Book reviews


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The argument over water resources is a big issue nowadays. Water shortage is already a problem in many arid regions of the world, including the Middle East, some parts of China, India and other countries, and will become even more so in future. One solution to this problem suggested by politicians and scientists is water markets (see, e.g., ‘Water markets may prove the way to save water wars’ by Roger Bate, *Daily Telegraph*, Monday, August 30th 2004, p. 30).

However, Vandana Shiva, a famous environmental activist and prominent writer on natural and human rights issues, has a different view. Her book is against the ‘ecological terrorism’ of the West. She advocates the rights of all people on Earth ‘to shape their destiny’ (p. xv) and to decide how to use their resources.

In the Introduction and the following chapters Shiva gives a meticulous analysis of the situation that brought about water shortages. A former famous Indian physicist, she looks into the problems of nature and society with a scientific accuracy. She discusses water rights and to whom they belong: the state, the market or the community (Chapter 1)? The answer is for communities to fight high-tech industrial pollution and establish ‘water democracy’ with nine major principles, such as the following: ‘water is nature’s gift, … essential to life, … is limited and can be exhausted, … must be conserved, … is a commons, …cannot be substituted’ (p. 36), to name only a few.

The second chapter introduces the important subject of how contemporary climatic change is influencing the water crisis, bringing cyclones, floods and hurricanes, destroying coastal ecosystems, and creating droughts and heat waves. The alternative to the life-threatening policy of atmospheric pollution leading to climate destabilization is ecological responsibility and sustainable development.

Chapter 3 shows the effects of river colonization mega-projects, such as the construction of dams, for example, on the regaining of state control over the water. As in other chapters, Shiva takes examples not only from the Indian experience, though this country naturally is her main concern, but also from other countries and regions of the world (China, Middle East, Africa, etc.) showing the general pattern of water projects causing the displacement of people, bringing ecological hazards, and making the lives of poor people even more difficult. She also demonstrates that some ethnic and religious wars should be considered as conflicts over scarce natural resources.

The next chapter reveals the role of such organizations as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and corporate industries in taking over the control of water. There might be a way for people to fight these corporations. Shiva gives the example of Bolivia, where a special organization *La Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida* (the Coalition in Defence of Water and Life) has been formed for the protection of communal water rights.
Water and agriculture is the subject of the 5th chapter. Industrial agriculture, so the author claims, reduces water retention in the soil and increases demands for water. It is ‘unsustainable agriculture’ (p. 111) with disastrous effects on nature and human lives. The disappearance of the Aral Sea in the former Soviet Union is just one such example of this unsustainable development. (More mega-projects in the history of the Soviet state that have brought about ecological destabilization could have been mentioned here.)

Chapter 6 is called ‘Converting scarcity into abundance’ (compare with the Introduction: ‘Converting abundance into scarcity’). The way to do it is to ‘conserve water and regain community control over their resources’ (p. 124) and to start ‘massive movements for water democracy…’ (p. 127). Simple …

The concluding chapter gives an insight into mythological and religious beliefs about rivers’ and water’s sacredness. It is a very poetic read. It is supplemented with 100+ names of the River Ganges, which are given in the Appendix: Siddha (perfect, holy); Duhkha-hantri (destroying sorrow); Parabrahms-svarupini (embodiment of the Supreme Spirit), and many, many more that sound like music.

This book is an important read. It makes you feel responsible as an individual for the future of our planet. At least that’s how I felt. I highly recommend it to students for reading and discussion, and to the general public as well.

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In contemporary Western societies, questions surrounding end-of-life decision-making and the ‘administration of death’ have become deeply vexed public debates. Modern secular culture has rejected many of the rituals that formerly surrounded death and the dying, adopting instead a new rhetoric of rationality. However, death remains tinged with an aura of inherent wrongfulness: ambivalence appears to be inescapable, beguiling the public efforts to make rational determinations about death. Robert Burt’s Death is that Man Taking Names provides a timely and compelling analysis of the conundrums surrounding the administration of death in American public policy. Although the focus of this book is on American legal disputes, the issues raised are relevant around the world where, for instance, the Royal Dutch Medical Association has recently liberalized its policy to recommend allowing well patients who are ‘suffering through living’ to request euthanasia (Sheldon, 2005), and development policymakers argue over the propriety of funding abortions as part of a health care and family planning package.

Burt’s principal argument is that policies about the administration of death must take into account and even embrace the psychological and moral ambivalence inherent in such decisions. The alternative ‘effort to banish ambivalence by rigidly
embracing the positive valuations in the ideals of autonomy, of a good death, or of physicians’ benevolence leads ultimately to the intensified eruption of their inherent negative valuations into guilt-ridden, hurtful conduct’ (p. 5). Burt draws insight from a wide range of sources (e.g. psychological experiments, war memorials, interviews with medical students and, especially, court decisions) to develop this thesis. Psychologically, people tend to cope with incomprehensible injustices (as, for example, when death is imminent), by denying the incomprehensible and reverting to absolutist positions. It is in the context of this denial of ambiguity, the overriding insistence on moral purity, that abuse (of the dying, for instance) occurs. This is because maintaining the sense of moral purity requires people to ignore or deny evidence of any wrongdoing, allowing (even impelling) them to continue further down the ‘slippery slope’ of harmful behaviour. Three contexts in particular command attention in this book: the treatment (or not) of dying people; abortion; and the death penalty. Ultimately, Burt concludes that ‘intentional, unambiguous infliction of death in any context should be rigorously avoided and socially disapproved [and that] where death cannot be avoided, ambivalence about its moral status is also unavoidable and should, accordingly, be self-consciously and visibly honoured through the design of practical techniques for highlighting and even amplifying its inevitable presence’ (p. 158).

These guidelines are worked out differently for each of the three contexts that Burt treats. The death penalty, he argues, must be abolished because its administration requires an unsustainable dichotomy between moral guilt and innocence. Legalized physician-assisted suicide, because it depends on the untainted moral position of all parties concerned, is, in Burt’s words, ‘the breeding ground for unacknowledged abuse – for self-abuse by the dying person or abuse by others’ (p. 163). By contrast, decisions about withholding or withdrawing treatment from the terminally ill demand incremental decision-making and care by a number of people so as to make it difficult to pressure the dying into unwillingly permitting the hastening of their own death. In the case of abortion, Burt concludes that its abolition ‘in order to protect fetal life [would involve] the direct imposition of coercion and suffering on another person – on the pregnant woman who is forced to carry the fetus to term’ (p. 158) and that this would necessarily entail ‘denying the humanity of the unwilling pregnant woman (treating her as nothing but a biological container)’ (p. 159). In response, Burt advocates a policy of allowing state legislatures to draft their own policies about the circumstances under which abortions can be performed, provided that they take account of multiple voices (especially those of the unwillingly pregnant) in the debate, and publicly acknowledge ambivalence rather than a rigid moral dichotomy. This analysis, it seems to me, draws on an unfair caricature of the pro-life movement: precisely, I would argue, because activists are keenly aware of the difficulties and the humanity of the unwillingly pregnant, the movement has increasingly turned its attention to providing practical support for pregnant women and new mothers, as well as drawing attention to the so-called ‘post-abortion syndrome’ suffered by some women following abortions. Whatever one’s position on this contested ‘syndrome’, public policies about abortion should be conceived in such a way as to protect against pregnant women being coerced into accepting abortions by doctors or others close to them, and this possibility for abuse is not addressed by Burt’s proposed solution.
Apart from this relatively minor quibble with Burt’s analysis, I found this book to be exceptionally argued and thought-provoking. Although the context discussed here is explicitly American, the book’s lessons will make an invaluable contribution to other such life-and-death discussions around the world.

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Reference