

Book Review

– *Watershed politics and climate change in Peru*, by Astrid B. Stensrud. Pluto Press, 2021

In this book, Astrid B. Stensrud, explores the world humans, more-than-humans and water make in the Majes-Colca watershed located in the Caylloma province, department of Arequipa, in the Southern Peruvian Andes. The Majes-Colca watershed with 17,152,73 km² is home to water realities that connect throughout the lower, middle, and upper basin. By focusing on social practices over a period of 13 months from 2011 to 2014, the ethnography narrates how the multiplicity of water unfolds in a tapestry of social relations, encounters, misunderstandings and contentions around the concept, value, and management of water. Multilevel transformations of Andean water management are explained not only as caused by neoliberal policies, but also by climate changes. The period of the ethnographic study is crucial as it followed a series of transformations that, under a neoliberal framework, took place in the water sector since 2000. To make sense of this complex world, Stensrud organizes the book into seven chapters, including an introduction and the conclusion.

In this review, I will focus on some aspects of her ethnography. Particularly, I will go over her discussion on the state and the state officials, the role of the international community, the law, and the historical processes in the watershed. The story of the construction of the Majes canal during the 1970s is the scenario where the hybridity of state officials' practices is shown as they navigate indistinctly between the mandate to modernize water and the local cultural understandings of water. Certainly, it goes without saying that the state is not monolithic (p. 60), but how shall we interpret this disconcerting behaviour that mirrors that of a tightrope walker. The interesting response of Miguel may decipher the puzzle: “[in the field] *nos adecuamos* and we mix the law with custom and base our work on internal agreements” (p. 43). For the author, these state practices are associated with deep concern and “caring about doing a good job” (p. 50), but this approach does not satisfactorily explain the twofold attitude they show while in the field, which helps them to compose legal assemblages or interlegalities in their attempts to approach the state to the people. The notion of care falls short to understand their sometimes non-Sancta practices, such as coercively

using climate change to induce water users to abide by the law, or ignoring peoples' claims when powerful users like mines compete for water.

While Stensrud's rich ethnographic data demonstrates that water is a local creation, water management in contemporary Peruvian Andes has also international dimensions. A history of Andean water should include a vertical slice to portray the role of International Financial Institutions (IFI) in the making of current institutional and legal water framework (Urteaga, 2010). In addition, the description of the 2009 Law of Water Resources (29338) emphasizes the legal obligation to pay the water tariff and the formalization of water rights, leaving behind the fascinating socio-political construction that the law entails. Different components of the law reflect the contentious process that led to its approval in 2009 (Roa et. al., 2013). Eventually, the author discovers the reason why only one face of the law unveils in the practices of officials is not the law in itself, but their "own judgement" (p. 191) dyed by the neoliberal ideology. Stensrud finds fascinating the assemblage of farmers' practices when paying state water tariffs and making *pagos* to the apus for water. The logic behind these practices is simultaneously different and compatible. Syncretism occurs also in water management. "Calling the water" (the 'marriage' of seawater and mountain water) (p. 91) and the *pagos* to the mountain (p. 87) remind farmers that water is embedded in the ecosystem. And, as they go up to the mountain to make the *pago* water dematerializes to find its symbolic significance. While the state tariff obliterates this meaning of water, rituals do respond to this ontological dimension. Therefore, *campesinos* do not seem to feel any contradiction in making the *pago*, paying the state tariff and also going to Catholic mass.

Finally, there seems to be an unresolved tension between a dichotomic narrative and a constructionist conception of the social in the Andes. Even though Stensrud contends that water is constructed as an assemblage, often the narrative pays tribute to traditional ethnographic accounts based upon binary oppositions. Nonetheless, the ethnographic journey that Astrid Stensrud has vividly described in her book invites us to look at water from local *sentipensares* (Escobar, 2014). By means of her vibrant ethnographic account, Stensrud allowed us to understand how the multiplicity of water flows in the Colca-Majes watershed where the emic imaginaries of water are definitely a significant part of the journey.

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References

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