Charting the Course of the Water Discourse through the Fog of International Relations Theory

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Introduction

Apart from being part of life, water is as old as life itself. Through the ages humankind has always demonstrated an acute awareness of the significance of water. However, in a world preoccupied with traditional security concerns of a 'high-politics' nature, water has, on rare occasions, become the focal point of international relations. The ending of the Cold War, however, introduced a sea change by precipitating the (re)emergence of the so-called water discourse as a distinct and highly topical field of practical and scholarly concern. The fluid (and often turbulent and opaque) nature of water vividly depicts the way in which it is currently being addressed as a common 'issue-field', at the level of technocratic problem-solving, political rhetoric and academic discourse. Furthermore, since it is impossible to limit the ramifications of water (more specifically water scarcity) to a particular functional domain, the discourse extends to issues of economics, development, the environment, security and human rights. Consequently, based on perceptions of

water as a global common and a shared concern, and resulting from the interdependence of and interactions between international actors, water complexes (and the complexities of water) have become an integral part of contemporary world politics.

Given the topical and salient nature of water as a scarce resource in southern and South Africa, it is not surprising that the past decade has seen a deluge of conferences, publications, research projects and even research institutions on water, all of which add substance to the discourse. Apart from the technocratic studies and projects of an applied hydrological nature, contributions have also emerged from the social and political sciences, and the discipline of international relations in particular. Influenced by foreign scholars such as Glieck (1993), Ohlsson (1995), Homer-Dixon (1994, 1996), Okidi (1997), Percival (1997), Percival and Homer-Dixon (1998), Allan (1999) and Fleming (1999), local contributions include those undertaken by Hudson (1996), Solomon (1996), Van Wyk (1998), Meissner (1999) and Turton (1999). These studies are mainly concerned with environmental security, resource security, water (in)security, water scarcity, water conflict and water cooperation, as well as the management of these issues at a policy level.

Apart from clarifying concepts and (axiomatically) subscribing to particular theoretical tenets regarding water resources as an environmental, developmental or security concern, the above do not self-consciously represent a distinct type of international relations theorising. Nor do they explicitly contextualise the water discourse in a particular theoretical mode, and they do not purposively construct a theory of water politics within the broader ambit of any specified paradigm or theoretical framework of international relations. Apart from Turton (1999), who comes close to the latter in a predominantly positivist context, the most notable exception is the critique levelled against the current water discourse by Swatuk and Vale (2000), which represents a post-positivist, reflectivist mode of theorising.

Does this state of affairs imply that the local water discourse is, for the most part, devoid of theoretical substance, or that it does not represent a particular type of theorising? No. On the contrary, the water discourse is steeped in theory, albeit implicit or subliminal. However, owing to several factors, it sheds little light on theory as such. On the one hand, most participants and stakeholders who enter from beyond the political field are unfamiliar with the broad contours of international relations theory. Therefore, they tend to be importers of non-political theoretical constructs (a beneficial, interdisciplinary practice not to be frowned upon). After all,

they are neither scholars, nor theorists of international relations. On the other hand, some scholars and analysts within the discipline are similarly unfamiliar with international theory, or tend to address issues in an atheoretical or deliberately non-theoretical context. Hence, they declare no specific theoretical position and often fail to produce analyses with distinctive international relations features. Those who do provide a theoretical framework – either explicitly or implicitly – often do so with scant concern for the theoretical positions they occupy or, to paraphrase Boucher (1998:6), justify their theory in terms of its practical relevance, in keeping with the intensely practical nature of the subject matter under discussion. After all, water is the issue of immediate or practical concern, not international relations theory — or so it appears.

Does this mean that the current water discourse is at sea when it comes to theory? Obviously not. However, what has to be borne in mind is that the superficial, shared concern with water at the operational level, as evidenced by its manifestation as a non-common interest in pursuit of uncommon security, has a divisive effect that transcends practice and penetrates the already divided realm of international relations theory. Consequently, the passage from practice to theory is not as smooth as may appear at first glance, and this has far-reaching implications. Two arguments suffice. Firstly, it is often contended that the aim of the social sciences is merely to systematise and formalise knowledge of the world (Ringmar 1997:284). From a positivist position, theoretical explanations will be true to the extent that they accurately reflect empirical reality. However, since the meaning of facts is not a factual question but a (meta)theoretical one, theory gains in epistemological and ontological significance. Hence, the notion that 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory', attains new meaning (Neufeld 1994:12). Secondly, since fields of study concerning commonly agreed upon subject matter are politically constructed, the limitations of particular theoretical constructs which focus on the specified field should be carefully assessed (Cox & Sjolander 1994:4-5).

Superficially, the water discourse appears to navigate an uncertain course through international relations theory, and also seems unsure about (dis)embarkation points and direction-finding beacons. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the theoretical (dis)course can be charted by, firstly, indicating the presence of theory in the water discourse; secondly, providing an overview of the development of international relations theory; thirdly, contextualising theory in the water discourse within the framework of

contending international relations theories; and finally, commenting on future challenges and prospects. As such, this account serves two purposes. On the one hand, it describes the theoretical landscape of international relations within which the water discourse is situated as a sub-field. Hence, the overview of international relations theories. On the other hand, it examines the theoretical course of the water discourse through, and its impact on, this landscape. Hence, the discussion of the theoretical dimensions of the water discourse. It is contended that similar to most scientific undertakings in the discipline, the water discourse is predominantly embedded in and representative of mainstream theorising of a positivist, explanatory and problem-solving nature. Since competing conceptions are, with few exceptions, mostly underdeveloped, marginalised or even silenced, there is a need and opportunity for conciliatory, extra-paradigmatic theorising and bridge-building.

Theoretical focuses in the water discourse

This section provides a brief overview of the focuses of theory in the water discourse as contextualised by this publication, inasmuch as they relate to international relations theory. As a specific sector is concerned – namely the water discourse – it is obvious that international relations theory as such, or any explicit attempt to construct such a theory, is singularly absent. What is at issue, are theoretical pointers in the water discourse and their relevance to international relations theory. It is not the intention of this section to provide examples of theory in the form of specific references and excerpts, or to analyse such examples. Rather, the main focuses of theory are indicated. These, and the manner in which they are dealt with, will then be related to international relations theory.

Firstly, as a natural resource, water (and the water discourse) involves the environment. Apart from the fact that all beings and social relations are fundamentally embedded in ecological relationships, environmental issues are at the centre of many of the world's most pressing problems. The concept of ecology, with its focus on the environment, and related ideas that humanity could collectively do large-scale damage to natural systems, dates back to the nineteenth century. However, the latter part of the twentieth century did see the (re)emergence of ecocentrism and ecocentric issues. As a result, green politics or ecopolitics has emerged as a significant political force in many countries. In this respect a distinction should be made between

environmentalism and green politics. Environmentalism accepts the framework of the existing political, social, economic and normative structures of world politics, and seeks to ameliorate environmental problems within those structures. Green politics regard these structures as the main origins of the environmental crisis, and contend that they need to be challenged and transcended (Paterson 1996:252). It is evident that transnational environmental problems are currently occupying higher priority positions on agendas worldwide, and they also focus public attention on assessing responsibility and attribution.

Secondly, by definition this emphasis on the global ecology also involves development, although this focus is less explicit. Global ecology writers present a powerful set of arguments as to how development is inherently anti-ecological, because they show how development in practice undermines sustainable practices. It takes control over resources from those living sustainably in order to organise commodity production. It also empowers experts with knowledge based on instrumental reason, and increases inequality, which produces social conflicts (Paterson 1996:266). The major concern lies not only with the need for and the importance placed on development, but also with the fact that a particular paradigm of development could entrench the power of the already powerful.

Thirdly, the water discourse is concerned with, and inextricably linked to, the concept of security. This concern extends to international security in general, and to water security in particular. This latter focus, and its collateral theoretical conceptualisations, are forced upon the scene by specifically linking the water discourse – in this publication – to the war/peace and conflict/cooperation problematique, and by considering water to be a potential source or cause of (violent) conflict. This idea, although not new, has become more widespread since the end of the Cold War. The result is the emergence of a new strategic imperative expressed by the term 'environmental security'. This addresses the environmental factors behind potentially violent conflicts, and the impact of global environmental degradation on the well-being of societies and economies (Porter 1998:215). This development is, in part, the result of the 'new' security paradigm that has broadened and deepened the security agenda by including non-military ('low-politics') threats, as well as non-state, security stakeholders at all levels of society. Hence, it is also linked to the notion of common security, which has as its foundation common interests that, at a minimum, requires a shared interest in survival (Butfoy 1997:126). Irrespective of the fact that post-1989 security

has acquired a wider meaning than protection from military threat, its broader conceptualisation has paradoxically contributed to the securitisation and militarisation of water as a traditional non-military concern. Consequently, socio-cultural factors have been overlooked, and even suppressed.

The arguments about global dangers are understood in very different terms by the south, which is often regarded as a main source of these 'new threats' (Dalby 1998:183). Part of this concern is due to the debate about environmental security, which also involves sustainable development as a formulation that can allow injustice and environmental degradation to continue as part of the ideologically refurbished processes of development, as well as the processes of enclosure and displacement that divide up and control space. Thus viewed from the south, the 'discourses of danger' that structure the environmental security literature are often seen as attempts to reassert domination of southern societies, albeit in the name of protecting the planet (Dalby 1998:183-185). Also linked to this is the politics of securitisation, which is seen as an attempt to take the politics out of water, but has perhaps ultimately benefited the security of international actors more than that of the intended local beneficiaries. Warner (1999a/b) argues that a repoliticising and desecuritisng process will be necessary in order for progress to be made. However, in the words of Butfoy (1997:130), although this line of thinking 'requires the repeated debunking of the more overheated Realist claims ... it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater: ... the competitive and self-interested aspects of international politics are not to evaporate' (Butfoy 1997:130). Consequently, what is required is the gradual reconstruction of the strategic environment in a manner which will facilitate less malign forms of policy.

Fourthly, as the logical extension of (in)security, the relationship between environmental change, scarce natural resources and conflict becomes the focus of attention. This is also not a new issue, although its 'discovery' by political scientists, as well as the concern with political violence, is of more recent origin (Porter 1998:217; Smil 1998:212). Prominent in this regard is the notion that scarcities of critical environmental resources (e.g. water) are powerfully contributing to mass violence in key areas of the world. More specifically, it is contended that resource depletion, resource degradation and resource scarcity (induced by issues of supply and demand, as well as structural scarcity) contribute to mass violence (e.g. Homer-Dixon 1998:204-211). Apart from a concern for the sources and causes of conflict and violence, this emphasis extends to the preconditions for, and the processes of, peace.

Hence, it also involves conflict termination, containment, management and resolution, as well as strategic approaches to peace. The water discourse, in as much as it involves conflict, thus focuses on a continuum ranging between war and peace, violence and non-violence, and conflict and cooperation or collaboration (e.g. Buckles & Rusnak 1999:1-9).

Fifthly, the water discourse also includes normative dimensions because it involves issues of value, such as settled norms (e.g. sovereignty) and nascent norms (e.g. intervention and political space), ethical concerns (e.g. the distribution of and access to scarce resources), and human rights (e.g. individual and collective rights). Sixthly, international law is involved as a basis for order, justice, cooperation and governance. Finally, geopolitics and geopolitical realities are also involved. The geopolitics of water, and environmental governance and decision-making concerning water, are rapidly changing as the geographical implications of environmental problems and the water discourse exceed local and national concerns (Mofson 1994:167,174). In addition, the geopolitical agenda and process also become highly politicised. Against the background of these pointers, attention is forthwith directed at the nature and scope of international relations theory.

The fog of International Relations theory

International Relations (IR), as a separate discipline, dates from the end of World War I, when a Chair of International Relations was established at the University of Wales in 1919. Apart from the fact that the autonomous status of IR has always been contested, and that it has never been universally accepted or secure – the field of study being regarded as a mere sub-discipline of Political Science, or as an interdisciplinary endeavour – and apart from the fact that its subject matter has undergone spectacular transformation over time – the last decade being no exception – IR has been cast as a discipline that is divided and dividing, a discipline of theoretical disagreement, and a discipline in a state of disarray. This situation is attributed to the divisive effect of numerous competing theoretical approaches which provide for a choice of conceptual frameworks. It is also attributed to the fact that IR has accumulated a huge intellectual balance of trade deficit *vis-à-vis* other disciplines, since it is a major importer of ideas and its scholars seldom lead or influence public debate. Consequently, IR scholars speak in many voices. They regularly propose or introduce 'new' approaches to the subject and they

engage in 'great debates' (Burchill 1996:3; Holsti 1985:1; Kubálková, Onuf & Kowert 1998:3-5). Familiarity with the resultant range of IR theories has become an essential prerequisite to understand the modern world, bearing in mind that these divergent theories enshroud issue-areas in a proverbial 'fog'.

Is it possible to account for these theoretical divisions and chart the course of the water discourse through international relations theory? A genealogical perspective that analyses both descent and emergence, provides some direction. It accounts for theory as a historical manifestation of a series of conflicting interpretations, whose unity and identity are the products of a victory in this conflict; it calls into question the picture that the discipline draws of itself and the self-image that dominates successive theoretical debates; it reflects the political and theoretical agenda, as well as the normative concerns each categorisation produces; and it indicates which accounts, voices and 'reality' are dominant (or marginalised and silent) (Smith 1995:6-7, 30-31).

The first great debate (1920s-1940s) – that being between idealism and realism – had an ontological preoccupation with the subject of international relations (what is it that we know?) and suggested a theory 'of being' based on the (altruistic and egotistical) nature of humankind. The second great debate (1950s-1960s) – that being between traditionalism and behaviouralism – centred on methodological considerations (how should we go about the business of knowing?) and presented a theory 'of doing' based on the nature of (the 'classical' and 'scientific') method (Cox & Sjolander 1994:4; Wæver 1996:150).

The third great debate (1970s-1980s) – the so-called inter-paradigm debate between the contending perspectives of realism, liberalism (liberal-pluralism) and radicalism (Marxist and neo-Marxist structuralism/globalism) – preoccupied itself with epistemology (how do we know that we know?) and suggested a theory 'of knowing', which involved the introduction of alternative conceptions of the international system in response to the dominance of realism. Although incommensurable in the sense that they did not speak the same languages, these contending perspectives were tolerant of one another (albeit a repressive tolerance). The third debate culminated in a 'decline' of Marxist variants of radicalism (considering the presumed ideological 'triumph' of liberal democracy and capitalism). More specifically, however, it resulted in realism becoming neo-realism and liberalism becoming neo-liberal institutionalism. This produced a neo-neo-synthesis (rational-institutionalism) owing to the fact that both underwent anti-metaphysical,

theoretical minimalism – making them increasingly compatible – and also because they shared a common research programme, conception of science and fundamental premises (Cox & Sjolander 1994:4; Wæver 1996:150-163). The third debate opened two broad avenues: firstly, a return to more traditional research projects and research agendas that had defined international relations scholarship since its inception; and secondly, a critical turn, with scholars preoccupied by the more fundamental implications of the metatheoretical distinctions of the third debate, engaging themselves in a re-examination of its basic assumptions (Cox & Sjolander 1994:4; Porter 1994:125).

The fourth great debate or postpositivist debate (1990s) is between the rationalism of the neo-realist/neo-liberal synthesis (inclusive of the subdebate between neo-realists and neo-liberalists concerning 'relative and absolute gains') and reflectivism (Cox & Sjolander 1994:4; Huysmans 1997:338; Wæver 1996:164-165; Wæver 1997:19). The defining element of this debate is incommensurability. Rationalists and reflectivists tend not to talk to one another very much since they do not share a common language (Smith 1997:184). Furthermore, among rationalists and reflectivists, there is an absence of repressive tolerance in the form of a similar self-understanding of the relationship among positions. There is also a reciprocal lack of recognition with regard to legitimate parallel enterprises, since these are believed to be linked to contending social agendas and political projects. Rationalists and reflectivists see each other as harmful, and at times, almost 'evil'. According to reflectivists, the mainstream can be co-responsible for upholding a repressive order. This intolerance is enhanced by the fact that the discipline has defined neo-realism as 'the dominant position', emphasising its 'totalising and monological theories', as well as the influential position neo-realists occupy among the 'gatekeepers' of the discipline (Wæver 1997:22,26).

However, the discipline tends to organise itself through 'a constant oscillation between grand debates and periods in-between where the previous contestants meet' (Wæver 1996:175). The 1990s witnessed the emergence of such an 'interregnum' or 'after the fourth debate' scheme. Recent developments are indicative of the de-radicalisation of reflectivism, representing a move away from side-marginalising guerrilla approaches, and the rephilosophisation of rationalism, representing a move towards constitutive principles (Wæver 1997:22-25). The result is an 'increasing marginalisation of extreme rationalists approaches (formal rational choice) and anti-IR approaches (deconstructivists), as well as the emergence of a middle ground where neo-institutionalists from the rational side meet the constructivists from the

reflectivist side' (Wæver 1997:23). The attempted *rapprochement*, namely constructivism, 'sits precisely at the intersection ... (because) ... it deals with the same features of world politics as are central to both the neo-realist and neo-liberal components of rationalism, and yet it is centrally concerned with both the meanings actors give to their actions and the identity of these actors, each of which is a central theme of *reflectivist* approaches' (Smith 1997:183). As such, it offers a *via media* or middle path representing a synthesis between rationalism and reflectivism (Kubálková, Onuf & Kowert 1998:3-4; Smith 1997:188).

The water discourse charts its present course through the theoretical landscape of both the fourth debate and the 'after the fourth debate' scheme. The metaphor 'swimming upstream' or 'swimming downstream' (Swatuk & Vale 2000), with its emphasis on conflicting approaches, situates the discourse in the domain of the fourth debate. Taken to its logical conclusion, the movement in opposite directions along the rationalist/reflectivist axis, with or against the prevailing current, is most likely to terminate in a stalemate where the debate is 'dammed up' by (or 'damned' to) the 'increasing boredom' of extreme incommensurabilities. Or, as a zero-sum outcome, it is likely to terminate in a situation where the 'upstream swimmer' succumbs to the force of the dominant (downstream) current, or (less likely) where the 'downstream swimmer' is drawn under by contraflow turbulence. As an alternative, a non-zero-sum metaphor is introduced that advances the discourse to the 'after the fourth debate' domain. In keeping with the river image, 'mainstream' and 'tributary' are used as metaphors to respectively indicate the dominant and marginal discourses. Irrespective of their relative strengths or the course each takes, both navigate through the foggy landscape of international relations theory to replenish a common issue-field characterised by water scarcity. In addition, provision is made for 'conduit' construction that merges the main and tributary flows and that may, as a *rapprochement*, open up a middle ground.

Mainstream rationalism

The 'main stream' of contemporary theorising comprises what is commonly known as mainstream, rationalist theories of international relations. These are 'scientific' or positivist formulations that offer rational, explanatory accounts of international relations, locking IR into a particular point on a broad spectrum of philosophical possibilities. Positivism sees the world as existing objectively and claims that the subject and object must be strictly separated in order to theorise properly. Since it assumes that images in the human mind can represent reality through observation, it also assumes that theorists can stand apart from the world in order to 'see' it clearly and formulate statements that correspond to the world as it truly is. In summary, positivism, as explanatory theory, thus adopts a rationalist position, sees the world as something external to the theories of it, and sees the task of theory as having to report on this world. Rationalist theories are therefore also foundational, as they represent an epistemological position which assumes that all claims about some feature of the world can be judged true or false (Burchill 1996:2; Devetak 1996:147; Kubálková, Onuf & Kowert 1998:3,13; Porter 1994:121; Smith 1997:167-169). Furthermore, being predominantly positivist, foundational and explanatory, rationalist theory also corresponds to what Cox (1981:128-129; 1996:88) calls problem-solving theory: theory that takes the world as it finds it, including the prevailing social and power relationships and institutions, and uses them as the framework for action.

Both neo-realism and neo-liberalism are rationalist theories. They are based on rational choice theory, and take the identities and interests of actors as 'given'. However, they deem processes such as those of institutions – and not the identities and interests of actors – as being able to affect behaviour. The neo-realist/neo-liberal debate or neo-neo-synthesis whereby the long-standing confrontation between realism and liberalism merge to form the central core of the discipline, similarly represents a rationalist enterprise. It ignores major features of a globalised political world system, and agrees that the state is the primary actor in world politics. It sees cooperation and conflict as the focus, and seems unconcerned with morality, but agrees that actors are rational, value maximisers (Smith 1997:169-171,184).

Realism/neo-realism refers to privileging strategic interaction and the distribution of global (and regional) power above other considerations. Both explain the inevitability of conflict and competition between states by highlighting the insecure and anarchical nature of the international environment. The nation state is regarded as a permanent fixture in the international system, limiting the prospects for alternative expressions of political community. Anarchy is the systemic structure that shapes and influences the behaviour of states, hence the main emphasis is on statism, survival and self-help. However, it is, assumed that there can be cooperation under anarchy, and that states can cushion international anarchy by constructing elementary

rules and institutions for their coexistence (Burchill 1996:90; Dunne 1997b: 109-123). Paradoxically, having shaped realism with a positivist zeal, the radicals of an earlier generation suddenly find themselves described as reactionary disciplinary guardians (Kubálková, Onuf & Kowert 1998:17). Liberal institutionalism has the positive benefits of transnational cooperation at its core. Neo-liberal institutionalists take the state as a legitimate representation of society for granted; accept the structural conditions of anarchy without excluding the possibility of cooperation between states, as the existence (and proliferation) of regimes demonstrates; accepts the increasing process of integration; and believe that absolute gains (rather than relative gains) can be realised from cooperation between states (Dunne 1997a:147-163).

By considering the unit-level actors involved, it is obvious from all the contributions that a state-centric perspective dominates, and that the state is considered to be the traditional or prevailing entity, with the inclusion of individuals and collectivities representing the state (e.g. government representatives, state departments and inter-governmental organisations). An interesting departure is the raising of water and the environment to unit-levels of investigation (e.g. Chonguiça 2000), but this conceptualisation eventually fails to escape its state-centric foundations. Sovereignty and territorial integrity, as collaterals, also receive attention. Pluralism is not excluded, since non-state actors – ranging from transnational non-governmental organisations to sub-national groups and communities – are specifically emphasised as key stakeholders in the water discourse. However, most contributions tend to 'speak' from the vantage-point of state actors, and none explicitly represent the alternative non-state viewpoint. The geopolitical references that are used (explicitly in Ashton 2000 and implicitly in most other contributions, of which Leestemaker 2000 is a good example) also fail to escape their state-centric foundations inasmuch as the paradigm of contemporary critical geopolitics (human/environment-focussed) is never expressly discussed. Chonguiça, Leestemaker, Nunde and Mulendema (2000) do, however, provide some indication of an awareness of the areas of critical geopolitics, but do not enter this domain. Although the classical realist 'billiard-ball' image is not projected, what remains is the 'cobweb' or transnational network of relations indicative of pluralism in conditions of complex interdependence. Although not explicitly articulated, most contributions eventually subscribe to the neo-realist notion of an anarchical or 'governless' international system, in which state behaviour is not only the product of state attributes themselves, but also of the structure of the international system within which these interactions take place. However, it is believed that, in a neo-liberal institutionalist fashion, cooperation and collaboration is possible under conditions of anarchy, thereby changing 'water wars' into 'water peace' through 'water regimes'.

In considering the *problematique* endangering peace, stability and progress, the emphasis is of course on 'water wars', on the threat water-related contingencies pose to security, and on water insecurity. In the description of 'water wars', and as a manifestation of system dysfunction, the notion of interstate war based on necessity is commonly used as a point of departure (e.g. Chonguiça 2000; Meissner 2000; Turton 2000). However, all these contributions extend the notion well beyond interstate interaction. This is particularly true of Turton (2000), who presents an overview that also contains social-historical, structural and virtual conceptualisations, thus departing from the conventional wisdom, but without making a quantum leap. This conceptualisation of 'war' as a manifestation of water-induced conflict ties in with the notion of security, which also provides ample evidence of, and a sensitivity towards, the 'new' security paradigm which extends traditional state-centric and military security to common or human security (e.g. Chonguiça 2000; Meissner 2000; Turton 2000). A charge that these conceptualisations involve a militarisation of water would be unwarranted and unjustified. However, a securitisation of water takes place by implication, thus drawing in the military. The Homer-Dixon thesis is subscribed to in respect of the causal relationship between water scarcity and societal violence. What is advocated as a solution or management alternative is a combination of the enhancement of adaptive capacity-building (eventually requiring water complexes or regimes) and lateral expansion (Turton 2000). The centrality of the state as a unit-level still underpins these options. Turton (2000) does, however, depart significantly from a state-centric focus, inasmuch as society is elevated to a primary unit-level in respect of the development of second-order responses to water insecurity. However, this stretches the parameters of the prevailing paradigm, without tearing it or moving beyond it.

In respect of the cooperative or collaborative responses to water-related (in)security and water-induced conflict, neo-liberal institutionalism comes strongly to the fore. Underpinning this, is the notion (either explicit or implicit) of regime development, which is based on stakeholder decision-making and has a distinct legalistic-institutional foundation, which runs like a thread through most contributions. In this respect, 'good governance' – again emphasising the centrality of the state, but also adding liberal-democratic and

capitalistic values as collateral – is also introduced in the equation (e.g. Mochebelele 2000). However, it is obvious that the key participants in this respect are mostly collectivities representing the state as a political entity, as well as technical specialists in the water field. Research institutions and interest groups are gaining more prominence and are strengthening their foothold, but the nature and extent of their 'establishment' links or 'established' links are, of course, a contentious and debatable issue.

From the point of view that these contributions also involve a 'scientific' endeavour, none critically reflect on subject, object or method. Although no self-identification is evident in this respect, the contributions exemplify a positivist and explanatory approach to the 'science' focussing on the water discourse. Although 'insiders' to the water discourse are involved, the prevailing approach is to distance the subject from the object, and to describe, explain and predict as 'objectively' as possible from the outside. The empirical referent is the real world 'out there'. Furthermore, the approach is a problem-solving one, in the sense of both the narrow technical and broader social sciences. Hence, in most respects, the contributions represent mainstream theorising of a rationalist, positivist nature within the neo-realist/neo-liberal institutionalist paradigm.

Tributary reflectivism

The 'tributaries' of contemporary theorising comprise what is known as reflectivist theories of international relations. Reflectivist theories – also referred to as reflexivists, in order to indicate their self-reflective nature (Wæver 1997:20) – emerged in the 1990s as a set of post-positivist theories that include normative theory, feminist theory, critical theory, postmodernism and historical sociology (Smith 1997:168). As critical conceptions, they reflect on the origins and conditions of different perspectives, and view theory as irreducibly related to social and political life (Devetak 1996:145). This critical disposition is based on the assumption that '(t)heory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose', and that there is 'no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space' (Cox 1996:87). In effect, theory rationalises, reifies and legitimises the existing order. Consequently, they question the presumed apolitical nature of positivist theorising, and are concerned with the concealed perspectives, the social and political purposes of knowledge, the cognitive interests and assumptions of the observer, and the

way in which key actors construct their images of the world (Burchill 1996:1-2).

Although the areas of work constituting the set of post-positivist theories do not add up to one theory of reflectivism (Smith 1997:172), commonalities do exist. The metatheoretical stance of reflexivity (reflectivism), as international relations theory, involves three core elements: a self-awareness regarding the underlying premises of 'own' theorising; the recognition of the inherently politico-normative dimension of paradigms and the normal science traditions they generate; and that reasoned judgements can be made about the merits of contending paradigms in the absence of objective standards (Neufeld 1994:13). How theory is approached is the central question, and the central dichotomy is one between post-positivist and positivist positions. Thus, a distinction is made between those for whom knowledge is socially constructed (and theory is therefore inherently reflexive), and those for whom it is not (Cox & Sjolander 1994:5).

However, reflectivist theories are united more by what they reject, than by what they accept (Smith 1997:172). As post-positivist theories, they are classified as constitutive (not explanatory), since they see theory as constitutive of reality, and are concerned with the importance of human reflection on the nature and character of world politics. In other words, they think theories help construct the world. Theories that are held become self-confirming, because the very concepts used to think about the world help to make that world what it is (Burchill 1996:15; Smith 1997:167). They are anti-foundational (not foundational), since they represent an epistemological position which assumes that claims about some feature of the world cannot be judged true or false, because there are no neutral grounds on which to do so (Smith 1997:167-169). They are critical (not problem-solving), since they note that social structures are intersubjective. In other words, these structures are socially constructed, and they are therefore interested in how hegemonic social structures can be transcended and overcome (Smith 1997:177). They are post-modern (reject modernity), since they demonstrate an incredulity towards meta-narratives by focussing on 'power-knowledge' relationships and textual strategies, which include deconstruction (Smith 1997:182).

Reflectivism seriously questions the theoretical inadequacies of state-centric realist and neo-realist conceptions of the war and peace *problematique*, neo-liberal institutional approaches to cooperation in anarchy, as well as the positivist assumptions that have dominated the study of international relations. However, the critique extends well beyond the theoretical assumptions and research agenda of the neo-neo-synthesis. Its major concern is with the

prevailing order constituted by these conceptions. Inverting the truism that knowledge is power, reflectivists contend that power produces knowledge. Based on the interdependence of power relations and a constituted field of knowledge, and the fact that, at the same time, knowledge presupposes and constitutes power relations (Devetak 1996:181 – quoting Foucault), '(r)ationality is seen as an ideological construction that is a form of power ... (which) operates by constituting self-disciplined individuals who monitor their own conduct by ensuring conformity, and by (establishing) boundaries that are used to silence and "exclude" others who are labelled insane, primitive, criminal, terrorist or the like' (Porter 1994:108). Consequently, the need is expressed to reconceptualise the discipline, abandon the positivist tenet of truth and accept the centrality of the political or normative content of international relations theory (Cox & Sjolander 1994:5-6).

It is obvious that none of the contributions represent the tributary reflectivist alternative(s), either explicitly or implicitly. At times, some do depart from the dominant paradigm and scientific approach, as evidenced by cursory references to normative and ethical issues, social history and a superficial questioning of state dominance. The water discourse as represented, never critically questions either its ontological, epistemological or methodological assumptions. Neither is the substance and direction of the discourse itself, critically or reflectively questioned. Hence, from a reflectivist point of view, the issue is not so much the presence of reflectivist modalities, but their absence. In this respect, the critical, reflectivist discourse is, to a significant extent, marginalised and at times even silent.

The extent of this reality, and the attribution of its causes, are vociferously dealt with by Swatuk and Vale (2000). In fact, they are 'swimming upstream' in relation to the current course of the water discourse, as they criticise the water capture effect of the Homer-Dixon thesis; deconstruct the discourse by identifying major problems associated with it and its resultant policy programmes (which by turn is racist, modernist, statist, capitalist, liberalist, technicist/militarist, exclusive and supportive of the *status quo*); and propose a strategy for subverting this discourse as a prerequisite for reconstructing it (the need for a change in thinking, language, focus and practice). The essence of this is twofold. On the one hand, it is contended (implicitly) that the water domain is predominantly a product of the theoretical tenets and contents of the prevailing water discourse itself, and that consequently, 'water theory' is in fact a constitutive of the reality it purports to explain. On the other hand, it is contended (explicitly) that the discursive

elite – comprising those persons who are in a dominant position within bureaucratic entities, and who can determine the nature, form and content of the prevailing water discourse (also known as the sanctioned discourse) – act as 'guardians' or 'gatekeepers' in order to dominate, legitimise and sanction the prevailing discourse, thereby leading to the creation of a dominant paradigm for the water discourse, within which the 'normal' science of water is conducted. Consequently, the critique matches, to a significant extent, the tenets of critical reflectivism in a post-positivist mode.

This is neither the time nor the place to respond to these arguments, assess their validity, or compare and judge the relative merits of the contending positions. It is, in any case, up to the 'accused' who operates within the framework of mainstream rationalism to respond (which will hopefully be done in due course). What is evident is that 'space' and opportunities exist for opening up the water discourse, thereby making the alleged 'silent voices' more voluble. In this respect, the ethics of water politics, its gendered nature, the genealogy of its self-image, its social history, its textual deconstruction and the history of its knowledge, provide ample scope for a new research agenda that could extend to and include the tributary, reflectivist course. In part, this challenge should be taken up by the reflectivists themselves, since very little that has been done in this respect, has come to public notice. Hence, the reflectivist challenge should not merely be ignored, but should be seen as an opportunity to cross-fertilise the water discourse.

Conduit construction?

In order to move beyond futile, 'debate-masquerading' posturing, constructivism attempts to make sense of social relations by explaining the construction of the socio-political world by human practice. As such, it shares with reflectionists, many of the premises and attacks on the mainstream, but 'rejects the "slash-and-burn" extremism of some post-modern thinkers who leave nothing behind them, nowhere to stand, nothing even for themselves to say' (Kubálková, Onuf & Kowert 1998:20). According to Wæver (1997:24-25), this can be based on the mainstream social constructivism of Wendt (1987), or on the traditional approach – which includes quasi-philosophical and historical reflection – of the so-called English School.

Wendt is of particular relevance. His basic view was that the 'actor-structure' problem arises from a belief that human beings are purposeful

actors, whose actions reproduce and transform society. He also maintains that society is made up of social relationships which structure the interaction between human beings (Wendt 1987:337-338). Since the world is pre-organised – and pre-structured – it shapes and moulds actors. However, actors are also international agents who act in this world, and who recreate or transform the structures it contains (Ringmar 1997:271). Hence, Wendt introduces a number of radical reformulations. He focuses not on structures or agents, but on the interrelationship between them; he theorises not about material facts and eternal imperatives, but about practices and processes, and about the social creation of meaning; and he puts the neo-realist picture into motion by historicising it, and moving it closer to actions, thought and human life (Ringmar 1997:285). Although Wendt sees states as 'given' in world politics, his key claim is that international anarchy is not fixed, and does not automatically involve the self-interested state behaviour that rationalists see as built into the system. Anarchy could take on several different forms because the selfish interests and identities assumed by rationalists are, in fact, the product of the interaction – they did not exist prior to it (Smith 1997:186-187). Thus, constructivist theories do not take interests and identities as 'given'. They focus on how intersubjective practices between actors result in identities and interests being formed during the processes of interaction, rather than being formed prior to the interaction (Smith 1997:185). In this respect and according to Wendt (1992:393-394,395): 'We are what we are by how we interact, rather than being what we are regardless of how we interact' and '(a)narchy is what states make of it'.

Elements of a constructivist approach are most notable in the contributions of Turton and Leestemaker (2000), but the current water discourse has not entered the 'past the fourth debate' scheme. However, the inclusion of this compromise or *rapprochement* primarily serves the purpose of indicating the need for a middle-ground. The major problem with the fourth debate is its destructive and debilitating nature. Like most previous incommensurable debates within IR, it terminates in a ('victory-less') stalemate where participants can only pursue 'point-scoring' in minor skirmishes. The question should rather be whether or not a collaborative enterprise is necessary, sufficient and possible? At least constructivism provides an alternative in line with current trends, which also includes or provides for marginalised concerns (despite the fact that the major critique is that constructivism is still dominated by a 'new' version of the neo-neo enterprise). If not a collaborative *rapprochement*, what other alternatives exist apart from conceding defeat/

accepting victory, or enduring the stalemate until a new debate appears on the horizon which will hopefully cast the water discourse in a new mould? However, considering the salience and topical nature of the water discourse, it is too serious a matter to underplay. Hence the need for participants and stakeholders in the water discourse to take up the challenge and chart a new course.

Conclusion

Perhaps, to quote Burchill (1996:23-24), 'we should not ask too much of theory', provided that it still caters for understanding, explaining and prediction. It should remain consistent, coherent and adequate in scope, and have a capacity for critical self-reflection and intellectual engagement with contending theories. Admittedly, the preceding discussion said more about international relations theory, than it did about the theoretical content and context of the water discourse. An understanding of the latter, however, requires more than a mere cursory overview of the former. Hence the emphasis on international relations theories. Two additional factors have to be borne in mind. On the one hand, purposive and self-conscious attempts at theory construction within the discipline are the exception, rather than the rule. Expecting a major contribution from the water discourse, which in fact seeks solutions to practical problems, would be asking too much. This does not mean that the water discourse is unrelated or irrelevant to international relations theory. On the contrary, as a 'theatre of operations' it forms part of and exemplifies the 'war(s) of theory'. On the other hand, theory manifests in different orders at different levels, and has a layered appearance. As a different order and level of theory, which is more remote from meta- and mainstream theorising – and more immediate to practice – the theoretical content and context of the water discourse is not always self-evident or self-explanatory. It has to be uncovered and explained. Therefore, suffice it to summarise the course of theory in the water discourse as follows.

Firstly, at the macro-level of contending approaches, perspectives or paradigms of international relations, the academic participants or stake-holders in the water discourse seldom explicitly or self-consciously subscribe to a particular theoretical position. Neither do they consciously attempt to construct a theory of water politics within the ambit of a particular paradigm. More by default than by design, they take cognisance of theory at this level,

and implicitly accommodate the fundamental tenets and assumptions of mainstream or (with high exception) marginalised theories. In addition to this, their critics are likely to identify their theoretical position(s), and in the process, label participants as exponents of a particular (ideological) position. In this respect, the major contributions to theorising fall within the ambit of the mainstream theories labelled positivist and rationalist. The neo-realist (with emphasis on hegemonous, regime-driven cooperation under conditions of presumed anarchy) and neo-liberal (with emphasis on liberal institution-alism) positions obviously dominate. Although representative of marginalised tributaries, voices advocating more space for a post-positivist and reflectivist critique are being heard, although they are least voluble at present.

Secondly, at the meso-level of partial theories on (environmental) secur-ity, (sustainable) development and (holistic) ecopolitics, the theoretical underpinnings of the water discourse are more developed, explicit and sophisticated. Owing to the fact that these partial theories are mainly exten-sions of existing sectoral debates, and although they admittedly contain elements of 'new' post-Cold War thinking, the water discourse follows and reflects existing theoretical courses, rather than mapping out and constructing new theoretical routes. As such – and this constitutes a major point of criticism – they are susceptible to and remain entrapped within the language and assumptions of the neo-realism/neo-liberalism synthesis, and reflect varia-tions of predominantly state-centred cooperation in pursuit of common security and sustainable development, under conditions of both anarchy and complex interdependence. In addition, their alleged politicisation, militarisa-tion and support of an agenda that maintains the *status quo*, makes them even more susceptible and vulnerable to criticism.

Thirdly, at the micro-level, and with reference to the causal relationship between resource scarcity as an independent variable and (sustainable) development, (in)security and (violent) conflict as dependent variables, theo-retical justification is provided to describe, explain and predict cause and effect. This justification is based mostly on related theories, or on purpose-built theoretical constructs of an eclectic nature. Although this approach is not to be faulted, hypothesis-testing theories require an awareness of the broader theoretical context within which they are situated, and which they introduce to the discourse.

Finally, it is advocated that participants in the water discourse should exhibit a greater sensitivity towards and explicitly involve themselves more in theorising, irrespective of the level of theory (i.e. contending theoretical

positions, partial theory, or hypotheses-testing theory) and the order of theory (i.e. theorising about theory, theory about the international relations context of water, or ideas and thoughts on how to manage the water issue). In addition, participants should also be more aware of the ideological and/or political context of the water discourse, and of its 'excess theoretical baggage', as well as their contribution to it. This is particularly important when considering the contentious and value-laden context of the water discourse at the sub-national, national and regional levels. In addition, lets not forget the fact that it stands at the nexus of theory and practice.

Since the above represents a continuation of the positivist/post-positivist or rationalist/reflectivist dichotomy – which unfortunately contributes little to intersubjective communication or consensus regarding the management of practical concerns – two challenges are posed to break the existing impasse. Firstly, the pursuance of a theoretical compromise or cross-field *rapproche-ment*. A possible solution may be found in a constructivist approach, which links the main and subsidiary courses of the water discourse, thus chan-nelling the course of theory into a single stream. Apart from being consistent with the current constructivist approach which attempts to bridge the rationalist-reflectivist gap – thus reducing the 'boundaries of boredom and negativity' associated with the overemphasis of formal rational choice by extreme rationalists, as well as the deconstructivism by radical reflectivists – the water discourse already exhibits several features of constructivism. Although the viability and success of the constructivist endeavour remains, at the most, unproven, or are at least questionable, it provides an alternative course for the water discourse. Secondly, assuming that the *status quo* of the dominant-marginalised position continues, there exists a need, on the one hand, to create space for the predominantly silent voices of ethical, gendered and critical debates; and, on the other hand, to also recognise the actual contributions of pragmatic problem-solving approaches to the management of real-time water issues.

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Water Wars in Southern Africa: Challenging Conventional Wisdom[1]

Anthony Turton

'The Ethiopians hold it for a fact that Egypt is "trying to monopolise" the Nile and cite the Aswan Dam, the Tochkan Canal, and the Peace Canal as examples of how Egypt step-by-step claims a larger amount of the Nile water; claims that may be used as evidence of an "acquired right" in future negotiations. This is the classic upstream-downstream dilemma, unsatisfactorily managed by international law, which has given rise to fears of *water wars*' (Ohlsson & Lundqvist 2000).

Introduction

Africa is dominated by transboundary waters, due largely to the scramble for Africa during colonial times, when European powers arbitrarily drew borders on the continent, showing little regard for the natural, geographic or ethnic realities that existed. The Charter of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) originally recognised all borders that existed at the time of its founding, thereby locking in one of the elements of potential political instability. Africa contains about 80 international river and lake basins. No less than 21 of these