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Author

Carchidi, Victoria

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Peer reviewed

Review: *Governing Water: Contentious Transnational Politics and Global Institution Building*
By Conca, Ken

Reviewed by Victoria Carchidi

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia PA, USA

Conca, Ken. *Governing Water: Contentious Transnational Politics and Global Institution Building*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. 466 pp. References, Index. ISBN: 0-262-53273-5 US \$30 ppbk. Recycled, acid-free paper.

Freshwater ecosystems, essential providers of world ecoservices and home to most endangered fish, are under ever-increasing stress from human uses. Most mainland countries occupy part of an international river basin. Our use of fresh water increased six times over a period in which the population increased only three times. What can change our attitudes toward this fundamental worldwide resource? In *Governing Water*, Ken Conca points out that no global agreement exists to safeguard the watersheds that provide the fresh water we use so greedily and that are needed to maintain functioning ecosystems.

Conca's field is policy and government, so his focus is on the formation of institutional agreements—the governing, rather than the water per se. But the parlous state of the world's waterways provides a test case for global concerns that do not fit easily into preexisting models of international "regimes." Conca presents the Montreal Protocol, which led to the phasing out of CFCs, and the Basel Convention, which regulates hazardous waste transport, as two examples of regimes whose rules established accepted standards of behavior and led to powerful change.

These models, Conca points out, do not accommodate rivers. Rivers and their watersheds are not essentially outside or across borders. They function in local conditions. Global consequences arise from a multitude of "local insults" inflicted by those living with and off the rivers. Regulation in such complex situations requires new forms.

Current studies of regimes limit them to forms that derive from three "norms": a bounded territoriality; an authority tied to state power; and a "rational-logical" body of knowledge. Conca wants us to look beyond this status quo "to conceive of institutions that construct more complex, diverse, or fluid spaces for fair and effective responses to a growing class of socioecological controversies" (389). Such new institutional forms offer hope for regulations that can prevent the wholesale "damming, draining, and diverting" (90) that has characterized treatment of the world's rivers.

This very comprehensive book takes readers through some possibilities for alternative regime formation: the unratified 1997 UN Watercourse Convention that tried to set norms; neoliberal efforts to "marketize" water; networks of experts formed around Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM); and the coming together of ecological and socioeconomic concerns which has generated a powerful grassroots voice. None of these "nascent regimes" has yet become a regime of accepted rules governing rivers. Yet each contributes to the "dynamic tensions" (253) that may generate new institutional forms.

Brazil and South Africa, respectively among the richest and poorest countries in water abundance, provide case studies of these forces in play at the state and local levels. These detailed chapters illustrate the conflicts from which, Conca suggests, new kinds of regimes may emerge. Conca concludes that cultural and geographical differences mean the various voices have different weights in the two countries, but both are alike in that “controversies over how to value water and who may participate in its governance” provide “the principle force for the development of a new normative framework for water” (371).

Ambitious and exhaustive in its discussion of institutionalizing regimes, *Governing Water* is best suited to those interested in policy and international government. Perhaps necessarily repetitive at points, the writing is generally clear. The chapter on “Pushing Rivers Around” gives a quick overview of threats faced by rivers that is very accessible. The introductory chapters on Montreal and Basel could prove useful for college or graduate level discussions of treaties’ implications. The case studies of Brazil and South Africa would inform anyone studying those countries. And the clear, direct final chapter would benefit any interested reader.
(597).

Victoria Carchidi, PhD <vcarchidi@hotmail.com>, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia PA, USA.

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