Book Review

Water: Abundance, Scarcity, and Security in the Age of Humanity. *By Jeremy J. Schmidt. New York: New York University Press, 2017. xii + 308 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth $35.00.*

For environmental historians and affiliated scholars, Jeremy Schmidt's *Water: Abundance, Scarcity, and Security in the Age of Humanity* offers heady reminders of the dangers of "naturalizing" philosophies. An intellectual and philosophical history of water, Schmidt reviews the changes to the ideas about water over time. This new work pushes readers to rethink how water itself became "normal water." More specifically, this is a story about how water became a resource and how tenaciously rooted that philosophy became in the United States. Schmidt's historical excavation of conventional (US) water management disguised as philosophy clearly lays out at least one pathway of how water as "normal" and naturalized to liberal societies was quietly constructed and then remained unquestioned for the last hundred years.

Starting with early American thinkers like W. J. McGee and John Wesley Powell, the author sequentially argues and builds through past constructions of water as notions of abundance, scarcity, and security prevailed in this framing of water. He argues that the formation of what he terms "normal water" depended on the early ideas of geology and anthropology, and how formative this coupling was in naturalizing water from geology into the social sciences. Other disciplines like geography, economics, and history also factor into this story of normal water. States and agencies later doled out water rights to individual property owners since water was, in this conventional view, already a resource in what the author labels an Earth-making

philosophy. Thus before the Anthropocene was a buzzword, thinkers more than a century ago rolled out the conceptual language that situates water as a resource for humans in a distinct geologic age, through the lens of liberal political societies. Schmidt's point in using the "age of humanity" also speaks to his concerns about how the Anthropocene as a concept reinforces the naturalization of water and humans as geologic agents.

For environmental historians, Schmidt's treatise requires careful and sustained attention. From Kant, to Wittgenstein, Hegel, and Aldo Leopold at the end, Schmidt assembles a constellation of philosophical arguments that reward careful reading. This book will challenge readers not steeped in modern philosophy, primarily drawn from European thinkers. That is understandable, given that undoing more than a century of conventional water nonwisdom is not an easy task. The author uses sound philosophical reasoning, although the empirical evidence for these arguments is often presented in deductive ways throughout the text. *Water* makes a strong and compelling case that we have accepted for far too long the perspective that water can be constructed only, or primarily, as a resource.

Other cultures exist that question this construction, of course. Yet their voices and power positions have been ignored for a variety of colonial, postcolonial, and capital-driven motivations, and Schmidt makes this clear. This is one area where readers familiar with other common cultural constructions of water not bound to property or "normal water" might object to Schmidt's analysis or at least anticipate the pore spaces of his final arguments. But that would be missing the point of his book, which in this case is to question the philosophical positioning of dominant Western water thoughts regarding "water resources." Schmidt's work is an impressive synthetic and philosophical achievement and treatise. Given its admirable philosophical scope, it may appeal more to graduate students and professionals in environmental history and water resources. But the book is clearly written and mercifully free of theoretical and conceptual jargon, and hopefully water managers and water wonks will learn about water's pathway to becoming "normal." For those seeking nature's agency, this may not be the environmental history one might expect. But for readers of this journal, *Water* is something to think about, and it may be the kind of story one needs to read in framing future stories about water. The arguments and propositions embedded in Schmidt's *Water* are vital for scholars who tell stories of nature, nature's agency, or in this case, how a particular story became naturalized to a way of thinking about a singular resource. Reconciling this powerful intellectual legacy remains relevant for

critical and historical scholars wishing to push back against the dominant stories and histories of water as *only* a resource in this particular age of humanity.

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