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Transboundary 'hydro-hegemony': ten years later

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Abstract

The article places the theorization and analysis of hydro-hegemony in the context of the scholarship on transboundary water conflict and cooperation. We discuss critiques, developments and debates in this domain over the past ten years, focusing in particular on the contributions of the London Water Research Group, showing how thinking on the theorization and analysis of hydro-hegemony – and hydropolitics – has moved beyond the state-centricity, the tendency to see hegemony as solely negative, and the conceptually hegemonic potential of hydro-hegemony itself. Various strands of International Relations theory (Realism, neo-institutionalism, critical theory) have left their mark on the London School. Intense interaction between analysts and pragmatic practitioners is found to invite (or incite!) eclecticism as well as to promote vibrancy.

Keywords: hydro-hegemony, transboundary water conflict and cooperation, hydropolitics, water wars

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Introduction: The Evolution of Hydro-Hegemony Analysis and its Criticisms

Ever since Naff and Matson (1) and Starr and Stoll (2) issued warnings over international 'water wars', violent open conflict over water has preoccupied politicians, journalists and academics. Amidst researchers and scholars, the potential for transboundary water conflict quickly turned into a 'numbers game' (3) seeking to predict war over water with the help of increasingly sophisticated datasets (4; 5; 6). As evidence grew, Allan's early claim that the water wars thesis was alarmist and unfounded gained grudging acceptance (7). Wolf (8) showed that there has not been a conflict over water alone since Nebuchadnezar sought control over the Mesopotamian Tigris and Euphrates and pointed to the overriding evidence of thousands of water treaties concluded since. The 1990s saw a shift within the scholarship from fears of water wars to upbeat expectations of co-operation between states over water, a 'reflexive modernisation' narrative epitomised by Ohlsson and Turton (9). This article examines scholarly trends in the theorisation and analysis of hydro-hegemony against this backdrop.

The London Water Research Group (LWRG or London Group) originated in the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies at the turn of the millennium. The core group was largely composed of students and colleagues of Professor John Anthony (Tony) Allan, a key advocate for recognising the central role of politics in water issues, particularly in arid regions. 'Politics', the London group argued, was not 'the problem' standing in the way of proper water management (10); rather, ignoring the political unduly put some actors at a disadvantage. The Framework of Hydro-Hegemony extended and refined these critiques, emphasising the importance of power in transboundary river basin relations.

The present contribution sketches developments, critiques, and ways forward beyond hegemonic concepts as seen by representatives from the London Group that launched it. To structure an overview of the debate and to point at next steps in this new domain, the article addresses and accommodates criticism levelled at the theoretical framework and analysis of hydro-hegemony. The article considers three main areas of critique: state centricity and territorial traps (including the role of institutions and the agency of non-hegemons and non-state actors); assumptions of negativity and the immutability of (hydro-)hegemony; and the potential for hydro-hegemony itself to be a hegemonic concept. The development of the theoretical Framework was significant as it challenged the then ideologically dominant school of thought in water resources governance focusing on management.

The LWRG argued that the trending confidence in 'cooperation', even if well intended, did not necessarily warrant or lead to peaceful and benign outcomes (11). Cooperation may be forced rather than voluntary, sabres may be rattled but not used, and treaties may never go beyond exchange of technical data. Moreover, conflictive relations between states are often not about merely water but instead compounded with other issues such as state legitimacy, personality clashes, access to other resources and historic grievances (the 'shadow of the past') (12). Water can act as a convenient, highly visible arena for escalating these issues. Perhaps the most challenging argument put forward by the London Group was that the presence of international organisations and of signatures under a treaty do not guarantee cooperative behaviour (13), and so are not accurately counted as 'cooperative events' in quantitative studies. Structural conflict may well underlie these relations and may sporadically come to the surface.

The preliminary conceptual framework laid down by Zeitoun and Warner (14) and its companion piece on counter-hegemony (15) sought to uncover the political context in which water is contested as well as the various strategies and tactics used to secure and control water allocation. Subsequent work utilised power analysis (primarily that of Lukes (16), a topic we will return to) in order to develop a framework focusing on how conflict and cooperation co-exist, rejecting static dichotomies of conflict or cooperation occurring in river basins (17, see also 18).

These studies brought transboundary water interaction centre stage in analysis, offering an alternative understanding to work simplifying hydropolitical realities as embodying either conflict *or* cooperation (11, 19, 20). This alternative approach enables a better understanding of transboundary water interactions by moving from simplistic, dichotomous claims assuming that 'the next war will be about water' or 'water scarcity leads to peace' to more fully examining situations characterised by neither militarised conflict nor

friendly relations. This does not hold for all basins: some are not conflictive, and even when there is (potential) conflict; water resources may not become politicised (21). But there are plenty of shared watercourses where conflict is seen and simplifications of causal water management outcomes cannot be made. These basins, the London Group asserts, are best served by analysis that places power asymmetry and hegemony at its core.

Hydro-hegemony analysis did not fall out of thin air. The role of power asymmetries and resistance to power play in transboundary basins had been dealt with before (by Lowi (22) and Shapland (23), among others). Its more hidden, discreet operation, however, including at the discursive level, was relatively new. Applying different theoretical forms of power to transboundary water analysis was first performed by Marwa Daoudy (24). Building on this, hydro-hegemony analyses looked into the effects of 'hard' and 'soft' power in maintaining the *status quo* of water allocation, frequently referring to Lukes' (25) three faces of power: decision-making power (the power to 'win the game'), non-decision-making power (the power to set the agenda), and ideological power (control over discourse, interpreted as a naturalised 'common sense'). The starting point of defining hydro-hegemony inevitably focuses on power and could be elucidated as the success of a basin riparian in sedimenting a particular discourse, which preserves its interests and impedes changes to the status-quo (21).[7] However, as it will be further explained in later sections, this definition of hydro-hegemony is not fixed, and as critical, action-research oriented scholarship, we also problematize the application and use of the term itself.

For the purposes of this paper, we address critiques of the theorisation and analysis of hydro-hegemony from a variety of sources. The LWRG purposefully borrows from and builds on multiple scholarly traditions and understandings of hegemony, considering both radical and neo-institutional perspectives. Rather than rejecting various critiques out of hand, and all too aware of the problems arising from unquestioned adherence to any school of thought, the London Group has constructively engaged with the critiques while also holding to the crucial belief that power and politics is key to understanding transboundary water arrangements. In showing the hard (infrastructural) and soft power associated with such prescriptions in transboundary water management, hydro-hegemony analysts open up hegemonic concepts for closer scrutiny to see what they *do*. The London Group has continually benefited from dialogue between academics and practitioners in its conferences, adopting and engaging with the same discourses it seeks to critique. The Group, then, is no exception to the policy and practitioner groups under analysis: we ourselves continuously risk getting caught up in hegemonic discourse and practice (see 26). However, our intent is to continue providing alternative perspectives and seek ways of reflecting on and engaging with water management practices in a way that is sensitive to the implications of power asymmetries.

Building on a discussion paper prepared for one of the London Group's semi-annual international meetings (26), this section considers three primary challenges for the LWRG and Framework of Hydro-Hegemony: issues of state-centricity and the territorial trap of the river basin as the scalar unit; the prevailing conceptualisation of hydro-hegemony as immutable and inherently negative; and the possibility that hydro-hegemony itself can become hegemonic as a concept, drowning out other issues in and approaches to transboundary water interactions. These issues challenge the analysis of hydro-hegemony, and by extension much hydropolitical analysis, to be more explicit about its theoretical assumptions and understandings of hegemony. They have helped the notion of power-laden transboundary water interaction advance several steps by addressing common issues in hydropolitics literature, including narrow understandings of territorial space and simplistic approaches to international political economy.

Issue 1: State-centricity and the Territorial Trap

As Furlong (27) has noted, much hydropolitical, and indeed hydro-hegemony analysis has fallen prey to the territorial trap – 'the reification of sovereignty as complete state control over a fixed unit of territorial space;

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While rooted in critical analysis, this definition does not rule out institutionalist and Realist readings of hydro-hegemony which emphasise stability of expectations as a common good. For critical analysts, the stable expectation of inequality is obviously not evaluated as positive.

the severing of domestic and foreign politics; and the state as prior to and a container of society' (28). In the early scholarship on water wars, 'conflict' was tantamount to conflict over (i) river basins, meted out between (ii) sovereign states and that was inherently (iii) zero-sum. As we will show below, these critiques have been addressed through the development of the hydro-hegemony scholarship.

Most hydro-hegemony analyses have concerned contested river basins, shared by neighbouring states. This ontology easily reinforces the dominant role of the state as a main and monolithic actor, responsible for and in control of the territorial space of the river. Such an assumption risks missing out the fact that the state's decision does not necessarily represent the interests of all within it (27), and that state control may well be contested. The Framework of Hydro-Hegemony has fallen into this trap with the river basin as the hegemonic, taken-for-granted scale of analysis. It is joined in this assumption by scholarship on water governance on Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and stakeholder participation, both generally bound by these same units (29). Usual suspects for hydropolitical analysis have been the transboundary rivers Jordan, Euphrates and Nile, as well as the Orange-Senqu and Mekong basins. Authors like Lebel et al. (30), however, showed that the Mekong has many ungoverned spaces and counterhegemonic practices, while South Sudan on the Nile and Syria and Iraq on the Euphrates and Tigris are obviously ill-fitting examples of undivided, water-controlling states representing the population along neatly delineated geographical borders.

Before the theorization of hydro-hegemony, there had been attempts to break through river centricity of the water conflict literature by zooming in on transboundary aquifers (23). Since then, there have been notable exceptions to the river basin focus combing hydro-hegemony analysis: Ferragina and Greco's (31) work on the politics of the Disi aquifer, shared by Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and Messerschmid (32) on the aquifers shared by Israel and Palestine and Gomez (33) on the Guarani aquifer shared by Brazil and its neighbours. Menga (21) focused on the hegemonic politics of the Aral Sea in Central Asia. However, much of this literature reverts to viewing the role of the state and analysis is bound up in how the state legitimises its actions. While the study of aquifers has opened up scope for analysis, these studies have yet to change fully the fundamental treatment of space and state agency.

Given its focus on the river basin as its original unit of analysis, and its origins in international relations theory, it is no surprise that hydro-hegemony too has been critiqued as state-centric. But while its origins have contributed to the problem, they may also present part of the solution. Hydro-hegemony has from the start been an eclectic theoretical mix, in which different (meta)theoretical strands can easily be identified – and perhaps leveraged to move beyond simplistic understandings of the state or a particular territory. Realism and neo-institutionalism are important directions that are, to a degree, mixed and matched. In Realist thought, hegemonic power is tied to a particular state calling the shots or acting as a 'balancer' in a region or in the world. Neo-institutionalism sees institutional engineering and complex interdependence as ways to overcome hegemony. Critical theory sees a global, neoliberal elite calling the shots though the debate on whether states are handmaidens of business is still unresolved (34). Hydro-hegemony analysis has evolved along several lines and also sought to take on board critiques of myopic hydropolitics. Varying interpretations of hydro-hegemony, rather than being a limitation to the body of work given the corresponding lack of a universally used definition, demonstrate disciplinary assumptions in how order, structure and agency are understood. Embracing the interdisciplinarity of hydro-hegemony analysis provides a way forward, if not without its tensions.

Within international relations, the theory of hegemonic stability (35) bestows hegemonic power 'with leadership responsibilities and privileges' (36). Non-hegemons may seek to counterbalance rather than fight hegemonic power to make sure no power becomes overweening. The resulting *de-facto* 'arrangement' between hegemons and non-hegemons brings order and stability. From a Realist perspective, hegemons set the rules of international relations and maintain the status quo in their constellation, while disgruntled actors may oppose the rules or the status quo; Turton and Funke (37) and Daoudy (38) have most clearly represented this Realist strand. While Realism is mostly focused on military power and violent conflict, some Realists consider soft (especially economic) power as well as hard power necessary to be hegemonic. While classical Realists would argue that hegemony is not at work on a basin or regional level but only on the global one, neo-Realists scholars identified regional hegemony in *regional security complexes* (39), a lead notably followed by Turton and Funke (37) after Schulz (40).

By treating states as unitary actors, the state centric approach is 'underpopulated': it risks failing to identify key actors. 'Blackboxing' the state 'takes preferences for granted' and negates the way 'domestic elites' are enmeshed in transnational networks to realise their ambitions (34, 41). The role of narratives in transboundary networks in cementing or resisting hegemony is a developing area in hydro-hegemony. While the London Group has incorporated critical theory from the start, its rather loose adaptation of neo-Marxist thought has exposed hydro-hegemony to its most trenchant criticism in papers by Selby (42), Davidsen-Harden, Naidoo and Harden (43) and Atkins (44). Selby has even claimed that Zeitoun and Warner (14) 'exclusively' conceptualise hydro-hegemony at the interstate level. While Selby is justified in noting hydro-hegemony analysis is essentially Realist in crucial aspects of its London School conception, we contend that it has moved quite a bit beyond that. With hydro-hegemony analysis taken up and expanded by multiple scholars, state centricity is by no means its key feature.

The state-oriented bias in hydropolitical analysis was further broadened when Sadoff and Grey (45) highlighted direct and indirect environmental services related to rivers. The concept of 'benefit sharing' (46) was reflected in the late David Phillips' Transboundary Water Opportunity analytical model (47). Recent policy and academic debates feature the water-food-energy(-climate change) nexus (48), which address the connections and relative interchangeability of environmental services. The development of these analyses is largely policy-driven, seeking 'improved' water management and avert situations of water scarcity. While such policy debates are indeed part of global hegemonic discourses as mentioned above, they also open up opportunities for scholarship to demonstrate how water is embedded in tradeable (agro-)commodities as virtual water or how kinetic hydro-energy can likewise be commoditized and exchanged. These insights from scholarship in turn demonstrate that these policy debates all too frequently disregard the politics of the water, its services and as commodity, and the dis-benefits and externalities of collaboration. These debates would thus benefit from any form of politics-sensitive analysis, hydro-hegemonic or otherwise (49). While moving away from zero-sum calculations in water claims is helpful, we caution against depoliticised decision-making, and thus the value of hydro-hegemony analysis, as it scrutinises discourses and underpinning power structures.

In addition to concerns over the de-politicisation of these discourses, Allouche and his co-authors (50) observe that the nexus is framed in security terms: an ever expanding menu of (state and human) security concerns imperilling the stable access to resources: water security, food security, energy security and climate security were all considered to be in crisis from 2008. 'Securitisation' (51) bestows special powers on a speaker, bypassing the political process to legitimise extraordinary measures in the name of the greater good. Winslett even claims that the difference in the extent to which riparian states securitise the issue of water informs states' relative bargaining power positions in a basin (52). At the global level, the 'securitisation of everything' may justify pre-emptive adaptive measures, bypassing deliberation on how to go about multiple perceived crises (53). However, the water-energy-food nexus privileges the uncritical promotion of large structures such as dams (50), which the trilateral World Commission on Dams considered questionable just fifteen years ago. Big dams are known to displace people, have serious environmental impacts, and have more recently become objects of rampant 'financialisation'[8] (54 and 55).
Such issues compel us to move beyond the river basin as the primary unit of analysis in international water issues. The emphasis on global trade and big infrastructure legitimised through the water-energy-food nexus also opens the door to including economic organisations and other actors in analysis.

Hydro-hegemony analysis has incorporated an understanding that transnational companies and INGOs are major actors on the global scene. Cascão (15), for one, shows how non-state actors are instrumentalised by domestic elites to further development goals. Warner (56) and Conker (57) highlighted the importance (but have not claimed the dominance) of transboundary private and civil-society actors when examining the hegemonic politics of the Ilisu Dam on the river Tigris, to which Turkey is upstream. Mirumachi (17) uncovers how the political economy of basin states propels bilateral and multilateral developments.
States in this view remain prime movers, but not as sole or even unified actors. They can seize on the proliferation of MNCs and INGOs, as Hensengerth (35) argues, to increase their power and actively steer systems, leveraging transboundary networks. The logic of government has, in this sense, changed

[8] Financialization describes attempts to reduce all value that is exchanged (tangibles or intangibles, future or present promises, etc.) into a financial instrument. According to its critics, financialization reduces any work product or service to an exchangeable financial instrument, like currency, and thus facilitates to trade in these financial instruments, as well as land and water grabbing (64).

substantially. The construction industry, banks, and also global activists are key players in understanding the transboundary politics of dams, while the international political economy of virtual water put relations between states and markets in agricultural trade centre stage.
While 'mainstream' neo-realists and neo-institutionalists have likewise ‘populated’ their analytical world with transnational actors, issue regimes, business networks, transnational advocacy groups, and terrorist organisations, all of whom have become part of decisional authority (35), HH scholarship has also been shifting on who is the driving force here. While rarely taking on 'neoliberalism', Sojamo *et al.* identified public-private elite collusion identified at multiple scales in global virtual water hydro-hegemony: only five transnational companies (Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Cargill, Louis Dreyfus and Glencore, or ´ABCDG´) control 80% of global agricultural trade – and thus the water contained therein (58). Their operations are actively supported and facilitated by national governments. From a recognition that ‘issues of power and privilege also dictate communities’ access to river basin resources beyond and within states’, a distinct scholarship is being built up within the London Group that explores virtual water hegemony (see, for example, 58; 59; 60). ‘Virtual water’ is subject to capture through large traders, further juxtaposing a divide between those who benefit from the global trade system and those who merely deal with its dis-benefits, detached from access to recourse within this global system. This line of analysis has flirted with a systemic (Wallerstein's ‘world systems’) approach to hegemony, placing core-periphery economic relations as its central consideration (59; 60), while avoiding the trap of seeing hegemony only as economic in nature.

The focus on the role of transnational actors has enabled a more intense engagement with political ecologists (61) to look at the politicised environment (see also (27) and, as an early forerunner (62)). Zeitoun et al. (63) engage with current ontological debates in the social sciences that explore how the social and the natural coproduce each other in the ‘waterscape’, drawing on the case of the upper Jordan basin. The waterscapes approach helps to “explore the ways in which flows of water, power and capital converge to produce uneven socio-ecological arrangements over space and time, the particular characteristics of which reflect the power relations that shaped their production” (64). Moreover, while (environmental) justice issues due to power asymmetry has been a concern from the start, the interface between political ecology and hydro-hegemony analysis has incited a greater emphasis onto dealing with concerns such as the process and outcomes of structural inequality (65).

Issue 2: Assumptions of Negativity and Immutability of Hegemonic Power Relations

Negativity

Hydro-hegemony scholarship generally presents hegemony as a fact of life (cf. Moffitt 2009 (66)), in which actors can only seek to change its nature. This may be more of a problem in some languages and cultures than in others, especially in those where ‘hegemony’ has a negative connotation. After all, linguistically, hegemony denotes positive leadership qualities, that of a vanguard and guide (*hegemon*). In the original Framework of Hydro-Hegemony, Zeitoun and Warner (14) expressed a reformist rather than revolutionary belief in the possibility of positive forms of hegemony, reflecting Realist (*Realpolitik*) leanings. In a Realist scenario, benign hegemons promote transboundary cooperation, taking on the burdens of a hegemon in contributing disproportionately to infrastructure and diplomacy that maintain the stability of a mostly uncontested transboundary water arrangement. In contrast empirical insights on hydro-hegemony are very limited on positive cases (26): critical scholarship tends to focus on hegemony when it has gone wrong - ‘bad’ leaders and destructive uses of hegemonic power (bullying). There is ample scope to research more 'positive' case studies - of visionary leadership, but also of plus-sum rather than zero- or negative sum outcomes (see also 67). Students of hydropolitics have expended rather less energy on the question why some, if not most, non-hegemons choose to follow the pattern set by the hydro-hegemon, whether inspired by opportunism or defeatism. Positive hegemony would be a hegemonic order from which all riparians would benefit. In this context Haugaard and Lentner (68) point at the mutual if unequal benefits of ‘strategic cooperation’. In that context Menga (21) reminds us that counting ´quanta of power´ to show asymmetry, the placeholder method suggested in Zeitoun and Warner (14), may not be as important as understanding how this asymmetry gets to be accepted as the way it is (acquiescence) or even should be. Past work of the London School sheds light on how compliance is often a resultant outcome in situations of power asymmetry (19). Integrative strategies can be seen in the endeavours to demonstrate a normative role of leadership in international fora cementing compliance (19). States such Egypt, Turkey, South Africa and Brazil have taken on such a role, reflected in their presence in multilateral bodies.

Assessments of the salutary effects of such leadership may vary. An example is the role of the Republic of South Africa in its hydropolitical constellation. While Turton and Funke (37) identified South Africa as a benign hegemon, promoting the 'common good', Furlong (27) arrived at the opposite conclusion from a political ecology perspective, claiming South Africa is promoting harmful neoliberalism. Sebastian & Warner (70) would not go that far, but claim South Africa may well be involved in a 'water grabbing' strategy. The question *cui bono?* (´good for whom´) as well as who puts the label remains crucial to any hydro-hegemonic analysis.

Present authors experienced the contradictions of hegemony first-hand when a Stockholm Water Week Session organised in 2006 by the London Group found that neither hegemons nor non-hegemons (seen from the Israeli or Jordanian perspectives, respectively) are necessarily pleased with their label. Their self-image or preferred public image may be quite different. While the object of study doesn't need to identify with how analysts see them, it should give pause for thought to the analyst about options for more sophisticated labelling. This issue also reinforces and legitimises the multiplicity of definitions of 'hegemon' and 'hydro-hegemon': There is not one approach to or understanding of hegemony. Within international relations, different schools of thought (Realism, neo-institutionalism, critical International Political Economy) conceptualise it very differently. Moving past the bounds of IR scholarship, other disciplines and non-academics also use the idea in a variety of ways. Rather than advocating for one particular approach as 'correct', the London Group seeks to call attention to these different uses and learn from each. This includes properly analysing the negative impacts of hydro-hegemony, but also giving appropriate attention to its many other forms and considerations. This will be further explored during **Issue 3**.

Immutability

Given the remarkable durability of power relations on rivers over time, the potential of counterhegemonic agency of non-hegemons has perhaps not been given enough credence, as Tawfik (69) points out in the case of Ethiopia on the Nile. But rather than assuming fixity and determinism, hydro-hegemony analysis has however from its early days attempted to explain how non-hegemons may resist hegemons (see, for example, 15, 72). Developments in the Nile River Basin amply demonstrate how the downstream hegemonic position of a country like Egypt can change after attempts at resisting and challenging the status quo. When Egypt's leadership imploded in 2011, Ethiopia seized the opportunity to capitalise on its growing clout. In cases where the tables were not turned, such as Turkish predominance in the Tigris-Euphrates river basin, its hydro-hegemony is far from complete and subject to what Sumer (71) calls 'corrosive forces'. While the Government of Turkey also did not resort to systematic coercion and capture (see also 57), Turkey's hegemonic project, if at all consistent, it was systematically contested and as such, he implies, may not be seen as a 'perfect' hegemony.
This is useful reminder that material power dynamics may change over time even as at the discursive level states actively choose to redefine their status through a new set of strategies and tactics. Cooperation may be intentionally declared as a strategic alternative to open conflict; or a state may choose to develop cooperation in parallel with conflict, in which case "the different sides' divergent interests – their respective goals, intentions and guiding principles – are not laid to rest, but merely change their form" (32). Turkey and Syria have been in a process of appeasement since 2001, with Syria even declaring in 2008 that "we have always been friends". This signified a move opposite from the Nilotic turn of events, where the negation of any conflict used to be the norm set by Egypt, and veiled consent became open standoff (20).

Hydro-hegemony is thus not and should not be considered inevitable or unchangeable. The potential of hydro-hegemony to be intentionally impacted by various actors was discussed further in the most recent of the London Group's publications. "Transboundary water interaction III: contest and compliance" examines and theorises counter-hegemonic strategies in what may otherwise be stagnant relations (20).

Issue 3: Hydro-Hegemony and Hegemonic Concepts
Analysis of hydro-hegemony aims to shed light on seemingly common-sense, partially fixed meanings and antagonisms. This is highly relevant to the scholarship on hydropolitics that is often tied up with policy debates on water governance. These debates can demonstrate how hegemonic concepts in the water sector

come and go.[9] A hegemonic project (*i.e.*, a project that seeks to bring a change into a hegemonic order) will "attempt to weave together different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or structure a field of meaning, thus fixing the identities of objects and practices in a particular way" (77, p. 102). As neo-Gramscians argue, hegemony is different from dominance. Crucial to this is the manufacture of 'common sense' and their spread in key positions in society – or, at a basin scale, in the political constellation governing shared waters. This notion has roots in thinking of Italian power theorists such as Mosca and Gramsci. While Mosca (73), in his doctrine of the 'political class' explained how a small minority can maintain power, Gramsci (25) turned this question on its head, asking how a regime can be overturned. Davidsen's (74) analysis on hydro-hegemony of Southern Africa drew on post-Marxist interpretations of hegemony along the lines of Laclau and Mouffe (75). In Laclau and Mouffe's argument, the vitality of fundamental antagonisms becomes driver of politics. In this approach, hegemony is strongly bound up with the fixing of meaning. All social life consists of meaning, and as meaning can never be fully fixed, it must be constantly reproduced and reconstituted (76) – this then gives space for resistance and change, promoting a 'logic of difference' that hardens friend-enemy antagonisms.

The critical perspective tends to see a hegemony of values linked to a ruling elite pursuing a particular global hegemonic project. This elite may create a common sense, a dominating political and ideological force that results from a broader geopolitical order in which the action or interest of a hegemon may not be required at all: "where issues have achieved a certain international discursive hegemony, the propensity of state actors, be they hegemons or subordinates, to act beyond them can be limited" (27). Here the London Group has made innovative insights as well as taking up a reflexive approach to understanding these elite actors and their discourses. While the initial starting point of hydro-hegemony analysis focused on basin riparians, as the London Group's analysis matured and diversified the object of analysis has also necessarily been called to question. In other words, from a critical perspective, the ruling elite need not be a particular state and thus demands the analyst to scrutinise the nodes of agency exercising power so as to call out these seemingly common sense ideas.

To this end, the London Group has advanced discursive analysis as discourse plays a key role in devising 'empty signifiers', like screens onto which actors can project their hopes and fears, around which coalitions converge. These empty signifiers are significant not because of their content but due to their effects bringing actors together (78, 79). Policy narratives tend to acquire a life of their own and are not easily debunked by contradicting empirical evidence: "they continue to underwrite and stabilize the assumptions" for policymaking "in the face of high uncertainty, complexity, and polarization" (79). Even if scientific analysis may indicate otherwise, narratives tend to be persistent and resilient because they are appealing, simple and draw on common sense (80). The scholarship on hydro-hegemony attempts to examine and moreover challenge these narratives and supposed common-sense approaches to water management.

From a critical/radical perspective, counter-hegemonies may be identified challenging the 'common sense' wrested in international academic and trade fora, a global counterhegemonic movement briefly alluded to by Zeitoun & Warner[10]. While Mukhtarov and Cherp (89) focus on the rise of Integrated Water Resource Management as a hegemonic discourse, Atkins (44) argues water 'neoliberalism'- the idea that water is an economic rather than a social good - is the hegemonic idea at the global level. 'Water as an economic good' brings individuation and legalisation of water rights, seen as a commons by its opponents (91). In Palestine,

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[9] (Regional or global) 'development' is a particularly powerful 'empty signifier'. The currently hegemonic liberal imagination sees human development as an ever upward-pointing arrow of enlightenment. This requires conceptual attractors, which of necessity display asymptotic tendencies towards integration such as with Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). IWRM became a globally hegemonic movement, together with Multi-stakeholder participation and the river basin level (29), currently replaced by Adaptive Management and the Nexus. Like any 'empty signifier' or Nirvana Concept, as coined by Molle (80), it is not very clear what IWRM actually entails. Yet, it is translated into prescriptive policies, so that now even authoritarian regimes such as Myanmar now claim to have participatory, integrated river basin plans.

[10] "There are a number of critical scholars representing this non- or counter-hegemonic perspective – in the manner of feminists exposing male hegemony; thinkers from developing nations taking issue with "western" neo-liberal hegemony; bottom-up environmental and anti-globalisation activists and others (..) Just as the mainstream discourse defined by the hegemons may go unchallenged, however, discourse that resists hegemony runs the risk of being self-referential, like a mutual back-slapping society" (14, p. 440)

for example, the hegemony of ‘water as an economic good’ supported the PA’s trial of pre-paid water meters in the West Bank, even as the 2002 Palestine Water Law defined water as a public good. The resultant system stabilised the water supply for some but worsened the most vulnerable groups’ insecurity (92). Such conditions create overlapping hydro-hegemonies, as the water security of marginalised Palestinians is threatened by both Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority’s interest in World Bank investments and international trade development – a stranglehold well described by Selby (94). This example usefully highlights that hydro-hegemony analysis cannot be limited to what riparians do at an inter-state level, and needs to extend to the context whereby hegemonic ideas are enabled and repelled. Moreover, this example points to the fact that the narrative of water as an economic good needs to be challenged if hydro-hegemony in the Jordan basin is to be tackled.

Alliances may organise for or against hegemonic order and sediment into institutions. From neo-institutionalist literature, hydro-hegemonic analysis accepts the importance of organisational factors such as procedural rules and the creation of specialised institutions that can correct for (but also reinforce) power asymmetries. But participation and organisation are not limited to the planned and designed types preferred in the neo-institutional literature. A coherent alliance and agenda surely help reinforce or upset the ruling common sense, as they allow or negate alternative norms and discourse becoming sanctioned. There is a need for hydro-hegemony analysis to be attentive to the unplanned movements and actions that attempt to change and transform the current order. After Newell (89) and Mukhtarov and Cherp (90), we can see organisation (institutional power) as a third key factor next to discursive and material power in upholding or eroding hegemony. The organisational factors shed light on the ways an alternative norm could become accepted. Social movements such as water protest movements based on an alternative identity can push open doors (91). Hence, hydro-hegemony as a term also encompasses elite forces not restricted to a basin riparian and is exercised through agents that effectively combine material, discursive and institutional power.

A key arena of contested global hydro-hegemony that comes to mind, in line with Atkins, are World Water Forums such as that of 2006 (Mexico) and 2009 (Istanbul). These bazaar-like triennial mega-gatherings bring together public, private, multilateral and civil-society actors from all over the world and are primary loci for cementing new catchwords and orthodoxies (56). . The fourth World Water Forum in Mexico was shaken by assertive voices from Andean countries denouncing the promotion of privatisation and deregulation. In doing so, they juxtaposed Andean Identity versus neo-liberalism, promoting indigenous values. The potential for Andean identity to be an alternative political force was spearheaded by Bolivian President Evo Morales, previously hailed by the United Nations as protector of the Andes. It promoted a wholly different ontology (a conception of ‘what is’), postulating a symmetry between human and nonhuman actors. This resonated with a Western obsession of looking for authentic values and created an unexpected counterhegemonic alliance (95). Alternative ‘memes’ such as *buen vivir* and *Pachamama*, and the claim that water is sacred, were bandied about with scant regard to the finer points of the Andean cosmology or the rather contradictory practice in Bolivia and Ecuador, where traditional collective use and rapacious water resource development go hand in hand. Many researchers, consultants and policymakers present at the Forum probably found it hard to identify with the neoliberal values they were associated with. Still, the image stuck and made the global headlines, to the palpable annoyance of World Water Council dignitaries. They found themselves in the ‘wrong’ corner of the arena in what Laclau and Mouff have termed an agonic ‘friend-enemy’ pairing. Since then, the Andean counterhegemonic coalition has remained a force to be reckoned with. At the subsequent World Water Forum in Istanbul, a widely varied Turkish and international coalition contesting water liberalisation gathered in an alternative Water Forum to discuss issues and their strategy, in part drawing on the London Group. Hydro-hegemony scholars can learn from these examples to continue pushing against dominant discourses and widen the scope of work. However, hegemony and counter-hegemony cannot merely be about ideology and discourse. The 'material substructure' undergirding the ideology continues to matter; the importance of normalising ideology, framing and perception in times of 'fact-free politics' does not absolve us from the duty to uncover the complexities of 'hard power' and 'hard facts' on the ground.

As discussed in the **Introduction**, the ‘water wars’ rationale for many years was a hegemonic ‘common-sense’ concept (3). This rationale was successfully countered by another ‘common sense’ idea of water peace and cooperation. Hydro-hegemony has, in turn, countered the cooperation claim. There are certainly numerous examples where water is not conflictive and politicised because there is plenty for all, or where it is not clear-cut who the hegemon is (Central Asia is one such place, see 86). The absence of a hegemon, after all, is not the same as ‘absence of hegemony’. A hegemonic order can be maintained despite a decline of

overt hegemony (35), and hegemony can be decoupled from specific hegemons. The reverse of that coin implies that it does not take the emergence of a new hegemon for a hegemonic order to change.Where water relations and allocative arrangements are disputed, this liberal-institutionalist body of work sees potential for 'breaking hegemony'. A situation with no hegemony, 'a-hegemony' (a situation of power-free 'authentic deliberation' realised by bracketing differences, see 86), remains a theoretical possibility the London Group has so far not displayed much affinity with. It is certainly helpful to allow for multiple voices, creating a pluralism of knowledge fora and demonstrating a deliberative kind of politics to 'level the playing field'.

We also need to remind ourselves now and then that the mere fact of writing about hegemony risks making it bigger, reifying it and turning it into a monster. Ironically, hydro--hegemony itself may become a hegemonic concept. Chase-Dunn et al. (67) warned against this type of dynamic in 1994, and now its application to hydro-hegemony is in danger of "becoming one of those common academic words that is thrown around too much, used to refer to too many things without clear definition or focus" (26). Analysts may be tempted to see hegemony everywhere, making the term shorthand for 'power exercise we don't like'.

Is the scholarship on hydro-hegemony too obsessed with hegemony and hegemonic powers? Lopes (81) thinks so, and has critiqued the Framework of Hydro-Hegemony for under-estimating the power of interdependence, institutions and integration. Her liberal-institutionalist critique of hydro-hegemony argues that states can work together perfectly well without hegemonic politics. They can decide it is in their best interests to establish common rules impinging on their sovereignty. She takes relations between Spain and Portugal as an example, where the European Union fostered a greener, IWRM-based value system enabling collaboration. Non-hegemonic states may try to influence rules through their participation in international institutions (19 cf. 82). However, this piece of work also draws on the state-centric legacy of hegemonic analysis. A less state-central liberal explanation drawing on the role of institutions beyond state borders is found in the adaptive water governance literature. Pahl-Wöstl et al. (83: p. 422) define global water governance as "the development and implementation of norms, principles, rules, incentives, informative tools, and infrastructure to promote a change in the behavio[u]r of actors at the global level in the area of water governance". These aspects can be underpinned by empirical observations: even within the durable stability of the European Union, for instance, riparian neighbours can run into intense diplomatic arguments – consider when Belgium, the non-hegemon on the river Scheldt, invoked historic grievances against the Netherlands (84; 85). As normative agreement expands, the coercion aspect becomes less important as hegemons become leaders moulding multilateral institutions in their image.

An alternative option would be to 'decentre' hydro-hegemony, to ignore it and focus on alternative spaces. We would argue however that there is an elephant in the room that won't go away once we stop obsessing over it (88). The meaning of hydro-hegemony is not fixed itself - participants in the London Group's International Workhops on Hydro-Hegemony have regularly requested clarification on what is meant by the use of the term hegemony - with no consensus answer given. As argued earlier, hydro-hegemony is about basin riparians but it is not restricted to one agency of power. It is this point that continues to play a key role in furthering the scholarship, a reminder to analysts to be precise in how we identify and analyse power differences and reflexive in understanding hegemony and hydro-hegemony. Analysis of hydro-hegemony is about being critical and questioning seemingly common-sense, partially fixed meanings and antagonisms through and beyond the workings of basin riparians.

Conclusion: The Last Ten Years, the Next Ten Years

Ten years of writings on hydro-hegemony have brought fundamental shifts and major expansions in thinking around transboundary water interactions. A microcosm of the progress of hydropolitical literature in general, hydro-hegemony analysis has broadened its scope beyond the river basin, the state and negative connotations of hydro-hegemony. In response to challenges voiced by both 'insiders' and sympathetic 'outsiders', it has found its place as an alternative conception of transboundary water relations in the water-related literature, somewhere in between the normally optimistic, neo-institutionalist writings on water diplomacy (96), and the normally pessimistic writings of critical geography. It has successfully contributed to both scholarship and policy debates to moving the perspective from 'water wars' to less visible water conflict and political strife, which may flare up in 'water riots' but often stays latent. Thanks to interdisciplinary dialogues within and outside the academic and nonacademic world, those engaged with hydro-hegemony analysis have not laid doctrines and benefited from the eclecticism brought about by cross-disciplinary and cross-sector fertilisation

of ideas. This does not rule out that tensions and even contradictions remain between, say, Realists and critical tenets of hydro-hegemonic analyis, on the role of the state, the nature of power and the effect of inequality, forcing the debate onwards.

As a result, hydro-hegemony as an alternative concept of transboundary water relations does not follow a neat or consistent progression from one paradigm to another. The engagement with multiple strands of international relations, (critical) political ecology and international political economy (particularly its neo-institutionalist version) has refined the scope and focus of hydro-hegemony analysis, continuing to demonstrate its relevance and contribution to the evolution of hydropolitics literature in general. The issue of scale in hydro-hegemony continues to require attention, as well as analysis on what is and what is not hegemony so as to avoid labelling every power difference hegemonic. Properly taking on challenges to the London Group and extant hydro-hegemony scholarship calls for a wider examination into agency, institutions and processes. Ten years after the introduction of the Framework of Hydro-Hegemony, considerable progress has been made – and considerably more work is yet to be done. Addressing these issues, and expanding the extent of empirical work directly tied to hydro-hegemony analysis, should be at the forefront of the hydropolitical scholarship agenda for the next ten years.

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