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Liquid Power: Contested Hydro-Modernities in Twentieth-Century Spain by ErikSwyngedouw

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BOOK REVIEW

Liquid Power: Contested Hydro-Modernities in Twentieth-Century Spain by Erik Swyngedouw (MIT Press, 301 pages; 2015)

In *Liquid Power: Contested Hydro-Modernities in Twentieth-Century Spain*, Erik Swyngedouw weaves socio-geographic perspectives through the tapestry of Spain's political history. Readers will appreciate these "socio-ecological," "hydro-social," and "hydro-structural" nuances and will find *Liquid Power* to be a well-referenced and informative commentary on Spain's hydro-modernization. At its core, Swyngedouw's investigation of Spain's water issues focuses on the pivotal role that hydro-social interactions played throughout Spain's modernization, thereby profoundly shaping Spain's contemporary social-ecology.

Swyngedouw analyzes Spanish water policy through "historical-geographical transformations"¹ in chronological fashion. This chronology begins with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1889 known as *El Desastre*, "The Disaster." *El Desastre* marked a new era of post-imperialistic Spanish politics. After the defeat, the Spanish elite was forced to look internally to address the dilemmas facing their nation. This intranational perspective laid the hydro-social framework that would underlie Spain's modernization.

In the twentieth century, the prevailing response to Spain's water problems was thus to construct dams and irrigate its vast arid regions. But many of these initiatives did not materialize until the dictatorship of Francisco Franco some thirty years later. Under the Franco regime, over six-hundred dams were built,² immensely increasing irrigation to the arid regions. While the dams mitigated the hydro-social inequalities between the arid South and the water-complacent North, more dams also signified more hydroelectricity generation, which facilitated the growth of Spain's cities.

Despite the success of Spain's hydro-structure projects under Franco, after his death in 1975, the post-Franco democratic government viewed the holdover hydro-structuralism as outdated and reminiscent of an authoritarian regime in need of reform. During this new democratic era, there were proposals to facilitate water basin transfers from the northern "surplus" regions to the "deficient" southern regions. These prospective transfers faced strong opposition from the north, but also from environmentalists and academics advocating ecosystem preservation. Opposition to these proposed intrabasin transfers would ultimately lead to increased desalination in an attempt to quench the thirst of the more heavily populated southern coastal regions. Swyngedouw frames the rise of Spanish desalination as a "story about how sociotechnical configurations can change radically so that 'nothing really has to change.'"³ Although this summary is far

1. ERIK SWYNGEDOUW, *LIQUID POWER: CONTESTED HYDRO-MODERNITIES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SPAIN* 14 (2015).

2. *Id.* at 100.

3. *Id.* at 193.

from a comprehensive analysis, Swyngedouw elucidates the major paradigms framing Spain's historical-geographical experience.

Notably absent from *Liquid Power*, as mentioned by another commentator,⁴ is a substantive analysis of Spain's involvement in international water conflicts and cross-national comparisons of Spanish hydro-social structures. Swyngedouw only briefly mentions international disputes arising from rights to seawater, which emerge from the proliferation of desalination; and this exposition is without discussion of how potential conflicts affect Spain's future desalination endeavors. Additionally, Swyngedouw does not discuss Spain's water conflicts with neighboring Portugal even though two of Spain's major rivers run through Portugal and one major river forms part of the border between the two countries. These omissions were not the result of academic shortcomings; instead *Liquid Power* purposefully declines to contribute to the international conflict theory literature.⁵

Conversely, there is some analysis regarding Spanish international water policy involvement generally, but no cross-national water policy comparisons. This discussion explores how Spain's international affairs have influenced its political conscience. Swyngedouw addresses the alliance between the United States and Spain during the latter half of the Franco regime, that resulted in the United States funding many of Franco's hydro-modernization projects. Additional mention is made of the limitations imposed on Spain in setting domestic water policy because of its entry into the European Union. Furthermore, Swyngedouw discusses the increased global demand for desalination technology, which has resulted in the exportation of Spanish desalination experts. However, Swyngedouw does not compare Spain's water policies with other European countries, or with any country, because such comparisons would likely detract from his illustration of Spain as a state at the forefront of hydro-social issues. As a result, a student of international conflict theory or comparative international politics may be dissatisfied with Swyngedouw's intra-national perspective concerning Spain's hydro-modernity.

Through the case study of Spain, *Liquid Power* tells the tale of humanity's timeless struggle to control its destiny by attempting to harness the power of natural resources, especially water, and illustrates how social-ecological interactions fundamentally shape the formation of states. Swyngedouw aptly declares at the book's conclusion that water is a symbolic issue, "one that expresses in its variegated meanderings the functioning of political democracy, not just as a system of governing, but also as a set of principles articulated around equity, freedom, and solidarity."⁶

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4. John McNeill, *Liquid Power: Contested Hydro-Modernities in Twentieth-Century Spain*, 22 ENVTL. HIST. 160 (2017) (book review), <http://envhis.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2016/10/20/envhis.emw094.full> [<https://perma.cc/3VEU-QRRJ>].

5. *See id.*

6. SWYNGEDOUW, *supra* note 3, at 230.