



Public stealth and boundary objects: Coping with integrated water resource management and the post-political condition in Montana's portion of the Yellowstone River watershed



Lucas Ward^{a,*}, Matthew B. Anderson^b, Susan J. Gilbertz^c, Jamie McEvoy^d, Damon M. Hall^e

^a Environmental Management & Policy, Yellowstone River Research Center, Rocky Mountain College, Billings, USA

^b Department of Geography and Anthropology, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, USA

^c Department of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies, Montana State University, Billings, USA

^d Department of Earth Science Montana State University, Bozeman, USA

^e Center for Sustainability, Saint Louis University, USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the case of recent efforts in the Yellowstone River watershed to illuminate how the implementation of Integrated Water Resources (IWRM)-styled activities by a Montana state agency is best understood as an exercise in practical expediency that indirectly, but consequentially, supports hegemonic neoliberalism. We present an innovative use of Q method, focus groups, and participant observations, as means to examine how scale-based interventions by the state moved IWRM-style reforms forward. The activities under consideration allow us to advance an empirically-based critique of so-called integrated approaches to environmental reform with a specific focus on the rescaling process inherent to adoption of the IWRM model. We argue that efforts to transition to IWRM-style governance are likely to be accompanied by stealthy, scale-based interventions. We use the concepts of “standardized packages” and “boundary objects” to raise questions about the degree to which use of such tactics should be interpreted as evidence of a broader hegemonic project to further imbricate neoliberal governmentality, as the literature on post-politics would suggest, or whether eco-scaling and careful circumscription of participation are simply the most convenient strategies for those charged with difficult and complex tasks.

1. Introduction

Aridity has long been an obstacle to development in the Western United States (Reisner, 1993; Stegner, 1953; Worster, 1992). As in other parts of the world (Cohen and Bakker, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2013; Ward, 2013), in the past three decades the approach to water management in the American West has transitioned from a focus on increasing water supplies through large, state-led, infrastructure projects (i.e., dams and canals) (Gleick, 2003; Kallis and Coccossis, 2003; Sauri and del Moral, 2001) to a focus on managing consumer demand through the application of neoliberal market-based principles and devolving decision-making and conflict resolution to local watershed groups (Conca, 2006; Gleick, 2003).

In this context, Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) has come to be widely regarded as the best pathway to develop and maintain water supplies and investments in ways that are socially

and environmentally sustainable (Durham et al., 2003; Graefe, 2011; GWP, 2005; ICWE, 1992; UNEP, 1992). In its purest form, the IWRM approach is intended to lead to the adoption of watershed-scale management schemes that are science-based, market-oriented, and decentralized (ICWE, 1992; GWP, 2005; Bateman and Rancier, 2012). As such, IWRM shifts away from traditional governance arrangements dominated by state agencies and anchored to political administrative boundaries, which are now viewed as un-scientific, fragmented, and sectorally divided (Bateman and Rancier, 2012; GWP, 2005).

IWRM attempts to reform governmental functions in two ways: (1) re-scaling of governance arrangements to the watershed scale, and (2) integrating stakeholder participation and input into watershed management processes, which are, ostensibly, articulated through “river basin organizations” (RBOs) (Bateman and Rancier, 2012; Cap-Net, 2008; Cohen, 2012). When IWRM uses re-scaling and participation to depoliticized processes, these same efforts necessarily extended govern-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: lucas.ward@rocky.edu (L. Ward).

mental initiatives further into the lives and landscapes of citizens (particularly the lives of those who participate)¹ (Brown, 2011; Cohen and Bakker, 2014; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

Thus, despite the proliferation of IWRM as the leading standard for reform, researchers and practitioners have noted numerous problems associated with efforts to implement this model in watersheds around the world (Giordano and Tushaar, 2014; Jeffrey and Gearey, 2006; Tortajada, 2014). These problems range from issues of power relations between stakeholders, experts, and managers (Swatuk, 2005), to challenges associated with integrating different ways of knowing (Mcdonnell, 2008), to the problem of balancing stakeholder desires with IWRM's predetermined mandate to "maximize economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems" (GWP, 2000, cited in Lautze et al., 2011). With widespread acceptance of the watershed scale and role of stakeholder participation as the appropriate frameworks for contemporary water governance, a "post-political" condition emerges wherein IWRM forecloses radical "dissent" and the neoliberal-capitalist order remains unquestioned (Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2011; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

This paper uses the case of recent efforts in the Yellowstone River watershed (Yellowstone River Basin or YRB) to illuminate how the implementation of IWRM-styled activities by a Montana state agency is best understood as an exercise in practical expediency that indirectly, but consequentially, reinforces neoliberal hegemony.

We begin with a review of literature that helps us understand IWRM as a reform model laden with particular political motives and assumptions. We unpack IWRM's key precepts—market-orientation, decentralization, participation, and watershed-scale planning—as "depoliticized" conditions of environmental governance. We also draw from the literature regarding post-politics to contextualize our empirical findings. Despite varying interpretations of what the "post-political" means (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1999, 2010; Žižek, 1999), it is often portrayed as a structural condition in which established political-economic configurations, or what Rancière (1999) calls "the existing order of things," are reasserted. The post-political is assumed to be realized within governmental technologies, and thus we assume it can be traced and critically assessed in terms of empirical contexts.

In the following section, we describe the case study context and methods, including the roles of the authors and officials from Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) in coordinating the public consultations and development of a scoping report. Next, we present an innovative use of Q method, focus groups, and participant observations, as means to examine how scale-based interventions by DNRC officials moved IWRM-style reforms forward. Then, we report the results of this analysis, and evidence how DNRC tactics rendered certain controversial management preferences invisible—thereby averting political debate and, perhaps, deliberative stalemate.

In the last section, we reflect on the tactics utilized by DNRC representatives and the research team to manage the messiness of participatory planning. We argue that efforts to transition to IWRM-style governance are likely to utilize scale as a means of illuminating one dimension of reality while obscuring others, a post-political procedure we identify as "public stealth" (Anderson et al., 2016b; Bakker, 2007; Brown, 2011; Cohen and Bakker, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2005). We question the degree to which such tactics should be interpreted as evidence of a broader post-political neoliberal project or whether eco-scaling and careful circumscription of participation are simply the most convenient strategies for those charged with difficult and complex tasks. We acknowledge that when researchers involve themselves in applied research they may also function as players in the

post-political patina of consensus. Yet, it is perhaps only in these applied projects that research teams can discover how unintended outcomes emerge from IWRM processes. It was in this applied venue that we were able to illuminate the nuanced procedural cracks where micro-political opportunities existed.

2. IWRM, neoliberal governance, and the post-political condition

Because water issues are geographically specific and because the United States lacks a coherent national IWRM policy (Ballweber, 2009; Stakhiv, 2002), IWRM manifests in various configurations (Ballweber, 2009) under various names (e.g., "One Water," "total water solutions," and "comprehensive water resources management" (Grigg, 2014; Tortajada, 2014)). Specific to the American West, there have been numerous experiments with IWRM to address water planning problems (e.g. Bateman and Rancier, 2012; Shabman and Scodari, 2012), including efforts to use IWRM to balance interstate demands from agriculture, industry, recreation, and ecosystems in drought-prone watersheds like the Colorado (Colorado Institute of Public Policy, 2006; Pulwarty and Maila, 2015) and Yakima (Bateman and Rancier, 2012; Bureau of Land Management, 2012) as well as statewide initiatives in Oregon (Oregon Water Resources Department, 2012) and Montana (DNRC, 2015).

Academics and practitioners generally agree that managing natural resources at "ecologically meaningful scales" generates better social and environmental outcomes (Cohen and Bakker, 2014; GWP, 2005; ICWE, 1992; Powell, 1962), and under IWRM the watershed is considered the most appropriate unit. As a result, "river basin organizations" (RBOs), comprised of state and non-state actors (Cap-Net, 2008) have been created. These RBOs necessitate a re-scaling of customary governmental arrangements, planning processes, and priorities, which were previously rooted in traditional administrative boundaries and institutions (e.g. state boundaries) (Bulkeley, 2005). A key outcome of this re-scaling is that, as Cohen and Bakker (2014) note, the resulting governmental arrangements are, superficially naturalized and seemingly depoliticized (Graefe, 2011; Warner et al., 2008; Wester and Warner, 2002).

Cohen (2012) points out that in the context of participatory water planning, the watershed scale is not simply consensually popular; once employed, the watershed becomes a boundary object (Bowker and Star, 2000; Goldman, 2009; Star and Griesemer, 1989; Ward, 2013). Boundary objects are abstract and concrete objects (Bowker and Star, 2000, p. 297) which, because of their plasticity "in meaning and function" (Goldman, 2009, p. 338), "inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them ... without imposing a naturalization of categories from one community or from an outside source" (Bowker and Star, 2000, p. 297; Cohen, 2012). Thus, as a boundary object, the watershed describes a physical territory with specific socio-ecological attributes that is occupied by numerous stakeholder groups, each of which imagines the watershed in its own terms. A call for watershed coordination resonates within each group as a way to deal with "the myriad problems plaguing water governance" (Cohen, 2012, p. 2210). Watershed—as a boundary object—permits the coexistence of heterogeneity and cooperation. Different groups "appear to work together on governmental reform projects without sacrificing their own agendas or stalling progress on policy reform and implementation" (Fujimura, 1992; Star and Griesemer, 1989; Ward, 2013, p. 99). While the concept of boundary objects helps us understand why the watershed is widely regarded as the most appropriate scale for water planning, questions remain about the degree to which rescaling water governance to the watershed does, in fact, generate more inclusive, sustainable, and just governance arrangements (Norman et al., 2015).

In geography and beyond, scholars have long insisted that rescaling is a highly political act which can diminish but also enhance the power that states or other actors have over environmental decision-making (Ong, 2007; Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003). Construction of new scales of

¹ By depoliticize, we mean render non-controversial a decision, approach, or technology that is, in fact fundamentally imbued with power and, hence, political.

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