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OPINION

The need to acknowledge, study and engage with new water justice movements

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Rivers around the world are in a detrimental state: dammed for water provision, flood control or energy production; straightened for navigability, polluted by deficiently treated domestic and industrial waste waters or runoff from intensive agriculture; depleted to cater for growing water demands up to the point of seasonal or permanent drying up. At the base of this situation is a view of rivers as resources to be exploited and dominated, put at the service of powerful economic and political interests. Whereas there is increasing awareness about the alarming state of rivers, water governance approaches so far have tended to respond with environmental standards that are permissive and little enforced. The imposition of uniform metrics, values and goals is proliferating worldwide–including through policies that are labelled participatory, integrated or nature-based. These approaches misread or override the complexities of socio-ecological river systems. All in all, they have failed to herald a transition towards just, equitable and healthy socio-ecological relations [1, 2].

This is highly problematic as the status quo with its destructive practices and the associated human and nonhuman suffering remains unchallenged. At the same time, the numerous grassroots initiatives and 'new water justice movements' [3] that exist around the world and that have much potential to foster alternative ways of relating to rivers, are obliviated by mainstream policies and approaches.

What we term new water justice movements (NWJMs) is in fact a colourful assembly of grassroots groups and initiatives, as well as regional networks and nongovernmental alliances, that mobilize to protect or revive rivers, and to challenge dominant ways of understanding, ordering and exploiting rivers and riverine inhabitants. Whereas previous water justice initiatives have mainly focused on issues of fair distribution (of environmental 'goods' and 'bads') and representation for human groups, the more recently emerging movements also explicitly include *nonhuman* concerns and intertwine distribution and representation with related struggles for cultural justice and socio-ecological, intergenerational integrity.

NWJMs come in many forms and operate in different geographic, institutional and time scales–while often also bridging across these. Their many activities are similarly highly diverse: ranging from protests, litigation, advocacy, river clean-ups, citizen science, to proposing alternative project designs and co-governance of riverscapes [4–6]. Many NWJMs maintain close contacts with likeminded organisations elsewhere. They form multi-scalar alliances and networks of trans-local solidarity that translate, combine and resignify local demands and concepts globally and vice versa, to devise new approaches and strategies. While various movements and initiatives are explicitly relating to rivers, others bring also other river-connected fields to the fore, such as irrigation, drinking water or wetlands. The common

denominator that joins them is the struggle *for* socio-environmental justice and care, and *against* dominant exploitative practices, policies and expert elites.

Yet, this joint struggle for justice is not based on universalistic, one-size-fits-all, normative ideas about justice and about 'what should be'. It is rather about multiple justices and injustices (in plural) as *experienced* by excluded, discriminated or exploited human and nonhuman groups. It is about *relational* and *rooted*, on-the-ground conceptions related to distributional, representational, cultural and intergenerational justices [7]. NWJMs are *united* in their quest for water justice(s); but they are not *uniform* [8].

If we want to move towards more just and equitable river (and, more generally, water) systems, these manifold notions of (in)justice as well as the new water justice movements themselves need to be acknowledged and critically engaged with–in their diversity, political complexities, and contradictions. Of course, this is easier said than done and comes with important challenges and questions [9–11]. For example, there is sometimes a tendency to romanticise grassroots initiatives or alternative approaches (such as the now famous Rights of Nature), essentializing them to a certain idea about 'indigeneity' or 'beautifully local'. Such idealizations tend to be far from the messy reality in which there is not *one* indigenous or river dweller identity, *one* riverine collective or movement, or *one* ideal image, cosmovision or way to engage with the river. They may also powerfully prescribe specific ideas that fix groups and practices in place and time–often in a paternalistic-colonial fashion [12]. Additionally, internal contradictions, dynamics and nuances are often obliviated. As Nancy Fraser [13] puts it "the overall effect is to impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications". Thus, NWJMs need to be studied and acknowledged in their complexities and not as fixed, homogenous or 'essentially noble and harmonious'. This requires openness to see what we might not expect or what might not fit with our own idealized ideas or political views.

At the same time, the call to study and acknowledge new water justice movements also brings about important ethical challenges: Who is 'seeing' whom? What adverse effects may visibility and visibilization have? Do NWJMs want to be seen, how and why? Foucault [14] argued that "visibility is a trap" and warns against "subjection by illumination". As James Scott has shown in *The Art of Not Being Governed* [15], it may be convenient or necessary to remain under the radar in order to avoid state or elite control and domination, and maintain self-determination. Because becoming visible also means becoming legible and 'manageable', opening up possibilities to be subjected to and absorbed into the dominant systems. This means that when working with new water justice movements, we need to constantly discuss the questions of visibility. At times, we might even need to refrain from our original research endeavours, 'invert visibility' and re-focus our 'gaze' on the harmful practices, policies and worldviews of powerful actors such as expert hydrocracies or multinational corporations–rather than exposing water justice movements (albeit with good intentions).

This does not mean that we should not aim to study NWJMs. Even though this might proof to be challenging exactly because of their existence under the radar, their informal status or short lifespan, as well as the possible ethical challenges, much can be learned from and with them, and much can be gained from supporting them. To do so we need to rethink the role of research and researchers. We need to debunk the idea of uninvolved, apolitical science and instead politically engage with rivers and movements, broadening our very understanding of rivers and reconsidering our role: becoming involved not as outside observers only, but as researchers-activists with a clearly articulated and acted upon political positioning.

In a recent paper [3] we have sketched a fourfold framework that may provide starting points for inquiry about NWJMs, as well as for co-learning and invites collaboration of

researchers and activists to unite in their struggle to protect or reclaim river commons. It departs from the assertion that rivers integrate human and nonhuman communities in one: rivers are not external to society but embody its societal contradictions and (diverse) ways of knowing and ordering. Therefore, the framework positions *rivers as ecosociety* (in which rivers are co-constituted by hydrology, ecology, climates and human cultures), *rivers as territory* (in which rivers are sites and objects of struggles over territorial control and power), *rivers as subjects* (raising questions about how subjects are made or subjecthood claimed in water justice struggles), and *rivers as movements* (where the attention lies on understanding the practices, tactics, networks of movements that form around the defence of river commons). These ontologies can help to engage with rivers as complex arenas of material, social-political and symbolic co-production; and provide bridges for research-activism and co-learning. The aim here is not to look for universally true 'best practices' to be scaled-up or replicated, but rather to learn about, map and support diversity in riverine defence and reviving practices.

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