INTRODUCTION

Water conflicts: the social life of an idea

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During the many times I have discussed water conflicts with my students in India, in Europe and in the United States, I have often been surprised by the uniformity of the images conjured in the conversations: two groups violently fighting for the last drop of water. Searching our global collective reservoir of information, which we once called the "world wide web", for the same keywords produce similar results—men with assault weapons threatening, ambushing one another around a muddy puddle. Even a more satirical take on water conflicts reveals a drawing of an individual with a wooden bat, a catcher's helmet and a water bottle, who, when asked whether they are going to play baseball, answers that they are going to collect water instead.

Puzzled by this consistent imaginary, I turned to the literature and found that environmental conflicts are defined as the violent escalation of an unresolved dispute (Burke, Hsiang and Miguel 2015; Homer–Dixon 1999; Khagram and Ali 2006; Peluso and Watts 2001) due to situations of environmental degradation (Libiszewski 1991). When an issue involves water, it is either one of quantity, i.e. scarcity (see Arsel and Spoor 2013; Donahue and Johnston 1998; Ganguli, Kumar and Ganguly 2017; Homer–Dixon and Blitt 1998; Verhoeven 2011) or, occasionally, quality (see Joy et al. 2008).

This long-debated definition takes a lot for granted. What is violence, for example? The World Health Organization defines violence as 'the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation' (World Health Organization 1996). Authoritative review studies of climate change and collective violence, such as Levy et al. 2017, use a similar definition, even though such authors might be expected to have a more nuanced understanding of issues related to environmental injustice and environmental racism. Many scholars have exposed the

limitations of these oversimplified definitions. Those who study conflict, for example, have expanded the notion of violence to include structural violence, or the erosion of people's well-being by socio-economic structures (Galtung 1969), as well as slow violence, a form of destruction that is dispersed in time and space (Nixon 2011) of which climate change is an excellent example. Political ecologists, first and foremost Peluso and Watts, have contextualised the complexities and dynamism of violence (2001) rooted in 'site-specific' local histories and social relations.

Others refute that conflicts occur because of the depauperation or loss of a resource. Joy et al. compiled a compendium of case studies about water conflicts to broaden the range of conflicts under consideration (2008). Khagram and Ali note that maldevelopment and environmental discrimination both contribute to conflicts, although they define both factors in terms of resource access (2006). Political ecologists, whose approach has developed precisely around the study of environmental conflicts, invoke the analysis of site-specific conflictual processes instead, reading local values in conjunction with associated global forces (Peluso and Watts 2001). In so doing, they also retain an association between conflicts and natural resources (Martinez Alier 2002).

Environmental anthropologists, on the other hand, despise an understanding of nature as purely material. This rebuke is also informed by their defiance of the nature/culture dyad, an opposition that, as I have argued, has been the organising principle of the subfield (Cortesi et al. 2018). Björkman, for example, builds on Mehta's argument about the construction of scarcity (Mehta 2013), a line of thought that rests on Sen's early reflections on famines as a political product (Sen 1981). According to Björkman, Mumbai's water scarcity is produced through the control over water distribution—what Björkman calls 'pipe politics'—which is contingent on aspects of knowledge infrastructures, sociopolitical power processes, and material networks, and is thus simultaneously social and material (Björkman 2015).

Another approach has been to dismantle the 'resource curse' bias, or the direct, simplistic, unidimensional correlation between the scarcity of environmental goods and conflict. In her case study in Caledonia, for example, Horowitz traces the roots of the environmental conflict she examines in the local lack of political legitimacy and trust in the democratic process, both of which are, in turn, grounded in the political-economic history of the area (Horowitz 2009). Pursuing a similar goal, Hiner unearths her share of resource conflicts in different understandings of rurality (Hiner 2016) and related political ecologies and environmental imaginaries (also in Nesbitt and Weiner 2001). Zhouri and Oliveira question the meaning of the environment as a universal asset detached from particular practices, projects and meanings (2012), as Strang (1997) and Ingold (2000) have also mapped out. Tuned into the ontological questions posed by Latour (2009) and Povinelli (2001, 2011), Blaser further explicates environmental conflicts as politico-conceptual difficulties, expanding on the notion of reasonable (read: agreeable) onto-politics, an idea that undermines the concept of culture by limiting it to reasonableness and alignment (Blaser 2013; Cortesi 2018, 2021).

Excellent studies such as those cited above label the mainstream definition of environmental conflict as not only obtuse but also pernicious. For example, Peluso and Watts' *Violent Environments* (2001) is devoted to discrediting Homer-Dixon's approach not only because of its Malthusian origins, but also because of the influence Homer-Dixon's framework has exerted on American politics since 1995, including in its reverberating effects found in the environmental security discourse. As a corpus, perhaps, the effort of deviating from a standard univocal interpretation also implicitly addresses the problem of the definition, which I will discuss below.

It remains that there is something eerily recurrent in the common representation of water conflicts across the most diverse groups of people. Earlier, I mentioned how I was struck by the fact that, when asked about environmental conflicts around water, my students, across continents and sociocultural contexts, conjured an image comprised of similar components: (a) two groups, b) contraposed to each other and in competition for a (c) scarce resource that both groups need and want. To be sure, when prompted, my students were also able to conceptualise environmental conflicts in more sophisticated and reflexive ways, as well as to consider conflictual and violent situations that would not immediately fit this narrow definition. As scholars, we learn such complexities and nuances from our interlocutors, and we aspire to teach the same in our pedagogical pursuits. Yet, such empirical experience of the way in which people deal with the idea of water conflict pushed me to realise the existence of a standardised understanding of the concept.[1]

Instead of focusing on dismissing it as inaccurate or dismantling the definition of water conflict, I am more interested in learning about the consequences of the concept so many deploy. Not only does the concept exist, but it also acts, insofar as it produces consequences. My intent here is to recognise that some forms of this standardised understanding, despite scholarly efforts to criticise it, have consolidated, remain alive, and have a life of their own. Attentive to broader sociocultural processes and frameworks of perception, knowledge, and understanding, while acknowledging problems of translation and word-choice, in my other work I ask: how do we word the world, and how do our ways of wording the world contribute to our knowledge of it?

In this introduction, I elaborate on what I call the social life of an idea, and what such an approach means in the particular case of water conflict. More than a lexicon, it is a concept, a thing, which owns its own social life. As other theories that aim to elucidate and explain inductively, the idea of an idea does not undervalue, instead underscores, the real lived experiences of water conflicts, while recognizing their interconnections, as discussed below.

It is the social life of this normalized, homogenised idea of water conflict that will unfold in what follows. Instead of attempting to track down the idea of water conflict historically or geographically, I am interested in a synchronic view of the life of an idea as standardised across different contexts and in a specific set of global circumstances, inhabiting the contemporary globalised neoliberal society (Cortesi 2014). More than feeding on its situatedness, it thrives on circumstances (beyond the scope of this reflection) such as English being the lingua franca for several

economic sectors across more than one generation, the globalisation of elites' education regardless of their national origins, and the oligarchic conquest of the information market by a handful of mediatic empires. I am not assuming the content of such knowledge to be universal, nor do I assume an amalgamated society in which cultural differences lose traction. I am instead suggesting a reflection on the empirically appreciable results of an idea that, if acquiring different shades in different contexts, maintains a set of common assumptions that coagulate in the category of water conflicts.[2]

What an idea is (and isn't)

I use the term 'idea' the way the Greeks did. Neither blindly submissive to Western epistemologies nor to their ostensible dismissal by those native in its contemporary imperialistic version, I reflexively trace the lexicon I use. In Greek—differently than in English—an idea is not just a mental representation. For Plato, differently from Descartes and his followers, an idea is a substance, it is form and it has matter, with neither pitted against the other. While for Descartes, an idea was only a mode of thinking, the carrier of a representation, for Plato, the idea was a thing that fulfils ontological expectations.[3] In the allegory of the cave (*Republic*), Plato tells the story of a dark cavern where chained prisoners see shadows of objects that pass in front of a light source behind them. Whatever the physics of the shadows, for the prisoners (at least), the shadows, or the phantoms, are reality, objects, things—they are not representations. Plato posits that one prisoner—the philosopher, or the academic—manages to escape the cave. When his eyes[4] stop hurting and adjust to the light, he eventually sees 'true reality' and realises that he, and his fellow prisoners, have been deceived all along. But when, proud of his discovery and full of compassion, he goes back to the cave to free the others from their epistemic prison, his eyes are again blinded by darkness. The other prisoners, seeing him incapacitated and therefore unable to see as clearly as they do, refuse to be 'freed'. Were they not chained, warns Plato, the prisoners would kill their saviour.

   This fable underpins my use of the word *idea*. Such a Magrittian richness in the metaphor of the shadow, the reflection over the fallibility and fragility of knowledge, the ambiguity and flaws of enlightenment, the casting of values over the damp, dark walls of our lives, the alienation of those who pursue knowledge vis-à-vis their previous lives and companions! Yet, if I make an effort to ignore the most obvious reading of the story, or the reference to the killing of Plato's teacher, Socrates, I realise that this allegory does not necessarily have to be read as a commentary on the human condition, or the situation of distorted knowledge that prevents humans from seeing what they do not see until their eyes are opened by those supposedly enlightened. The allegory of the cave can be turned and folded in other ways. For example, the cave could stand for today's academic community, the phantoms being the language that scholars use to talk about the knowledge they produce. I am interested in twisting the fable of the epistemic assumption of a single truth that

originates a series of illusionary representations. I wish to dislodge the fantasy of the well-intentioned elitist scholar who works hard to eventually discover 'reality' and then returns to the cave to epistemically save his fellows humans, only to find himself (sic) blind again, unable to see what his fellow humans can see. As an anthropologist, I wish for my eyes to be firmly aligned with those of my fellow prisoners, taking seriously what (we) commoners all see and name.

As introduced above, an *idea* is not a *definition*, despite both being of Platonic/ Socratic inheritance. In Plato's earlier dialogues, Socrates asked his disciples and acquaintances 'what is x', where x is alternatively piety (Euthypro), justice (Republic), temperance (Meno), friendship (Lysis), virtue (Laches), love (Phaedrus, Symphosium), knowledge (Theaetetus), or wisdom (Philebus). The task of defining is the cultural project of grasping the essence of the thing, of reaching its universal and univocal nature, of attaching it to precise, necessary and sufficient conditions. Defining, or pretending to get closer to, a constantly moving goal seems to be an inherently failing project, caught between the action of limiting to maintain specificity and broadening to account for variations. Yet this project continues to exert influence on contemporary reasoning, despite the criticism to essence (Mill 1991), the notorious difficulty of finding the meaning of meaning (Putnam 1975), the polysemy of language (Bakhtin 1986), the ambiguities of representation (Foucault 1971), and the push to de-centre (Derrida 1966). As mentioned above, however, the x that Socrates asks his friends to define continues to exist, even when we find the definition fallacious or the project of defining too tight: the x has an ontological presence; it is a thing, a signified, not a word or a signifier.

Confronting what is often taken for granted by a flat definition, a *genealogy* is the Nietzschean and later Foucauldian technique of accounting for the history and the conditions of possibility for a certain discourse. Nietzsche, in his second essay on the Genealogy of Morality, explains how punishment acquires different meanings and proposes the method of genealogy over that of a definition, observing that 'only something which has no history can be defined' (Nietzsche 1887: 94). Foucault acquires and develops this method, which he intends to ameliorate in his *archaeology* (Foucault 1977). A product of such illustrious lineage is Molle's seminal essay (2009) on the idea of a river basin. Molle's "social life", worth mentioning here also because it is subtitled with a locution similar to the one I am proposing ('River-Basin Planning and Management: The Social Life of a Concept'), is certainly more than what I suggest in this Introduction. Perhaps a humble synonym for a genealogy, in Molle's work, "social life" carefully traces the history of the concept of river-basin planning and management in its evolution from early colonial conceptualisation to recent developments in ecosystem approaches. By tracing the multiple meanings that a certain concept has carried over several decades and signifiers, a genealogy differs from the social life of an idea in that the former is a method, and a container, while the latter is substance and form. Further, the latter is grounded in its contemporary materialisation. This does not mean that the present is not relative to the past or that a concept's coming into being cannot be explored, but that, in a pendular meta-history of diachronic and synchronic frameworks, the fact that these ideas are

neither timeless nor static should not distract from the contemporaneity of the cat-egory: having seeped into the cognitive imaginary of a large number of people and influencing how they think and make decisions, its sway rests in its future present.

For the same reasons, the idea introduced here is not a genealogy, it is neither an *ideology:* they differ in both structure and content. Far from being a 'science of ideas', the word ideology has been considered by Marx and Engels, but also by members of the Frankfurt School, as a distortion of reality that naturalises, and thus protects, exploitative economic relations (Marx and Engels 2001; Marx and Engels 2000, Marcuse and Horkheimer 1937). Even without the metonymic association with the specific ideologies of capitalism and communism that informed the perception of a distortion, an ideology, differently from an idea, operates at a more complex, sys-temic level. Different from an idea, an ideology lends itself towards the teleological and prescriptive, thus it is projected in time towards the future, while the idea here proposed is alive in its contextual present, it is engaged not with time, but rather with its continued potential. Like an idea, however, an ideology is a form of social cognition held, often unconsciously, by large groups of people and across cultural contexts. Nonetheless, while positing a global lexicon filled with a set of dogmatic, homogenised meaning, by being less systemic and complex, an idea is available for travelling across ideologies. An idea is more ductile: I stress its circularities, freezing the path which continues to be followed and the channelling of the many possibili-ties that could have materialised instead, as well as recalling its bottomless possibili-ties. Like in Derrida's reading of Mallarmé, an idea dwells in the imitation of an imitation of another imitation (1972).

An ideology is reproduced by a *discourse*, a close heuristic. Discourse—with its methodological deployment, discourse analysis—is involved in recognising both its effect in engendering subjectivity and in its depoliticising tendencies. Similar to dis-course, unpacking an idea illuminates the construction of texts, practices and other forms of meaning production that affect the positioning of the subjective self. *Pace* Fraser, who criticised Foucault for lacking the political commitment that permits normative adjudication (1985), an idea is not imbricated in the underlying politi-cal interests and responsibilities that a discourse helps individuate, nor even in the structure it derives from them. The politics of investigating the social life of an idea are situated in a normative commitment to the value of difference, and thus in the political recognition of the dangers of homogenising both ontology and subjectivity.

The concepts of *narrative* and *framing*, which refer to the act of selecting and arranging narrative elements to attain a certain message (Entman 1993), are also not appropriate synonyms for 'idea' for several reasons. First, as discussed above, both the concept of narrative and that of framing are forms of representation, thus refer to an object. Epistemologically different, the idea is an appellative—it is possible to make reference to the narrative of an idea, an important example in Kroepsch (Chapter 5 in this volume). Second, narrative and framing are subsumed to a cer-tain agential capability, if not intentionality. As mentioned earlier, the idea of water conflict is the product of a set of circumstances, but, most importantly, retains an agential purchase, a consequentiality of actions. Third, both concepts refer to a

speech-related act, not a cognitive or epistemological one. Those terms could have perhaps been more appropriate for Molle's essay (cited above), which illustrates how the concept of the river basin has been technocratically appropriated by and invested with social power configurations.

Vice versa, the terms *concept* and *imaginary* stress the epistemic and the cognitive, which are only part of the story I am narrating here. The latter, in particular, is a 'constellation of ideas that groups of humans develop about a given landscape' (Davis and Burke 2011) that reflects the local congeries of sociocultural values, norms and power relations (Grandi, this volume; Watts and Peet 2004). As such, however, it retains a much more contextual understanding of socio-ecological processes. The idea, instead, shifts the focus to its consequences, albeit originated in articulation with a given context.

The idea here explained could be considered the *phenomenon*, intended primarily as the object as it appears and is intended (Husserl 1913). In common, an idea and a phenomenon have the ontological presence of objects and mental representations. Given that the social sciences are more influenced by Merleau-Ponty than other phenomenologists, however, a phenomenon is commonly understood as related to perception, to our immediate experience of the thing, and is thus distinct from inference, even though Kant, Popper and many others have made clear that our perceptions are influenced by *a priori* categories (intended as pre-experience, see Kant 1878) and from previous experiences (Popper 1963; Thornton 2007). The idea here proposed, however, remains directed towards the dissolution of the dichotomy of visible versus invisible/logos thus invested in the refusal to engage in chicken-egg dilemmas such as senses versus intellect and things versus language.

The word *idea* has had its own ordeals, and my use of the term derives from such lineage. Hacking uses it to explain that social constructionism is not necessarily resting on a dichotomy between reality versus representation (1999). While Pickering has been outspoken about reality, not the idea of it, being socially constructed, Hacking believes ideas to be constructed as much as objects and words, intending social constructionism as the process of formation of categories that are rooted in a context (Hacking 1999; Pickering 1995). Inspired by anti-essentialists such as Stuart Mill (Systems VII, 1991), Hacking's idea, which he qualifies as 'a shorthand, a very unsatisfactory shorthand', is therefore the unspecific for *kind*, for category, that works through a mechanism of reinforcement that he calls looping effect (1995).

To reply to Hacking's question—what's the point?—my point is to discuss the consequences of the idea of water conflict, an idea that has become part of the cultural armour in a wide variety of contemporary situations and has cementified in observation and practice. The rationale for this argument is rooted in the insufficient inattention to the actual processes of circulation and dispersal (and then influence) by Foucauldians on one side, and the focus on the interaction and competition between ideas (and perhaps the uncritical formulation of their intrinsic attractiveness as the cause for their success) by intellectual histories and history of science on the other side. This is not about how and why repeatedly falsified or discredited ideas remain powerful, discussed to great length by the Orientalism tradition and

Postcolonial Studies, for example, but more about the pathways, transformations and contentions through which ideas have consequences.[5]

It is by re-discovering a simple, overused word like *idea*, explaining it by virtue of difference within its semantic field, and justifying its ability to influence a set of processes that this book is making, through a series of essays, a collective theoretical contribution to the literature on water and environmental conflicts.

The social life of an idea

This introduction rotates around the observation that the locution 'water conflicts' conjures up a similar image for people with different backgrounds, professions, levels of education, and environmental beliefs, across cultural contexts. This does not mean that all of these individuals share the meaning of water conflict, or of water, or of conflict, but that such individuals are socialised—informally trained—into a specific way of interpreting the idea of water conflict.

I am here interested in the agential purchase of the idea of water conflict, shifting the focus from critically exploring a concept and liberating people from false representation towards taking seriously the epistemic categories that people use for what they engender, in line with the anthropological contribution to the social sciences. Other scholars have engaged in similar projects, including James Ferguson, who, in his pathbreaking *The Anti-politics Machine* (1990), sets out to discover not the reasons for which a certain development project failed but the consequences of its failure.

The social life of the idea of environmental conflict resides in its private and public existence and epistemological traction. Calling a concept 'social' is reminiscent of Arendt, who defines social as neither private nor public, but both (Arendt 1959). Reference to the social life of an idea has the purpose of evoking its material, almost archaeological character, and yet the fact that its existence rests on its shared validity and communicability. De Wit, in her work with Masai agro-pastoralists, calls adaptation to climate change, as well as vulnerability, a 'traveling idea'. In her story, however, such an idea inevitably clashes with local categories (De Wit 2015). My interest is complementary to hers: how does this idea live both private and public existences, and enact consequences by surviving cultural incompatibilities?

This leads me to the broader question at the heart of this book: what does an idea engender? As an anthropologist, I look at common understandings that live in the practices and communications that people engage with, which are the result of a variety of contextual social, historical and political factors. When Joy and I started thinking about this book, we found immediately a great set of diverse collaborators whose work, expressed in multiple drafts, conference presentations, peer-reviewing workshops, has enriched tremendously our original understanding and led to the theorisation proposed above. In the following pages, the authors investigate ten cases of water conflicts for how the idea of conflict itself has defined, moulded, sharpened those conflicts.

The process of writing an introduction to this volume has further stirred the essays below into forming the following overarching theoretical argument. The idea of water conflict emerges primarily in three ways: (i) how the idea has conditioned

the conflict itself, including leading to its avoidance; (ii) how the idea has been utilised or mobilised in order to pursue a set of interests, to justify the actions and decisions behind such pursuit, or in order to provoke or prevent change; (iii) how the idea has been instrumental in naturalising or challenging a certain understanding of socio-environmental relations, including ecological and technological ones, as well as a specific historicising of such relations, i.e. ways of remembering the past and imagining the future. These situations, whether intended goals or unintended outcomes, are not mutually exclusive: as will be made clear, most chapters are examples of all the three phenomena. In the subsequent part of this introduction, I will interpret the essays with respect to their contributions to the broader discussion, noted as (i) agential purchase of the idea of water conflict; (ii) instrumentalisation of the idea of water conflict; (iii) naturalisation of environmental, ecological, technological, and historical relations. Where appropriate, the contribution to other sub-arguments will also be noted.

Part 1 Agential purchase of the idea of water conflict

Chapter 1: Bowles in the UK

Boaters live on London's canals for a variety of reasons, from a preference for a floating lifestyle to a necessity related to historical and contemporary housing crises. Living on a boat without a permanent mooring is soaked with daily inconveniences: a floating habitation precludes a zip code, and thus access to health care, mail, social services, and documents such as passport and work permits. While Boaters can easily obtain gas and electricity, for their drinking water and disposal of sanitary waste, they rely on a network of facilities-providing moorings that are run by the newly instituted charitable Canal and River Trust (CaRT).

CaRT is a charity that not only facilitates the Boaters' permanence on the water, but, paradoxically for people whose identity rests on their non-sedentary lifestyle, also enforces a rule that requires them to change their mooring every 14 days. The 1995 British Waterways Act, which allows Boaters to live on the canals, has de facto defined this group of people in terms of their way of living, with 'continuous navigation' a condition for their presence on the canals. Although the Boaters' ethos tends to encourage mobility, the 14-day rule remains gruelling: navigation may be temporarily hindered by the weather, personal issues, or mechanical complications.

It is unclear what motivates this ruling if not the need to impose a definition on people's identity: hinging on a sedentary logic, the ruling implies that Boaters are different citizens from those who live on land or own private moorings. We do not know the motivation behind the imposition of shorter moorings, either: it does not seem to be an attempt to solve a conflict, but we know from Bowles' chapter that it did, instead, trigger one. By forcing movement, the ruling penalises the very identity it supposedly undergirds, thus engendering hostility and even oppositional identities (i).

The Boaters, even when self-identifying as such, seemed to be a loosely defined group before finding themselves sharing the negative experiences of CaRT's policing:

it was the enforcement of the 14-day rule and the exasperation it caused that unified the Boaters as a group. This group formation mechanism reached the point of exploring legal instruments that would equate the Boaters to an ethnic group, perhaps one of 'Bargee Travellers', in order to protect their lifestyle by further codifying it.

As Bowles explains at the end of the chapter, water had an important role to play in exacerbating the conflict. Boaters enjoy water as a medium that provides their life with both the desired affordances of mobility and a substratum to habitation that does not imply possession. Thus, the water of the canal does not qualify as a resource subjected to depauperation—Boaters do not consume it nor evidently limit others' ability to enjoy it. But their life on water is dependent on accessing drinking water and sanitation services, a vulnerability that CaRT uses to arm-twist the Boaters. As water was 'resourcified' (transformed into a resource) and weaponised, the Boaters appropriated the idea of the conflict in the form of a media appeal to the human right to water, an operation that results not only in public sympathy and (if only temporary) conflict resolution, but also in the consolidation of the Boaters' identity.

In this case, the idea of water conflict has been used to justify a certain decision (ii) that furthered the interests of the state in sedentarising people. It conditioned the conflict itself, creating opponents where there had not been any (i). The idea of water conflict has also been mobilised in order to challenge a status quo perceived as discriminatory (ii) and, as a result, it has helped to naturalise a certain understanding of water as a resource (iii).

Chapter 2: Mabon and Kawabe in Japan

Chapter 2 is of particular interest in this collection because it contributes to our discussion with the case of a conflict whose official narrative includes the construction of the adversarial other, then followed by an alternative narrative that pursues the same outcome through a different path.[6] The official narrative about radiation in fish produced after the Fukushima disaster claimed the existence of sufficient facts and scientific information to guarantee the 'absolute safety' of Fukushima produce. Opposing concerns were thus framed as *fuhyo higai*, 'harmful rumours'. Realising that such a narrative would be ineffective in rebuilding the consumers' trust and thus in returning to full-scale business, the fisherfolks of Ikawi, one of Fukushima's fishing districts, provided an alternative narrative based on a more localised, nuanced account of the uncertainties surrounding radiation.

By constructing the imaginary of an antagonistic set of people who either believe in or spread rumours, the official narrative created a broad 'we' that included the state, the farmers and the fisherfolk of Fukushima, as well as all the citizens who were supportive of science, technology, reason, society, and the nation. The fisherfolks of Ikawi, logically the primary beneficiaries of such a narrative, did not, however, support the assumptions of risk and trust that underpinned it, and instead prioritised winning consumers' trust. Choosing a more transparent, if slower, process of trust-building, they set up additional monitoring by citizens groups, created independent data, made visible the process of data production, and accepted the

losses that came with such additional information. Pursuing the goal of returning to business, they distanced themselves from the political apparatus that promoted economic growth at all costs, thus avoiding an alignment of their interests with those of the industrial and nuclear sector.

In deconstructing the patriotic, rational 'we' from which they were meant to benefit, the fisherfolk of Ikawi established an alliance with the imagined adversarial group that supposedly damaged them. By actively reframing the conflict and their positionality within it, not only did they recognise that consumers hold the ultimate economic power by choosing whether or not to purchase the fish, but they also challenged the idea of water conflict as operating between two opposite and homogenous groups. They acknowledged that the way in which an issue is framed both influences its development and orients its consequences.

In this case, the idea of conflict is mobilised by the state in order to pursue a specific set of interests (ii), engendering a nebulous set of opponents as a by-product (i). A sub-group, however, reinterprets the alliance, choosing to avoid conflict in favour of trust-building (i). This move leads to a reinterpretation of certainty, and thus of socio-environmental and technological relationships (iii).

Chapter 3: Roth, Warner and Winnbust in the Netherlands

Like Lazzaretti in Chapter 6, the authors of Chapter 3, Roth, Warner and Winnubst, describe a pendulum, an oscillation between two alternate paradigms, in this case between centralised top-down and decentralised participatory management. Like Quintero and Selfa in Chapter 7, the authors of this chapter narrate the paradigm shift between the infrastructural approach to the 'Room for the River' framework, but do so precisely where it originates, in the Netherlands. Unlike all the other chapters in this collection, however, they narrate a case of conflict denial despite complex dissent and divergent interests and priorities.

Shifting from the centralised engineering model (the Delta programme) to the decentralised paradigm (the Room for the River model) was not based on the agreement of scientists, engineers and policy makers, but instead on the assumption that environmental management should be depoliticised and that consensus should be enforced by decoupling the decision-making process from parliamentary negotiation. The consequences of these bold and often unilateral decisions were not met with the same kinds of opposition found in the Tocks Island case that Bloodworth narrates in Chapter 4, but nor were they left unattended: citizens organised to source counter-expertise, file lawsuits and build coalitions across interest groups as well as alliances across national borders. The opposition was effective in contesting standard narratives as well as constructing alternative representations and even solutions.

Inspired by Mouffle's work, the authors suggest that conflict should be recognised and dealt with. The Room for the River model advocates 'giv[ing] room to the political', making the case that conflict is foundational for democratic decision-making processes in so far as antagonism forces the negotiation of different priorities among different political forces. The conflict avoidance that the authors narrate

is perhaps peculiar to its context: the Netherlands is not only a democratic setting with low institutional violence, but it is also a country based historically and discursively on land reclamation. With well-established expertise pertaining to the management of floods, 'water conflicts' in the Netherlands are perhaps less influenced than elsewhere by the global idea thereof.

What happens when the idea of water conflict is actively negated? While perhaps not paradigmatic (see different outcomes of a similar negational approach in an industrial contamination case in Ottinger 2018 for example), this case study showcases prototypical effects of conflict denial (i). It traces, for example, the vocabulary used to deny transformative participation (Hickey and Mohan 2004): citizens are 'stakeholders' (yet powerless ones), 'sounding boards' and legitimising 'supporters', language that resonates with similarly gregarious terms used in the development sector such as beneficiaries, recipients, users, members, and communities. While all these terms sound inclusive, the opinion of the stakeholders who were most involved in the decision's outcomes managed to elude decision makers. It was the apolitical consultation process put in place that short-circuited dialogic possibilities.

Nonetheless, the political imaginary did not succumb to the depoliticising mechanism (i): the denial of the water conflict did not result in consensus, but in the broadening of the conflict to include more stakes than 'just water', such as flood safety versus agrarian interests, aesthetic environmental benefits and infrastructural growth. It did not result in passive acceptance of the flattening of possibilities, but in an enhanced engagement and participation in grading them according to a shared value system.

Part 2 Instrumentalisation of the idea of water conflict

Chapter 4: Bloodworth in the USA

At the end of the Bowles' chapter, we see how the Boaters, eventually aggregated as a group, were able to leverage the media to assert their right to water. The case study of Tocks Island in the 1960s and 1970s instead zooms into a moment of collision between two ideas, one of the technocratic appropriation of nature and one of environmental conflict (both ideas also referred to in most of the other chapters). The controversy around Tocks Island and Sunfish Pond was a decades-long event in the United States that undermined the Army Corps of Engineers' hegemonic power, but also, as Bloodworth argues, made a dent in the global dam paradigm. This history is often overlooked in favour of its international version, which features the story of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (the protest against the dam on the river Narmada) in India that, in the 1980s and 1990s—decades after the movement on Tocks Island—delayed a mammoth dam project by the World Bank and the Government of India, an action whose global resonance culminated in the 2000 Report of the World Commission on Dams and effectively halted financial support to big dams for more than two decades.

In this vividly written chapter, Bloodworth tells us how the Army Corps and associated interest groups fostered the idea of a dam as unstoppable progress and regional economic growth by saturating the media with a persuasive and glossy campaign. Despite the campaign, because of the gross, arrogant and oppressive actions of the Corps, and thanks to a concomitant set of legislation, grassroot protesters were able to contest the paradigm with a story of environmental destruction, wasteful federal spending, and violent conflict. Such oppositional narratives were represented by a few committed individuals, common people who were able not only to grab the attention of the media, but also to provide a face and a set of relatable interests representing the other, oppressed, side of the story.

The idea of conflict, which conditions the dispute as it develops (i), was therefore mobilised to challenge the naturalisation of a technocratic understanding of socio-environmental relations (iii), in order to pursue a set of interests and to justify actions that provoked change (ii). The narrative of the conflict revealed the social and environmental tensions that would have otherwise gone unseen. It also engendered, like in Bowles' chapter on the Boaters, both the consolidation of a group identity (i) and the sympathy of public opinion, which in turn made the situation recognisable and put pressure on those who would resolve it (ii).

Chapter 5: Kroepsch in the USA

While Bloodworth's work in Chapter 4 digs into the potentials of mediatic representation, Kroepsch examines its pitfalls in Chapter 5. Without attempting to determine the risk of fracking, Kroepsch conducts a discursive analysis of water narratives in Colorado's hydraulic fracturing debate vis-à-vis other resources' competitive allocations and their respective narratives. Through media analysis, participant observation and interviews, Kroepsch examines the proliferation in the public realm of numerical representations and related policy narratives fuelled by the idea of water conflict that underpins fracking in the United States (ii). In doing so, she illustrates the agential purchase, both symbolic and political, of the idea of water conflict (i), which saturates the discursive space of data production and reliability and naturalises associated ideas such as nature as a resource (iii).

Such power is revealed by exposing the strategic use of specific framings to represent water consumption, such as through volumetric comparisons, which flatten other variables, such as time, space and allocation trade-offs. Ultimately, Kroepsch reveals that 'a full accounting of how much water is being used for hydraulic fracturing (…) and whose water it is' was never achieved, most likely due to a lack of cooperation between the water and energy sectors, in particular between regulators. Information about water quantity issues is simply not available, a dearth that is shaped by, and shapes, the narratives about the topic.

As I understand Kroepsch's argument, the idea of the conflict acts as a convenient matrix to shape accounts about water, its regulations and its consumption. It also performs a narrative gatekeeping function (ii) by effectively clouding the possibility of data production. In addition, Kroepsch's analysis suggests that water is not the

only reason or *casus belli* for this conflict, with several other contingencies heavily informing the debate. First, water is merely the vehicle through which policy debates are played out in the public space. Second, media attention, volatile and erratic, instrumentalised the idea of water conflict for their own interest of representation (ii). Third, concerns around the weather influenced the volatility of media attention as much as political interests do: after two years of drought, a rainy season was sufficient to archive the debate and render 'an already non-transparent energy–water nexus even more invisible'. From this chapter, we learn that, in conditions of climate change, the effective volatility of the debate is all the more consequential because it impedes environmental learning, which instead requires sustained and steady attention.

Chapter 6: Lazzaretti in India

Similar to Kroepsch's and Bowles' chapters (Chapters 1 and 5, respectively), this case study from Benares, India, shows that water is not the reason for this particular conflict but rather the weapon in historical political clashes between Hindu and Muslim peoples (ii). The Well of Knowledge is situated in the same compound as the Vishvanath temple, one of the main pilgrim destinations for Hindu followers, and the Gyan Vapi mosque, the main mosque of the city. Because the two religious groups have been in a political clash (at the national level) since Independence, the co-presence of two centres of worship traps the well in a site of conflict.

The Well itself, as Lazzaretti writes, has not been uniformly associated with the conflict, but rather its role vis-à-vis the dispute has oscillated from central to peripherical and from peripherical to central. At times, water has been a pillar in the narrative of Muslim usurpation of Hindu gods. At times, the well, and the unity of the compound itself, have become invisible, a mere space of passage that overlaps in alternative ways to live religious belonging as conflated in the urban fabric. The idea of water conflicts, infused with symbolic power, is fertile ground for other conflictual narratives to take root.

I also take this chapter as a reflection on the idea of water conflict as naturalising water as a resource (iii). The Well of Knowledge is a water place, but one of minor importance, whose water is only a symbolic presence, often forgotten until other less watery tensions arise. This thought merits pause: we have come to the awareness of the false dualism between the symbolic and the material, which is particularly salient in studies of semiotics (see Kockelman's work, for example, 2005, 2010b, 2010a, 2013, 2016). Lazzaretti goes to great lengths to explain that the water of the well may not even be there (see Cortesi 2018 on the semiotic presence of mud) and that the well's structure itself is repeatedly forgotten, out of sight, until it again becomes involved in practices of heritage that are instrumental for articulating the conflict.

The point is that water here remains a resource, at least narratively: water's symbolic power is particularly susceptible to being inflamed with meanings that sustain narratives of disputes. It is therefore readily appropriated for its entanglement with other narratives, fuel for heating up the conflict (see Mabon and Kawabe, Chapter 2,

for a discussion on heating up and cooling down conflicts), lubricant in the mechanism of the technology of conflict. Water also returns here as the carrier par excellence, infused with ad hoc meanings.

The reasoning of it, however, is associated with the idea of water conflict, whose social life has melted together the two parts (water, conflict) of this compound into one singular idea. As two substances that form a third and whose chemical bond is preferred by both elements, one constantly recalls the other: water conflict is a narratively stable compound, where one element, in the right conditions, conceptually conjures up the other.

Part 3 Naturalisation of environmental, ecological, technological and historical relations

Chapter 7: Moreno Quintero and Selfa in Colombia

Moreno Quintero and Selfa show how the idea of conflict, this time, river versus people, naturalises a set of relationships that is far from 'natural' (iii). As in Chapter 1 by Bowles, Chapter 7 reflects on the construction of opponents, a construction that reveals the power dynamics behind the category of 'the people'. As in Chapter 2 by Mabon and Kawabe, behind a group discursively constructed as aligned on the basis of shared interests, there is a multiplicity of different, at times competing, political relationships. Further, Moreno Quintero and Selfa continue the discussion by demonstrating how such groups are also aligned (if roughly) with different ontologies. As a result, we see how the idea of the conflict is able to mask not only subgroups and relations, but also radically different ways of seeing the world as well as the possibility of their incommensurability (iii).

Following major floods in the Cauca River Valley (Colombia) in 2010 and 2011, the previous top-down, engineering-intensive river management paradigm modelled after the Tennessee Valley Authority was renegotiated for the Room for the River paradigm, a more recent model of Dutch derivation based on spatially accommodating the river as well as on principles of participatory, egalitarian and horizontal governance (see Chapter 3). The earlier paradigm, however, had enforced a differential set of environmental rights, whose resulting race-based power inequalities ended up hindering the realisation of the new scheme. Sugar landowners managed to appropriate the decision-making process and to eventually override the components of the project that did not foster their interests. As a result, the project was stripped of its own purposes. The Afro-Colombians' voices, ironically the only ones compatible with the Room for the River model, were instead silenced.

This experience—and I am here interpreting Moreno Quintero and Selfa's work— questions the ability of a water management scheme to design social equality into a technical solution, in particular when deprived of the instruments, the capabilities and the power to understand or affect the social fabric on which the project is positioned. Yet, this is not only a story of the inattentive import of an ineffective environmental management model, but also of its epistemic consequences: the earlier programme had engendered an understanding of water and land that

treated them as resources, limited, desirable, meant to be optimised for productivity (iii). If the perspective of the Afro-Colombians, whose livelihood was based on small-scale agriculture and fishing, considered flooding the manifestation of a living ecosystem, the earlier project had caused the minority view to lose its grip in the larger social context.

The narrative of the river versus the people was perhaps too unrealistic to consolidate a group, such as in the case of the Boaters (Chapter 1), but it is still held together by the corollary narrative of disaster and risk as well as of the historical memory of the harshness of flooding. This cluster of narratives that pretends to unite people against the river does not convince everybody, however; it does not cohere for the African-Colombians, for whom the river is neither an enemy to be tamed nor a beast to be subjugated to human needs. But it continues to have purchasing power with the experts who have the final say on the project—to their eyes, the cluster of narratives effectively masks the views of those affected by the events along with the power gradients that silence their perspective.

We could also interpret this case as a non-conflict, or at least as a case in which another invisible conflict (not that of humans versus the river, but that of the sugarcane landowners versus the Afro-Colombians agriculturalists) is too latent, has not (yet, perhaps) escalated, and is (not yet) considered a conflict by its own stakeholders (the Afro-Colombians do not necessarily represent themselves as a group with cultural consciousness). As Mabon and Kawabe (Chapter 2) remind us, there is a conflict-potential that could eventually heat up, open to the different narratives by the diverse groups that make up 'the people'. Precisely the idea of the water conflict could be instrumental for this process (ii), set up against different ontologies and power differentials. This heating up would be necessary, Mabon and Kawabe's (Chapter 2) discussion seems to imply, and Roth *et al*. (Chapter 3) seem to insist, in order to then 'cool down' the conflict by reaching a resolution.

Chapter 8: Grandi in Egypt and Ethiopia

Grandi's political analysis reframes the transboundary water conflict on the exploitation of the Nile between Egypt—downstream, yet politically and economically hegemonic in the region—and Ethiopia—upstream and historically weaker yet armed with recent hydro-developmental ambitions. As a water conflict that has long been predicted but has not (as of yet) fully materialised, this story teaches us the many unpredictable possibilities of an idea by serving as a warning against its own realisation (i).

Grounded in international relations and allied disciplines while effectively engaging multiple levels of analysis, this contribution rests in finding that the idea of water conflict intersects, and its agential purchase manifests, in resource governance. In my liberal interpretation of Grandi's political analysis, I understand *resource governance* as the art of allocation through the negotiation of environmental imaginaries with political priorities, both aspects that this chapter goes to great lengths to investigate.

Chapter 8 accomplishes the innovative move of grounding international relations between two countries in the contextual environmental imaginaries built through long-term engagements with the river. The life of the idea of the Nile is semiotically and rhetorically built through language, history and literature: the Nile is 'the river to be harvested' for Egyptians vis-à-vis the fatherly yet destructive figure who punishes Ethiopians by stealing from them their fertile land. In part, this analysis explains the counterintuitive relations of the two countries towards the river, with Egyptians benefitting from the river despite being downstream, and Ethiopians only recently interested in exploiting the resource despite being upstream. Such complex three-way relation is at the root of the resource conflict, yet unexplainable through a purely materialistic framework. The chapter continues by substantiating how the idea of the conflict between the two countries is leveraged to modify enviro-social relationships with the other country, and, in the case of Ethiopia, with the river itself.

Political priorities are built, as this case shows, through the idea of a water conflict, or through the narrative that water is 'essentially threatened', hence naturalised as a resource (iii); and that its securitisation requires 'extraordinary measures' (such as violence), i.e. the instrumentalisation of the idea of water conflict (ii). In order to induce political support and compliance, the process of securitisation leverages the idea of water conflict because the latter serves to dramatise and prioritise the issue in the public sphere (ii); to legitimise extraordinary measures to manage (ii) and therefore to influence (i) the conflict; and to naturalise a single one-dimensional interpretation to the exclusion of alternative perspectives (iii).

Chapter 9: Bresnihan in Bolivia

Chapter 9 brings us to the epitome of a water conflict, one of the most consequential cases for the development of its idea: the so-called Water Wars that occurred in Cochabamba in the early 2000s. For our discussion, the contribution of this chapter lies in empirically challenging two discourses at the basis of the idea of water conflict: that of water as a resource and that of water as a right. The suggested change in perspective is consequential because the case of the Water Wars is perhaps the most paradigmatic case of water conflicts, and hence the case is influential in the formation of the idea.

While the typical story of the Cochabamba Water Wars narrates that citizens, motivated by the unaffordability of water after privatisation, protested against the state and the corporations that formed the Aguas del Tunari consortium, as Bresnihan and other authors make clear, the goal of the protesters was to save not SEMAPA, Cochabamba's water supply agency, but the many water collectives that the state had appropriated during the privatisation process. In this chapter, Bresnihan focuses precisely on these cooperatives that, two decades after the Water Wars, continue to provide basic water services where the government pipes do not reach.

The Tunari water cooperative, with its almost mythological genesis, is an institution built on the shared responsibility of the water system and an understanding

of water that goes beyond its value as a resource. Although part of the Tunari's members' activism consists of opposing new development and urbanisation, the cooperative is willing to accept newcomers as long as they actively perform their duties towards the collective. The cooperative is not willing to sell water, however, nor will it include those who are likely to disperse the responsibility into a monetary transaction. Instead, the Tunari are investing their attention, labour and time in a relationship with the infrastructure of water that Bresnihan qualifies as one of care.

The idea of water conflict has imposed a pattern of exploitative relationships (iii) that members of the cooperative comprehend well. The cooperative's President, for example, expresses his scepticism towards the newcomers, who 'only care for water in their tap', while they, instead, have much more at stake: 'the political dispute amongst the members of the cooperative', says Bresnihan, was about who 'had the right to discuss and make decisions'. In so doing, the idea of water conflict and its effects (iii) are powerful, but not impossible to upend. Despite having appreciated the value of water in 'highly stressed conditions, rapid urbanisation, and a sclerotic public administration', they nonetheless refuse to treat water as a finite and indispensable resource.

Such a stance is also an ontological consideration that, importantly, does not presume an attribution of personhood, nor a flattening of ontological hierarchies (King 2007). The relation of responsibility resides between humans, and the relationship of care extends towards the infrastructure. Such relationships grant ecological benefits, but do not necessarily involve an ontological fluidity among humans, water, pipes, and the non-human beings that follow a restored ecology. This is intellectually relevant because it helps to de-romanticise the scholarship on the relationship with the non-human, and thus directs some of our attention to societies whose motivation for ecological care are not necessarily ontological.

Further, challenging the categorisation of water as a resource also means questioning the standardised positive outcome prescribed by the idea of a water conflict (i), which states that its resolution involves attributing rights to water. Establishing water as a right, Tunari and Aurora cooperative members seem to note, not only remains subjected to power relations, but may potentially remain productive of conflict in situations where the relationship between people, water and infrastructure is not a transactional one, but one of responsibility.

This is an example where questioning the standardised idea of water conflict means challenging not only its political-economic assumptions—state/public versus market/private—but also its expected positive outcome—the establishment of water-rights. The Water Wars were not only about resisting privatisation or claiming the right to water access, but they were also about reclaiming water as a collective responsibility. The analysis of the Water Wars and their consequences proposed in Chapter 9 sets the narrative straight in terms of their history as it belongs to those actors. It also points to the idea of water conflict and the consequences that it does (not need to) have (i–iii).

Chapter 10: Van Hemert, Polsani and Ramnath in India

Similar to Chapter 7 by Moreno Quintero and Selfa as well as Chapter 3 by Roth, Warner and Winnubst, the final case study of the collection discusses a water conflict that is the *negation* of a conflict. Almost a counter story to the protest told by Bloodworth in Chapter 4, this chapter is a standalone piece in so far as it does not explain how the idea of water conflict has agential purchase (i), has been mobilised or instrumentalised (ii), or has engendered appreciable consequences not tied to the conflict per se but to socio-environmental relations (iii). Instead, it focuses on a complementary aspect of our argument: Van Hemert, Polsani and Ramnath's analysis of the pro-dam argument explains the narrative work it takes to keep the idea of water conflict at bay, out of the discursive arena.

The multipurpose mega dam on the Godavari river, pushed by the state of Andhra Pradesh since before Independence, today adds to an ever-growing budget shared with the central government that does not justify its expected benefits, which are distributed primarily in Andhra Pradesh at the expense of land in Telangana, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. Although the project has been shelved several times over the preceding decades, its justification continues to hold on to the original reasoning, based on unfounded, and long-dismissed, claims about the ability of dams to solve poverty based on water availability for irrigation. The state of Andhra Pradesh also prides itself on pro-tribal resettlement and rehabilitation packages, despite the project on paper being very different from its actualisation: the compensation coverage is partial and arbitrary and it removes people from the forest, which is the source of their livelihoods, their environmental knowledges, customs and food supply as well as the main locus of their identity, sense of community, and spiritual world.

We do not know, in this case, how much the idea of water conflict played a direct role in the narratives presented, but we know that it was carefully excluded from the hegemonic, pro-dam narrative. The chapter's most important contribution for our argument rests precisely in showing how this result is achieved: the authoritative tone of the pro-dam narrative holds performative value as it 'brings about' the representation it projects. It does so through the articulation of two complementary narratives: the pro-dam reasoning ties together the narrative of irrigation benefits and that of the compensation policy. Their articulation is based on contextually valuable ideas of timelessness and innovation—dams as a timeless solution to poverty, the compensation package as an 'innovative' 'pro-tribal' land-for-land. Such articulation, successful in appearing as solid and non-negotiable, is a mechanism that contains contestation and thus curbs the possibility of water conflicts emerging. Counternarratives, if they invalidate the official ones, do not overturn the latter's hegemonic positioning.

Conclusion

The idea of water conflict is a powerful one. We can all succumb to it; I did succumb to it, if for a moment. Reading about instances of water conflicts, I found myself thinking about water as *the substance one cannot do without for long but can generally do*

without for long enough to fight for it. With all the tropes water has been defined with—the matter we need to sustain our life, to drink, clean, irrigate, feed, absorb, bathe, cook, soak, enjoy, purify, save—such a thought was the result of my internalising the truism of water as the thing that we all need, of which there is not enough, for which we are willing to fight.

Until I paused to gather the realisation that such an understanding was limiting, instead of illuminating, my quest to understand water and its role in conflict. My own definition was extending the idea of the conflict in framing water as a resource. Further, I was buying into a story that positioned itself as the only one. In a certain sense, I then realised, it *is* the only one. One standardised, homogenised story, and a consequential one.[7] What does such a uniformity imply?

I started this introduction noting how the idea of water conflict exists across contexts, societal and cultural differences, and is standardised in projecting two factions without visible internal tensions, interests or power differentials that compete for water, intended as a natural resource, material, scarce and essential. I posit that the idea of water conflict stands on the twin passage points of *homo homini lupus* and water scarcity and indispensability. The standard definition, then, is correct in identifying the main tenets, if not of water conflicts in their multitude, of the idea of water conflict.

It was by stirring these essays together, again and again, leveraging them to pay attention to the real cases in which this idea was formed, operated, acted, and responded, that emerged the collective argument this book proposes: water conflict is an idea—an idea being not a representation, but an ontologically dignified thing. Without pretending to represent the theoretical traduction of the lived experiences of water conflicts, the idea of water conflict lives a life of its own: it engenders consequences for the conflict itself (i), is instrumentalised to foster or justify specific interests (ii), and it intersects with and legitimises specific environmental, ecological and technological relations[8] as well as a specific historicising of such relations (iii).

I wish to quickly recall these three points. First, to say that the idea of water conflict engenders consequences for the conflict itself means to say that it has agential purchase, or the power to modify the course of events. This has nothing to do with performativity, the reality-creation ability of an utterance that becomes a fact once it is pronounced. An idea is not an utterance, nor does it simply materialise. The idea of water conflict puts things into motion and enacts change, although the operation it performs is not only and necessarily activating a conflict—a conflict can be prevented, and other processes can be intersected or transformed by the idea. An idea creates, for example, values, senses of places, feelings of belonging, commonality and difference, timelines. All of these influence the conflict, including the possibility of its pursuit or its avoidance.

Second, an idea is interpreted: it becomes an interface that is used, instrumentalised, leveraged by people, things, narratives. The idea of water conflict is mobilised to support, or defy, a certain set of interests; to justify actions or representations that pursue specific positions or ideologies; to enforce, or to avoid, a modification, a transformation. An idea, to be clear, is neither right nor wrong, neither a good thing nor a bad one. This instrumentalisation is open to negotiation and

counter-instrumentalisation: it can be used to protect the status quo but also to challenge it. Problematic when it curbs ecological and social experiences, the idea of water conflict can also give voice to the voiceless or be used to enact progressive change. Within the *doxa*, the delimitation of the field of processes in which consequences can develop, an idea may become a recognisable category to mobilise in order to prevent or engender change (Bourdieu 1977). Even Derrida, who believed in nothing outside of the text, explained that the text is a game whose result is unexpected; the idea of conflict can take the form of repression of other futures, or that of an empowering resource. It provides a transcendental signifier, whose significance, and roles, are all to be played (Derrida 1969). The possibility of closing the gate does not exclude the feasibility of opening it.

Third, the idea of water conflict has the peculiar ability to intersect with other ideologies and solidify them, naturalise their ideological identity. This idea is tied to ideologies that regard the environment as a set of resources, thus naturalising (socio-) environmental and ecological relations, including from a political, historical, technological perspective, about the possession and utilisation of such essential and scarce substances, and it is used to legitimise these ideological stances. Several chapters of this collection, for example, de-centre the over-representation of the powerful as the only consequential influence on environmental management decisions. They instead demonstrate how the idea of water/environmental conflict itself plays a role in pushing for a certain understanding of nature that is erected on specific conceptual and sensorial configurations of the river, the water, the land, as well as people, power relations, and decision-making mechanisms.

This book does not delve into all the mechanisms that make this possible. From my own empirical exploration of environment knowledge of disastrous waters (forthcoming), I suspect the leverage of an emotive component, for example the fear that the likelihood of a conflict incites. This aspect, not present in the empirical material of the chapters, is worth to be signalled in its possibilities of conceptual exploration.

If Derrida describes a communication marked by the absence of an idea, the idea he questions is the message, the content between a sender and a receiver. What is proposed here instead is to re-centre the idea in the event, including a communicative one, not as the content of the communication between players, but as a fully-fledged player. The idea is therefore an agential interlocutor—for example, imagine a magnetic field that conditions the event or can be played to a specific advantage. This does not, therefore, undermine the concept of subjecthood that feminists have worked hard to rescue from both Foucault and social constructionism (Allen 1989; Fraser 1989; Hartsock 1990).

An idea travels, lives both private and public existences, and survives cultural incompatibilities. It ripples and multiplies, feeding on itself as well as on mediatic and political amplifications, but also on silences and avoidances. It provides a format that may fit uncomfortably, or productively. It is the channelling of the many possibilities and ways in which things could have gone, or a wild card to get to a new level of action. This is, at its simplest, what this book proposes: to learn about water conflicts by looking at the idea of it.

Notes

1 This remark, of course, is also fed by a larger set of observations pertaining to my own anthropological work on how people learn about and from disastrous waters.
2 Concurrently with other local ontologies, this category counts a large and diverse number of people in its community of practice.
3 While Kantian metaphysics has been called into question, and without assuming a split between noumenal and phenomenal words, to explain the ontology of the thing, it is useful to use the concept of *das Ding*, a physical entity that exists.
4 Plato's philosopher is clearly a man—how could it ever be a woman? This being said, most citations in this second part of the introduction refer to European philosophers, more in reference to standard concepts used in the social sciences than to the politics of citation that it implies.
5 Thanks to K. Sivaramakrishnan for this acute observation.
6 Chapter 2 offers a contribution to several bodies of literature, for example, exposing and weaving together common difficulties in the knowledge of disastrous nature (see also Cortesi 2021), such as the trouble of understanding nature beyond our sensorium, of trusting science beyond its official representation, of communicating risk and managing uncertainty at different spatial and temporal scales.
7 For a wonderful educational tool on the power of a single story, see Adichie (2009).
8 For pure heuristic purposes, I here differentiate environmental from ecological. Environmental include social relation, while ecological focuses more on understanding humans as living organisms.

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