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Water as a Social Opportunity edited by Seanna L. Davidson, Jamie Linton, and Warren E. Mabee

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Together on a Rising Tide of Change

***Water as a Social Opportunity* edited by
SEANNA L. DAVIDSON, JAMIE LINTON, and
WARREN E. MABEE**

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015
\$39.95

Reviewed by **KATHERINE CHUNG**

"The framing of this water crisis is a critical issue because the way in which a problem is described inherently suggests a solution."

—Merrell-Ann S. Phare and Brendan Mulligan, 53

"[W]ater as a social opportunity means more than just thinking positively, it means recognizing the potential to make deep structural changes in social relations through the way we respond to water problems."

—Seanna Davidson and Suzanne von der Porten, 161

Water plays such a vital yet constant role in our lives that it can be easily taken for granted. How can we think about and engage with water in a more conscious, active way? What is a useful approach to water issues within the context of the diverse experiences and geographies that is Canada? Possible answers can be found in this book—one of the latest in the Queen's Policy Studies Series, which explores major public policy issues concerning governments and society in Canada and internationally.

The volume follows a 2011 Queen's University workshop on water as a social opportunity that sought to enhance stewardship and development in the water sector, and promote the establishment of a clear national water strategy. Written by 13

authors from various disciplines and sectors, the collection of ten papers is loosely organized into three sections. Together, these papers advocate our taking a critical and creative approach to our attitudes towards water, as well as to water-related processes of decision-making and problem-solving. Broadly focusing on social opportunities "re-frames our relationship with water, as an individual, a community, and a country" (Davidson and von der Porten 161).

First, we are provided with some high-level historical context around the development and fluid nature of water issues, societal goals, and governance in Canada, and are introduced to the idea of water as a social opportunity. This unifying theme, Linton argues, has the potential to drive water reform by clarifying both the problems and the benefits of pursuing change in a more meaningful way than through typical economic or business analyses (2, 11). For most of the contributors, the current fragmentation of water governance underscores the importance of developing a thoughtful, transparent, and integrated national water strategy.

This initial section also critiques the "moral silence" of the Canadian water sector (Schmidt 29), and explores how water inherently involves basic questions of social character and governance (Linton 3). In considering a plurality of water ethics, it is made clear that understanding the context of decision-making is as critical as acknowledging the biases and perspectives of decision makers; this is particularly true when dealing with complex systems such as water (Schmidt 44).

A compelling portion of this first section is Phare and Mulligan's chapter on water governance and Indigenous peoples,

and the relationship between decolonization and water. Multiple papers in the volume make a strong call to address the historical and ongoing inequities experienced by Indigenous nations and peoples, and their claims for sovereignty. “Aboriginal rights are fundamentally environmental rights, as most Aboriginal rights are directly and indirectly connected to functioning ecosystems” (59). Given the history of colonization in Canada, collective decolonization forms a cornerstone of finding and enacting solutions for water concerns (55). Further, in exploring the broad reach of decolonizing water ethics, it is argued that all Canadians have been colonized by a mindset of unsustainable water commodification and waste (61).

The middle section of the book focuses on the development of innovative governance processes and structures around water that stem from and influence the way we think and act. Case studies included in this section make for interesting reading and we learn of innovative policy and market measures applied to water and land use in Alberta, and of the complexities and challenges of municipal water governance in Ontario.

In reading these first segments of the book, I was occasionally struck by the extent to which our deeply entrenched, market-driven worldview informs the framing and messaging of various chapters. The messages sometimes even seem at odds with their expression and framing. In one instance, alongside a critique of the “absurd” view that GDP measures progress, statements elaborate on the need to harness efficiencies of the free market in order to balance economics and sources of “natural capital” such as water (Pentland 18-19). Although these arguments may have been intentionally framed in this way

to seem more relatable and persuasive to readers, the primacy given to economic prosperity as an ideal in much of the book is often undeniable and almost unquestioned.

The final part of the collection highlights examples of innovative projects and transformative politics to demonstrate some of the changes and initiatives already underway in Canada. While some earlier papers were more thought-provoking and theoretical, this section was the most inspiring and exciting to read overall. From a bi-national, arms-length, and deliberately consensus-seeking roundtable informing water governance around the Great Lakes, to a dynamic nation-wide business built around dialogue and interpersonal connections, and also inclusive, community-led public engagement initiatives, these final examples bring together and illustrate the themes of the book.

The multi-faceted social opportunity of water revolves around strengthening community and social relationships, and developing truly participatory, collaborative governance models. Further, it calls for a shift in our collective mindset—about sustainability, how we interact with each other and our surroundings, and how we think about and take care of water for ourselves, our environment, and the future.

Some chapters of the book are more readable and engaging than others, but part of the success of the volume lies in its diversity of perspectives and content; within the framework of its theme, the collection offers many entry points for the reader to develop interests and further knowledge and understanding. A solid balance is struck between delivering information, posing questions for consideration, and sharing leads for further reading.

Somewhat less balanced is the presentation of a broader conception of equity. While the theme is recurring, I at times questioned the accessibility and value of possible solutions and approaches for the average person, and especially for those who face systemic inequities. A deeper discussion of *whose* social opportunity, and *how* to address a wider range of inequities would have strengthened the book overall.

The book has format-related limitations as well. Each paper in this collection could virtually stand alone, and each concludes with a reference list; there is no collected list of references at the end of the book, nor is there an index. The inclusion of at least a bibliography would have been a welcome and user-friendly feature. The reading experience is also disrupted by some remarkably low-quality figures, including a watershed map and a sample charter. The resolution of these

images is so low as to be illegible, which I found to be distracting and frustrating.

However, these shortcomings ultimately do not detract from the message or value of *Water as a Social Opportunity*. With a refreshing outlook on a challenging and timely subject, this collection provides diverse critical analyses of water governance issues from a Canadian context, and a comprehensive picture of water as an opportunity to build relationships and change our ways of thinking. We are called upon to be inspired and transformed by water, in order to make a better future— together.

KATHERINE CHUNG is a graduate student at York University. Her research interests include social and environmental justice within water and food systems, questions related to mixed-race identities, and the use of popular education to disrupt inequitable power structures.