PUBLIC Power, Private Dams: The Hells Canyon High Dam Controversy

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were transformed in the 1980s and 1990s through domestic democratization and the growing role of transnational environmental actors in Brazil and the growing interest in protecting the nation’s rainforests and other natural resources. The authors document and characterize the development and nature of the Brazilian environmental movement that began well before global environmentalism’s interest in Brazil. The book emphasizes the differences between the politics of the Amazon, which was significantly internationalized after the mid-1980s, and antipollution efforts that have been a central part of environmentalism in Brazil but have been given comparatively little attention by outsiders.

Finally, Brazil provides a fascinating case study because of the complexity of the case. Transnational and domestic actors and processes interact in layers of local, national, and global politics. Random and unpredicted events make linear explanations irrelevant. The story the authors tell of the history of Brazilian environmental politics is one of “discontinuities, contingencies, dead ends, and sudden surges of opportunities” (p. 223). Frequent changes in institutions and processes have made policy making particularly problematic. Brazil is challenged by the confluence of the environmental problems typically associated with industrialized nations and those of developing countries that face tremendous challenges in reducing poverty and increasing economic well-being.

Understanding Brazilian environmental politics is a challenging task for non-natives who must grapple with a complicated political history, a complex network of actors and organizations within Brazil and across national boundaries, and the links between environmental and other social movements. Hochstetler and Keck provide a model of how social scientists from outside a country can make a very valuable contribution to understanding the environmental politics of that nation by engaging in extensive fieldwork and by providing a comparative lens for viewing political developments. Together, they represent 40 years of regular visits to Brazil to interview key players, attend meetings, and study archival material. The result is a model of thoughtful and perceptive analysis and a terrific example of how to study national environmental politics, how to integrate in-depth research with the broader relevant scholarly context, and how to tell a complicated story in a clear and engaging style.

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In the red-versus-blue maps of recent electoral politics, one of the reddest, most Republican states is not in the southern Bible Belt, but Idaho. Those who wish to understand the success, strength, and environmental effects of conservative ideology and mobilization would do well to read Karl Brooks’ (2006) Public Power, Private Dams: The Hells Canyon High Dam Controversy, a history of a forgotten conflict over a never-built dam on the border of this too-often-ignored state. It proves to be an eye-opening window into the history, strategies, appeal, and practical environmental effects of the late twentieth century conservative resurgence. Brooks shows
convincingly that in the early postwar period, a fight for private rather than federal
development of a major Western river was linked to a wide grassroots mobilization
that opened up valuable civic debates about the public good and the role of public
versus private economic leadership. It also helped bring needed restraint in society’s relationship with nonhuman nature.

Brooks’ story is about the Hells Canyon High Dam, a huge federal dam that was
proposed to be built in the deepest canyon of the United States, on the Snake River.
Drawing from an impressive array of archival sources, industry newsletters, and
secondary sources, he traces this dam from its conception immediately after the
Second World War to its final demise at the hands of the Supreme Court in 1957.
He recounts how and why instead of a federal dam, three smaller dams, collectively
called the Hells Canyon Complex, were built by a moderate-sized private electric
utility, the Idaho Power Company.

Brooks’ early chapters describe how the Hells Canyon High dam was conceived
and promoted as the linchpin of an expansion of the New Deal’s successes in the
main Columbia Basin. The Hells Canyon High Dam would provide farms and
homes with cheap federal power and enable industrial development throughout the
Snake Basin, the Columbia’s greatest tributary. Power proceeds would fund a major
water diversion project to irrigate new parts of southern Idaho’s Snake River Plain.

The plan generated immediate concern from influential Idahoans. Idaho Power
Company, the private electric utility which claimed almost all of southern Idaho as
its territory, was rightly alarmed that an expansion of federal power into the Snake
Basin could mean its own demise. Irrigators from the Snake River Plain, who
dominated Idaho’s political and social elite, feared that filling the high dam’s huge
reservoir each year would threaten future irrigators’ claims to Snake River water.
These actors saw in the federal government’s plan not an inclusive and prosperous
democratic vision, but an aggressive invasion from an outside force that wanted to
take over and remold their society in its own image. The Idahoans offered an
alternative: the Idaho Power Company quietly submitted an application for a
license to build its own, low dam in Hells Canyon.

Brooks’ greatest contribution is his account of how a dam-versus-dam fight
tapped and expanded into a national political and philosophical debate about the
legacy of the New Deal and made room for new environmental debates. The
argument reaches its peak in Chapter Seven, “Unplugging the New Deal.” Private
corporations and other business interests still seething from New Deal federal
government intrusions rallied behind Idaho Power. They invoked themes very
familiar today—the freedom of the market, business efficiency, the unfairness of
government competition, local prerogative, and the need for wider civic engage-
ment. The fight also forged new alliances concerning natural resource develop-
ment. Salmon advocates and private business found common cause in opposing
unbridled federal hydropower expansion.

Thanks to Idaho Power’s connections with a far wider conservative resurgence,
it won the day. Brooks’ Chapter Nine, “Privatizing Hells Canyon,” covers the
profound change effected by the return of Republicans to federal government
leadership. In 1952, presidential candidate Eisenhower, speaking to an enthusiastic
crowd in Boise, attacked federal government domination in electric power, prom-
ising instead a policy of “partnership.” In 1953, President Eisenhower’s Interior
Department withdrew support for Hells Canyon High Dam, and after an epic deliberation that Brooks covers in illuminating detail, the Federal Power Commission in 1955 approved Idaho Power’s proposal. A circuit court affirmed the decision, and in 1957 the Supreme Court let it stand.

Brooks refrains from making far-reaching claims about the beneficence of private rather than federal development, but his tone and language in the book offer clear sympathy to Idaho Power’s dams as the more democratic and less ecologically damaging option. Here, though, Brooks overplays his hand, revealing the biases of his former roles as Idaho litigator and legislator. Although Brooks acknowledges that cheap federal power was enormously popular, he caricatures the plan to expand federal power as an effort to “annex” the Snake Basin and further “federal primacy” and “profligate power consumption” (pp. 8–9). As with the campaign against the high dam, the campaign for the high dam needs to be understood in a much more ambiguous light. Federal ambitions and self-interest were also inseparably tied to legitimate democratic and public-interest goals.

It is not at all clear that the Idaho Power option was more ecologically benign. As Brooks acknowledges, for political reasons, Idaho Power in 1952 expanded its proposal to a three-dam Hells Canyon “complex.” Salmon passage around these dams failed. Other questions about the links between the decision in Hells Canyon and the history of other dams that were built and not built and the ongoing decline of the remaining Snake River salmon are more complex, any answers equivocal.

Brooks’ brilliance in this book is in capturing a moment some 50 years ago when, in what is now perhaps the Reddest of states, private business made legitimate claims to represent the public good and helped make public policy more accountable to the public. But Brooks’ empirical work suggests that what was important for democracy and environment was not the defeat of federal initiative per se, but rather that private challenge catalyzed political debate. Broader discussions forced needed restraint and a broadening of concerns as part of both public and private policy.

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