersecting historical, technical, cultural, economic and political factors.

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