

Editorial

# Re-Theorizing Politics in Water Governance

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**Abstract:** This Special Issue on water governance features a series of articles that highlight recent and emerging concepts, approaches, and case studies to re-center and re-theorize “the political” in relation to decision-making, use, and management—collectively, the governance of water. Key themes that emerged from the contributions include the politics of water infrastructure and insecurity; participatory politics and multi-scalar governance dynamics; politics related to emergent technologies of water (bottled or packaged water, and water desalination); and Indigenous water governance. Further reflected is a focus on diverse ontologies, epistemologies, meanings and values of water, related contestations concerning its use, and water’s importance for livelihoods, identity, and place-making. Taken together, the articles in this Special Issue challenge the ways that water governance remains too often depoliticized and evacuated of political content or meaning. By re-centering the political, and by developing analytics that enable and support this endeavor, the contributions throughout highlight the varied, contested, and important ways that water governance needs to be recalibrated and enlivened with keen attention to politics—broadly understood.

**Keywords:** water governance; political ecology; Indigenous water governance; water rights; water insecurity; water justice; politics

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## 1. Introduction

This Special Issue, “Water Governance: Re-theorizing Politics”, engages in explicit and critical examinations of the role of “the political” in shaping water governance. Water governance refers to the processes through which institutions, actors, and societies broadly decide on how water is to be used, by whom, and under what circumstances [1,2]. Among the set of related definitions, the Global Water Partnership (GWP) describes water governance as “the range of political, social, economic and administrative systems that are in place to develop and manage water resources, and the delivery of water services, at different levels of society” [3]. As these definitions make clear, water governance includes a wide range of considerations over how the circulation of water is animated by formal institutional structures as well as everyday negotiations, contestations, and conciliations between actors. These dynamics are embedded both within historical and geographical contexts as well as broader preferences and managerial practices of institutions [4,5]. Even within this wider understanding, the ways in which “the political” is conceptualized and analyzed in water governance realms too often remains partial or under-elaborated. Death [6] suggests that politics involves critical engagement with how power relationships produce, establish, and maintain key practices and dynamics, including:

Who gets what, how, and why? Who or what are the most important actors, institutions, groups, movements, ideas, and practices in a given situation or issue? What are the rules

of the game, and who sets them and why (as well as who are the winners and losers in the game)? What are the pros and cons of particular ideas, structures, rationalities, and programmes? Who is being silenced, excluded, marginalised, or harmed? What are the consequences of particular actions or ways of thinking? What values or principles should guide our action and thought? What are the conditions of possibility of change? Where can we identify resistance? [6]

This Special Issue is interested in what it might also mean to engage more with such an expansive understanding of “the political” in water governance. To proceed, we begin with a brief overview of the ways that water governance scholars have engaged power and politics in their work to date. While we do not provide a comprehensive account, we nonetheless provide context to set the stage for the contributions of the Special Issue. The remaining sections summarize the key contributions, themes, and starting points that are offered and further elaborated in the present volume. Finally, we conclude with thoughts on how to continue advancing research and scholarship on these key concerns.

## 2. Theorizing Power and Politics in Water Governance

Defined above, governance differs from government in that the latter is focused on formal government institutions, rules, regulations, and managerial practices while the former involves wider considerations over how, and for whom, water is managed and made available [1]. This broader governance framework includes focus on the interplay between actors, preferences, and political-economic imperatives [1], as well as historical, socio-cultural, and legal considerations, and privileging of certain values, preferences, and worldviews. A focus on government and management invites attention to politics as the formal regulation of water, inter-jurisdictional negotiations, or outcomes of policies. Such an orientation also often implies that better information and sharing of scientific data will help mitigate or solve problem  $x$  or  $y$ . Relatedly, such pursuits might also assume that (a) water is knowable and can be managed, and (b) norms and desires are universal and can be put into practice [7–9]. The reality is often remarkably different: Water access and rights are often linked to contentious politics of struggle, water access and quality is deeply differentiated, water uses are fundamentally contested, and what water “is” and how water is known, constructed, and lived is variegated and difficult to conceptualize, let alone implement [8,10–14]. Allied with this, Perreault [15] suggests such calls for “good [water] governance”, often ambiguous and vague, can:

help conceal the political and economic interests that lie behind the institutional arrangements, social relations, material practices and scalar configurations involved in so-called ‘good governance’. If we are to employ this concept, then it is imperative we do so critically, carefully elucidating the political nature inherent in the institutional arrangements and socio-environmental relationships to which it refers. [15]

The diverse understandings, constituencies and interests that surround water can be neglected, further erased, or oversimplified when water governance actors assume what normative and shared understandings of water are [2]. Feminist scholarship, Indigenous theorists, and political ecologists have contributed valuable frameworks and analytics to extend analysis of politics and governance. Applied to water, we can engage these approaches to understand water not as a hydrological or biophysical system but as a “hydro-social” system, inseparable from politics, culture, and economy [9]. Offering another important example, Indigenous scholars and allies have foregrounded Indigenous water ontologies and epistemologies, rooted in responsibilities to water as a living entity and suggesting that colonial understandings of water, as a material resource, should be challenged and decolonized to address past injustices and move towards more just and sustainable interactions with, and uses of, water (e.g., [11,13,16,17]). Ethnographers, including feminist scholars, have re-scaled and re-contextualized water’s access, uses, and governance through a focus on citizenship and racialization, the emotional and affective embodiments of water, and the politics, negotiations and relations of “the everyday” (e.g., [18–23]). Examples of wider conversations opened-up include how bodies are

enrolled in uneven geographies of water access, the multi-species and multi-actor entanglements that (re)constitute “hydro-social” and infrastructural assemblages, and analytical re-orientations of governance to include *intangible* meanings and values of water (e.g., [18–23]). From such scholarship, a broader understanding of what governance might entail is brought into view, often contrasting with a narrow managerial perspective on how to “better” govern water [1]. These provocative entry points invite attention not only to the uneven distribution and access to water for humans and non-humans, but also highlight the wider governing ethics, arrangements, histories, and political-economic systems that give rise to, sustain, and reinforce such patterns (e.g., [20,24–28]).

Approaching “the political” from such a broadened perspective, the purpose of this Special Issue is to offer a set of openings and entry points regarding what politics in water governance might mean, and how we might approach it more meaningfully as scholars (and practitioners). One framing that is helpful in highlighting key elements of power that are likely to be significant for such a task is offered by Brisbois and de Loë [29,30]. Highlighted below, these authors extend Lukes’ [31] elaboration of power as *instrumental*, *structural* and *discursive* in the context of collaborative water governance. *Instrumental power* reflects influence over others exerted through expressions of force (e.g., financial, technical and social) [30,31]. As one example, Bakker et al. [32] trace such concerns with respect to regulatory injustices of water governance for Indigenous peoples in Canada. *Structural power* refers to the historical, social, economic, and political contexts through which particular water governance arrangements come into being, and (re)produce systems of injustice and inequality [29–31]. States serve a central role in exercising structural power because they hold (and claim) the authority to determine the problem-framing and set of possible solutions for how water, or water problems, will be governed [29,30,33]. Structural power further includes broader systems of colonialism and racism that (re)produce uneven quantities and qualities of water [21,34,35]. For instance, systemic inequalities include those constituted through settler colonialism as an economic and political system that structures Indigenous peoples’ ability to assert their self-determination [36,37]. As several authors have asserted through analysis of such considerations, these inequities are not necessarily about specific negotiations and interactions, but much more about the uneven playing field of structural and historical relations. For example, Mushkegowuk (Swampy Cree) scholar Michelle Daigle [38] discusses the ways neoliberal settler colonialism shapes particular types of water governmentalities. She states:

Mushkegowuk water governance, like Indigenous water governance across Canada, is further ruptured through neoliberal policies that secure and stimulate capitalist accumulation at the expense of Indigenous autonomy and environmental sustainability. [38]

In this example, neoliberal governmentalities, structural racism, and racial capitalism coalesce resulting in particular ruptures of water-related decision making—with unjust and unsustainable outcomes. To appropriately highlight these longer histories, and broader relations of power and inequality that structure water governance, it is important to engage multi-scalar lenses, and to embed an analysis of current decisions and outcomes in relation to broader histories and contexts (e.g., of neoliberal hegemony, racial capitalism, and colonialism) (e.g., [21,35]). It is important thus to note that structural power is not necessarily the direct interplay among opposing actors or interests, but often more diffuse historical trajectories and systems (of inequality, or political economy) that impinge on water governance and its current instantiations.

*Discursive power* is another dimension and refers to the capacity of actors to construct or shape norms, values, and framings, including in ways that prevent actors from recognizing that particular solutions or implements can harm their interests (see [30,31]). Such power is often characterized using *governmentality*—defined by Foucault as “the conduct of conduct” [39,40], or the myriad ways that human behavior is directed and regulated, often in ways that are diffuse, everyday, self-oriented, and implicated in a range of socio-political relations beyond formal spheres of “politics” (at times referred to as *capillary power*). Among other examples, Vos and Boelens [41] examine water justice in relation to the virtual water trade and argue that *neoliberal water governmentalities* “aim to organize and direct water users’ behavior by approaching users as rational, enterprising agents who economically

benefit from water development . . . ” [41]. Other examples similarly highlight certain discourses of conservation, efficiency, or even the human right to water that condition particular water-related uses or shifts. Consider, for instance, the argument that a focus on the human right to water can privilege human users over ecosystems, or that this discourse and policy has also served as justification for large water transfers from rural users to urban consumers [42,43].

Political ecologists, human geographers, and anthropologists have more recently scrutinized ontological and epistemological politics or sedimented notions of how water is understood, governed, used, and incorporated into daily life practices [13,14,38,44–47]. These offerings suggest that alternative and counter-hegemonic approaches (in relation to epistemologies, axiologies, and ontologies) are of critical importance in re-defining our relationships with water in ways that might further justice and sustainability goals. A related example is the literature on the “post-political”, referring to the intentional de-politicization of environmental crises particularly in service of capitalist accumulation (e.g., geo-engineering or large infrastructure development) [48,49]. These processes offer clear examples of discursive power, often working to suggest certain processes are “natural” (e.g., water scarcity), or domains of technology and engineering, in ways that work to evacuate the associated politics.

Beyond these notable examples, there are other contributions that have extended our understanding of water politics and governance, from engagements with the politics of scale regarding the consolidation of notions of the waterscape or particular river basins [50,51], to work on hydro-social territories and conflicts between rural and urban users and uses of water (see the recent Special Issue of *Water International*: [52]), to interventions that engage with the politics of emotions and embodiment in water relations and worlds [22,23]. More generally, there has also been long-standing interest with water inequities and uneven water geographies [53]. All such contributions provide a basis to affirm the foundational role of politics, broadly understood, as key to any analytical or practical engagement with water governance.

The papers that comprise this Special Issue contribute to these ongoing debates, and also extend the analytical and conceptual terrain to further these discussions. This Special Issue comprises a number of diverse and exciting research articles that met our call for engagement and (re)theorizations with the political in relation to water governance frameworks and decision-making processes. Key themes that emerged included the politics of water infrastructure and insecurity; participatory politics and multi-scalar governance dynamics; politics associated with emergent technologies of water (bottled or packaged water and water desalination); and Indigenous water governance/ontologies. We highlight several, below.

### 3. Key Outcomes of this Special Issue

#### 3.1. *New Terrains and Engagements with the Political in Water Governance*

##### 3.1.1. Politics of Water Infrastructure and Insecurity

Several articles of the Special Issue encompass the politics of infrastructure and water insecurity. As one example, Mawani’s [54] research in Ahmedabad (Gujarat, India) demonstrates how religious difference and access to municipal water supply infrastructure operates through, and is mediated by, multiple state and non-state actors. In particular, she suggests practices of (un)mapping municipal water access can contribute as an analytical and methodological framework in water governance [54]. Water governance in certain Muslim majority spaces, ostensibly left “unmapped” and outside the remit of formal planning processes, are concordant gaps in critical infrastructure [54]. Here, the politics and practices of zoning, engineering, and other technical requirements are important factors that produce and animate “underserved” Muslim areas of the city [54]. Offering another example of entanglements between institutions and infrastructure is Rodríguez-de-Francisco et al. [55], who explore the extent to which a Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) scheme contributes to an integrated and sustainable Water–Energy–Food nexus (WEF) in Colombia. Where PES is often idealized as an integrative institutional mechanism capable of accounting for environmental externalities, their research suggests

the program helps justify large-dam development and has enabled the developer to directly and indirectly accumulate and secure the reservoir's water while constraining the possible set of livelihoods in upstream and downstream spaces [55]. Such institutional arrangements thus do not inherently (or even, actively) contribute to a sustainable and equitable WEF nexus [55]. Their analysis attends to the diverse politics, negotiations and experiences across scales in an effort to illuminate which interests are served by such projects, and as a means of countering the universalized language, logics, and objectives of PES and the WEF nexus [55]. A third example comes from Atkins [56], who suggests the "national interest" of the Belo Monte Dam in Brazil is a core site around which both de-politicization (economic benefits) and re-politicization (corruption) movements converge and coalesce. The effects of resistance and (re)politicization movements are not contained to a singular project but have animated and altered the political terrain of hydropower development in Brazil [56]. Their analysis highlights the various narratives for and against the project, highlighting the intensely political contestations and ways it was discursively linked to ideas of corruption or elite interests [56]. In line with the "post-political" (above), both Rodríguez-de-Francisco et al. [55] and Atkins [56] highlight how "politics" can become obfuscated through particular discourses (e.g., national interests or economic benefits) and formalized social-ecological institutional arrangements (i.e., PES), producing spaces for the consolidation, justification, and development of large-dam development.

### 3.1.2. Participatory Politics and Multi-Scalar Governance Dynamics

Contributions further explore long-standing political questions of *who* is able to participate in water-related decision-making, *whose* knowledges and voices count in such negotiations, and *how* certain (vulnerable) actors and communities may be situated within institutions or decision-making processes (cf. [6]). For example, Razavi [57] examines the unfilled promises of social control and improved access-conditions under the re-municipalization of water service in Cochabamba (Bolivia). Contextualized using a typology to characterize different modalities of "participation", she argues that demands for "transformative" participation (i.e., implying a transfer of power) following the city's short-lived experience of water privatization have culminated in "nominal" modes of citizen engagement (i.e., reinforcing standing social orders), a process mediated, stalled, and resisted through the "radical" reception of democratization, the fragmentation of social movements, and clientistic relations between state bureaucracies and elites [57]. A second example is MacDonald's [58] critical interrogation of Water Users' Associations (WUAs) as a fundamental mechanism in water governance reform. MacDonald's [58] research in Tajikistan illustrates how WUAs reproduce exclusionary outcomes by requiring members to possess farmland, in turn threatening rural food security and sovereignty for those without such land. As a result, such households remain voiceless within architecture of WUAs, with their kitchen gardens and subsistence crops threatened (among other consequences) [58]. Again, while couched in the language of empowerment and engagement, such research helps underscore the political exclusions and consequences of these processes as they articulate with social contexts. This contribution [58] is one of several [55,57] that makes explicit linkages across the resource security nexus. Taken together, both cases [57,58] illustrate how exclusion becomes expressed, if not reinforced, both through formal governance institutions (and, processes of institutional change), as well as show re-scaled governance can re-configure exclusion in problematic fashions. In a third example, Workman [59] considers that ways that water scarcity is produced by and embedded in water policies and infrastructures in Lesotho. Highlighting the "micro-politics" of water, this contribution re-centers the political by situating local tensions (the power of chiefs) within national policies and development agendas [59]. In this way, Workman [59] highlights the complex interaction among formal and informal governance structures (or plural and multi-scalar governance structures), illustrating that politics further plays out in terms of the tension, interface, and frictions between them. Once more, we can understand how popularized water governance arrangements, here as Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) [59], vigorously promoted by various agencies, and across scales, produce uneven and intensely political outcomes as it plays out in practice.

### 3.1.3. Emergent Technologies of Water

Three articles in the Special Issue examine the political landscape of emergent technologies, including those associated with bottled and packaged water, and desalination technology. Of interest is how these emergent technologies of water treatment and distribution articulate with long-standing concerns of decision-making, regulation, uneven access, or shifting ecological and justice concerns. First, Pacheco-Vega [60] understands the proliferation of bottled water as a political phenomenon enrolled within the relationships between industrial marketing and weak regulatory regimes. While societal norms serve a partial and context-specific explanation behind the sustained growth of global bottled water, Pacheco-Vega argues a “systematic attack” on water infrastructure, utilities, and experiences has unfolded, not merely “on the part of multinational corporations with a stake in commodifying local resources, but also local governments who abdicate their responsibility towards citizens” [60]. In doing so, Pacheco-Vega [60] problematizes containerized and commodified liquids as a mechanism to enact the human right to water and as one that prioritizes (if not serves) the bottled water industry over public water distribution networks. Here, an explicit analysis of the politics of water access and associated production processes (e.g., bottled water) reveals the ways that regulatory gaps enable exploitation by the bottled water industry [60]. In a second article, Kooy and Walter [61] re-theorize the politics of packaged drinking water (PDW) in Jakarta (Indonesia) using a “situated Urban Political Ecology” (UPE) analysis of the wider urban water distributions in which it is inserted. These authors interrogate the unevenness of individual “choices” for securing safe drinking water and highlight the ambiguity of PDW’s impact on water access and associated insecurities. Here, packaged water must be situated and understood in relation to broader circuits, water flows, and uneven water insecurities [61]. To do so invites us to ask and answer critical questions: What leads certain households (and communities) to rely on packaged water, and how do such situations emerge in relation to other widespread considerations consistent with a UPE approach, including governance failure, service gaps, and similar concerns [61]? Indeed, these are exactly the kinds of questions that are not commonly emphasized in work on packaged water where the focus remains on the individual, and on ideas of choice and preference [60,61]. Here, Kooy and Walter [61] further interrogate the politics of what it means to focus on individual and household water security and quality, rather than broader systemic or structural concerns. Overall, these contributions understand bottled and packaged water as emerging from particular discursive framings, regulatory gaps, and in relation to uneven and unequal access conditions in particular sites [60,61]. Herein, the politics of water governance shape the possibility for these water flows and circuits, and in turn the movement and sale of packaged water further condition the broader politics, governance, and management of water. In both senses, packaged water is an important site for the political, particularly with respect to the intersection with social/political and regulatory conditions in different times and places.

Shifting focus, Campero and Harris [62] center their analysis on water desalination technology in Chile. The authors highlight the implications of the mining industry’s use of desalination within an undefined socio-legal landscape. In this case, again, the apolitical nature of the technology has the effect of masking both the uneven and shifting outcomes and the distribution of benefits from particular water uses and conditions [62]. Not surprisingly, the mining sector is able to benefit from the legal loopholes and apolitical valence of desalination to fundamentally shift hydro-social landscapes and mining geographies in contemporary Chile [62]. Alongside the papers on bottled water [60,61], new technologies and facets of water availability are being reconfigured in relation to shifting economic requirements (e.g., mining production). There are clear regulatory gaps which are being effectively exploited by the mining industry to further mining interests.

### 3.1.4. Indigenous Water Governance and Politics

Perhaps not surprisingly, our calls for “re-theorizing the political” in water governance solicited a very strong response (six articles in total) from scholars working on themes of Indigenous water governance and politics – defined as the study of the complex and diverse ways that Indigenous

relationships to water and legal orders inform decision-making processes about water, which are shaped by historical and ongoing colonialism [63–66]. While this might be in part due to our context and networks (all of the editors are located at the University of British Columbia on the unceded Musqueam ( $\lambda^w m \theta k^w \acute{a} y \acute{a} m$ ) territory in Canada and several of us have worked on Indigenous water governance), this strong response is notable nonetheless. We consider that there are intellectual as well as historical-contextual reasons for the strong response. Among them, Indigenous water governance is a growing arena of study that has been making important contributions to the broader water governance field. For instance, work has examined how regulatory injustices, resulting from exclusion from colonial water governance frameworks, constrains Indigenous peoples' ability to protect the waters within their territories from increasing resource development. Nonetheless, Indigenous peoples are also redefining water governance by re-asserting their own understandings of governance and jurisdiction [38,63,67–69]. Still others in this field have engaged with ontological politics of water governance by highlighting how Indigenous understandings of water as a living entity frequently conflict with colonial understandings of water as a resource available for human exploitation [11,17,44]. Some of these insights and realities profoundly unsettle aspects of “hegemonic” or “modern” technocratic water governance that has been foundational and common to Western, colonial, and “modern” systems of the past decades. These challenges are ontological, epistemological, practical and deeply political.

With respect to the contributions of this Special Issue, Curran offers a case study of groundwater licensing in British Columbia (Canada) [70] to examine how Indigenous communities are re-politicizing colonial decision-making processes in order to shift away from colonial jurisdiction and towards processes that institutionalize Indigenous responsibilities and relationships with water. The article traces case studies where First Nations are reframing water governance by embedding their own Indigenous governance and legal traditions and expectations for Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) [70]. In this way, decision-making about water is being transformed as Indigenous peoples are engaging on their own terms and employing Indigenous methodologies, knowledge, and institutions [70].

Baijius and Patrick [71] offer a compelling piece on the current water crisis facing First Nations in Canada, and, in particular, on the Canadian prairies. By engaging at the intersection of settler colonialism and political ecology, they demonstrate how this crisis is produced and reproduced through institutional power differentials and the persistence of colonial water governance practices. In particular, they develop a framework for analyzing water governance through the political ecological narrative of “exclusion and injustice”, which they argue can be applied to reveal the influence of historical context (exclusion from decision-making) and present-day impacts (water injustice) on the persistent water crisis faced by many First Nations in Canada [71].

Taylor and colleagues [72] critique the slow response from the water sector globally to challenges from Indigenous water governance and politics. They examine the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) “12 Principles on Water Governance” (listed in [72]), a proposed framework for “good water governance”, finding they are underpinned by assumptions of colonial state authority and understandings of water as a resource, consequently reinforcing colonial water governance. They propose that the principles should be revised to be more consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [73] and the principles of Indigenous water governance exemplified by Anishinabek and Haudenosaunee peoples. In particular, they suggest the “water justice” should be added to the OECD in order to better reflect Indigenous peoples concerns and relationships to water [72]. In this way, as with the other examples, the politics need to recognize, and remedy, colonial injustices, ultimately working to decolonize water governance.

Another contribution by Chilbow (*Ogamauh annag qwe*) [74] reframes water governance according to Anishinabek relationships to water. In particular, she engages Indigenous research methods, including interviews with Anishinabek Elders and reflections on her lived experience, to outline how Anishinabek understand and construct *giikendaaswin* (knowledge) based on Anishinabek ontology-epistemology which includes *nibi* (water) *giikendaaswin*. This powerful article also engages a gender lens as it provides insight into the special roles and responsibilities Anishinabek women have as holders of

*giikendaaswin* about *nibi*. It is through understanding and engaging *nibi* (water) *giikendaaswin* that water governance can be transformed and, more broadly, decolonized to better align with Indigenous ontology-epistemologies or relationships to *nibi*.

Cavazos Cohn and colleagues [75] highlight the benefits of engaging with hydro-social spatio-temporalities, or aspects of water belonging to space and time, for theorizing Indigenous water governance. In particular, they explore the spatio-temporal conceptions central to water quality, which, they argue, are biased towards colonial technical and scientific approaches. Through case studies of water governance through Tribal Water Rights under the Clean Water Act's in the United States, they conclude that water quality and associated diversity of spatio-temporalities can be transformed through adopting more holistic practices that recognize tribal sovereignty and hydro-social variability [75]. Here, then, broader concerns of Indigenous rights and sovereignty impinge in crucial ways on water quality and other material outcomes, showing again the complexity and centrality of politics for water governance and, indeed, water itself [75].

Through a case study of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in relationships to traditional drinking water sources (e.g., creeks and springs) in Yukon, Canada, Wilson and colleagues [76] call for the need to reimagine water security based on Indigenous relationships to water. Achieving this, they argue, requires moving beyond a mere focus on the material dimensions to water security (e.g., water access, quality, quantity, and affordability) to develop a more holistic approach cognizant of a broader set of relationships to water that connect Indigenous people to their traditional territories. Again, the conceptual move is to shift away from a technocratic and apolitical understanding of water governance, or water security, and instead highlight the entwined social-cultural-political, ontological, and territorial aspects of water governance.

### 3.1.5. Water Governance Practices, Ethics, and Narrative

While all of the articles are inviting a re-theorization of water governance, several contributions deal with some of the broader theoretical and practical elements of how we might incorporate politics into water governance processes more fully. Meisch [77] is interested in the narrative structures of human-water-relationships and their significance to more fully grasp the political nature of water, helping to overcome and counter reductionist and technocratic forms of water governance. Focusing on the idea of narrative ethics, the work highlights the potential of this approach to make "the political" real, visible, and productive for engagement and debate [77]. The implication here is that while water governance is political, new approaches that directly uncover politics and bring them to the forefront of negotiation are required. As Meisch offers, narrative ethics can help to open spaces for wider public engagements about moral practices and social-ecological imaginations [77].

## 4. Conclusions: Re-theorizing Politics

Water governance practices that elide "the political" do not challenge the direct production and concealment of uneven social-ecological risks, nor do such approaches create opportunities to articulate and redraw water-related decisions, uses, or practices in ways that will be more just and sustainable. As many of the contributions make clear, particular discourses, policies, and governance frameworks too often suggest that certain "solutions"—be it decentralization, PES, participation, IWRM, or nexus approaches—will overcome problems with water governance. Yet, as these contributions demonstrate, such constructs mask the associated "politics", but politics are integral to such interventions and their uneven outcomes. There is an ongoing need for attention to these politics, as well as new analytics and methods to highlights their dimensions. There has been considerable progress to promote analyses that center and re-theorize "the political" in water governance. Clear themes emerge in this Special Issue, including the need to interrogate purportedly apolitical institutional structures and infrastructural interventions, as well as to investigate the on-the-ground realities as 'apolitical' interventions. As such, the themes outlined above help to underscore some of the concerns associated with de-politicized water governance, and further offer insights on what it means to position politics at



the forefront of water governance analyses. The contributions also include radical re-formulations of water governance, including a focus, for example, on ontologies, axiologies, and epistemologies within the contributions on Indigenous water governance. Through these contributions, the wider political terrain that enables the production of certain waters—be it desalinated, packaged, or bottled, and their uneven outcomes (e.g., private over public interests, mining industry over domestic users)—come to the fore. Together, the contributions contained within engage with and offer new insights to both re-center and re-theorize the politics of water governance.

There are also new openings made possible by the contributions here. Among them, we expect scholarship to further the types of questions and realities offered by the considerable work on Indigenous water governance. Noted here, there are many political struggles and openings provided by deeper engagement with these realities, histories, and ways of knowing and ways of governing. There are also ongoing political challenges and debates more fundamentally about what societally and politically we want to do about biophysical and water related challenges, such and those associated with climate change or ongoing water related degradation. Thus far, there has often been a reversion to the “technical” (e.g., augment supply by building new dams, the pursuit of desalinization, or compensate upstream users through schemes such as PES). Even if such options proceed with the notion that these are technical solutions, and thus evacuated of politics, this is not the reality. As such, we must make visible and confront these politics head on: Who benefits, who loses, why? In addition, there are options and possibilities such as those associated with narrative water ethics or Indigenous legal frameworks that might offer hope for bringing these contestations and trade-offs to the fore; that is, what do these offer for the future of water governance and what new work, concepts, and governance mechanisms might enable us to do this more adequately, appropriately, and with an orientation towards justice and sustainability?

As technologies and governance practices continue to change and adapt, there will undoubtedly continue to be new and different questions to be addressed and considered. As we do so, we must continue to attend to the politics of such interventions. The pretense of apolitical and win-win interventions must also be taken as a red flag—here, an analysis to understand the politics might be all the more difficult, yet of critical importance. We also see considerable value, illustrated in the pages of this volume, regarding the important learning that can occur across disciplines and geographies, whether from bringing realities of First Nations into conversation with the situation elsewhere, or by linking political ecology with urban studies, planning, anthropology, and other approaches. Here we can break new conceptual and analytical ground, whether that relates to the concept of “unmapping” [54] or thinking about the implications of *nibi* (water) *giikendaaswin* (*Ogamauh annag qwe*, see Chiblow) [74], or through understandings of Indigenous wellbeing as connected to territory and the relationships that are forged with and through water [76]. We find such critiques and learnings to be of vital importance. Especially when they can be conveyed in ways that highlight the conceptual and empirical lessons, and also that can be read in ways that are accessible and relevant to diverse audiences. We are pleased to offer this Special Issue, with the hope that we have met and maybe even exceeded these goals.

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