Hydro-perspectivism: Terrestrial life from a watery angle

Franz Krause
University of Cologne, f.krause@uni-koeln.de

Abstract

This essay introduces the idea of hydro-perspectivism in order to better understand what happens if anthropologists, alongside their research participants, comment on terrestrial life from a watery angle. Based on a close reading of the contributions to this special issue, it indicates how being afloat rather than grounded, shifts people's points of reference around, even though their general cultural framework might remain the same. A perspectivist, rather than representational, approach to the juxtaposition of water- and land-based subject positions pays heed to the specific materialities of watery heterotopias and to the ways water may engender certain social and political forms. This also means that different waters and waterways produce different perspectives – a British canal fashions different points of view than an Atlantic beach or a Taiwanese drinking water reservoir. As a way of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, hydro-perspectivism can serve as a technique to afford a new look at our terrestrial assumptions and identify problems and blind spots in our received ways of thinking.

KEYWORDS: canal, hydrosocial, materiality, perspectivism, shore, water

Making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange, are among the core aims of anthropological work. Anthropologists attempt to describe seemingly exotic lifeworlds in ways that make them comprehensible and familiar; and by the same token, they hope to disclose blind spots in our own mainstream, continually reminding our peers and us how different things could be and how strange, indeed, many of the otherwise unquestioned truths in our worlds are. These interventions are intended to de-exotisise people and ways of being that may appear problematic to an ethnocentric observer; and they are to create new spaces for thinking about alternatives to our received wisdom.

In this spirit, Marcus and Fischer (1986) have famously argued for understanding anthropology as cultural critique: a perspective learned from lifeworlds elsewhere, they argue, can help us formulate criticism of the lifeworlds that have been naturalised in our own political, economic and academic contexts. Hornborg (2001) provides a powerful example of this approach when he juxtaposes current global industrial capitalism with the Inca kingdom and other historical Andean polities. He demonstrates how, given the divinity of the Inca ruler and the understanding that all fertility and wealth originates in

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this person, what may appear to us today as a system of highly exaggerated tribute and wealth accumulation is indeed a logical part in this universe. Simultaneously, by portraying increasing resource exploitation and the concentration of wealth in the global capitalist economy alongside his Inca analysis, he demonstrates how this system of exploitation – like the Inca universe – is only logical given very particular assumptions. The Inca story provides Hornborg with an external perspective on our taken-for-granted political economy, laying open its brutal and unequal redistribution of resources, wealth and wellbeing, and suggesting that alternatives are not only possible but also desperately necessary.

This special issue deploys *water* to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. As the editors point out in their introduction (Bowles, Kaaristo, & Rogelja 2019), contributions to this collection analyse life on, in and with water in situations where water is "other" – possibly exotic, and definitely not standard. People living on boats along English canals, surfing and defending waves on an Irish beach, or coping with reduced drinking water supply in Taiwan all do so in contexts where life on firm land is considered normal, and relations with water as somewhat extraordinary. In some ways, this reflects our own predicament in academia, where we work, write, and theorise predominantly while grounded on land. This land and groundedness has, we could assume, become part of the way we think in our academic endeavours, for instance rendering a sense of stability through the fact that our offices keep being arranged in the same spatial order year in year out, quite unlike the fluctuating "linear village" of British boaters.

Water is, therefore, interesting not necessarily as a material with specific characteristics or affordances, but mostly in its relation – and possibly opposition – to land. Some of the laws that govern life on land, such as territorial real estate, seem not to apply as much to reservoirs, canals, or the sea. The logics of capitalist accumulation and state governmentality seem suspended in the water. In short, water in this special issue constitutes a space that Foucault (1986) might have called "heterotopia" – a space that differs from the hegemonic mainstream while maintaining significant relations with it: 'something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites … are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (ibid.: 24). By studying these counter-sites, researchers learn something about mainstream society, similar to anthropology's method of making the familiar strange in the process of making the strange familiar. For the present collection, this means that by approaching it from a watery angle, we can learn something about terrestrial life that would have been more difficult to apprehend from a more "grounded" perspective.

We might call the approach followed in this special issue *hydro-perspectivism*. Perspectivism, a concept based on Amerindian ethnography and developed by Viveiros de Castro (1998), Kohn (2013) and others, describes an ontology of "multinaturalism", as a radical alternative to the "multiculturalism" of Western thought. Whereas the latter sees the world as a common natural space apprehended by different cultural visions, the former sees all beings in the world as sharing the same culture, but as differing through their various natures, as animal, spirit, or human. All of these are understood to have the same kinship, ritual, and food, but because of their different corporalities, these take different forms:

> … all beings see ('represent') the world in the same way – what changes is the world that they see …: what to us is blood, is maize beer to the jaguar; what to the souls of the dead is a rotting corpse, to us is soaking manioc; what we see as a muddy waterhole, the tapirs see as a great ceremonial house (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 477–8).

While all beings thus entertain the same representations, what differs is their perspective, which distinguishes not only different species and spirits but also different groups of people.

Extending this idea from Amerindian ethnography to the anthropological study of relations with water as proposed in this special issue renders clearer what happens if we, alongside our research participants, comment on terrestrial life from a watery angle. In fact, we engage in a form of hydro-perspectivism, which outlines how being afloat rather than grounded shifts the points of reference around, even though the general cultural framework might remain the same. A perspectivist, as opposed to representational, approach to the juxtaposition of water- and land-based subject positions seems particularly apt as the editors of the present collection emphasise the materiality of watery heterotopias, and claim that the particular substance of water engenders certain social and political forms (cf. Strang 2005; 2006). Therefore, the anthropological lesson in this collection seems to flow from the shift of perspectives: looking landwards from a watery heterotopia, and commenting on terrestrial life based on aquatic experience.

Hydro-perspectivism builds on a recent trend in anthropology and related fields that considers water as a co-constitutive part of social life, and – *vice-versa* – considers social relation as co-constitutive of what water is (e.g., Hastrup & Hastrup 2016; Krause & Strang 2016). Linton (2010) has argued that water from a public fountain is a different thing than water from a plastic bottle bought in a store, since these different waters emerge from and reproduce different social relations. Ballestero (2019) has explored in detail some of the social, legal and technical devices that, in different configurations, turn water into either a commodity or a universal human right. Kuo (2019) traces how, during a Taiwanese water crisis, the government performed water as a quantitative substance, the decline of which was an indicator of climate change, while in public discourse water was a political substance, the decline of which was an indicator of bad governance. If water is, therefore, not a single thing, but a multiple substance, we must critically ask what exactly the *hydro* in hydro-perspectivism is, and what views and experiences it affords.

Take the example of canals, which figure prominently in two of the papers in this collection. Are they predominantly instantiations of the general substance water, or do they embody a more particular water? Hastrup (2013) has argued that, if water configures social worlds, it does so in specific ways – a river that flows along implies different landscapes than a well, which centres social life around it. The canal, for Hastrup, figures as an attempt towards engineered control of hydrological processes and transport routes, which draw in ever more efforts to maintain them and realise their projects. The watery perspective that canals offer, therefore, differs from the perspective that the sea, the reservoir, or the water tank afford.

Moreover, even the water in canals is not singular across space and time. The English canals, for example, that today offer an alternative space to that of private real estate and class society, came into being as artefacts of industrial capitalism and social and ecological exploitation – quite the contrary to what they stand for today. They are based on extensive hydrological manipulation even if they presently constitute green and tranquil corridors.

Furthermore, the fact that they currently afford a de-centred and democratic network must be seen as a geographical and historical specificity rather than a general characteristic of the canal. In Thailand's predecessor states, for example, canals were dug radially outwards from the political centre, materialising and reinforcing the spatial hierarchy of the "galactic" polity, rather than creating an anarchic network (Morita & Jensen 2017). The Thai case also illustrates that canals used for transportation are rather different conduits – and thus afford different perspectives – than those used for irrigation. With the restructuring of the Chao Phraya Delta from a space of watery corridors for trade and power into a region of irrigated agriculture came not only the rerouting of many of its canals, but also a fundamental redefinition of the relation between water and land (Morita 2016).

What is more, while irrigation canals work through the movement of water through them, transportation canals work best if water movement is reduced to a minimum. For the former, water matters as a substance, for the latter as a substrate. Not only does moving water provide a different perspective than stagnant water (cf. Krause 2013), but the particular technologies along British canals that keep water in place but allow boats to move, like locks, engines, and sewage disposal sites, seem to be integral aspects of boaters' watery experience.

When Foucault claimed that '[t]he ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*' (1986: 27), he spoke of sea-going vessels that connected empires and colonies, covering vast distances in uncertain voyages. Nevertheless, to some extent this characterisation may apply to canal boats as well, which embody the places and histories that gave rise to them, while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance: 'the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea' (ibid.). The similarities and differences between boats and ships, just like the historical and hydrological similarities and differences between different canals, again remind us that we must be cautious about the specific angle that the respective kind of water may afford.

Likewise, we must keep in mind that one kind of water may afford different perspectives to differently situated people: bottled water, for example, separates those who can buy it from those who cannot – or environmentally conscious people from those who are not. This call for specificity should not be taken to imply that perspectives on water as a general, global phenomenon are irrelevant. Rather, the multi-scalar characteristics of waters, and the discourses and practices of water users that equally shift between specific and generalised can become guiding principles for anthropological analysis. Whyte (2019) illustrates this through the tension of universalism and particularism in surfers' relations with the sea. On the one hand, they perform a global surfing scene where any

beach concerns all surfers around the world, and where any of them is free to surf waves no matter where. On the other hand, they maintain a potentially strict exclusionary practice, where the surfers' home and skills may determine whether they have access to a particular wave. In short, water and watery perspectives exist in a tension between universal and particular manifestations.

A similar tension exists between continuity and difference in water- and land-based perspectives. Not everything that people perceive from the water differs radically from their terrestrial perceptions. In fact, many water-related social forms are strikingly similar to their landed counterparts, such as the elusive search for "community" in current society or the re-assertion of divisions and hierarchies. Bowles's (2019) juxtaposition of two boating associations shows that the fact that both converge around water, access and the performance of alternative lifestyles does not necessarily lead to the same principles and practices of social relations. In fact, these two associations seem to differ far more between each other than each of them differs from similar land-based organisations. One of them, London Boaters, appears rather similar to other British social movements that form and re-form temporarily to address a specific purpose, and all but disappear in between. Also, as Bowles notes, the anti-authoritarian discourse and anarchic aspirations of this boating organisation can be found among many other British organisations, too. I do believe that there is a lesson to be learnt about the temporality of social groups, which may congregate in contexts of externalised threat (e.g., Jencson 2001) and dissolve again under their own anti-authority attitude. The temporal switching between online and real-life group manifestations may indeed be a contemporary form of the rhythmic "social morphology" of contraction and expansion that Mauss (1979) is famous for describing. Again, while this is something that a water-based perspective may bring to our understanding of land-based life, we cannot claim that this is unique to watery sociality. The problem of political representation in acephalous groups is long known and not specific to London boat dwellers. For example, the Dene people in the Canadian Northwest Territories had to identify "chiefs" to sign the treaties that the Canadian government had drafted, even though they had no chiefs in the sense of a political representative (e.g., Heine et al. 2007). Interestingly, the inverse problem seems to exist as well: while the British administration cannot find a representative for a boating organisation, the Irish legal system cannot grant a right-of-way permit to a group, but only to individual claimants, as Whyte (2019) reports. Similar tensions between group, individual and state representation are known from various fields, including the watery sector of fisheries co-management (e.g., Jentoft 1989).

Indeed, some of the water-based perspectives may generally overlap with land-based ones. As Bowles (2019) notes, there are striking behavioural similarities between London's population of continuous cruisers and the British traveller community; the latter traditionally move in caravans, while the former live on boats; the latter are categorised as an ethnic group while the former as a lifestyle community. What, then, is the difference of life along the canal and life along the road? This question seems particularly apt as the congestion problems reported in London canals are paralleled by its terrestrial traffic jams. Both roads and canals afford movement in some direction but restrict it in others.

They enable evading some localised authorities, like municipalities, while remaining in the sway of others, like national navigation authorities. Both travellers and boaters can thus evade some issues while having to face others. London boaters, for instance, are bound to canals in and around London because of their work or schooling commitments (Roberts 2019). This is also why they cannot always "vote with their feet", but must resist rather than escape, and form organisations like London Boaters. In the context of Whyte's (2019) surfer study, mobility is not a matter of concrete transport infrastructures at all, but rather a privilege that distinguishes the surfers' relation with the sea from that of the inhabitants of the village on the beach. The surfers can choose where to go and will not lose their homes and jobs with increased coastal erosion. While we must, therefore, be cautious when looking for causal relationships between water and social relations, it remains clear throughout this collection that water is socially and culturally significant as the "other" of territorial society.

In the cases from Britain and Ireland discussed in this collection, water as the "other" is not limited to its material properties, but emerges in relation – and in opposition – to many taken-for-granted realities on the land. Whereas boating life remains steeped in distinctions and hierarchies, and sometimes very conservative gender norms, as Roberts (2019) elaborates, it continues to feel free and unconventional to many of its practitioners. May this be because its "other" – mainstream England – is even more stratified socially and economically? One of Bowles's interlocutors comments that boating constitutes "a very English kind of anarchism" and thereby hints at the specificity of this "other" space: it is not only non-terrestrial in its materiality, but above all anti-terrestrial in its politics. Perhaps the stark inequalities in British class society are, therefore, as important motivations for Londoners to take to the water, as any specific opposition to the state.

Similarly, the Irish surfers with whom Whyte trespasses on the golf course seem to rebel as much against the politics that prioritise economic development through large foreign investment as against state-sponsored environmental degradation. In his discussion of different perceptions of a drought in Taiwan, Kuo (2019) illustrates how the focus on water provides a way for people to voice their grievances with the government, but also a way of renegotiating relations within the household, where different generations and genders struggle to agree on the best solutions to the crisis.

Therefore, what can we learn from hydro-perspectivism? As a way of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, it can serve as a way to afford a new look at our terrestrial assumptions and identify problems and blind spots in our received ways of thinking. For example, a view from the water can inform us about the temporality of social and material processes (e.g., Krause 2017b), which might be less obvious from a land-based perspective. It might point towards the malleability of matter, and divert our attention from fixed forms (e.g., Bachelard 1983). It might also unhinge our focus on surfaces by exploring issues such as opacity and volume (e.g., Steinberg & Peters 2015). Moreover, it can teach us many lessons about our assumptions about stability and solidity, as encounters with water tend to be characterised by volatility and movement (e.g., Raffles 2002; Strang 2014; Björkman 2015; Krause 2017a). Furthermore, the contributions to this collection provide many examples for this perspective.

Water is the common theme of this collection, and a water-based perspective from this "other" sphere its common approach. In the cases discussed here, this seems to be warranted as water indeed figures as the other in people's lives, as boaters seek alternative spaces and lifestyles, surfers feel different from their non-surfing contemporaries because of their bodily bonds with the sea, and water users in Taiwan discuss a resource that has become exceptional due to its perceived scarcity. What water is, and how it fills the other space, differs from case to case, and between differently situated people in each case. Therefore, however, we must remain critical of the political ecology behind this substance, including questions of its definition. Who has the right to define what water is and does in a particular context? How and by whom are certain kinds and functions of water naturalised, for example, as laminar, as an equaliser, a scarce resource or a male-dominated space? Moreover, whenever we follow our research participants in opposing land to water – ontologically, strategically, or heuristically – we need also to remember that humans reproduce socially and culturally beyond this divide and that there may be radically other ways of categorising the world. A recent example of this latter possibility can be found in da Cunha's (2019) argument that water and land in India are best understood not as separate spheres, but as linked phases of wetness in a "rain terrain".

Similarly, in this collection, most action and meaning seem to be concentrated in the spaces where water and land meet. This includes the technologies and domestic practices that Kuo's research participants concentrate on when coping with drought. It also includes the Irish beach, where waves, currents, sand, sediments, people and capital converge and that matters for surfers and developers alike. "The Ocean" itself, which Whyte describes, might be an emic way of othering, perhaps to strategically emphasise the surfers' distinctiveness, but does not seem to be the place where they actually feel the waves and develop a sense of belonging. The breaks and their energy and challenges occur at the beach; "the surf" as a zone between water and land is where surfing happens.

Finally, many of the encounters with London boaters that Roberts and Bowles recount refer to moorings or the "towpath village" where boats are fixed. Here, life happens at the edge; not in the canal but alongside it, where water and land meet. From hydro-perspectivism to considerations of amphibious lives or wet landscapes, the relations between water and land and the different experiences drier or wetter lifeworlds may afford remain fruitful fields for anthropological research.

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Povzetek

Esej predstavlja idejo o hidroperspektivizmu, da bi lažje razumeli, kaj se zgodi, če antropologi poleg svojih udeležencev raziskav komentirajo zemeljsko življenje iz vodnega zornega kota. Natančno branje prispevkov v tej posebni številki pokaže, kako plovba namesto bivanja na trdnih tleh, premika referenčne točke ljudi, čeprav njihov splošni kulturni okvir morda ostaja enak. Pri bolj perspektivističnem kot reprezentacijskem pristopu k soočanju vodno in kopensko zasidranih pozicij subjektov, esej obravnava posebnost vodnih heterotopij in načine, na katere voda ustvarja nekatere družbene in politične oblike. To pomeni tudi, da različne vode in vodne poti ustvarjajo različne zorne kote - britanski kanal spodbuja drugačna stališča kot atlantska plaža ali tajvanski rezervoar s pitno vodo. Ker hidroperspektivizem lahko znano naredi tuje in tuje znano, lahko deluje kot tehnika, s katero si lahko privoščimo nov pogled na naše zemeljske predpostavke in prepoznamo težave in slepe točke v naših privzgojenih načinih razmišljanja.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: kanal, hidrosocialnost, materialnost, perspektivizem, obala, voda

CORRESPONDENCE: FRANZ KRAUSE, University of Cologne, Classen-Kappelmann-Str. 24, 50931 Cologne, Germany. E-mail: f.krause@uni-koeln.de.