

Waves, Floods, Currents: The Politics and Poetics of Water in Social Movement Analysis

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Abstract: The task of conceptualising social movements draws on a wealth of watery images, from protest waves and political currents, to imagining mobilisations as tides, ripples, cascades or high-pressure hydraulics. Called upon to analyse complex processes, these waters have a life of their own, carrying analytical implications while extending a relationship to water that is never only symbolic and is material, embodied and historical. This article explores the ways water is “enrolled” to understand movements, to advance three arguments: first, these use familiar water morphologies to naturalise particular, located understandings of political change and social form; second, they imply normative claims and ideological affinities regarding political struggle; third, this has implications for our relationship to water, echoing the abstract and alienating “modern water” of capitalist world-ecology. The article considers how critical water knowledges and subjectivities, often sustained by social movement spaces, indicate possibilities of a being-otherwise with water and its meanings.

Resumen: La tarea de conceptualizar los movimientos sociales se basa en una gran cantidad de imágenes acuosas, desde «oleadas de protestas» y «corrientes políticas» hasta imaginar movilizaciones como mareas, ondas, cascadas o hidráulicas de alta presión. Llamadas a analizar procesos complejos, estas aguas tienen vida propia, y conllevan implicaciones analíticas al tiempo que extienden una relación con el agua que es material, encarnada e histórica, y no simplemente simbólica. Este artículo explora las formas en que el agua se inscribe para comprender los movimientos, para presentar tres argumentos: primero, utilizan morfologías familiares del agua para naturalizar comprensiones particulares y localizadas del cambio político y la forma social; segundo, implican reclamos normativos y afinidades ideológicas en torno a la lucha política; tercero, esto tiene implicaciones para nuestra relación con el agua, haciéndose eco de la abstracta y alienante “agua moderna” de la ecología-mundo capitalista. El artículo considera cómo los saberes y subjetividades críticos del agua, muchas veces sostenidos por espacios de movimientos sociales, indican posibilidades de un ser-otro con el agua y sus significados.

Keywords: water, hydrosocial, social movements, social theory, metaphor

Introduction

Be water! We are formless. We are shapeless. We can flow. We can crash. We are like water. We are Hongkongers. (Protest placard, Hong Kong, 2019)

Water is the mistress of fluid language, of language without a jolt, of continuous and continued language, of language which renders rhythm supple and which gives a uniform matter to different rhythms. (Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, first published in French 1942)

In the essay *Water and Dreams*, Gaston Bachelard documents the ubiquity of water in the construction of metaphor, allegory and poetic allusion. So widespread is this influence on literature, and the processes of the imagination, that Bachelard argues that water is “a *mainstay* of images ... that quickly becomes a *contributor* of images” (1983:11); that is, not a toolbox of inert symbols, but an active participant joining us in the conjuring of sense.

Perhaps connected to Bachelard’s emphasis on water as the element of transition, an important arena for the uses of water metaphor has been in the analysis of social movements. From crashing waves and networked tributaries to currents and high-pressure hydraulics, water offers a set of tropes and images through which to understand social movements as processes of motion and force. But what meanings and assumptions hitch a ride on this ubiquitous imagery? And if we call the waters to join us in this “reverie” (Bachelard 1983) what relations does this set up between people and the watery world at a time of socio-natural crisis which is, in turn, mediated so often by water?

This article examines the way in which water is enrolled to understand social movements, and asks what this makes possible, what it constrains, and how this might be otherwise. This problematic draws upon work in the political ecology tradition (Loftus and Lumdsen 2008; Pulido 2016; Swyngedouw 2005, 2015) that has documented how water’s symbolic and material features are “enrolled” (Swyngedouw 2015) by diverse political projects—especially those of states—as a means of organising the material foundations of the economy, and affirming who is valued, what is prioritised, and what water *means* in a given society. While recent social movements scholarship has certainly begun to address the way a radical politics also enrolls water (Bieler 2021; Sultana and Loftus 2020) this has understandably focused on struggles over water policy issues (privatisation, pollution, hydraulic infrastructure). But, as this article demonstrates, water inflects on social movements far beyond such cases, as it is poetically constitutive of the very way we imagine and understand social change. It is this turn to the way water is enrolled by those seeking to make sense of social movements—scholars and theorists as well as activists, revolutionaries and popular commentators—that is at the heart of the present study. The value of such a close reading draws on the sense, common to much ecocriticism (Wampole 2021) that metaphors and language shape relationships between humans and the more-than-human world; what Donna Haraway (2003) usefully calls our “nature-cultures”. From the critical reading of water’s analytical effects, the article therefore considers the relationship this metaphoricity brings about in the social relations of water.

Understanding these watery imaginaries has become especially important in our era of climate crisis, not only because siconatural relations are ever more consequential, but because water itself takes on a particularly totemic role in this

context. Whether in Nick Shepherd's argument that "it might be said that water—along with fire—is one of the elemental languages through which Anthropogenic environmental change expresses itself" (2019:10) or Naomi Klein's assertion that climate change is "a civilizational wake-up call ... spoken in the language of fires, floods, droughts and extinctions" (2014:25) we find a growing post-humanist sensibility where water is lent a directly communicative and expressive function. It is therefore useful to interrogate the wider circuits by which water's meanings are encoded and interpreted, and the specific place of social movement waters within this.

Metaphors play an essential role in everyday sense-making, whether this is taken to be foundational to the very neuropsychology of linguistic cognition (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) or to play a more rhetorical role, as in the discourse analysis tradition (Charteris-Black 2006; Hart 2008). This question of whether metaphors are there to *understand* or to *convince* acquires a particular significance when they are found amongst the concepts of political and social theory. In Hobbes' "body politic", Rousseau's "social contract", or Foucault's "capillaries", for example, metaphors expound the analysis while also acting as a form of discursive framing and normative nudge (Ankersmit 1993). Indeed, concepts are both invented and inherited, staging a tension between the agential production of metaphors and the structuring effects of prevailing discourses and ideology, and of language itself. It is beyond the scope of the current article to address these questions of metaphors' individual, social and structural provenance, and besides, the examples I draw on, reveal the complex layering of water metaphors across these strata. What is worth signalling at this point is the way concept-metaphors stage an essential entanglement of analytical and normative implications, a point which runs throughout this article.

The discussion below interrogates the uses of water by movement scholars, participants and commentators, to make three substantive arguments. The first, concerning its *analytical* implications, explores water metaphors as an analogy of movement, which hinges on a water of edges and surfaces. I argue that even as water language has moved from an older "hydraulic structuralism" (Scott 1990) to an emphasis on more complex processual flows, a reliance on water's edges continues to discipline the implications of a fully molecular understanding of social change. I consider how contingent analytical perspectives—and the subject positions these imply—are naturalised through our embodied familiarity with water.

The second argument, concerning *normative* effects, is that thinking with water typically brings with it an implied claim about what is right and good, how movements *should* proceed, and what processes *should* occur. I explore the use of water to suggest tactical, strategic and ideological biases, and identify an intriguing line of ideological difference, with broadly progressive and democratic movements and their sympathisers adopting the language of water processes, while a conservative ethos of defensive siege imagines water, and what it embodies, as an external antagonist whose movements must be stalled and levied.

Finally, I consider how social movement waters are implicated in the reproduction, and sometimes the unmaking, of prevailing hydrosocial possibilities. What

problems emerge when representations of water are abstracted from the multi-sensory, located and historical conditions of real waters? With reference to Jamie Linton's (2010) concept of the "modern water" of capitalist world ecology, I explore some of the ways of thinking water otherwise that have emerged from feminist, Indigenous and ecological scholarship and activism.

Where existing studies have engaged with water metaphors in the framing of social movements (e.g. Romano and Porto 2018) these have largely remained within the field of discourse analysis, with a focus on the *linguistic* processes of specific water metaphors (Romano and Porto [2018] explore the "marea/tide" in Spanish protests). The current article instead follows the multifarious presence of water—in its many forms, across all manner of contexts—to establish the contours of a wider phenomenon with a common set of problematics. The use of a deliberately eclectic set of socio-natural conceptualisations produces sensitivities that are not easily captured in discourse analysis—for example, the affective, corporeal, haptic and lived dimensions of water—and makes it possible to interrogate social movements, the metaphors we understand them with, and prevailing hydrosocial regimes as part of a mutually entangled ecology. My arguments about the analytical, normative and hydrosocial dimensions of movement waters each represent a contribution to the way we understand social change and water relations, and it is in establishing the relationship between these that new ways of understanding water and social movements are opened up.

In the foreword to Bachelard's *Water and Dreams*, he states that despite all his efforts in the research process, he cannot fully unpick and demystify the fantasies that mediate his relationship to water, conceding "I still live water images; I live them synthetically in their original complexity, often according them my unreasoning adherence" (1983:7). Taking seriously this inability to ever fully get out of the water, I nonetheless take "water" to be a category whose meanings and uses are always contested and up for negotiation; it is a *political* category (Swyngedouw 2005). As such, it is argued that a thinking-better-with-water is inseparable from a being-otherwise with water; one tributary in the work of building a socially just ecology.

In what follows, I begin with a section offering an overview of what I take to be the most significant and illuminating uses of water metaphors in social movement theory and analysis, considering some of the specific theoretical implications attendant to particular water metaphors. After establishing this field (or *pool*) of concepts, the article moves through the three central arguments enumerated above—the analytical, normative and hydrosocial effects of water metaphors—each with its own sub-headed section. The article concludes with some closing remarks about the political and scholarly implications arising from this study.

Movement Waters: Key Concepts and Metaphors

Through the diverse literatures aiming to make sense of social movements, you find yourself time and again neck deep in water. In a literature saturated by watery images and metaphors, the most common, and even archetypal, metaphor is the *wave*, having made its way into the language through which popular

mobilisations are understood by scholars, journalists, activists and wider publics. Whether this is put in terms of “protest waves” (Koopmans 1993) or “waves of contention” (della Porta 2013) it represents one of the most common frameworks for envisioning a movement sequence as “a phase of heightened conflict across the social system” (Tarrow 1989). While other common frames like the “protest cycle” similarly emphasise ongoing sequences of struggle, the wave conjures a spatio-temporal image of elevating conflict.

While all kinds of waves rise and fall, the *oceanic* wave provides a morphology that resonates with understandings common to much social movements research. It helps to visualise not only a certain temporality of mobilisation, but also a threshold of visibility distinguishing the rising crest of contention from the rolling pressures beneath the surface. When Karstedt-Henke (1980, cited in Koopmans 1993) seeks to explain the emergence of protest waves in terms of a growing pressure that collides with a contrary force—in particular the counter-strategies of the authorities—we can observe the physical metaphor expanded, in this case conjuring the movements of the rolling ocean, driven up against the solidity of sub-aquatic reefs or sea walls. With subsequent scholars extending this imagery, such as those referring to how activists “ride the crest” of protest waves (Valocchi 1999) this oceanic imagery has become further established as a way to visualise and understand processes of mobilisation. It is an image that in many cases joins us at the first moment of making sense of a movement.

In his famous formulation of what happens in between, Alberto Melucci (1989) conceptualises the periods before and after the visible wave as those of “submerged networks”, where the cultural codes and social agencies that will form the coming wave roll and build, out of sight to most. This invocation of visibility through the oceanic metaphor helps us to identify the perspectival nature of this framework and ask the critical question, “Out of sight to whom?”. The very notion of infrequent waves, between which insurgent forces exist in a state of unseen oceanic submergence, privileges a certain perspective; one that claims to be capable of viewing the entirety of the social container, while relying on a “public” visibility mediated by compromised media industries. In truth, social, political and class struggles bubble up all the time in countless locations and at various scales, and this is far from invisible to the people there. By attending to the water metaphor, we confront the implied standpoint underpinning this conceptualisation.

Deploying the wave metaphor invokes our familiarity with the sea to assert a broader view of how these events must be understood. Even if not strictly “cyclical”, waves follow—and are followed by—other, similar waves. As such, the image of the political wave locates us in a longer tradition of seeing movements as recurring events in the life-cycle of democracies, themselves taken to be essentially stable arrangements, periodically unsettled, for better or worse, but remaining broadly constant in their fundamental form and mechanics. We find a family resemblance in the classical sociology of Robert Michels which also frames democracy’s historical cycles in oceanic terms: “the democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed. This enduring spectacle is simultaneously encouraging and depressing”

(Michels 1962:371). In this sense the movement wave stands for that occasional interruption of the demos; what has variously been described as “redemptive democracy” (Canovan 1999) or the events of “popular sovereignty” integral to post-Marxist radical democracy (Mouffe 2000). Maritime waves, and our knowledge of them, lend themselves to this sense of incremental and corrective phases of change.

The symbolic baggage of the wave sequence is clearer still when considered in contrast to water’s enrolment for an unabashed revolutionary politics and analysis. An exemplary case of this can be found in Leon Trotsky’s (1932) *History of the Russian Revolution*, a text that reviewer Louis Gottschalk (1938) described, suggestively, as a “natural history” of revolution. While this text has its own underlying animus and genre, it is useful for comparison. For Trotsky, the singular, revolutionary event breaking with cyclical time could hardly be described in terms of an unending series of waves (whether lapping or crashing). Instead, two recurring water metaphors stand out in his account. The first of these is the *flood*, an image extended in several ways, to convey a sense of cataclysm, rupture and scale. The “colossal political flood” (Trotsky 1932:565) inundating the social order brings too “receding waves in the flood of the revolution” (Trotsky 1932:547) that gather as “whirlpools and backwashes” (Trotsky 1932:565). In this way, Trotsky suggests that the twists and turns of an uneven revolutionary process appear to obey “the fundamental laws of social hydrodynamics” (1932:547). Elsewhere, describing the mobilisations of workers and soldiers as the flood’s “two mighty currents”, Trotsky emphasises the *revolutionary* quality of these waters that “wash out, clean and carry away the walls, the roof, and later the whole groundwork of the old structure” (1932:92).

The second water metaphor Trotsky employs, in keeping with his use of the language of industrial engineering (Dickman 2014) is that of pressurised *steam*. The Bolsheviks watch the masses for signs of “the steam pressure of the revolution” (Trotsky 1932:307) and while this may require the “piston box” of party organisation, “nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam” (Trotsky 1932:xvi). To be clear, this metaphor of steam echoes a much wider mode of thought, whereby social uprisings are understood in terms of pressures and strains in the social system, that are either released through some institutional or cultural “pressure valve” or else build to the point of bursting. It is a language that unites, in some respect, early collective behaviour psychology (Blumer 1951) and some New Social Movements theory (Habermas 1981) each quite different from Trotsky’s revolutionism, but similarly imagining society through images resembling plumbing.

Across several of these examples, we find that water’s spatio-temporal relocations—its *movements*—are used to demonstrate not only change but scale. A further example of this can be found in the aggregation of early 21st century movements and left-wing electoral victories in Latin America, described as a “pink tide”, something grander and more sweeping than a wave (though in Spanish, this was called both the transliteral “*marea rosa*” and the “*ola sociodemócrata*” or “social-democratic wave”). At the other scalar end, smaller effects emanating from the aftermath of mobilisation are describes in terms of the “ripple effects” or

similar (of course, reflecting a more general usage). A ripple is a wave, but one which implies a different perspective, seen from an angle somewhere above as an entire pattern of concentric undulations. The waves discussed above are part of a comparable phenomenon, but there the perspective is that of one dwarfed by it, who might be drowned by it, or if they're lucky surf it. In this way water metaphors call upon an embodied familiarity with water and its consequences.

Water is also deployed to describe the relations between apparently distinct social *parts*, whether different "currents" of a given movement, or between activists and their wider social base. Sheila Rowbotham's (in Rowbotham et al. 1979) account of UK radicals in the 1970s finding it hard to re-enter "the stream of the community" from their subcultural groupuscules uses water to denote a territory of social life with its own forces of motion. The use of "mareas/tides" to describe the apparently distinct protests, moments and groupings of 21st century Spanish activism does something similar (Romano and Porto 2018). Elsewhere, the idea of "infiltration" draws on a familiarity with the boundedness of liquids to imagine the processes by which they are breached and compromised.

And the list of water morphologies deployed to make sense of social movements goes on, from cascades, pools, reservoirs and springs, to eddies, drips, saturations and absorptions. Given this ubiquity, it is worth exploring the common problematics that emerge across this varied but connected set. I consider these the three most significant effects of social movement water: these are the analytical effect of water's edges, the normative effects of identifying with water, and the implications these carry for prevailing hydrosocial relations.

Analytical Effects: The Water's Edge

In their important intervention on social theory and methodology, John Law and John Urry (2004) insist that social inquiry does not simply describe, but "enacts the social", by affirming a certain ontology and perspective, which is then embedded in the concrete world through a range of institutional machines, from publishing and media interventions to policy. What then is enacted by the wave, current or flood? Mimi Sheller's (2000) analysis of the recurrent "mechanisms of fluidity and liquidity" in canonical social movement studies signals the use of water as a way of representing movement and change; part of a wider phenomenon where political metaphors draw on our familiarity with physical nature to describe complex situations (for example the "slippery slope" or "balance of power"; see Carver and Pikalo 2008). The wave, the ripple or the coursing river all call upon a similar familiarity and its naturalising effects, and Trotsky's *History* even refers to "fundamental laws of social hydrodynamics" (1932:547).

Sheller (2000) notes the limitations of an excessively deterministic "hydraulic structuralism" (Scott 1990), and so she calls for a more varied aquatic vocabulary, favouring both complex "flows" of rhizomatic bifurcations with unclear origins (Urry 2000), and the emergent intelligence of slime mould. On the one hand this reflects a zeitgeist and wider structure of feeling in the milieu of radical scholars and street movements at the turn of the millennium; the appeal to a language of the networked, decentralised and multiple (and indeed a fascination with slime)

spoke to the organisational reality of (parts of) the alter-globalisation movement. On the other hand, this call for an ontology of “flow” usefully signals the more general fact that movements rarely have clear starts or ends and are never separate from the wider social fields with which they interact (see Taylor 2000; Whittier 1995).

What remains only implicit in these works, however, is the way in which such water concepts—whether waves, floods, flows or aqueous slimes—draw their sense-making capacity from our knowledge of water’s *edges*, its surfaces and limits. This is true of much of the deployment of water addressed in the section above, whether this is the “heightened” activity of the protest wave, its contact with opposing forces, the bank-bursting of revolutionary floods, or the use of water to delineate a movement’s parts. Metaphors of water as matter-in-motion always require the *other* of not-water into which it can move and drive: the air into which the wave rises; the shore where it crashes; the pipe before the rushing steam; contact points between currents; the banks of streams; lands that are flooded; the surface tension that might break, or gather and seal again. Even where a dynamics of flow is affirmed, these metaphors carry the contrary suggestion of a motionless and non-flowing outside; the re-emergence of an ontology of delineation.

These bounding effects associated with using water’s mobilities are especially pertinent in the analysis of social *movements*, not least as “social movement” is itself also a metaphor; one that not only imagines such phenomena as *motion*, but that also thereby suggests *immobility* as the otherwise common state of things (whereas the social is always a field of movements). The spatio-temporal metaphor of “social movement” is therefore also about marking edges, as the movement is distinguished from a tendentially stable outside (either the social formations *not* in movement, or those times *outside* the sequence of mobilisation). This is especially true in the social movement studies tradition, with its orientation to the corrective events (even radical ones) within democracies, and where a degree of system-level stability is assumed. Although other important traditions—not least those influenced by Marxist dialectics—reject such delineated or stable social ontologies, in practice the call to demarcate distinct social forms remains prevalent in the discourse. This in turn is a marker of the distinctly modern context of the “social movement” concept (Chesters and Welsh 2006; Conway et al. 2018) and the profound difficulty of orienting ourselves to the consequences of what, with Deleuze and Guattari (1987), we might call the “molecular” complexity of unfolding processes of assemblage. The idea of “the” movement, or “a” movement is the return of the “molar” orientation to fixed structures rather than open processes.

Water metaphors extend the modernist metaphor of movement. More than this, they ground arguments for an ontology of flows in something that stops short of the full implications that this might have. This is also true where particular *bodies* of water—tides, currents, streams, pools—are used to distinguish and separate out the “parts” of a movement in terms of its component groups and organisations, or even looser structures like factions or tendencies. The enrolment of water contains this propensity to foreclose a more molecular imaginary; one

more sensitive to the multiplicity and “microsegmentarity” (Deleuze 1986) that actually characterises these phenomena. The molar waters deployed by social movement scholars establish a “macrosegmentarity” of delimited forms, dividing parts.

To be clear, this might be a very practical analytical move, making sense through the imposition of categories and divisions, but these disciplinary effects must be noted. What is more, the use of water metaphors—which draw on our knowledge of water’s bounding to naturalise the bounding of the political formation in question—provides a kind of theoretical cover for this reversion to discipline and identity.

This naturalising effect depends on an embodied human experience of water as necessarily enclosed by its edges, which is how we almost always perceive it as non-aquatic land animals. We might imagine, for a moment, what analytical and poetic implications might be drawn from a quite different position, one fully submerged *in* the water, *under* the water, away from any surface and fully *inside* its three dimensions. I will return to this question of the sensory and perspectival nature of our water knowledge below. First though, having now established the way in which edged water is deployed to naturalise particular understandings of social change, I turn to the unavoidable consequence of such a naturalisation: that water metaphors carry normative claims about social movements, and in turn often reveal the ideological affinities of those using them.

Normative Effects: Affinities with Water’s Movements

Distinguishing clearly between a concept’s descriptive and normative elements is never straightforward. Water metaphors naturalise contingent social processes and, by extension, often work to legitimate them. Where the analysis discussed above seeks to explain social movements in terms of wave patterns, hydraulics, floods, tides and currents, each of these call upon our knowledge of what water, in each of these states, *should* or indeed *must* do. We know it is in the nature of waves to rise and fall, to crash and dissipate, and therefore the “wave of contention” should do likewise. We know that steam builds in volume, amasses pressure, ready to drive and burst, so the developments described by Trotsky’s “steam pressure of the revolution” are rendered similarly natural. Ripples should spread, rivers course forward, cascades should tumble in stages. In this way, when social and political events are described through water processes, they acquire the association of being not only *necessary*, but in some sense, *right and good*. This tendency of water metaphors to connote particular sympathies and solidarities is perhaps best demonstrated when water is enrolled within journalist and activist discourses, where the connection between movement analysis and ideological side-taking is most stark (though it should be clear that the pattern we find here is also reproduced in the analysis of “scholars”).

Particularly evocative examples arise when activists describe their own movements in terms of water. This has been seen in the 2019/20 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in Hong Kong. Sometimes referred to as the “be water” protests, this involved a self-conscious adoption of the language of water

to describe the supple, mobile tactics adopted to confound authorities (Holbig 2019). The memory of the 2014 Umbrella Movement, and its suppression, demonstrated the danger of static occupations, identifiable leaders and predictable marches, so the 2019 activists adopted a repertoire of leaderless organisation through online forums and polls, in what Francis Li called—by way of an indirect water metaphor of sorts—an “open-source” strategy (in Lam 2019). Tactically, they deployed an approach where “a rally may turn into a march; a march may begin in one direction and abruptly change to another direction; the focus of a particular protest action may only emerge in the course of the march itself” (Dapiran 2019). Describing this, protesters circulated a 1971 quote from Bruce Lee, insisting that the successful martial artist “Be formless, shapeless, like water ... Water can flow, or it can crash—be water, my friend”. Taking this further, protesters articulated the four principles of their resistance in the following terms: “be strong like ice; be fluid like water; gather like dew; scatter like mist” (Anderlini 2019). In this way water morphologies were used to assert the validity and utility of organisational methods, becoming a kind of self-positing rationale for how best to proceed.

Such positive associations (and identifications) with water have understandably had a particular resonance in ecological struggles, especially those where water is an explicit concern. The resistance at Standing Rock, North Dakota, to the Dakota Access Pipeline from 2016 onward, and its central slogan that “Water is Life”, had a profound international effect. In a recent conversation with James Orr, Director of Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland and long-time environmental campaigner, he spoke of the important relationships that had been opened up between Sioux “water protectors” and various local struggles on the Irish border centred on rivers, lakes and the water course. Noting first how this had brought a new language, where some now adopted the claim that “we are the water; the water is us”, Orr took this further to suggest an emerging approach to the campaigns themselves: “If you want to protect nature you do it in the way that nature teaches you to campaign. Maybe we should look at the river and see what it teaches us about how to protect it. Sometimes you have to be ferocious, sometimes calm” (James Orr, personal communication, 18 May 2022). Here again, the identification with water is linked to the sense that water has lessons as to the right course of action; that campaigning *as* and *like* the water you fight for has both tactical and ethical advantages.

To take one last, quite different, example, this connection between identification and water ethics can also be found in Enric Castelló and Arantxa Capdevila’s (2015) discourse analysis of the media framing of the 2012 Catalan independence protests. In their study of the newspaper coverage of the March Toward Independence demonstration in Barcelona on 11 September 2012, the authors find a fascinating distinction between the poetic discourses present in those Catalan language sources supporting the movement, and those Spanish language ones that opposed it. They note how supportive papers deployed a range of water metaphors—describing the protests as a “flash flood”, “surging wave”, “flow”, “tide”, “ocean” and “river”—while hostile papers used none of these, instead drawing heavily on a quite different “discursive superdomain”

based on images of the besieged fortress. The authors conclude that the water (and weather) metaphors were used not only to describe but to valorise the show of popular agency on the streets. Just as the tumbling river is right to flow, so too was the coursing of the demonstration and its mobilising cause. This relationship between legitimation and naturalising metaphors is further indicated by the hostile papers' use of a quite different natural metaphor: the need for Catalan society to "ripen" (*madurar*) before it is ready for independence.

These conclusions bring with them the intriguing, if provocative, suggestion that the uses of water might reflect a political or ideological orientation, not just in terms of a generic affinity for the movement in question, but along something resembling a left/right split. If we consider the dominant water poetics of the right, alongside the uses of water to naturalise capitalist wealth distribution and inequality ("trickle down economics"; "a rising tide lifts all boats") the most common deployment of water metaphor is a wholly reactionary one: the well-documented discourse of human mobilities as "flood", where flows of immigrants inundate and swamp, and where the putative response is to stem the tide, or cut off the flow (Charteris-Black 2006; Hart 2008). This is, of course, a dehumanising imagery of the threatening, faceless and mobile mass (quite a different way of seeing water to the Hong Kong, Catalan and North Dakota cases). It is also one whose poetry is connected to very real waters. The literal border waters of the Mediterranean, Rio Grande, or English Channel, for example, function as sites of ongoing potential threat in the nationalist fantasy. Precisely not a terrain but something else, waters resonate with a right-wing affective sensibility of fear in the face of the symbolic disturbances of an external other.

A similar representation of water as other and threat can also be found in some of the wider right-wing framing of movement politics. One exemplary case of this is a promotional video for Canada's conservative Manning Centre (now Canada Strong and Free Network) titled "I am a Movement Conservative" (Canada Strong and Free Network 2014). This clip of quick-edited images and voiceover begins with the totems of conservative ideology: the conservative movement, the voiceover insists, is an "extended family" that supports the "family business" of elections, while "training recruits" and supporting "veterans of the political wars". But then it shifts to a set of depictions of water—in its terrestrial and airborne forms—in what is the most visually dramatic part of the film. With the audio stating that this movement "provides a place of shelter when the political storm clouds burst and the electoral tides are unkind", we are shown an aquatic scene with gathering clouds reflected in the upturned waterscape, cutting to a dark, heaving sea, with waves pounding all sides of what looks to be a military submarine on the surface. Unlike the examples discussed above where movements were identified *with* the water, here the symbolic depiction of the conservative "movement" has water as its other. This sea is the source of hostile forces and contexts raised against the embattled submarine of the movement.

While the earlier sections of this article demonstrated the frequency with which movements are identified with water, it is worth noting how conservatives, from Spain to Canada, not only choose another trope, but in fact identify water as a symbol of external threat. It is at the very least a curious coincidence that a right-

wing animus has identified progressive movements, migrating peoples, and the waters of the earth as all characterised by a similar dangerous excess. In this sense it is not simply that water naturalises and legitimates particular demands or practices, nor even that this is cut through by a fascinating line of political difference, but that this appears to imply a particular attitude toward the waters themselves. It is to the role of water metaphors in shaping the politically contested field of hydrosocial relations that I now turn.

Hydrosocial Effects: Thinking Water Otherwise

The insistence that we take water metaphors seriously is born not only of a sense of their analytical and ideological effects, but of a sensitivity to the way our stories establish certain relationships with water. The waters of our analytical schema, which spring in part from our situated relationship with water, find their way back to those concrete hydrosocial relations. If, as Jason W. Moore (2015) insists, all social and cultural forms are fundamentally internal to world ecology through the multilateral entanglement of “humanity-in-nature”/“nature-in-humanity”, this includes the metaphors we use to think about social movements. Concepts are therefore lent an ecological character, existing in a creative friction with material ecologies and their politics, which is all the more important in our era of climate crisis. Recognising the performative dimension inherent in all language, as it structures and directs the relationship between things (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) we should therefore consider the ordering and distributional effects of social movement waters.

Much of this abstracted water imagery represents a subtle extension of what Jamie Linton (2010, 2014) has called “modern water”, which is rooted in “a way of knowing, accounting for, and *representing* water apart from its social context” (Linton 2014:111, emphasis added). Replacing a panoply of situated and differentiated water knowledges, Linton argues that modern water emerged with capitalist modernity, which brought not only technological developments (for example the chemical revolution) and the desire to rationalise and measure, but the wider “disenchantment” of the natural world that could facilitate its exploitation (see also Dickens 1996; Seymour 2022). This was a shift to a water of “endless repetition” (Linton 2010); a rubric whereby all water—wherever it is found, with whatever local uses, meanings and forms—is of essentially identical characteristics, always an example of abstracted “H₂O”. Modern water, in sum, is about the instrumentalisation of a universal *resource*. Erik Swyngedouw’s (2015) references to water’s “enrolment” by state projects usefully highlights the political dimensions of this instrumentalisation, and the role played by the way water is represented in water policy and governance discourses. What is emphasised far less is the enrolment of water as a resource to represent other things; a crucial but neglected aspect in the cultural imaginary of water.

In the water metaphors used to make sense of social movements, the reduction of water to an abstracted symbol marked by the repetition of universal morphologies to be “enrolled” as a resource—this time conceptual rather than material—is an extension of the estrangement characterising modern water. The wave,

stream or current is each a generic pattern of motion stripped of its particularity, its wetness, and the concrete conditions of actual waters. The use and ubiquity of this abstract water, as documented throughout this paper, locates us within a wider alienation from “nature”. It also reveals water metaphors as one articulation point of a critical ecological politics that might contribute to the “resocialisation” of the hydrosocial, which Linton asserts as the way out of the modern water paradigm.

As laboratories of imagination, movements and social struggles themselves represent an important field of practice where a being-otherwise with water is imagined and experimented with. Indeed, as modern water is a *modern* problem, it is unsurprising that a critical water imaginary often emerges from precisely those subaltern knowledges and subjectivities marginalised by the project of modernity. It is in the “cramped spaces” (Thoburn 2003) of such marginal positions as the Indigenous, the feminist or the non-human that we find the potential for the critical powers and agencies capable of challenging the prevailing state of things, and where we find visions of water as inhabited, agential, and always located in particular geographies and social relations.

One illustrative example can be found in the case, discussed briefly above, of network-building between Sioux water protectors and Northern Irish water activists. Campaigns along the Irish border—centring on issues of energy, water pollution and democratic governance—have also staged the power of water as a mediator of new solidarities amongst geographically distant members of what some have called “Blockadia”, the dispersed territory of located ecological resistance (see Klein 2014). The slogan of the Standing Rock activists that “water is life” articulated a particular ethics of struggle attached to water and place. Its global spread as slogan, meme and “orientational frame” for action (see Gillan 2008) has been one among a wider set of encounters, direct and virtual, that have strengthened new and unexpected affinities between far-flung campaigns. One consequence of this, James Orr of Friends of the Earth has noted, has been that it became increasingly common, among the working-class women running campaigns in small Irish towns, to hear people saying that they themselves *are* the water—“that we are the water; that the water is us”—which Orr locates in a wider “language of indigeneity” to rationalise and legitimate resistance (James Orr, personal communication, 18 May 2022). Leaving for now the problematic nature of universalising the category of “Indigenous”, we can nonetheless note here how globally networked activism has fostered new practices of collective imagination and consciousness, in ways that challenge alienating modern water. Describing a movement using generic water morphologies is quite different to saying “*We are this river here*”.

The critical imaginary produced in these activist spaces has included the affirmation of the river as not simply an *object* of their concern, but a *subject*, participating in the movement. In July 2022, the Northern Irish network and their Sioux allies organised a set of solidarity-building actions, where visiting Native American activists—led by Ojibwe leader Sharon Day and Lakota activist Chas Jewett—would guide a ritualised river walk along the Foyle watercourse, connecting locations through the counties of Leitrim, Tyrone and Donegal, and across the Sperrin

Mountains. Aiming to use the Native American ritual of “water carrying” to inspire and initiate new local practices of water defence, the programme of events was titled “Making Relatives”. The new kinships envisaged were not only that of a global family of (human) water activists, but a kinship with the river system itself, and between geographically distant entanglements of people with their rivers. As James Orr summarised:

The women from three different tribes will carry the water from source to sea—the water can’t stop—and I think from this we’ll learn something about how to create our own rituals; rituals of decommodification and of celebrating water. It’s about building community; about “Making Relatives” across the world, but also making relatives with the water, because that’s the source of life here. (James Orr, personal communication, 18 May 2022)

In this way, water retains a strongly symbolic and poetic dimension, but within a quite different framework to that of the water metaphors above. Here, the water and the movement are not two separate linguistic and even ontological “domains”, but instead inhabit the very same landscape, in a common ecology. Water still joins these activists in their “reverie” and imagining of what movements are and might be, but in a manner always tied to a real material presence and social relationship.

With women playing a central organisational role, as in so many ecological justice struggles the world over (Klein 2014) “Making Relatives” draws on the wider feminist critique that is a key coordinate in today’s ecological politics. Feminist epistemologies—and especially approaches to the body and subjectivity—present fundamental challenges to the very water metaphors discussed throughout this paper. The crucial insight that knowledge is always contingent on perspectival “standpoints” (Harding 1986) already raises questions about the standpoints of those proposing general theories of social change. But this is lent an especially corporeal dimension when we are reminded how those water concepts—whether waves, ripples, or lines of marine visibility—always depend on an embodied perspective vis-à-vis that water. This identifies a connection between two aspects of patriarchal abstraction present in certain concepts: the abstract-standard *male* position assumed by theory, and the alienating abstraction of nature underpinning modernity’s gendered violence against “wild” socio-natural relations (Collard and Contrucci 1988).

Feminist ecologies problematise our relationships with water and sense-making still further. While linguists have recognised the general significance of the human body for mapping metaphors of all kinds (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), the post-humanism of some recent feminist scholarship has “productively, posthumanly torqued” (Neimanis 2016:27) understandings of what constitutes bodies in the first place, insisting that these are produced as complex, relational becomings, in arrangements with, among other things, “geological and meteorological bodies such as oceans, rivers, aquifers, subterranean streams, clouds, storms, swamps, and soils” (ibid.). This insistence on a saturated, irrigated body carries the call to understand water not only through its representations as images, but through haptic and multi-sensorial “wet ontologies” (Steinberg and Peters 2015). This has

even been expressed as a rejection of water's enrolment in the social sciences, as in Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) "liquid modernity", which Amy Hough (2019) has accused of a "dry liquidity" stripped of its materiality, and privileging representations over the senses in an implicit defence of the modern (male) subject for whom knowledge is a cerebral, not a bodily matter.

This challenge to instrumentalised, modern water by activist networks like "Making Relatives" also depends on its Indigenous references. The growing scholarship on Indigenous water epistemologies reveals the plurality of ways of relating to water: as a medicine (Cohn et al. 2019); as heritage held in stewardship (Shepherd 2019); as a companion (Chaudhury 2019); as a (human) right and as a (non-human) possessor of rights. These add up to a polyvocal chorus against modern water's assumption of a universal hydrology. Importantly for the analysis here, this also includes far more delicate answers to that crucial question on which water's sense-making capacity so often depends: where does the water start and end? Having earlier discussed the significance of water's edges, we might now note that our understanding of water's limits is contingent not only on perspectival standpoints (as above) but on ontological and even cosmological understandings of the world. Among the most interesting recent interventions on this is Tina Ngata's (2021) account of the pan-Polynesian cosmology of a humanity and life-system fully saturated with oceanic waters at every point. In these cultures of seafaring peoples in an expansive seascape, Ngata documents a worldview in which the boundedness of water is far from straightforward, a reminder that the perspectives from which we perceive (and conceive of) water might feel immediate and natural, but are undergirded by cultural and historical conditions. It is fitting that we can witness the (partial but important) unmaking of such perspectives in precisely those social movement spaces that have long been understood through the deployment of watery imaginaries.

Conclusion

Water is a companion that joins us in our "reverie" (Bachelard 1983) of the world as it is and as it might be. It is so ubiquitous in imaginaries of social change that its waves, floods, flows and ripples are often present from the very first moment that movements are theorised and explained. This article has contended that the implications of this ubiquity demand interrogation.

Water metaphors stage a drama of force, motion and scale, but these rely on implied perspectives of perception and their corresponding social positions. The sense-making capacities of these concept-metaphors draw on our familiarity with water's boundedness to affirm the edges and surfaces of the social formations in question. Even when this moves beyond the highly structured modern framing of *the* social movement to an ontology of complex flows, water imagery continues to propose edges, surfaces and limits as the nature of things. That familiarity with particular hydrological patterns also carries a normative suggestion of what movements should do, such that water metaphors often bear an ideological stamp, marking the solidarities of their user. Furthermore, in reducing water to a set of

representational images and fixed hydrodynamics, these concepts contribute to the wider abstraction and objectification of water that has characterised modern capitalist hydrogeopolitics. As Bachelard noted, there is, however, something about water that defies the completion of this abstraction: a set of haptic, embodied qualities that insist on *another* hydrogeopolitics. Social movement waters remain haunted by this excess; by water that is more than an image, and is instead a set of presences, encounters or spirits, and their concrete ecological and historical conditions.

By exploring the multifarious entanglement of social movements and water metaphors, the current article provides a framework through which to critically interrogate water concepts in terms of a tripartite question: that is, what are the *analytical*, the *normative* and the *hydrosocial* implications of any particular enrolment of water to understand social change? My exploration of these problematics has not only accounted for the connections between movement practice, movement theory, and the social relations of water, but has demonstrated that these must be understood as part of a mutually constitutive ecology: the descriptive potency of water metaphors, the normative claims on political practice and the state of our relationship to water are inseparable features of this phenomenon.

I have suggested that a better water poetics—and possibly a more emancipatory movement politics—can be seen in activist imaginaries that connect movement practice to the materiality, corporeal encounter and embedded socio-natural conditions of particular waters. These do not deny the deep symbolic attraction of the world's waters, but suggest alternative orientations, identifying with, and taking lessons from located waters, and attenuating the boundaries between the bodies of water, people and their communities. Not only does this connect these struggles to the wider critique of modernity's ruptures (nature/society, body/mind, universal/local); it also reminds us that a radical re-orientation of water politics requires building real solidarities and modes of inhabiting the watery earth together, as the basis for any emancipatory poetics.

Here, the right-wing enrolment of water's meanings provides an illuminating and cautionary counterpoint. The reactionary view of water as a terrifying *other*—epitomised in, but not limited to, the migrant "flood"—marks a wider alienation at the heart of such a politics: an estrangement from social relations of care and a disavowal of the socio-natural interdependencies that govern life on this watery earth. This only further cements the view that a critical water politics is one working against these estrangements, by building identifications with the world's waters while insisting on their *social* character. Although a more troubling, even ecofascist, identification with water as national territory remains possible, the critical, pluralistic water knowledges of feminists, Indigenous peoples and others are a means to spot and reject such authoritarian reflexes and the false solution to alienation proposed by nationalism. Indeed, it is through water's very defiance of the borders between nation and nation, person and person, and humanity and ecosystem, that a "reverie" suitable for a world of cascading crises may yet emerge.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful for the careful and critical reading provided by the three anonymous reviewers, whose comments helped to improve the present article considerably. I would also like to thank Margarita Aragon, Antje Scharenberg and Jenny Rosenberg for their supportive engagement with an early draft, and James Orr for generously sharing his reflections on water and activism, contributing to the arguments of the present article.

Data Availability Statement

The small amount of original interview data that support this study are available from the corresponding author [J Matthews], upon reasonable request.

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