

## **Erik Swyngedouw - Interview Transcript**

Interview by Donna Mlyneck, April 1 2021 on Zoom.

*Donna:*

Why was desalination seen as *the* solution to the water scarcity problem in Spain? How could this dominant discourse emerge?

*ES:*

We have to situate this within the transition from the **dictatorship to democracy in Spain in the early 1980**.

This transition, including the massive political changes, **paralleled** - but did not necessarily cause - an important set of transformations (but not all of these forces had a direct relationship with the Franco dictatorship).

From the early 1980s onwards, the old state hydraulic models, which consisted of big dams and water transfers, were no longer sustainable and tangible. The strange coalitions of socio-political forces that have sustained the state-based 'modernising' infrastructure regime began to break down. This is where I think the causes of the shift have to be found. Indeed, we can identify a breakdown of a certain hegemonic way of thinking and what to do with the society-water nexus. This breakdown can be situated in a variety of terrains that coincided. These have contributed to dissolving the - what I call - "hydro-hegemony". Let me summarise the different forces:

1. **Disintegration of Spain** itself: Let us look at the geographical fragmentation of the geopolitical landscape in Spain. The fascist period (dictatorship) was based upon Spanishness ("Spain as one and undivided"). Also, there was the marginalisation and suppression of regionalist tendencies which were not tolerated and subordinated during the Fascist period (as "Catalonia knows very well - they were the great 'victims'"). So, we see the **geographical fragmentation of Spain** but also in a socio-political and cultural manner. This made it increasingly more difficult to have a national infrastructure. Indeed, the old model was based on national integration of water resource management.
2. **Fragmentation & Transformation of the general political Landscape in Spain.** During the fascist period you had the 'right' and its immediate alliances and the 'suppressed' left. Actually, the left PSOE and the communist party basically shared the same national technological imaginary (and vision of water management). Indeed, the technological imaginary was similar. By the early 1980s - in the context of political liberation and disintegration of the meta-narrative of left vs. right - you had the emergence of new voices and imaginaries of which the most well known is the "green and ecological imaginaries". Also, significant values of ecological and environmental concern began to articulate in Spain around anti-big-water infrastructures in the early 1980s. There was the rise of environmental and ecological consciousness and greater concerns of non-human, such as fish or the 'greenery'. In addition, we can observe the rise of radical movements. Also, we can identify greater attention to 'localised cultures', such as the lives of fishermen and fisherwomen that

were articulated in particular socio-ecological regimes. So, their visions became increasingly more vocal and began to undermine the old hegemony.

3. **The shift of culturally imaginaries & ideas of a 'beautiful' ecology.** The old aesthetics of many people was that the absence of water is "bad" - an obstacle - in the sense of 'desert-like', 'mortal', 'infertile' or 'worthless'. Thus, there were negative connotations connected with the absence of water - Water was seen as a source of life by many. But then we observe a change and re-imaginings of water. People said that different ecologies had their own aesthetic values and have begun to value aridity in Spain: Discourse of "beautiful deserts" emerged. So, desert is no longer seen as necessarily bad but 'valuable', 'sublime', and 'beautiful'. Increasingly more people were motivated to preserve the wetlands.
  4. **Spain joined the EU in 1986.** That period corresponds with the dominant form of capitalist development: What I call the "Post-War Keynesian Welfare State state-led and state-based economic development model", which came in a crisis during the 1970s and going into the 1980s. Subsequently, in the 1990s, we can observe the rise of neoliberalism. In my opinion, neoliberalism is a state-policy to get themselves - the states I mean - out of organising the economy and moving the authority over economic forces to the private sector. So, not the private sector did that, it was actually the EU, including the Spanish state, themselves. In 1986, Spain joined up the EU. The EU was increasingly neoliberalising and increasingly setting the 'rules of the game'. An example is the Maastricht Treaty of 1992: A set of common rules were set, which made it illegal for national states to subsidise the economy because that would destroy competition according to EU's logic. In 1993, the Spanish government announced its new water plan. However, the EU would not allow subsidisation which would be considered an economic good in itself.
  5. There was much greater policy configuration, that focuses on **private capital investment** as much as independent from the state as possible. But all of that was encapsulated in a 'modernising logic': A logic of Development - "We got to grow and got to grow and in order to keep on growing we need more water and more water!". In fact, all these previously mentioned changes did not fundamentally undermine the underlying 'obsession' with economic growth, capital accumulation, development and modernisation etc.
- To sum up, desalination began to emerge first as a *possible* alternative that would actually satisfy many of those tensions mentioned before. So the 5 processes mentioned above would contribute to undermine the hydro-hegemony that characterised 20th century Spain (it begins to dissolve). And a new articulation of a new hegemony (not fully hegemonic but certainly dominant in the sense of "important enough to get things done). We can see new alliances of very strange political forces that allied around this new and different hydro-technical complex in the form of desalination.

*Donna:*

Thank you! When you have to pinpoint the main actors, who mobilised the discourse for the construction of desalination plants in Spain who would this be in your opinion?

*ES:*

1. **Autonomous regions.** Some Spanish regions no longer wanted to see the water transfers. Especially the North, such as Catalonia: They saw the water transfers to the South and were not happy about it. However, the South of Spain desperately needed and still needs more water to sustain their agro-urban-speculative economic model, which is based on, for instance, extensive agriculture and flower culture to sustain the highly competitive market and at the same time the processes of increasing urbanisation. Thus, desalination offered an alternative in a context where there was a decreasing likelihood of inter-basin water transfers. Even though the South wants these water transfers it became increasingly less likely.
2. Also, the '**eco-modernisers**', who did take the ecological concerns seriously but looked at it in a 'modernising logic'. In other words, they want to have growth and save the environment at the same time.
3. The **neoliberalising/marketisation** forces that became dominant ('mercantilization' in Spanish) were a major driver. Also, the increasing but self-made weakening of the state in its capacity to intervene in the infrastructure economics and conditions is important.
4. The **water engineering companies.** Spain has extraordinary expertise in big large scale infrastructure. They are internationally within the top ten of desalination companies. Indeed, Spain has a long history of expertise. They clearly saw that desalination, which was considered a high-tech and "environmentally sensible" new technology, could save the 'earth from drying' out and 'people getting thirsty'. Desalination was seen as a frontline technology. Indeed, if you look at the international contracts around the world surrounding desalination, many Spanish companies are involved.

*Donna:*

In your opinion, which actors were not heard in the desalination controversy in Spain? In other words, which are the "hidden" non-dominant voices in this controversy?

*ES:*

1. The most important actors, which are not heard in this desalination controversy are the **non-humans**. Desalination is commonly portrayed as 'environmentally more sensible' (in comparison to inter-basin transfers / large hydro structures) but if you consider the ecological transformation as a result of desalination there are significant effects! **Fish don't talk** in the human language. There are mostly ecologists, who speak for the fish, the health of the ecosystems and habitats, which are threatened by the 'byproducts' of desalination, such as the waste in the form of 'saline brine'.

Indeed, there are significant problems with the disposal of the waste from desalination. The waste from desalination is highly saline.

2. Also, the “**traditional classic nationalists**” did not like desalination either. They argue for water-transfer from the north to the south in Spain.
3. Voices that are utterly silenced in this whole process are those who argue that the desalination ‘fix’ is precisely a “**socio-ecological ‘fix’**”, which is aimed at sustaining a fundamentally unsustainable socio-ecological development model that is capitalism: In the logic of “growth for growth’s sake” and “Accumulation for accumulation sake”. There has been plenty of opposition to this unlimited growth based model by the **degrowth movement** and **degrowth academics**.
4. Also, more **radical political movements** on the socio-ecological side, which are not heard very much in this debate are against desalination. They find desalination, for instance, ‘undemocratic’. Also, indigenous movements and political movements such as POMEDOS and associated movements are important to mention. They demanded radical democratic transformation. They are not in line with large infrastructure projects, such as desalination and inter-basin water transfers.

*Donna:*

To what extent do you consider that desalination is a technical “fix” towards the water scarcity problem? What other solutions and alternatives would you propose?

*ES:*

Desalination is obviously a **socio-technical-managerial “fix”**. It is crucial to point out that the technology is not working on its own as it needs a **social support structure and social embedding**. So, it does not work without institutions and the cultural and political configurations that sustain the technology. Again: The social embedding of the technologies in institutions is key!

Desalination is legitimised by its defender. The techno-managerial ‘fix’ is political and based on particular assumptions of the water scarcity problem in Spain, which are deeply engrained.

So, there is a heavy emphasis on the socio-technological “fixes” to solve problems and issues that are hegemonically accepted to be a problem, such as water scarcity or climate change. In the terrain of socio-technical fixes are: Commodifying water, capturing CO<sub>2</sub>, desalinating water, which are all parallel.

The techno-managerial ‘fix’ does **depoliticize** things, and this is what I am really interested in. So, the techno-managerial discourse and the associated practices support and sustain a process of **depoliticisation**. But, what is a process of **depoliticisation**? It continues to be an antagonistic struggle over how to organise different worlds. This domain of the political is being colonised, suppressed, silenced and disavowed through the imposition process of the techno-managerial logic. The “myth” of scarcity is absolutely central on the one hand to sustain this socio-technological fixes as well as the myth that development is good. Actually,

development produces its own scarcity. Development is never ending. It is never enough. Like a sexual pervet: never enough sex.

So we can see that the myth of scarcity is sustained: The systematic, universal truth is important to sustain a growth based model which is never ending. It continues to mobilise. It is never good enough.

Are there other solutions to desalination?

In my opinion, we have to stop nurturing further this techno-managerial pathway. We should not any longer engage in discussions over different technologies and managerial practices. Leave this to the 'bloody' engineers.

We - those who genuinely believe in the socio-ecological configurations and democratic transition - should stop talking over technologies and socio-managerial fixes which sustain this process of depoliticisation. We first need to think through as 'intellectual of environments' what needs to be done. This includes thinking about politics: How can we nurture again a genuine political debate and antagonism over the kind of world we want to inhabit which is based on socio-ecological forms of organisations?

Afterwards, we can think of the technologies, which are adequate for this socio-ecological transformation and change. So, let us get away from being seduced from the techno-managerial dominant rhetoric. We have to focus again on the political struggle of how to organise civilisation. Also, I am personally not that interested in the political ecology of desalination. I am more interested in the *critique* of the political ecology of desalination.

*Donna:*

Thank you! How can we apply the concept of "Accumulation by dispossession" to desalination in Spain?

*ES:*

The history of accumulation by dispossession can be identified in Spain, especially in the irrigation sector and extensive agriculture. So, the water is taken away to be asserted in the money circulation/capital accumulation process. However, it became increasingly contested. The Catalans did not want to be anymore dispossessed of their water.

Going to the ocean can be seen as a **socio-spatial 'fix'**. Most of the ocean water is a "common", which is a very interesting concept! Not owned by anyone! Now we can observe the production of surplus value.