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A Future History of Water by Andrea Ballestero (review)

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After many years of relative abandonment, the topic of water has flooded back into anthropology. There were 237 mentions of the word “water” in the Program of the 2019 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, whereas 5 years earlier the 2015 Program of the Annual Meeting only mentioned that word 41 times. The relative abandonment may have resulted from fatigue in the 1980s with older materialist approaches such as cultural ecology and peasant studies; the recent flood of interest may be a response to proclamations of a global “water crisis” by popular authors, national governments, the UN, and others. At the forefront of this renovated interest in the topic of water is Andrea Ballestero, and her excellent book *A Future History of Water*. Ballestero sees human engagements with water through the lens of a cultural anthropologist, focusing on the conceptual “devices” that people in the modern world have developed to help them collect and distribute the liquid, but also to simplify in their minds what water is so that they can act upon it. In the current context of environmental collapse anthropology has sought alternatives in water cultures formed around traditional ecological knowledge, or fundamentally different ontologies. Ballestero does not search for that elusive elsewhere, but rather offers a sustained analysis of “deskwork and cubicle-based decision making” related to urban water systems, constitutional and property law, grassroots development, accounting, and other banal aspects of the global present (186).

The cultural devices Ballestero singles out for analysis are: Formula, Index, List and Pact. Each of these is a form of knowing, and each one orients a chapter of the book. Her approach is rooted in a critical reflection on modernity and modern forms of knowledge—science and political economy—that gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, and which distinguishes her work from earlier research on water that tended to focus on agrarian social organization, state formation, institutions and the like. True to this mold she rejects the temptation to erect a typological or taxonomic architecture around these four devices by arguing that they should be anthropologically de-familiarized; seen as “oddities” that stimulate “wonder” much like those incommensurable objects that found their way into the early modern “cabinet of curiosities”.

A second break this book makes from statistical modes of abstraction and commensuration is methodological. Ballestero submerges the reader in a beautifully crafted ethnography that toggles between lucid narrative accounts of everyday work in the water sector, and sophisticated intellectual history. With this form of writing she shows the multiple complex ways these cultural devices are performed and makes it difficult for a reader to conclude that they are expressions of a type. Her deeply processual approach makes it clear that the actions that compose a “device” are constantly shifting as they gesture toward an indeterminate future that is shaped by both the manifold materiality of particular settings and an open

dialectics of thought and practice. She terms the latter “bifurcation”, and shows how it both produces and simultaneously erodes the familiar oppositions that are often used to conceptualize and manage water. Principal among those false oppositions is that of commodity versus human right, but there are others such as accounting versus economics. Through her exquisitely wrought ethnography we see how these bifurcations of modern thought do not hold water but rather channel it along to further bifurcations. This sensitive analysis of the dialectics of science renders a mechanism of history but the somewhat unintuitive title of the book—*A Future History of Water*—hints that Ballesteros’ narrations of time and human action are not mechanical.

Chapter 1 “Formula” begins in Costa Rica with a man reading a water meter in a small town: how is that water measured and priced? Can water companies profit from the service, and if not, how can they create a surplus for reinvestment in their systems? Neither only human right nor only commodity, water managers create a hybrid calculus to operate delivery systems for a substance that defies categorical assignments of “commodity” and “right”. Water workers in Costa Rica devised a formula (“ $X=O+A+D+R$ ”) to determine a “fair” price that covers costs and also provides capital for reinvestment. Ballesteros shows that the quest in Costa Rica for a fair price has early-modern roots in both the argument by the Salamanca school of economists that prices are fair because they are forged by a balanced market, and also in the peculiar artefact of the double-entry ledger, which gave material form to those moral accountings. And again, endless bifurcations: the Salamancan economists also argued that markets by themselves are unable to set fair prices for all things, and so too do current-day water managers in Costa Rica as they set percentages of surcharge (“development yield” or, in their price formula, “R”). Much of the struggle over neoliberal reforms in the water sector can be understood as conflict between setting that “R” flexibly by using the intimate, contextual knowledge of local water service providers (“accounting”) or setting it rigidly for all providers (“economics”); the former often cast as “political”, the latter as “natural”. Practices at both ends of this dualism, however, are implemented using similar, modern devices of enumeration and commensuration: formula.

Chapter 2 discusses how regulators in Costa Rica consider the changing household economies and the cost of water in proportion to a wide array of commodities found in the household. What is an “affordable” price for water? The “device” developed to do this work is the “index”, specifically the Consumer Price Index (CPI) that regulators of water service provision use to guide their role as surrogates for market forces that do not exist for water service because, among other things, water companies function as monopolies and legal frameworks insist on a degree of open access to water. Indices such as the CPI condense a wide array of social relations (work, kin, community, etc.) into prices of commodities, replacing the human subject with an abstracted household represented by the things that are found within it: rice, insurance, snacks, engine repair, etc. Ballesteros’ command of sociological theory allows her to apply some relatively old notions, such as the

commodity fetish, and to contribute to newer discussions about, for example, the cultural and political dimensions of statistics.

Chapter 3 is about lists. In Costa Rica, libertarian politicians fiercely resistant to the idea that water should be recognized as a public good in the Constitution elaborated, over years of filibustering in the Congress, a list of multiple and heterogeneous forms of water that defy the boundaries of that category. Their ceaseless iteration of forms of water—ice cubes, rivers where women washed laundry, clouds, the water that makes up 70% of the bodies of Costa Ricans, and twenty-seven more—destroyed the possibility of considering water to be a singular object under the jurisdiction of Constitutional law. This list, as a device, ruptures the material categories needed to uphold conceptual distinctions between forms of property: public goods and private goods. The slow production of the list through performances in the Costa Rican Congress also resulted in infinitely postponing a resolution to the proposal of making water a public good in the Constitution. Temporality itself shifted through that postponement of the future and concomitant dilation of the present.

The “pact” is the last device Ballesteros analyzes, and she does this in Chapter 4 through a discussion of a novel form of water management in the state of Ceará, Brazil. To break with existing, clientilistic modes of water governance, activists and government officials worked to put together a “pact” that was formed by innumerable commitments to “care” for water that were not predicated on belonging to any collective group. The pact was not developed as an overarching plan based in a singular vision of the future, but rather as an effort to create a new water culture through the collection of numerous promises to take relatively minor, individual, positive steps. The “unruly multiplicity” (159) within the pact was considered a strength rather than a weakness, and the contradictions engendered by it were embraced by the organizers, as their recognition and expression allowed people to reject the pact as a collectivity, yet still contribute their promises to it. Once again, materiality plays a key role in Ballesteros’s analysis, and she focuses on the actual slips of paper upon which promises were made at the meetings convened by the promoters of the Pact. These slips of paper physically separated the promise from the person, and could then be collected and aggregated into many possible collectives far different from those modernist hydrosocial assemblages that the people of Ceará were so disillusioned with. The future effects of the pact were unverifiable, and so this device afforded the possibility of any number of radical breaks from the past.

A Future History of Water contains both a sophisticated theoretical exercise that will appeal to professors and graduate students, and a graceful ethnography that undergraduates may enjoy. The book will likely shape emerging discussions around water in the coming years.

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