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Domestic and International Dimensions of Transboundary Water Politics

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ABSTRACT: A considerable amount of research in the field of International Relations (IR) has acknowledged the interplay between domestic politics and foreign policy. Few studies, however, have investigated this phenomenon in the narrower field of transboundary water politics. There is also a general lack of research exploring how the formation of a national identity can overlap with the construction of a large hydraulic infrastructure, and how this can have repercussions at the international level. This paper draws on Robert Putnam's (1988) two-level game theory to illustrate how the interrelation between the domestic and the international dimensions matters in transboundary water politics. Perspectives from IR, political geography, and water politics serve to present a conceptual framework which is then linked to studies on nationalism. This helps to highlight the analytical relevance of such a perspective to understand the issue of large dams. The paper takes the cases of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia and the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan as examples.

KEYWORDS: Transboundary water politics, hydropolitics, international relations, nationalism, dams, Ethiopia, Tajikistan

INTRODUCTION

The management of transboundary water resources has gained a central role in the political agenda of countries across the world. While in the 1990s Miriam Lowi's (1995) distinction between the 'low politics' of water and the 'high politics' of war and diplomacy seemed generally acceptable, it is now appropriate to refer to a global 'high politics of water'[1] (Nicol et al., 2012). Concurrently, the study of transboundary water politics (or hydropolitics) as a discipline has evolved over time. Aarun P. Elhance's (1999: 3) view of hydropolitics, which he saw as "the systematic study of conflict and cooperation between States over water resources that transcend international borders", effectively sums up the dichotomous approach towards the discipline maintained in the 1990s and early 2000s. Scholars saw water as a reason for either conflict or cooperation, thus mirroring the two main discourses forming the rationalist paradigm of International Relations (IR), realism, and liberalism. More recently, research has shown that conflict and cooperation can coexist in any given international river basin (Earle et al., 2010; Mirumachi, 2015), and scholars have emphasised how critical interdisciplinary perspectives can further the understanding of transboundary water politics (Sneddon and Fox, 2006; Warner and Zeitoun, 2008; Wegerich and Warner, 2010; Julien, 2012). Indeed, research on the 'politics of water' (broadly understood as in Mollinga, 2008) can draw from, and span, several disciplines (a non-exhaustive list would include geography, economics, engineering, law, development studies, sociology, international

[1] Although we should bear in mind, as Frederic Julien (2013) observes, that a hydrocentric reasoning might be plausible for a biologic person, while states are after all not as obsessed with water as thirsty individuals (rightly so) are.

relations, political science, and anthropology), as it is, for instance, evident from the editorial manifesto of the journal *Water Alternatives*[2] and from the articles published therein.

This inherent interdisciplinarity, matched with relatively recent academic attention, makes the study of water issues an extremely challenging and exciting matter, as many avenues must yet be explored or discovered. Rather than review all gaps and limitations within the study of water politics, in this paper I will limit my attention to two aspects that have been somehow overlooked and that, if linked, can arguably bring useful insights to the analysis of transboundary water relations and open up new research questions: i) the interrelation between domestic politics and international relations and ii) the influence of nationalism and nation-building processes on transboundary water relations.

The necessity to focus on these two aspects originally stemmed from what Robert Jervis defined as one of the longstanding debates in IR (Schouten, 2008): on what level of analysis among the three identified by Kenneth Waltz (1959) – individuals, States, and the international system – should we focus to explain outcomes in interstate relations? While this matter finds a parallel in political geography, and, more recently, in issues related to water governance (see Norman et al., 2012 and the themed section featured in Volume 5, Issue 1 of *Water Alternatives*), in mainstream transboundary water politics States have largely been taken as analytical black boxes (e.g. Wolf, 1998; Toset et al., 2000; Yoffe et al., 2004). If, on the one hand, I tend to concur with Allan and Mirumachi (2010: 15) when they observe that "[p]oliticised and securitised relations over transboundary water disappear first into ministries of foreign affairs and then, on the other, into what has become known as the *shadow state*",[3] domestic politics can (and should) be problematised, as they can indeed influence international politics and vice versa. I will thus draw on Robert Putnam's (1988) two-level game theory and further develop the work initiated by Warner and Zawahri (2012) to illustrate how the interrelation between the domestic and the international dimensions matters in transboundary water politics.

I will then link this, for analytical and explanatory purposes, to another question which has so far received little attention (Allouche, 2005; Menga, 2015), namely how studies on nationalism and issues related to the formation of a national identity can be used to explain transboundary water politics. I will suggest in more detail that the formation of a national identity can overlap with the construction of a large hydraulic infrastructure, such as, for example, a large dam,[4] and that this can, in turn, have repercussions at the international level. The decision to focus on large dams is relevant for at least two reasons. First, due to their sheer size and their multilevel impact, large dams offer a good platform to analyse both the domestic and the international spheres. This is because at the internal level, ruling elites can use dams to shape national identities and gain legitimacy and consent, portraying them as a panacea, a symbol of national pride and honour, of progress and prosperity (Menga, 2015). At the same time, dams also have a foreign dimension, since they can, for instance, alter the natural flow of rivers, thus causing tensions among basin riparians. A government can then portray the construction of a dam against the will of a neighbouring country as a symbol of internal cohesion that epitomises the nation's right to self-determination, its sovereignty over water resources, and its assertion of national interests. Second, following a decline in their number from the 1970s onwards, dams are now back on the global agenda, and hundreds of new, extremely costly, and controversial projects have been launched in the last few years (Gleick, 2011). In a time marked by increasing attention to, and concern over, a pending

[2] Accessible at www.water-alternatives.org/index.php/manifesto.

[3] By 'shadow state' the authors refer to the process by which the topic of sharing transboundary water resources gets lost in inter-ministerial labyrinths. They make the example of how, in the UK, it was impossible to identify the department responsible for the country's position on the 1997 UN Convention on the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (Allan and Mirumachi, 2010: 25).

[4] The International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD) defines a large (or major) dam as a dam with a height of 150 m or more from the foundation, a reservoir storage capacity of at least 25 km^3 and an electricity generation capacity of at least 1000 MW (ICOLD, 1998).

water crisis worldwide, it is essential to further delve into the motives behind a government's decision to engage in the construction of these megaprojects.

Therefore, this study aims to expand the research agenda in the field of water politics by pursuing two main and connected goals. First, to illustrate the ways in which the interrelation between domestic politics and foreign policy matters in transboundary water politics. Second, and consequently, to argue that considering mega-dams as a nation-building tool can bring new and unexplored insights to the analysis of transboundary water relations. To do so, this paper has been organised as follows. The next section draws upon perspectives from IR, political geography, and water politics to illustrate the multilevel and multi-scalar nature of transboundary water relations. The third section connects this conceptual framework with insights from studies on nationalism, highlighting the analytical relevance of such a perspective to the issue of large dams, which will be discussed more in detail in the fourth section. The fifth section reviews two examples of internationally controversial dams that fit within this framework, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in Ethiopia and the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan. Proponents of both projects are presenting them as a matter of national pride and identity, using hydraulic development to increase control over a territory and assert absolute territorial sovereignty. The article concludes by discussing implications for the study of water politics and suggesting a number of questions for future research.

IMAGES, LEVELS AND SCALES

Just like liberal theorist Ernst Haas, whose ontology "avoids fixed dogmas and unchanging universal values […] allowing for cognitive evolution and allying itself with an evolutionary epistemology" (Haas, 2000: 419), I think that disciplines should interact, images of international relations should be associated with different interpretive understandings, perspectives should and could change, and theories should converse with each other. For instance, just because rationalist IR theories could not predict the end of the Cold War, it would be short-sighted and unfair to say that IR theory is a failure, as Gaddis (1922) claimed in a provocative article, or that realism as an ontology cannot bring insights to, say, constructivism. It is with this mindset that I will carry out the following literature review, bringing together insights from various disciplines to further our understanding of water politics.

As a starting point it is worth noting that, unlike in water politics, the interaction between domestic and foreign politics in IR has received considerable attention. As James Fearon (1998) observed, a "significant amount of recent research in the international relations (IR) field advances the proposition that domestic politics is typically a crucial part of the explanation for states' foreign policies" (Fearon, 1998: 289-290). In this regard, Kenneth Waltz's (1959) renowned book *Man, the State, and War* was the first to prompt a discussion on where to look for the major causes of war among three images: "within man, within the structure of the separate states, within the state system" (Waltz, 1959: 12). Going beyond the need to understand the causes of war, the matter of the levels of analysis, as David Singer (1960) defined it in his review of Waltz's book, gained relevance as a broader question, that is, whether we should select "the micro- or macro-level of analysis" (Singer, 1961: 77) in the study of international relations. Subsequently, Waltz (1979) refined his theory and came to the conclusion that while states can affect international politics, domestic politics do not influence foreign policy,[5] thus adopting a macro-level of analysis. Waltz acknowledged that different domestic structures, i.e. the second image, might limit political leaders in their abilities to act as they prefer, making an example of the dissimilar constraints faced by the US President and the British Prime Minister. Waltz's structural

[5] Along a similar line, the notable realist scholar Hans Morgenthau (1973) made a strong distinction between domestic and foreign policy, arguing that the two should not be studied as a whole. For a comprehensive review of the literature exploring the connections between foreign and domestic politics in IR, refer to Hendla (2009).

realism is indeed a theory of the constraints in foreign policy, and it would be an error "to mistake a theory of international politics for a theory of foreign policy" (Waltz, 1979: 121).

Arguing against Waltz's vision of the domestic structure as an independent (and sometimes irrelevant) variable for international affairs, Peter Gourevitch (1978) reversed the second image argument to underline how international politics affect the domestic structure, with the latter becoming the dependent variable. What seems relevant in Gourevitch's work is his acknowledgement of the reciprocal relationship between the two: "[e]conomic relations and military pressures constrain an entire range of domestic behaviours, from policy decisions to political forms. International relations and domestic politics are therefore so interrelated that they should be analysed simultaneously, as wholes" (Gourevitch, 1978: 911).

The work of Robert Putnam (1988) led to a further development of the study of the interrelation between the domestic and the international. Starting from the assumption that it is "fruitless to debate whether domestic politics really determine international relations, or the reverse" (Putnam, 1988: 427), Putnam criticised both Waltz's second image argument and Gourevitch's second image reversed argument, as both "would miss an important part of the story, namely, how the domestic politics of several countries became entangled via an international negotiation" (Putnam, 1988: 430). Using the example of the Bonn Summit Conference of 1978, where an agreement was reached only because each government supported domestically the policy being put forward at the international level, Putnam suggested an approach that accounts concurrently for the interaction of domestic and international factors.

His popular two-level game approach "recognises that central decision-makers strive to reconcile domestic and international imperatives simultaneously" (Putnam, 1988: 460), since statesmen often face strategic dilemmas and have to play a multiple-level game, in line, apparently, with Hoffmann's (1972) view of world politics as distinct issue areas placed on alternative chessboards, each with a different weight. As is often the case with seminal works, the two-level game theory has attracted criticism, partly because of its oversimplification of complex interstate relationships (Schoppa, 1993) and for not taking into account a third level of analysis, that of regional and international organisations (among others, Knopf, 1993; Patterson, 1997). Yet, its value to the present analysis does not lie merely in its acknowledgement of two levels of analysis, but rather in the recognition of the multiple 'spaces of appearance' in which politicians need to perform.

Putting aside the work of Putnam temporarily, we can find parallel concerns relating to the level of analysis also in the field of political geography (among others, Delaney and Leitner, 1997; Cox, 1998; Newman and Paasi, 1998; Flint and Taylor, 2007; Herod and Wright, 2008; Neumann, 2009) and political ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Swyngedouw, 1997; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Brown and Purcell, 2005; Neumann, 2009), where scholars have tried to define different spaces and scales to understand, for instance, the interplay between transient natural resources and the political constructs – such as states, institutions, and borders – that have to manage them. In this regard, seminal research by John Agnew (1994; 2010) warned about the risk of falling into the territorial trap that relates to three geographical assumptions which laid the theoretical foundation for the three mainstream ontologies in IR theory (the realist, the neo-realist, and the liberal). The first assumption is that states are fixed units of sovereign space. The second is that the domestic is separated from the foreign, while the third is the assumption that the state existed prior to, and as a container of, society (Agnew, 1994). Therefore, the state should not be the fixed unit of analysis and the domestic/foreign polarity might be misleading when analysing international relations and political geography.[6]

[6] Agnew's territorial trap recalls, in a way, what Buzan and Little defined as the 'Westphalian straitjacket', that is "the strong tendency to assume that the model established in seventeenth century Europe should define what the international system is for all times and places" (Buzan and Little, 2001: 25). In other words, the theoretical simplifications behind the notion of

What is analytically significant here is the emphasis on how space, territory, and society can be socially and politically constructed. The work of Erik Swyngedouw (2007) has, for instance, advanced the concepts of hydro-social territory and waterscape to illustrate how a socionatural space can be constructed and reconstructed by a national elite through discursive, ideological, cultural, scientific, and material practices. Within this framework, and as "a geographical construction, scales become arenas around which socio-spatial power choreographies are enacted and performed" (Swyngedouw, 2010: 8). Budds and Hinojosa (2012) further developed the concept of waterscape to explore not only how social processes can shape water but also how water, in its turn, can shape social relations beyond the watershed scale.

And indeed, various scales of analysis need to be carefully considered to understand the politics of natural resources and of the most transient among them, water (refer for instance to Harris 2002, 2005; Sneddon and Fox, 2006; Furlong, 2006; Harris and Alatout, 2010; Norman et al., 2012; Norman et al., 2016). Thus, the State (or in this case the nation) scale cannot be understood without the interstate (or international) scale and the basin-regional scale. As Harris puts it, "each of these functional scales can be understood in isolation, but can also be understood as being linked to processes, actors, and systems across all other scales of analysis" (Harris, 2005: 267). Political constructions of scale also play a role, and particular actors, such as politicians and decision-makers, can construct and adopt particular discourses at different scales. Trottier (1999), for instance, introduced the term parallel-sanctioned discourses to show how different discourses were promoted by the Palestinian Water Authority according to the receiving audience (national and international), to legitimise its actions and increase its control over a territory.

Moving back to Putnam, we can now link his two-level game to the study of transboundary water politics, building upon the work of Luzi (2007), Warner (2008), Warner (2012), Warner and Zawahri (2012), and Thomas and Warner (2015). These authors explored the deep interrelation between domestic and international politics and its relevance to water politics, overall recognising that "national governments seek to maximise their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures at the international level, while minimising the adverse consequences of foreign developments" (Putnam, 1988: 434). Existing research examined, for instance, how local environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can influence transboundary water politics in the Tigris and Euphrates river basins (Warner, 2012) and in the Ganges and the Mekong basins (Zawahri and Hensengerth, 2012). Likewise, the role of non-State actors has been studied (Suhardiman and Giordano, 2012), along with the importance of national power struggles to gain control over transboundary waters in the Harirud/Tejen River Basin in Asia (Thomas and Warner, 2015). Nevertheless, the existing literature does not discuss how one of the more multidimensional phenomena in global politics – nationalism – can provide an analytical lens to further our understanding of the domestic-foreign interaction in water politics.

The debate on scalar politics in relation to water governance as it was advanced by Norman et al. (2016) is relevant as it emphasises how political processes over water happen and can be observed beyond a fixed territory or administrative entity such as, for instance, a country. Further challenging the idea of borders and States as fixed entities, Norman (2015) explored the role of indigenous communities in transboundary water governance, including First Nations and Native Americans in the discussion of Canada-U.S. border relations and thus delving into the cultural politics of transboundary water governance.

Based on this, and expanding on insights from Harris and Alatout (2010), who linked the politics of hydrological scale to nation and State building in the Middle East to argue that water is central to the consolidation of the nation and its authority, in the following section I will connect the abovementioned

Westphalian sovereignty have led to a limited (and Eurocentric) understanding of international politics and security studies where the State is the only referent object.

conceptual framework with insights from studies on nationalism, laying the premises for a new approach to the study of large dams.

TWO-LEVEL GAME AND STUDIES ON NATIONALISM

As illustrated by Jan Selby (2006), the nation as a social construct and nationalism as a phenomenon have attracted harsh criticism from post-colonialist studies and postmodernism in general, as nations and States eventually lead to the dominance of one identity over other(s) and to the loss of internal differences. Homi K. Bhabha (1991: 6), for instance, paraphrased Joseph Conrad's famous preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* to define the nation as "one of the dark corners of the earth". Nevertheless, in spite of all the damages that nationalism might have made to the planet[7] (for arguments on the evil consequences of nationalism refer, for instance, to Brighouse, 1997; and Lichtenberg, 1997), I agree with Anthony Smith (1995) when he argues that nationalism is here to stay for at least three reasons: i) nationalism is politically necessary; ii) national identity is socially functional; and iii) the nation is historically embedded. As Smith pointed out (1979: 1), "[n]o other vision has set its stamp so thoroughly on the map of the world and on our sense of identity", and it therefore still seems highly relevant to study nationalism to understand contemporary events.

The lively debates in studies on nationalism (the most notable is perhaps the debate between the primordialists, who see the nation as a timeless phenomenon, and the postmodernists, who view the nation as modern and constructed), are not reflected in the study of water politics where, for instance, the connection between water and nationalism (and nation-building) has been so far surprisingly overlooked. Such a connection seems straightforward because both nationalism as an ideology (especially in extreme forms such as fascism) and water as a resource have, often, been singled out as a cause of international conflicts, and both can be linked with the notions of territory, sovereignty, and self-determination.

Of further relevance to the present study is the fact that the abovementioned images and scales have a parallel in studies on nationalism, where several levels of analysis also need to be considered. This is, for instance, the innovative analytical suggestion advanced by Karolewski and Suszycki (2011), who dropped the traditional one-level vision of nationalism to bring to the fore a nonhierarchical heuristic model based on four levels of analysis that can interact between them: i) the individual; ii) the societal or political discourse; iii) the governmental; and iv) international relations. To understand nationalism we have to emphasise that just as scale can be politically constructed, so can nationalism, and the nature of this ideological construction can change depending on the audience (e.g., a domestic or an international one).

Thus, if we assume that the term nationalism contains the ideological means necessary to reproduce the nation (Billig, 1995), and that the nation is a social or cultural construct with limited spatial and demographic extent (in line with Anderson's [2006] interpretation of the nation as an imagined political community), we can appreciate how a nation and a national identity can be deliberately constructed. While the concept of nation-building remains controversial (Polese, 2011), for the purpose of this study a fitting definition (inspired by the work of Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2004) of the term covers the set of policies aimed at creating a common national identity and a sense of patriotism and loyalty toward the State. We should therefore examine States and nations as processes rather than as preexisting entities (Kuus and Agnew, 2008). Throughout these processes symbols and symbolism play a crucial role since

[7] Benedict Anderson (2006: 145) offered a different and more positive view of nationalism, seeing it as an integrative and cohesive force: "In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love".

ruling elites can use them to legitimise their actions, and motivate and mobilise their populations (Smith, 1998), enacting a top-down nationalism that creates a cohesive national identity (Mosse, 1975).

As Flint and Taylor (2007) pointed out, nationalism is the dominant manner in which the political geography of the modern world is conceptualised, even though the idea of the nation permeates political geography to such a degree that the concept has been seen as largely unproblematic. And yet, Armiero and von Hardenberg (2014: 3) suggested that "we need to deal with multiple scales which 'merge and intersect' in our lives. The nation is one of them", and is a particularly powerful one. Anderson (1986: 219) viewed nationalism as a territorial form of ideology, two-faced in its relation with space: "looking inward, it seeks to unify the nation and its constituent territory; looking outward, it tends to divide one nation and territory from another". This interpretation of the concept obviously takes inspiration from that advanced by Nairn (1975), who saw nationalism as essentially Janus-headed, since it faces both backward to a glorious past, and forward to a promising future.

Nation-building processes and nationalism can be thus highly relevant to the study of political geography and also to that of transboundary water politics. In that last regard, one of the few (and still unpublished) studies that explored this connection is the one carried out by Jeremy Allouche (2005), who suggested that the concept of 'water nationalism' – which combines State-building and nation-making – may be seen as one of the primary causes of transboundary water conflicts in the basins of the Aral Sea, the Jordan River, and the Indus River. Allouche (2010) observes that governments perceive and construct water not merely as a natural resource, but as an inherent part of the homeland, with water sites and constructions becoming part of the national landscape.[8] The cause of water conflicts is not water scarcity, but rather the State nationalising its territory and refusing to recognise the transboundary character of water resources. In a subsequent study, Allouche (2010: 50) explained how State-building over water has operated in three ways to enhance control and power over water resources: "first, the dilution of authority from the local level; second, the creation of a water identity at the national level; and third, the (initial) refusal to recognise the international character of transboundary river basins". The State embedded water into the national collective identity using its symbolic value to make it a cohesive element in the nation-building process, in line with Anderson's (2006) idea of an imagined community.[9]

It is now clear that nationalism as a phenomenon has mutual ramifications at the domestic level and at the international level, and it therefore offers an appropriate analytical lens to explore the interconnections stemming from the two-level game in water politics. To this end, I will move my focus to large dams, whose construction, as I will illustrate, can overlap with the formation of a national identity while also affecting international relations.

[8] As it was highlighted by Lowenthal (1994), the strong link between geography and the formation of a national identity is indeed evident in the case of landscapes, which can be treated as national symbols by both citizens and politicians.

[9] While the work of Allouche is the more insightful, other scholars have also explored the connection between water and national identity. Wirsing et al. (2013) have, for instance, linked water scarcity to water nationalism in Himalayan Asia, although they delved on the notion of national security rather than on that of identity. Alley (2006) took an anthropological stance at the Ganga Action Plan (a pollution-abatement initiative) in India, showing that one of its purposes was to ideologically unite the country in the conviction that the government is a benevolent 'water manager' (in a socialist acceptation of the term). Hoslag (2011) briefly mentioned India's water nationalism (without providing a definition of the concept) while exploring the threat of a water war between China and India. Chellaney (2014) argued that in internationally shared waters the fusion between national identity and a river creates a sense of ownership that lead countries to see sharing waters as a zero-sum game. Kalpakian (2004) also attempted to illustrate that identity is what matters the most in conflicts, although his analysis appears theoretically weak in its contribution to transboundary water studies.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL LARGE DAMS

Large dams are arguably the most spectacular way to tame water resources. Besides representing human ingenuity and ability to tame nature, they can serve multiple purposes such as generating hydroelectricity, controlling water flows, and allowing irrigated agriculture and urban development. In his seminal book *Oriental Despotism*, Wittfogel (1957) advanced the concepts of hydraulic society and hydraulic despotism to denote how political elites might increase their grip on power by building and managing hydraulic infrastructures such as dams and networks of canals. Large dams can have both performative and discursive effects, and in his political analysis of Egypt, Mitchell (2002: 44) observed that thanks to their ability to capture the popular imagination, "large dams offered a way to build not just irrigation and power systems, but nation-states in themselves". Focusing on the construction of the Aswan High Dam, Mitchell noted how the Egyptian government ignored issues such as salinisation, waterlogging, and declining soil fertility, carrying out its construction without even attempting studies of costs and benefits, because the dam became the "centerpiece of postwar nation making in Egypt" (Mitchell, 2002: 45).

Technological innovation has been studied as the benchmark by which nation States enact claims of modernisation and progress. For instance, Edgerton (2007) developed the concept of "techno-nationalism" to denote the pride stemming from producing and exporting state-of-the-art technology. However, research has not explored how large dams can become a new tool of nation-building (Menga, 2015; Isaacs and Polese, 2016). This seems even more significant considering that these projects are often realised with foreign technology by countries that do not possess the necessary technological and engineering expertise,[10] and yet, this does not stop a ruling elite from appropriating them and framing them as national symbols.

In spite of an abundant literature on dams, scholars have focused mostly on their economic, developmental, and environmental impacts (refer, among others, to Thukral, 1992; Khagram, 2004; Scudder, 2005; Turpin, 2008), rather than on their deep symbolism and political value (see for instance Reisner, 1993; McCully, 2001). In this last regard, one of the more insightful readings was produced by an environmental historian, Daniel Klingensmith (2007), who explored how dams in 20th century India and the United States became central in the creation of an ideology that featured imagined and re-imagined notions of development. For Klingensmith, the rhetoric around dams can be seen as a dialectical process that leads to a political imagination of the nation and the world. While he does not see technology as ideology in Habermasian terms,[11] he identifies a group of strategically placed individuals who "manage to appropriate and corrupt the development process and are able to undermine the coherence and viability of the scheme" (Klingensmith, 2007: 29).

And indeed, in its report the World Commission on Dams[12] (WCD, 2000) noted that "[f]rom the 1930s to the 1970s, the construction of large dams became – in the eyes of many – synonymous with

[10] The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia, for instance, is being built by the Italian construction group Salini Impregilo. It is worth mentioning that in the 1930s Benito Mussolini's Italy invaded and conquered Ethiopia, maintaining a military presence in the country until 1941.

[11] Jürgen Habermas (1970) perceived the ideologisation of technology as a means through which ruling elites could overcomplicate technology and practical questions in such a way that the population is depoliticised and stripped of its participatory democratic rights.

[12] As a result of the growing opposition to large dams, in 1997 the World Bank launched the work of the WCD, a body tasked to review the development effectiveness of large dams, along with their social, economic and environmental impact. This seeming new era for the hydropower sector was also marked by the establishment of the International Hydropower Association (IHA), an international organisation created under the auspices of UNESCO in 1995. In 2011 the IHA published the Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Protocol (accessible at this link: www.hydrosustainability.org/IHAHydro4Life/media/PDFs/Protocol/hydropower-sustainability-assessment-protocol_web.pdf a document containing an elaborate complex scorecard to rate the sustainability of dam projects.

development and economic progress. Viewed as symbols of modernisation and humanity's ability to harness nature, dam construction accelerated dramatically." (WCD, 2000: xxix). According to Worster (1984), who took as an example the Hoover Dam in the United States, large dams have been built following the illusion that men can dominate nature. Drawing from Horkheimer's (1974) *Eclipse of Reason*, Worster argues that dominating nature also implies dominating men, since a few powerful individuals manage to get a concentration of social, economic, and political power through the construction of a dam. Kraak (2012) also analysed how an elite can use the symbolism of a large dam to legitimise a regime that lacks authority (as in the cases of Ethiopia and Kyrgyzstan), and Pritchard (2004) illustrated how State elites in France used the River Rhone to intertwine hydraulic technology with debates on national identity and State-building. As Flyvbjerg et al. (2003) effectively explained, megaprojects (and therefore also large dams) have to be considered as both political and physical objects for their meaning to be fully appreciated. A dam could indeed be metaphorically represented by a centaur, the mythological creature half man and half horse: its performative effects, those that are clearly visible such as the diversion of a river or the generation of hydroelectricity, epitomise the strength of the centaur, its animal side. Its rather hidden discursive dimension, the one connected with nation-building processes, corresponds to the sapiens part of the centaur, its ideological production (Menga, 2016).

But what is also significant for the purpose of this analysis is that besides their symbolic and emotional significance at the national level, large dams also have an impact at the international level, since they can alter transboundary water flows and cause severe tensions in an international river basin. If we accept that a dam can symbolise a nation, then those who question a dam become the enemies of that nation. This is particularly apparent in a competitive setting marked by already tense relations among basin riparians, where the assertion (and protection) of national interests through the construction of a large dam happens at the expense of another nation. The expression 'zero-sum game', that in transboundary water politics is often used to define competitive scenarios where a gain for one actor implies a loss for another one, can correspond, after all, to a practical analytical application of the dualistic notions of 'self' and 'otherness' in studies on nationalism (Reicher and Hopkins, 2000).

Following this interdisciplinary discussion, it is evident that a two-level game perspective can be relevant also to the study of transboundary water politics, where international relations and domestic politics are strongly interrelated. Furthermore, nationalism and nation-building do influence transboundary water relations, and large dams, due to their symbolic value, emerge as key tools with which to analyse this phenomenon. To further develop the above reflection, in the following I will briefly review two examples of well-known dams that fit within this framework – the GERD in Ethiopia and the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan – and will subsequently identify and suggest new avenues for future research.

DISCUSSION

Although the number of large dams being built worldwide started to decline in the 1970s, that trend changed in the 2000s, and several controversial projects have been launched in the last decade. China and India, in particular, are leading the new dam movement worldwide, driven by the prospect of more hydroelectricity and a boost in irrigated agriculture. And it is under these premises that the Ethiopian government is building the GERD (also known as the Millennium Dam) on the Blue Nile. The construction of this hydroelectric dam, which when finished will be the largest one in Africa and give a significant boost to the fulfilment of Ethiopia's energy needs (Hammond, 2013), started in 2011 and is expected to be completed in 2017. The dam is strongly opposed by downstream Egypt, which is afraid of a reduction of its water inflow and sees the project as a violation of its historical rights over the Nile. These rights were, for instance, asserted in the 1960s by Gamal Abdel Nasser through the construction of the grandiose Aswan High Dam.

Beyond electricity generation, flood control, and grand irrigation schemes, the dam is charged with highly symbolic meanings by the Ethiopian ruling elite. As its name suggests, the dam embodies the reawakening of the Ethiopian nation, and it represents an essential element in the process aimed at reinventing and redefining Ethiopia's identity, so that the country can deal with the challenges posed by ethnic federalism and a multi-ethnic society (Orlowska, 2013).

The analytical significance of a two-level game perspective in water politics, and the relevance of nationalism to the study of large dams, become clear if we apply Karolewski's and Suszycki's (2011) three largest levels of analysis for studying nationalism – societal or political discourse, governmental, and international relations – to the narrative of the Ethiopian government around the GERD. What emerges is that the top-down nationalism enacted by the ruling elite reproduces an idea of the nation which is firmly grounded at both the domestic and the international levels.

On the one hand, the GERD is presented as a national pride and success, as a project that is leading Ethiopia towards a glorious future built upon the ashes of an important imperial past, in line with Nairn's (1975) metaphor of the modern Janus. This is evidenced, for instance, by the ubiquitous large-scale patriotic billboards displayed around the country (see Figure 1), where the GERD is often linked to the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, a man with 'vision' and the protector of the nation. Furthermore, since 2011 (when construction work began), the main State-owned Ethiopian TV and radio channels have been providing constant updates to spur patriotism. To give just a few examples, it is common to see on the evening TV news programme reports of patriotic citizens vowing to work unpaid hours to buy dam bonds (BBC Monitoring, 2012a), discussing how to support the dam's construction (BBC Monitoring, 2014), or celebrating the arrival of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Cup[13] in their own city (BBC Monitoring, 2015).

On the other hand, government officials are also framing the GERD as a foreign policy issue, emphasising that it is being built in spite of the opposition coming from Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Sudan. Significantly, while launching the construction of the GERD, Zenawi made an implicit reference to Egypt when he warned about the existence of an actor "attempting to undercut Ethiopia's efforts to secure funding to cover the cost of the project" (Zenawi, 2011). In the same speech, Zenawi also urged the Ethiopian people to support the construction of the dam:

> No matter how poor we are, in the Ethiopian traditions of resolve, the Ethiopian people will pay any sacrifice. I have no doubt they will, with one voice, say: 'Build the Dam!' […] nothing can stop us from exercising our rights […] we not only have a plan, but we also have the capacity to assert our rights (Zenawi, 2011).

A few months later, in an address to the Ethiopian Parliament which was broadcast on national TV, Zenawi explicitly singled out Egypt as the main obstacle to the construction of the GERD, laying the foundations for the upcoming framing of the dam as a tool of nationalism. According to Zenawi (BBC Monitoring, 2011), Egypt had spent the previous 100 years trying to disrupt Ethiopia's efforts to build a large dam on the Nile. Zenawi accused Egypt of using military, diplomatic and financial means to interfere with his country's hydraulic ambitions, adding that the Ethiopians need to be ready to contain further threats coming from Cairo in the future. Through this statement the Ethiopian Prime Minister clearly identified Egypt as the 'other' in relation to the Ethiopian 'self', as the external interference posing a threat to the development of Ethiopia both as a State and as a nation.

[13] A national football tournament named after the dam.

Figure 1. A billboard in Meskel Square, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

Note: The billboard shows the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi together with some flagship projects of modern Ethiopia, including on the right the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The writing on the billboard (in Amharic) reads: "The vision and the mission that you started is near. By working hard we will get it/hold it!". Photo courtesy of Ane Hess-Nielsen.

Indeed, from this moment on, Ethiopian politicians started to represent the GERD as a symbol of national self-determination, with Egypt filling the stage as the main rival, to the extent that local newspapers started rumouring about the Egyptians "hoping for Meles' death to stop the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam" (Tigrai Online, 2012). And while Zenawi did die in 2012, the Ethiopian government continued to deploy the same two-faced rhetoric portraying the dam both as a symbol of national pride and as an assertion of sovereignty against an antagonistic neighbour. Dina Mufti, the Spokesperson of the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, tellingly explained that "Ethiopia is not intimidated by Egypt's psychological warfare and won't halt the dam's construction, even for seconds" (Reuters, 2013), while at the internal level the government continued to festively celebrate the realisation of what is portrayed as a "unifying project that offers hope" (Bloomberg Business, 2015), whose realisation has become a tribute to the beloved and charismatic former Prime Minister Zenawi.

Another meaningful example of how large dams can become a new-nation building tool for a top-down nationalism enacted by the ruling elite with ramifications at both the domestic and the international level comes from Central Asia, where Tajikistan is attempting to build the large Rogun Dam. The project was originally planned by the Soviet Union in the 1960s, and its revamp in the 2000s has been criticised by downstream Uzbekistan, which perceives it as a threat to both the environment (the dam is located in a highly seismic area) and its annual water inflow. Similar to the GERD, if and when it is completed the Rogun Dam will generate large amounts of hydroelectricity in a country that suffers from recurrent energy crises. Furthermore, according to the Tajik government the dam will lead to an increase in irrigated agriculture that will bring benefits to both upstream and downstream basin riparians (Zarifi, 2009).

Yet, what also strikes one about the Rogun Dam is that its meaning has gone beyond that of a simple multipurpose dam. As Menga (2015; 2016b) highlighted, the Tajik government has framed it "as a matter of national pride, a fundamental leap forward in national development, an existential achievement for the survival of the country, and ultimately, a matter of life and death" (Menga, 2015: 490). The Tajik President Emomali Rahmon has often reiterated that the dam is Tajikistan's national

idea (see for instance Rahmon, 2009; 2010), defining it as "a source of endless light which will turn Tajikistan into an ever-shining star in the ancient East!" (Rahmon, 2010). As with the GERD, the main cities of Tajikistan were covered by patriotic billboards presenting the dam as a national priority (see Figure 2), and citizens were asked to show their patriotism by buying shares of the Rogun Joint Stock Company. Pupils had to recite patriotic verses about the dam, such as "Roghun is our national pride, our brightest future. It's the light in Central Asia!" (Al Jazeera, 2010), and the Tajik Education Minister Abdujabbor Rahmonov explained that "how many shares a student will buy depends on his patriotism" (BBC Monitoring, 2010). Furthermore, the State-owned national TV and radio channels have been providing regular updates on the dam and the status of its construction, which were, however, interrupted in 2012 to allow the World Bank to carry out a feasibility study (The World Bank, 2014).

Figure 2. A billboard in the Tajik capital Dushanbe, July 2010.

The billboard displays the Tajik President Emomali Rahmon showing the way forward for his country while standing in front of the Rogun Dam construction site. The writing on the billboard (in Tajik) reads: "Rogun is the Life and Death of Tajikistan". Photo courtesy of Derek Henry Flood.

The opposition of Uzbekistan, a country that has a longstanding rivalry with Tajikistan and that has so far managed to get the lion's share of the Central Asian waters (Menga, 2014), seems to have reinforced Tajikistan's resolve to carry out the project as an assertion of power and self-determination. The rhetoric adopted by the Tajik leadership portrays the dam as a symbol of national cohesion and patriotism, and in 2010 the then Tajik Prime Minister Akil Akilov significantly underlined how Uzbek

criticisms have no other effect than uniting the "people of Tajikistan in the idea of building this vitally important hydropower plant" (Akilov, 2010). Tajik elites accuse Uzbekistan of thwarting Tajikistan's economic development ambitions through the disruption of energy supplies and the sabotage of transport corridors (BBC Monitoring, 2012; Shustov, 2012; Saipov, 2014; Stronski, 2016). Moreover, they present the Rogun Dam as a way to achieve energy self-sufficiency (BBC Monitoring, 2011a) in a setting where Uzbekistan is the country's sole supplier of natural gas (The World Bank, 2012). When the Uzbek President Islam Karimov reportedly defined the Rogun Dam as a meaningless project, the Tajik newspaper Ozodagon eloquently countered: "An interesting point in the position of the Uzbek president on the construction of the Roghun power station is that he called the national project of an independent State a 'foolish' project, and with this he insulted a State and a nation" (BBC Monitoring, 2010a). Mirroring this embittered conflict, an opinion poll conducted in Tajikistan in 2013 showed that a quarter of the respondents recognised Uzbekistan as a threat to Tajikistan (M-Vector, 2013), arguably as a result of the narrative adopted by the Tajik government.

Both the GERD and the Rogun Dam illustrate how a two-level game perspective can be relevant to the study of transboundary water relations. At the domestic level, a hydraulic infrastructure can help legitimise those in power, channelling people's attention while contributing to the creation of a national identity. This process is magnified by the international level, especially when a dam is opposed by a rival country. In these cases, constructing a dam also becomes a way to defend national interests, increase regional influence, and assert absolute territorial sovereignty in the terms enunciated by the Harmon doctrine.[14] Dams thus exacerbate existing international tensions which, in turn, serve to buttress and legitimise the actions of the government that builds them. In addition to helping a government gaining popular support, framing a national issue as a foreign policy one can serve to distract public attention from other pressing matters and to deproblematise the environmental and societal consequences that come with the construction of a large hydraulic infrastructure (such as the resettlement of peoples, environmental impact, and financial costs).

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have argued that an analytical framework that accounts concurrently for the interaction of domestic and international factors, and where the nation scale is examined along with the international scale and the basin-regional scale, can lead to a better understanding of water politics. Examining states and nations as processes rather than as pre-existing entities can also improve our understanding of how a large dam can become a nation-building tool and therefore embed a meaning that goes beyond that of a mere hydraulic infrastructure.

Clearly, I am not suggesting that all hydraulic development should be examined under this perspective, or that the ideological dimension of dam building is more important than the actual material effects that accompany these types of projects. However, and as I illustrated with the examples of the GERD and the Rogun Dam, both the ideational and the material dimensions should be taken into account to understand the drivers of hydraulic development (as was also argued by Molle et al., 2009; and Molle and Wester, 2009), and the apparently uncompromising attitude of the actors involved in regional disputes over shared water resources triggered by large dams. This approach is particularly useful to analyse cases of internationally controversial dams being built (or proposed) in a

[14] The Harmon doctrine – which takes its name from former US Attorney General Judson Harmon – is considered the most notorious theory in all of international resources law, and is today identified with the principle of absolute territorial sovereignty. It is based upon an opinion issued by Harmon in 1895 concerning a dispute between Mexico and the US for the use of a shared river, the Rio Grande. The doctrine basically states that "a country is absolutely sovereign over the portion of an international watercourse within its borders. Thus, that country would be free to divert all of the water from an international watercourse, leaving none for downstream states" (McCaffrey, 1996: 549).

competitive setting marked by already tense relations among basin riparians and a contested control of water resources.

This framework could be fruitfully applied to critical hydropolitics studies and, in particular, to the branch dealing with the importance of discursive constructions and on the ways power, hegemony, and power asymmetries can influence transboundary water relations (among others, Zeitoun and Warner, 2006; Cascão and Zeitoun, 2010; Zeitoun et al., 2011; Zeitoun et al., 2016; Menga, 2016a). Further research might explore how being the hegemon or the hegemonised (and consequently power relations) riparian influences domestic politics and the discourse adopted at the internal level to justify hydraulic development. To this end, suitable international river basins with asymmetric power configurations would include those of the Euphrates and Tigris, the Ganges, the Jordan, and the Mekong.

Also, and following up on the arguments made by Warner and Zawahri (2012) regarding the influence of a regime type on the behaviour of riparians, further studies should be carried out to explore differences and similarities in the rhetoric adopted by democratic and authoritarian regimes when it comes to building a large hydraulic infrastructure. Authoritarian regimes that operate in a non-competitive political setting with a weak (or nonexistent) civil society face fewer constraints at the domestic level than do democratic ones, and this might influence which strategies they adopt to legitimise their actions. Scott (1998), for instance, argued that being an authoritarian or a democratic regime played a crucial role in determining the fate of social engineering schemes in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with authoritarian regimes being the force behind high modernism. Can we interpret the current boom in the dam building sector as a 21st century revamp of the ideology of high modernism?

In addition, and with regard to a water literature that is now saturated with the securitisation discourse (Fischhendler, 2015), further research could also be conducted to determine whether it is appropriate to refer to the 'nationalisation' of water resources as one of the key determinants of international water conflicts. Framing hydraulic development as an assertion of the national interests of the 'self' against those of the 'other' can provide fresh and original insights to the analysis of transboundary water relations. This could appeal to constructivist perspectives to water studies, since the view of the 'self' as an offset of the 'other' recalls Wendt's (1992) classic interpretation of agency and structure as being reciprocally constituted. This study could have discussed how the notions of agency and structure can help understand the reciprocal relationship of the domestic and international dimensions, but this would have overly expanded the already dense literature mobilised so far.

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