
Matthew Gandy has written a new and potentially important examination of place and water, providing evidence and insight into the experiencing, making, and consuming of water in modernity. The book is particularly welcome because of the contribution it makes to the debate which over recent years has begun to look at the “hydroscape” of consumable water. That debate has presented water as both an important material-something in the making of geographies and a product of culture, and Gandy’s own *Concrete and Clay* from 2002 has been an important part of it, notable as a model of clear, informative writing on the topic. *The Fabric of Space* follows on from that earlier book—water’s making of geography, and water as a product, being examined through the contexts represented by a range of city examples.

The book is attractively produced by the MIT Press: hardback, a readable Bembo typeface, and with plenty of white space on the page. The illustrations are all monochrome, but that adds to the lustre of many of the photographs such as of the Los Angeles River (p.162) or the Thames Barrier (p.193). A substantial proportion of the book is given over to the endnotes: 77 pages of them, but most of that seems entirely reasonable; many of the notes are a worthwhile read in their own right, such as those on infrastructure (p.225-226) or on the medieval sewers of Paris (p.240). Gandy writes engagingly and intelligently: throughout the book he makes the persuasive case that water is a fundamentally important element in building the real, imagined, and symbolized spaces of the city in modernity. To do this he uses the historical and geographical contingencies of six example cities to give different perspectives on key patterns in the production and use of urban water: the sewers of Paris; the urban waters of Berlin; the wetlands of Lagos; water provision in Mumbai; engineering the Los Angeles River; and the future fate of the Thames in London.

Gandy’s claim is that each example demonstrates a different manifestation of the modern or postmodern urban condition, “a different facet of the relationship
between water, modernity, and the urban imagination” (p.viii). While the examples follow a sequence, from mid-19th century Paris to late-21st century London, and, as he acknowledges, provide an “implied chronology” (p.24), Gandy counters this trajectory by documenting how the representative quality of each city is undercut by its historical and geographical uniquenesses, and his intermingling of cultural discourse and landscape history allows him to develop the proposition that modernist theoretical conceptions have misrepresented the uneven making of the many landscapes of the city. Central to this emphasis on the unevenness of modernity is the discussion of waters in the globally marginal cities of Lagos and Mumbai. In Lagos, although the techniques of discipline and drain remained surprisingly constant between colonial and postcolonial periods, the unreliable waters left by drainage meant that malaria proved impossible to eliminate because it was unthinkable for the ruling elite to invest in the social welfare initiatives that ended the disease elsewhere. Likewise in Mumbai where, despite some more positive notes such as the rediscovery of traditional techniques of water conservation, no “comprehensive” modernization has proved possible and in the provision of water, “division, inequality, and injustice have become defining features of the postcolonial city” (p.142).

The real strength of the book lies in its patient exposition of the geography of modernity’s relationship with the materiality of water—and what can and has been made of it. Concerning this, Gandy seems pessimistic, even in his discussions of the contemporary situation in the more favoured parts of the West. The future is at best not resoundingly hopeful and at worst…well, worse than that. Despite the hesitantly positive tones with which he writes on Los Angeles, and what he clearly wishes for London, Gandy seems unconvinced, anxious. The fundamental reason seems to be not with modernity as such, but with the neoliberal spatial fix by which modernity’s nature and its space have become organized. Emblematic of this situation for Gandy is London, a city in which water has traditionally been managed by technocrats. Might such an approach be reversed? For London he sees that change is possible but
suggests that its future will be constrained by past patterns of governance. That weight of history, Gandy suggests, means a likely continuation of techno-managerialism.

Perhaps the root of the problem here is geographical; more specifically, the grasp that Gandy has of the “fabric of space” created by water. Gandy’s perspective on space and its importance is tied up with the materiality of water. His water narratives show a firm belief in the significance of place and his method is one of a consistent teasing-out of complexity so that he argues, for example, that “[m]any authors have read the Haussmann era as axiomatic of modernity, but the reality is far more complex, involving an interweaving of ideas and developments spanning both modern and pre-modern conceptions of urban form. In fact, the flow of water in Paris did not become modern, in the sense that we would now recognize, until after the fall of the Second Empire” (p.28). So, the dialectic between water, space, and modernity is shown as played out in the identity of each of the cities Gandy examines, the fabric of space both making the local experience of water and locally being made by it. Yet, even so, to understand is not to explain, and given that The Fabric of Space is the book’s main title, some readers might have welcomed an explicit theoretical explanation of the spatial forms that underpin these examined cities.

The key message is the unevenness of space in modernity, its contingent and differentiated nature. Such an approach reminds of the understanding of space put forward by David Harvey in Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference (1996), one in which it acts to structure the unsettling of the total. The relationality underlying these social relations is constructed from materiality, the nature of the water that flows through the cities. The implication is that there is something special about what Ivan Illich, in H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness (1985), called the “stuff” of water. Gandy’s point is that it is the “fickle materialities of water” that “serve to elude both technomodern attempts to control nature as well as increasingly sophisticated attempts to model socioecological systems” (p.219). This transgressive identity of water therefore “underpins both the limits and the possibilities of modernity” (p.224), and its disobedient nature is made more problematic by its enrolment in what he
identifies as variegated fabrics of space. Gandy exploits this unsettling in his water
narratives to produce his argument that the infrastructure of water and urban space
can together be seen to have both a history and a geography that is consequently both
“checkered and unpredictable” (p.4) and which therefore produce a “spectrum of
ecological imaginaries” (p.218).

Despite the finely examined commitment to difference, the difficulty
presented to us as readers by Gandy’s position on these examples seems to be that
there is no clear way by which to imagine getting out of the current spatial fix and the
way it has disenchanted the political from our geographies. For Gandy, and it must be
said for a number of other writers on contemporary environmentalism, the “post-
political” discourse of contemporary urbanism is no politics at all. “Eviscerated” of
critical insight, that discourse consequently becomes a site of non-debate over techno-
managerial banalities, enabled by what Gandy dismisses as “the lexical mutation of
vested interests and other manifestations of power into ‘stakeholders’ and other
obfuscatory euphemisms” (p.223). Consequently, he suggests, the possibility of
reasserting the primacy of politics over this geography is unlikely. So, in the epilogue
to the book Gandy writes of a visit in 2013 to the River Ravensbourne in south-east
London. There he records “a shift from a narrowly techno-managerial response to
flood risk” and that “a different kind of approach is under way” (p.217). In spite of
these echoes of the encouraging lessons from Los Angeles, Gandy worries about the
“uncertainties” (p.218) of even marginally sustainable solutions like these under
current economic conditions. Is such anxiety necessary? On every occasion and in
every place? Harvey implied otherwise—and Gandy’s patient exposition of
“checkered” difference seems at least in potential to support him.

In fact, the book’s recognition of a “spectrum of ecological imaginaries”
seems to suggest the possibility of an alternative vision, of new political re-
appropriations of the geographical. In a number of places in the book Gandy identifies
possible alternatives to hegemonic neoliberalism in social movements that have
looked outwards from a concern with the fickle materialities of water to a broader
political transformation of place. In Berlin the liberal heritage of a “‘rational synthesis’ between nature and culture” (p.78), never completely eradicated by the political developments of the 1930s, has important lessons for the contemporary era. There, the anti-privatization campaigns of the Berlin Water Roundtable have made possible, though not yet realized, the taking back of social control over water and its production for use rather than for profit. In Los Angeles the example of a city divorced from a river managed in a way that “does not correspond to any neat distinction between the modern and the postmodern” (p.176) has made an important site for socionatural experimentation. On and around the Los Angeles River, in however fragmentary and fragile a way, such experimentation has allowed the development of what Gandy presents as a “new consensus” to remaking the relationship between the city and its nature, allowing the making of “spontaneous forms of social and ecological appropriation” (p.182) through the environmental justice work of groups such as Mothers of East Los Angeles. Such examples provide what appear to be entirely plausible sites of resistance.

Against the sense of pessimism with the neoliberal spatial fix there is therefore a case for some qualified optimism. True, there is no overwhelming imperative that the stakeholder post-politics Gandy rejects must be worthwhile, but neither does there seem to be a converse necessity that it must be worthless. While the notion of the stakeholder grew originally out of the engagement between social ethics and managerialist theory, there seems to be in what it stands for at least the potential chance of something politically transgressive. Something political in it might unsettle the core of existing economic structures of power—as perhaps a fuller examination of the Berlin Water Roundtable and Mothers of East Los Angeles might have shown. Maybe, at some times and in some places, such social movements are possible indications, whatever the uncertainties they may embody, of political ways out of the current economic dead end?

References
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