

# REASON AND RATIONALITY IN WATER POLITICS

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Water resources research rescued me from a deluge of undergraduate teaching at the University of New Mexico during the first years of my career. I left New York ABD (all but dissertation). It was nothing short of a miracle that I managed to complete my Ph.D. from Columbia University while birthing two daughters and teaching three or four classes each semester with hundreds of beginning students in packed lecture halls. My dissertation on urban housing policy did not provide me with much of a research agenda in the rural oriented Southwest in the 1960s and, for several years, I floundered with unsuccessful research proposals to various foundations. Luckily I became acquainted with the grant program of the state Water Resources Research Center, thanks to my great friend and mentor, Albert E. Utton who then served on the research review committee. The best thing about the program was that not only did they offer research money, they required the university to provide a match, in this case through course release. I can still remember the confusion on the faces of the research review committee members, all of them physical scientists except for Al who was a lawyer, when I tried to explain that I was going to build and test a model of the pattern of policymaking in water resources legislation in Congress. "Model" and "testing" carried a much different meaning, especially to the engineers, than was my intention. I know it was Al Utton's bargaining rather than my powers of persuasion that got me that first \$15,000 grant to study the historic battle to put dams in the Grand Canyon. That project and my work since then traces the major issues and problems that have plagued water resources during the past thirty years.

## **POLITICALLY FEASIBLE POLICY**

How various provisions of the Colorado River Basin Bill were cobbled together in to legislation that was politically feasible was the fundamental issue my first book addressed (Ingram, 1990). The notion that water politics have reason and rationality that can be understood and predicted which is separate from and as important as engineering or hydrologic reason was certainly not

original with me. A number of other political scientists had pioneered the way and provided legitimization for my work both to other political scientists and to the water community (Maas, 1951; Hart, 1957; Wengert, 1957; Stratton and Sirotkin, 1959; Mann, 1963; Englebert, 1965).

## **BETTER POLICY**

Insight and understanding, rather than prescription, were the main concerns of political scientists working in the field at the time I began thinking of myself as a water scholar. It was not until I became a staff member at the National Water Commission in 1970 that I began to perceive my role as a policy analyst concerned with changing institutional arrangements to better serve effectiveness, efficiency, and equity. My co-authorship with resource economists David Allee and, somewhat later, William E. Martin led me to realize that criticism was insufficient and that some constructive ideas for policy change were necessary. As the environmental movement gained momentum, it became clear that past methods of creating political consensus for water projects through logrolling and distributive politics were neither politically feasible nor desirable. Policies needed to be better designed to protect the environment and to reflect changing public values. Environmental impact statements were just such a policy design innovation, and a great deal of excellent work in political science traced the evolution of the idea and its implementation (Liroff, 1973; Dreyfus and Ingram, 1976; Fairfax, 1978; Mazmanian and Nienaber, 1979).

## **SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION**

The fact that environmental impact statements in practice turned out to be so very different from the intentions of the framers of the National Environmental Protection Act of 1970 taught me that implementation matters. A whole arena of politics is opened up after a new law is passed, and legal language becomes just one of the tools in larger

battles that involve bureaucratic interests, resources, constituency groups, leadership, and other forces. Using water policies as my case example, I was one of the many contributors to a growing implementation literature in public policy and political science. My most successful contribution in this area dealt with Title III of the Water Resource Planning Act of 1965, and the ways in which states were able to use grants-in-aid to pursue their own agendas rather than those the Federal Water Resources Council set for them. I wrote:

“A bargaining framework fits more accurately than a superior-subordinate model the complex intergovernmental relations involved in grants-in-aid. Instead of a federal master dangling a carrot in front of the state donkey, the more apt image reveals a rich merchant haggling on equal terms with a sly, bargain-hunting consumer” (Ingram, 1977).

## EQUITY AND DEMOCRACY

The two years I spent as a Senior Fellow at Resources for the Future, 1978-1980, marked a shift in research commitment. The extent to which water resources policy served values of equity and democracy absorbed most of my interest for the next two decades (Ingram, McCain, and Laney, 1980). While many co-authors helped me develop these themes, my long associations with Dean Mann, F. Lee Brown, and Gary Weatherford were especially productive. In *New Courses on the Colorado* (Weatherford and Brown, 1986), we explicitly addressed the balance between environment, efficiency, and equity as competing values. The failure of Western water policy to adequately address the water needs of Native Americans and to meaningfully include them in decisionmaking is a continuing problem (DuMars and Ingram, 1980). The book of which I am the most proud is *Water and Poverty in the Southwest*, which tried to establish a new research agenda for social science studies in water resources (Brown and Ingram, 1987; see also Ingram and Brown, 1998). Rather than treating water simply in rationalistic, instrumental terms, the book focused on emotional and symbolic attachments. The book argued that water, especially for the rural poor including rural Hispanics as well as Native Americans, represented security, opportunity, and community. With the exception of some work recently undertaken by James Wescoat and colleagues at the University of Colorado, the relationship of water to equity and civil society has generally been neglected.

The highly specialized scientific discourse, which characterizes water, has contributed significantly to the

domination of expertise in this field. Ordinary citizens have not usually understood what was at stake in water matters. Partially for this reason, the issue of water and growth has not been squarely addressed in the desert regions of the urbanizing Southwest. My economist colleagues convinced me for a time that real cost-pricing of urban water could raise urban consciousness, and perhaps mobilize citizens against expensive water projects that also threatened quality of life. *Saving Water in A Desert City* (Martin et al., 1984) and *Planning for Growth in the Southwest* (Martin and Ingram, 1985) suggested that the Central Arizona Project was unnecessary and was being pursued primarily to assure developers that future growth would never be limited by lack of water availability. However, I soon became convinced that free market ideology of “win/win” solutions in which water transfers could take place between willing buyers and sellers often masked the considerable third party effects and community impacts of rural-to-urban water transfers (Nunn and Ingram, 1988; Ingram and Oggins, 1990). As I have argued previously in this journal, only water policy designs that engage, involve, and empower those affected in water decisions are likely to result in equitable and democratic water politics (Ingram and Schneider, 1998).

## GLOBAL WATER IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

Transboundary water resources, especially those shared between the United States and Mexico, have always interested me, thanks to the tireless tutorship of Al Utton who made this subject his life work (Utton, 1989). As the world becomes increasingly global, modern ideas of national sovereignty, progress, and development through rational control are being challenged. Narrow modern conceptualizations of water based on the belief in human action, control, and choice are not adequate. Instead water is taking on different meanings: as a necessary component of ecosystems that are highly contextualized, or as an essential ingredient in transboundary social networks espousing certain belief systems and lifestyles (Blatter and Ingram, forthcoming). As the contemporary world uncomfortably straddles the modern and postmodern, new, critical social science approaches to the study of water in philosophy, the humanities, and anthropology will and should emerge.

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