Water Multiples in Israeli Politics

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Introduction:
Following Gramsci’s lead, British cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (19xx) argues that what we take to be “commonsense” is often the end result of a fierce ideological struggle that determines winners and losers, not right from wrong. Using different terms that extend this framework of analysis, though without its theoretical package for the most part, science studies scholars in the past three decades have been arguing that “closures” in scientific controversies (Collins, Pinch) and the production of scientific facts (Jasanoff, Knorr-Cetina, Pinch) are intensely sociological, cultural, and political processes. From this perspective, since science itself is implicated in the political and cultural frameworks of the day, it becomes more difficult to adhere to the conventional approach to science policymaking which assumes that “science speaks truth to power.” In this sense, what we take as facts, in commonsense politics or in scientific closures, should be treated as the end result of a fierce ideological struggle.

Briefly, the argument of this paper is that current knowledge about the water resources of Israel and the technical and administrative apparatuses that knowledge legitimizes and justifies all have a role in constructing the new Jew as a neoliberal subject that is at once a participant in the making of globalization and a subject to its increasing pressures. This new shift in Jewish subjectivity in the state of Israel is by no means easy, linear, or peaceful. It comes about in fits and starts. It also faces great challenges, two in particular are immense and important for my purposes: (1) It requires the dismantling of a strong Zionist ethos that frames Jewish subjectivity by articulating immigration and settlement—one that has recently been manifesting itself more in symbolic forms, a romantic story of origin; and, (2) it also requires the dismantling of a strong statist ethos that frames Jewish subjectivity in terms of citizenship of the modern nation-state—a framework in existence since the early 1950s and built through both nationalist symbols and a specific technical and institutional apparatus in which the state functions as the source of all identity.

How does water, its knowledge, technologies, and institutions, participate in constructing the new Jew as the neoliberal subject familiar to us in the literature on globalization? This paper tells that story. In the first section, I provide a brief theoretical background that uses science studies frameworks to describe the relationship between knowledge production about Israeli water resources, the technical and institutional arrangements for their governance, the Israeli state, and Jewish subjectivity. In the second section and using previous research findings (e.g., Alatout 2007a, 2007b, 2008, and 2009) I briefly retell the stories of (1) the origin of the link between water and Jewish identity politics in Palestine between the mid-1930s and 1948 (constructing water as abundant and Jewish subjectivity in terms of immigration and settlement) and (2) the shifting relations between water and identity politics between 1948, when the Israeli state was
first established, and the late-1950s when the water law was passed (constructing water as scarce and Jewish subjectivity in terms of citizenship). In the third section, I use new research material to make the argument that new shifts in water knowledge and governance (water as a commodity) have been taking place since the early-1980s that facilitate, if not outright construct, Jewish identity in neoliberal terms.

A pause is important here: the argument of this paper is not that Jewish identity can easily or exclusively be captured in one or another of these forms of identity (Zionist, Israeli, or neoliberal); rather, that Jewish identity has been constructed and maintained, precisely through the continuities and discontinuities, relations and tensions, implied in these three hegemonic attempts at capturing Jewish subjectivity.¹

In the fourth and last section I offer a few concluding remarks on the relationship between water resources, their knowledge, management, and governance, on the one hand, and identity politics, on the other.

**Theoretical framework:**

Since the mid-1970s, a number of scholars in the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) challenged the assumption that scientific facts are reflexive of ‘nature’ (e.g., Bloor 1976; Barnes and Edge 1982; Collins 1976; Latour and Woolgar 1979). They argued that, instead, ‘facts’ are social constructs that interpret the world through political, sociological, and cultural lenses. Moreover, at a somewhat later stage, many argued that facts produce political effects, not only in the process of their construction or negotiation, but also in the role they play in policymaking as sources of legitimacy for different policy options (Jasanoff 1992; Wynne 1996). This is an important framework for this paper: facts are political in two ways, before they are agreed on, in the process of their construction and solidification, and once they become recognized as facts, when they become the basis for intervening in the world.

SSK offered important insights into the construction and deployment of facts in political decisions that order social and political life. However, for the last three decades, there has been less agreement, or should I say a lively debate, on the process by which facts are constructed and then deployed in shaping social life. How do scientists arrive at facts? Why and how are scientific controversies resolved? How does a consensus emerge? And, how do constructed facts end up shaping social and political orders? In order to answer these questions, science studies scholars focus on different case studies, approaches, and methodologies. There are those who focus on scientific practice (e.g., ethnographies of laboratory work) as a cultural practice (Pickering 1992) or as a literary practice (Latour and Woolgar 1979). For example, for Latour and Woolgar (1979), the results of scientific laboratory practice are often summarized in an
inscription, a graph, a table, that hide from view the sociological and political negotiations involved in the production of that very inscription. Moreover, a number of scholars followed these inscriptions through their travel in different social worlds as they become the basis of politics and for policymaking (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Starr and Griesemer 1989; Fujimura 1987). Other scholars turned attention to the regulatory process (regulatory science) by which scientific facts become elements in policymaking (Jasanoff 1990): regulatory agencies take up ‘facts’, place them under scrutiny, and devise policies accordingly. Jasanoff (1995) also focused attention on the role of the courts in settling scientific and regulatory controversies through law. Yet others underscore the process by which scientific communities protect their fields through boundary work (Gieryn 1983 and 1999; Jasanoff 1990)—defining the extent of the scientific community and guarding it from the encroachment of those who see things differently.

For the purposes of this paper, two important attempts at studying the process by which facts are both constructed and deployed in shaping sociopolitical orders are those of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and what came to be known as the co-production of technoscience and politics.

The concept of co-production of technoscience and politics ((Jasanoff 1996, 2004) became an important framework for explaining the empirical observation that many historians alluded to (e.g., Shapin and Schaffer 1985) that technoscience and politics are often mutually shaped. This is important for scholars who see the scientific and the political as distinct fields of practice (e.g., Bourdieu 1999) or as constituting separate social worlds (Fujimura 1987; Star and Griesemer 1989). For the most part, these social worlds are seen as having their own histories of emergence, their own games, rules of conduct, methodologies, and boundaries. The connection between the two is one of crossing the already established boundaries back and forth and, in the process, shaping one another. Most of these scholars, undoubtedly to different degrees and in different ways, see the technoscientific and the political social worlds as coherent within, but distinct and separate from one another. Jasanoff, for her part, rejects the assumption of pre-determined boundaries between science and politics and sees the establishment of those boundaries as precisely what is at stake. Co-production in this case helps explain how boundaries between science and politics are constructed and maintained. For my purposes here, I see the relationship of co-production along the same lines—scientific and political actors participate in drawing and maintaining their own boundaries and those of one another. Consensus building in the scientific field around a fact, such as that of water scarcity, for example, legitimizes a host of water policies like those of centralization, the primacy of efficiency, etc. In other words, it defines the horizon, the extent and limits, of politics. The same can be true in reverse: for example, consensus in the political field over building a strong, centralized Israeli state that is the source of all identity legitimizes a certain reading of research on water, its methods, legitimate
Again, politics in this sense draws its own boundaries, but also the limits of legitimate science. Co-production tunes us to scientific and political practices aimed at creating boundaries, but also at legitimizing “true” facts and “appropriate” politics.

ANT scholars (Callon 1986; Latour 1987, 1988, and 1993; Law 1994; and Law and Hassard 1999) for their part see distinctions between scientific and political practices unwarranted or, at least, irrelevant. They shift emphases from similarities and differences in science and politics, from how one shapes the other, and from an emphasis on how boundaries are constructed and maintained to an emphasis on how nature and society, technoscience and politics, are linked in uninterrupted networks. In this sense, they place emphasis on the relational and strategic aspects of the production and deployment of biophysical, sociological, and humanist categories. Scientific facts or the natural elements they purport to describe, sociological categories or the society they pretend to speak for, and literary categories or the cultural worlds they represent, acquire their meanings from the networked relations they find themselves entangled in. Nature, society, and culture, in other words, are meaningless if viewed in isolation; they are immaterial unless they are mobilized within networks that are at once social, technoscientific, and cultural—in other words, sociotechnical networks. What matters most, the argument goes, is the production and mobilization of such sociotechnical networks or socionatures (Haraway 1989). Again, for my purposes in this paper, ANT works very well. We find that since the 1930s water becomes an articulatory principle, an essential element around which elements of technoscience (knowledge about water resources, techniques for managing them, and institutional apparatuses built to govern them) are tied to elements of society (struggles over definitions of appropriate Jewish polity, struggles over the boundaries between Jewish civil society and the state, and struggles over the very definition of what is essential about a Jewish community in Palestine) and elements of culture (at the core of this is Jewish subjectivity and its appropriate form).

Keeping in mind (1) that the boundaries of science and politics are themselves cultural constructs and (2) that nature, society, and culture present themselves to us in networks, I follow Zionist and Israeli water (technopolitical) networks starting from the mid-1930s until the present. I trace three shifts in water networks that occurred in three consecutive periods (mid-1930s to 1948, 1948-1959, and early-1980s to the present). I describe the process by which the seemingly benign networks of water policymaking participate in defining Jewish identity and the way it is politically organized and governed.

**Water and Jewish identity in Palestine-Israel, 1918-1959:**
In this section I provide a brief account of the relationship between water and Jewish identity in two historical periods, during Mandate Palestine between the mid-1930s and 1948 and in Israel during its first decade of existence, 1948-1959. Together, they help us appreciate the changing nature of the relationship between humans and their environments or, more specifically in this context, between water and identity politics. As will become apparent, the changing nature of knowledge about water is tightly coupled with its management and governance, but, also, with the changing nature of Jewish subjectivity in Palestine and Israel.

More specifically, I describe how and why between the mid-1930s and 1948, the notion of water abundance became dominant among Zionist water experts, how abundance became the basis for justifying a number of technical and political options and, in the process, helped define Jewish identity in terms of immigration and settlement (the Jew is settler).

Following that, I describe how and why between 1948 and the late-1950s, the notion of water abundance was slowly, but surely replaced with that of scarcity. Water scarcity during this period became an important element around which technical and political actors coalesced and formed a network; it was used to justify the centralization of water technical apparatus, the centralization of water management and governance, and, in the process, was used to justify a strong, interventionist state. This network was essential for articulating Jewish subjectivity with that of citizenship of the modern nation-state.

*Water abundance, immigration, settlement, and Jewish subjectivity, mid-1930s to 1948*

Despite the fact that most actors, experts and lay people alike, are convinced that water had been scarce in Palestine-Israel since time immemorial, the fact of the matter is that these perceptions changed a number of times in different directions throughout history. Most important for our concerns here is that at the eve of the establishment of the state, most Zionist scientific and political experts believed that water was an abundant resource in Mandate Palestine. Many would deservedly wonder why. Given the dominant view of water scarcity at present times, how and why did the majority of Zionist experts believe water to have been abundant in Mandate Palestine?

Water became a political resource, deployed in the management of daily political relations between Zionist institutions and British Mandate authorities, increasingly since the early- to mid-1930s. The reason for that is more or less obvious. Even before the British occupation of Palestine started, the British Government offered the Zionist Organization its commitment to establishing a Jewish National Home in Palestine. After the British forces entered Palestine toward the end of 1918, they immediately
recognized the Jewish community of Palestine as a political community and limited their recognition of the Palestinians as a civil and religious community. Increasing Jewish immigration into Palestine was the main agenda item on the Zionist Organization’s political program towards creating a Jewish National Home. This became especially the case since the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine were limited—by 1918 Palestinian Jewish community was below 10% of the total population.iv

The British Mandate’s main objective in Palestine was also increasing Jewish immigration, but, under Palestinian pressures, linked the annual increase to what came to be known as the “absorptive capacity of Palestine,” a term meant to soften, at least rhetorically, the effects of increasing Jewish immigration on the original inhabitants of Palestine (Alatout forthcoming).v

Palestinian rejection of Jewish immigration became increasingly vocal, especially during the mid 1930s, which forced the British to reconsider their assumptions about Jewish immigration, the absorptive capacity of Palestine, and the political aspirations of the Palestinians. The result was an increasing tension between the Zionist Organization and the British Mandate authorities over the ‘appropriate’ annual level of Jewish immigration into Palestine or, in other words, over the exact level of Palestine’s absorptive capacity.

It is here that water was mobilized as an important part of what I called before “a Zionist water network of immigration, settlement, and colonization.” (Author forthcoming) For the Zionists, water was an abundant resource in Palestine that would, if used properly and utilized in agriculture, expand the absorptive capacity of Palestine. The British authorities on the other hand concluded that the water resources of Palestine were meager, scarce, and insufficient to support the Zionist program of open immigration into the country.

Even though the particulars of these debates are not of our concern here, it would be beneficial to make at least one point. Struggles over the water balances of Palestine increasingly became shorthand for a political struggle over immigration, settlement, and colonization; over what is or is not allowable; and over which political program was legitimate. Moreover, those struggles often took the form of struggles over a number of technoscientific elements that were directly or indirectly linked to water estimates: struggles over the annual water potential in Palestine (abundance or scarcity), over the methodologies used to arrive at such estimates (theoretical-deductivist or empirical), and even over the productivity of a unit of water.
By 1948, a number of hearings were conducted by the Mandate authorities in order to decide British policies in Palestine. Throughout, a large number of Zionist water and political experts were interviewed and, in the process, many of the exchanges focused on water resource availability, research methods, appropriate uses, etc. The overwhelming majority of Zionist experts strongly argued that the water resources of Palestine were abundant, diametrically opposed to British estimates of water resources. In addition, during the same time, a number of studies were written and published by Zionists or Zionist sympathizers on the water resources of Palestine describing the role water could play in expanding the absorptive capacity of Palestine.⁶

In addition to this shift in scientific thought, water resource management and the institutions built to govern those resources became increasingly national, i.e., concentrating and organizing water management in Jewish national institutions like that of Mekorot water company established in 1937.⁷ This was the beginning of a shift that was to solidify during the first decade of the state. Before 1937, water companies were organized on a local and regional scale only.⁸

The same trend of arguing in favor of abundance continued during the 1940s. The height of water research came with the publication of Walter Lowdermilk’s book, Palestine: Land of Promise. Building on a mix of biblical conceptions of Palestine, archaeological study of ruins, and soil studies, Lowdermilk argued that Palestine was capable of supporting millions of people and that recent declines in population has to do with its inhabitants—in short, Arab cultures did not allow for an agricultural way of life to thrive and led to the destruction of water ways, soil, etc. Lowdermilk’s conclusion was that Palestine should be open to Jewish immigration, not only because it can support that many immigrants, but also because those immigrants were Palestine’s only salvation and protection from the desert. Lowdermilk, moreover, argued for the diversion of the Jordan River in the north to the Negev desert in the south.

In the late-1940s and continuing the argument of abundance, James Hays of the Tennessee Valley Authority, built on Lowdermilk’s work and wrote a detailed engineering plan for the diversion project.

In the end, water abundance became the center of a network of forces, water experts, institutions of water management, Zionist political institutions, and Zionist settlement organizations, that made its main form of knowledge the framework of abundance and built in the process an understanding of Jewish subjectivity as one of immigration and settlement.
During the initial years of the state (1948-1952), water policymaking was entrusted to a couple of institutions. One, the more important from a political viewpoint, was the Water Department within the Ministry of Agriculture and inherited from the British Mandate. The first Israeli director of the water department was Simcha Blass, a Zionist water expert who was largely involved in determining a number of water policies of the Zionist organization in the pre-state era. The second institution was Mekorot Water Company. The Chief Engineer of Mekorot was Aaron Wiener.

In a way, one cannot ask for a better expression of the tensions within Israeli water policymaking than the relationship between these two experts. It is not an exaggeration to say that Blass and Wiener were diametrically opposed on a number of issues that underscore what is important in water policymaking in Israel at the time. These can be summarized in three elements, which engendered strong debates: legitimate scientific estimates of the water potential of the state; appropriate technical structures for the management of water resources; and approaches to water resources governance.

The move from an estimate of abundance to one of scarcity was, probably understandably, contentious, at least because of the entrenched belief in water abundance in pre-state period. Faced with a commitment to opening up Israeli borders for Jewish immigration, more than doubling the state’s population by 1952, and a commitment to the dispersal of those immigrants throughout the country, but especially in the Negev desert, settlement of these immigrants became one of the most important issues facing the new Israeli state. Moreover, immigration and settlement were articulated with concerns over the state’s very sovereignty, the state’s very reason for being, expressed as the protection of its territorial integrity and security—since the early-1930s, the assumption had been that sovereignty is ensured only when the project of Judization of empty spaces, as well as spaces inhabited by Palestinians, is fully accomplished.

Water was essential for the project of immigration and settlement—basically to make available water for agriculture, industrial, and domestic use in the Negev desert and new border towns. As a matter of fact, water projects claimed up to 25% of the state’s budget until the mid-1960s. Then, it should not be a surprise that questions about water’s annual potential, technologies for managing it, and institutions for governing its use dominated discussions until 1959. Neither should it be surprising that answers to those questions were meaningful to other questions like the sort of society that was being built in Israel, the type of state/civil society relations that were appropriate, the type of institutions of government to manage daily life, but also the type of Jewish subjectivity that is appropriate for the new emerging polity.
Water scarcity versus abundance: In 1950, the Israeli cabinet convened an interministerial committee to look into building a diversion scheme of the Jordan River from the north of the country to the northern parts of the Negev. The committee was unable to reach an agreement on the water potential of the state, which was deemed the most crucial question for a water policy that imagined building huge structures in the process. The conflict over the water potential of the state lasted three years with Simcha Blass leading the charge that the water potential of Israel was more than 3,000 million cubic meters per year (mcm/y) and Aaron Wiener arguing that the water potential was significantly less than that. The conflict extended to accusations over how scientific or how politically motivated was each of these estimates—it boiled down to a conflict over what constitutes legitimate evidence. Blass argued that a hybrid historical, theoretical, and deductivist approach was the only legitimate scientific approach to the water potential of the state. If there is more than 10 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/y) of rainfall and assuming the rate of percolation to groundwater aquifers was at least 30%, then it makes sense to assume that the water potential is at least 3,000 mcm/y. Others, led by Aaron Wiener, chose the empirical route, “the water potential is exactly the water we have access to,” argued Wiener in an interview. That was extremely scarce, not more than 1,500 mcm/y initially. What is ironic about the empiricist position is the fact that it was that of the British Mandate Government earlier in the 1940s and that was attacked by Zionist experts as unimaginative, uncreative, and empty.

The presumed resolution of this impasse came through the establishment of a new water institution, Tahal Water Company for Israel (Tahal from here on) that was to take care of the planning aspects of the national project. The makeup of Tahal embodies the conflicts over the water potential: Blass was appointed Tahal’s director general and Wiener his deputy.

This was short lived, however, and Blass was forced out by the end of 1953. Despite the politics of the day and the many issues that might have surrounded his resignation, I have to say that Blass’ resignation was based, at least in part, on the fact that he could not deliver: after sinking more than 200 exploratory wells throughout the state, water was empirically scarce and even he, as the head of the water apparatus in Israel, was not able to prove it otherwise. He invested his credibility as a water expert in his abundance thesis and found it difficult to survive the network of scarcity that emerged. This is despite the fact that Blass kept insisting that water resources of Israel are indeed abundant in a number of his writings and discussions until his death in July 1982.
The technical apparatus for water management: Debates over the water potential of the state spilled over to debates over the type of technical solutions to water policymaking. Despite the large number of technical disagreements between the two groups, one, in particular, is important for our context here: was the National Water Carrier to be a limited project of diversion that was to bring water from the Jordan River in the north to the Negev desert in the south for the purposes of settlement or was it to become a central technical apparatus through which all the water of Israel was to be managed. Blass argued for the former: the National Water Carrier should be a diversion project exclusively (for the management of the Jordan River waters) and other technical solutions should be devised on local and regional scales for managing water resources throughout the country. Wiener and others, though, thought of the National Water Carrier as a centralization project that would help solidify control over the scarce resources and guaranty their efficient use, the biggest challenge facing water policymaking from their viewpoint.

As this demonstrates, scarcity was deployed to legitimize a centralized technical option. This was in contradistinction of abundance that was deployed in order to legitimize local and regional control of technical options. This was only one of the moves toward centralization in water management (extraction and distribution). Water governance, as we will see in the next section, was also subject to the same argument.

Centralizing water governance: the centralization of water governance was a messy, difficult, and multifaceted process. It gained legitimacy only by the emergence of a network of scientific and political institutions, scientific experts and political actors that successfully articulated together Ben-Gurion’s political philosophy of Mamlakhtiyut and scientific conceptions of water scarcity.

Mamlakhtiyut, often translated as statism, conceived of the state not only as the institutional representation of its citizens, but also the very source of their identities. For Ben-Gurion, the state is the ultimate expression of both Jewish history and culture; it is the ultimate expression of Jewish ‘regeneration’ after years of the ‘degeneracy’ of diasporic life. Because of that, the very meaning of Jewish identity emanates from and finds expression in the state and its institutions. Jewish identity is fulfilled in a strong notion of citizenship of the modern nation-state. Most importantly, centralization of Jewish politics, in contradistinction with the decentralized life of the diaspora as well as pre-state Palestine, is precisely what would enable the state to take on the historic responsibility of regeneration. Ben-Gurion and his party colleagues in Mapai often grounded the centralization project (of education, the military, population dispersal, etc.) in a general, but vague notion of scarcity (of people, of land, of
natural and financial resources). Water scarcity and the centralization of water institutions was part of this project of state making.

As a number of scholars (Mitchell 1991; Jessop 1990) have argued, the state’s character as a unified and a homogeneous project should not be taken for granted or as a pre-determined given. Rather, it is the conclusion of diverse practices in a number of locations and policy spheres. Nor is there a guarantee that the state as a homogeneous actor will ever emerge or, in case it actually does emerge, that the state as a unified actor across all policy domains will continue to be thus. In other words, the emergence and fixity of the state is an empirical question. It depends on the struggles waged in local situations to answer certain problems—what Gramsci (1971) calls ‘war of position.’ In water policymaking, the Israeli state-as-actor can be said to have emerged and, more or less, stabilized through debates and struggles over water availability, the appropriate technical apparatus for its management, and the appropriate institutional apparatus for its government. This process came to a conclusion with the passing of the Water Law in 1959.

Of the three institutions entrusted with water policymaking in Israel during the 1950s (the Water Department in the Ministry of Agriculture, Mekorot Water Co., and Tahal), the Office of the Water Commissioner in the Ministry of Agriculture emerged as the most powerful, both in the formal (legal and institutional) and symbolic (its tie to agricultural settlement cooperatives and Zionist institutions that predate the state) senses of the word. In addition to consolidating and centralizing the institutional apparatus of water management, the centralization of water governance was made possible in a number of legal codes passed throughout the 1950s starting with the General Agricultural Ordinance (GAO) of 1950 and culminating in a comprehensive Water Law in 1959 (Table 1). As water scarcity took hold in technoscientific debates over water availability, legal discourse over water governance did two things: first, it progressively encoded scarcity in law and thus grounded it as the basis of policymaking (Alatout 2008), and, second, it progressively provided legitimacy for the centralization of the institutional apparatus for water management. By so doing, the Water Law did not only help solidify the notion of water as a scarce resource, but also helped define state interests and the institutions authorized to represent those interests. Of particular importance here is the comprehensive governance apparatus that defined Jewish subjectivity in terms of citizenship of the modern nation-state, subject to its surveillance, intervention, and discipline.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Water Code</th>
<th>Main Objectives</th>
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<tr>
<td>General Agricultural Ordinance (1950)</td>
<td>Declared all water surface resources publically owned and entrusted with the state</td>
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<tr>
<td>Water Drilling Control Law (1955)</td>
<td>Declared groundwater resources publically owned and entrusted its monitoring and control to the state</td>
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<td>Disconnected water rights from land ownership</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Drilling permits to be obtained from the Water Commissioner</td>
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<td>The Water Commissioner to monitor water abstracts and use</td>
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<tr>
<td>Water Metering Law (1955)</td>
<td>Authorized the water commissioner to monitor water uses at every water source</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Authorized the water commissioner to establish water tariffs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Defined state interests and linked those to the water commissioner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drainage and Flood Control Law (1957)</td>
<td>Extended control of the water commissioner to winter floods and waste water</td>
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<td>Authorized the Minister of Agriculture to declare drainage areas and establish drainage authorities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Water Law (1959)</td>
<td>Extended definition of water that is public to everything including “springs, streams, rivers, lakes and other currents and accumulations of water, whether above ground or under ground, whether natural, regulated or man made, and whether water rises, flows or stands therein at all times or intermittently, and includes drainage water and sewage”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extended the authority of the water commissioner who could intervene at any time and any place to permit, monitor, withdraw permits, define legitimate uses, change those, etc.</td>
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Since the mid- to late-1950s, water scarcity became a powerful scientific construct, hegemonic given its ideological and political effects on Israeli society and the region at large. The network of scarcity and
centralization also became a fixture in Israeli policy and made possible the centralization of the water policy apparatus, its institutions, its technologies, and its policymaking frameworks.

At the conclusion of the 1950s, Jewish identity came to be defined, at least in some circles, for the purposes of water management, and not without struggle, as that of citizenship of the modern nation-state—subject to its surveillance, discipline, and control.

**Water and the construction of Israeli neoliberal subjectivity**

As I mentioned above, just like in the pre-state period, when the construction of water abundance was heavily articulated with the construction of Jewish subjectivity as one of immigration and settlement, the construction of water scarcity in the first decade of the state was heavily articulated with the construction of Jewish subjectivity as one of citizenship of the modern nation-state. In other words, water and knowledge about the resource were underscoring, legitimizing, and underwriting imagined-turned-real sociotechnical orders (or sociotechnical orders as Harraway 1989 and Swyngedouw 1999 would say). A similar, yet distinct, transformation has been taking place throughout the last three decades, beginning in the late-1970s. A new set of techniques—borrowed from neoliberal economics—have been gradually, and not without strong resistance at times, transforming water from a biophysical object that is scarce in the biophysical, absolute sense of the word to an economic object, a commodity, whose scarcity or abundance are ever elusive and dependent on market and regulatory mechanisms.xi

A strong neoliberal, technopolitical network has been working on these changes and solidifying its presence on the water policy scene in Israel since the early 1980s. The network is extremely diverse, but dependent to a large degree on a number of elements that span the human-natural divide: water experts and academics, a new political framework for governance since 1977, cooperating water resources, and new geopolitical realities. A number of changes have been taking place ever so slowly since the early-1980s, again, not without tremendous resistance and with a unique mix of successes and failures. Those changes can be thematically described in three ways: First, increasing efforts have been spent on disarticulating water from absolute notions of abundance or scarcity and on reframing it as a commodity, subject to economic dynamics. Second, there has been an increasing effort to disarticulate water from both Zionist (linked to settlement, immigration, and farming) and Israeli (linked to citizenship and its role in the protection of the nation and the state) notions of Jewish subjectivity. The neoliberal alternative has been to offer water as a commodity and to articulate it with neoliberal notions of Jewish subjectivity—constructing in the process the Jewish subject as a consumer whose worth is linked to his/her participation in the market place and whose basic form of identity is the individual him- or herself, not the nation or the
state. Third, in order to reflect such changes, there has been increasing pressure to reinvest water with new institutions and regulations, i.e., new rules of government—more involvement of the private or semi-public sectors in the management and development of water resources and less involvement of the state.

From a biophysical to economic object: water’s travel from absolute scarcity to economic abundance/scarcity

In an interview in the late 1990s and when asked about water scarcity and its role in policymaking, a renowned Israeli water expert, Hillel Shuval, exclaimed: “scarcity? There is no such thing as water scarcity. You can use all water in the sea,” endless as that water may be. Upon further prodding, Shuval explained that the availability of water depends on one’s ability to pay for the cost of its production/extraction and distribution. This pronouncement from Shuval becomes even more intriguing when we consider the fact that he himself edited a volume that was published in 1980 and was titled, *Water quality management under conditions of scarcity: Israel as a case study.* Despite the book’s interest in water quality, it nevertheless takes *absolute* water scarcity for granted.

Nor is this exchange incidental or unique as it may appear at first sight. As a matter of fact, it reflects a change in conceptualizing Israeli water resources by a group of academic and policy advocates who have been arguing since the early 1980s and more forcefully since the early-1990s that water should in fact be demythologized in Israeli politics and policymaking, i.e., vacated from any residual national symbols inherited from early- and mid-twentieth century. For this group of water experts, diverse and complex in its own right, the link between water and the nationalist project of the 1950s resulted in conceiving of water policy as part of agricultural policy on which immigration and settlement were said to rely (e.g., Feitelson 2002, 2005, 2006; Kislev 2006; Menahem 2001; Mossenson 1991). From this perspective, heavy subsidies of water for agriculture, where domestic users pay three and sometime four times the price paid by agricultural cooperatives, led to wasteful and inefficient use of that water. This was true, even though water saving techniques, such as drip irrigation, were in fact developed in Israel and heavily used. The waste, according to some, came from the use of water to produce cheap crops that did not recover the true cost of water. This group of experts also point to the fact that while agriculture contributed more than 30% of Israeli GDP in the 1960s, in the 1980s it contributed less than 5%. The same is true of the labor force, which decreased from about 20% in the 1960s to less than 3% in the 1980s.
Even though the State Comptroller had been critical of the water management of the state in a number of yearly report including those of 1979, 1986, 1987 and 1988, the most celebrated public display of this framework, the strongest advocacy in its favor, came gradually in a number of report, publications, and legal and institutional changes—for e.g., the draught of 1989-1990 and the consequent publication of the Israeli Comptroller report of 1990 on the status of the water resources of the state are heavily debated and credited with placing the ‘need’ for drastic changes in water policy on the public agenda; the Arlosoroff Commission’s report, submitted in April of 1997, continued the trend; the displacement of the water commission from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of National Infrastructure, even though its significance was often downplayed in interviews with water experts in the late 1990s, reflects an important institutional shift with effects that would be felt in the future if not immediately; the ‘extreme’ drought of 1997-1999 and the threat to water tables in lakes, reservoirs, and groundwater aquifers and the debates that surrounded those effects brought some urgency to policy change; and the parliamentary report of 2002 that called for a number of changes in water policymaking provided a starting point.

[This section deals with the thematic shifts advocated by these reports, events, and research. Most importantly, it deals with the way these actors redefine water as an economic good demanding in the process (1) full pricing of water resources; (2) while in the past there was a uniform price, the new wave is requesting a shift in that policy (if you live near the water you pay less); (3) treating agricultural uses of water like other activities (domestic and industrial for example, but also water for the ecosystem, etc.); (4) allowing economic and market mechanisms to determine the price and cost of water; (5) moving decision making abilities away from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Finance; (6) treating agriculture as a wasteful field of practice that should not be protected against the rights of individual consumers who end up paying its subsidies; and many more]

Disarticulating water from nation- and state-building projects and articulating it with a community of consumers

Almost everybody agrees that water-as-a-commodity implies the end of both Zionist and Israeli projects, at least is as much as they imagined farming and agriculture as the main source of economic benefits and the main source of identity. For the Zionist project, farming was about regeneration—of the nation, the land, and the Jewish subject who lost her ways in the diaspora. For the Israeli project, agriculture was about immigration and security—of the threatened Jewish subject, the state, the land, and the nation. These two views of Jewish subjectivity coexisted, in tension no doubt, since the early 1950s. Israeli water
policy, its knowledge base, and its institutional expressions that favor agriculture are in part the result of those very tensions.

One of the most important ways in which water is being detached from the project of nation and state building is its detachment from agriculture, which was taken for granted in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. [The same literature mentioned above deals with this issue and argues for the primacy of economic efficiency; the need to define food security as the encouragement of free trade and the use of virtual water; deconstructing the national and statist ‘myths’ that place agriculture at the core of Zionist and Israeli identity, pointing to all the statistics that show that agriculture is not as important at present as it once was; and so on]

*Rearticulating Jewish subjectivity: from citizenship and settlement to consumerism and participating in the global economy*

The unfairness of the water system as seen by a number of these studies is that individual Israelis, in towns and cities in the mid-section of the state, those credited most with highly productive work (understood as contribution to the GNP per individual), are being penalized because of mythical Zionist ethos or a paranoid security apparatus. The individual that comes across from these works is very unlike that of the 1930s or that of the 1950s: he or she is an individual consumer who has no ties with a larger community or, to be fair, whose ties to the larger community have nothing to do with water subsidies to agriculture or to waste and inefficient systems. [This section fleshes out this theme by highlighting the different economic mechanisms suggested to get beyond the water use inefficiency. For example, importing food, participating in the world markets, is seen as a more efficient use of water resources (the notion of virtual water). Redefining efficiency in economic terms: productivity, long seen as a Zionist and an Israeli theme that focused on working the land and on manual labor, is now seen as inefficient. The notion that the Jewish subject has to work the land or to do manual labor in order to fulfill him or herself is seen as strange and nonsensical. Efficiency is redefined in monetary terms. For water, it is the market value of a unit of water—agriculture loses in this equation. So, the community itself, inasmuch as there is one in neoliberal thought, is understood very differently.]

**Conclusions:**
As we have seen, while under a technopolitical framework of abundance the Jewish subject was constructed as an immigrant and settler of the land; under a framework of scarcity the Jewish subject was constructed as a citizen of the modern nation-state. These two constructions are indeed very different and demand different technical, political, and economic institutions for their governance, their support, control, discipline, and management. However, rather than looking at Israeli identity as the total displacement of the Zionist project, it makes more sense to think of it as a hybrid identity, Israeli-Zionist in a way, that declares itself in the very continuities and discontinuities, real or imagined, between the two. It is in the very tensions, differences and similarities, between the two technopolitical projects, that either becomes apparent.

In the past three decades, however, there is surely a new layer of identity politics that is being mapped onto this hybrid form and water, yet again, plays a major role in its making. This new layer of identity is advocating a new cultural narrative, a new set of technical and institutional apparatuses for water management, and a new legal discourse that would legitimize them. However, it is also obvious, most clearly in the 2002 parliamentary report I mentioned above, that resistance to these changes is quite strong and that it is helping shape the new form of identity politics. Neoliberal subjectivity, the pure type we often read about in advocacy literature, the type that threatens with a total transformation and displacement to everything that preceded it, is not materializing. What is emerging is a hybrid framework of identity politics that reframes Jewish subjectivity in ways that fit neoliberal economics and globalization, but that coexists, in tension without a doubt, with Zionist and Israeli frameworks of identity politics.

To conclude, there are two important theoretical messages in this paper that are informed with empirical research on water. First, identity is not the monopoly of the political field as such. It emerges in diverse fields of practice, in technopolitical networks that, for example, study the water resources, intervene in them, and govern them, defining in the process human subjectivity. Second, identity is relational and is often revealed in the struggles and tensions between the different projects laying claim to it.

Taken together, these conclusions have a number of implications for the way we understand the role of water, its knowledge production, and its governance in broader issues. They also have implications for the way we understand identity politics. Struggles over the definition of identity, political and otherwise, are not waged at the centers of power or rarely so. Rather, they are waged in everyday practices and in the details of social life: how to do research on water resources, what methodologies to use, what counts as evidence, and what are the truth effects of such practices. Moreover, since the struggle over identity
cannot be exclusively waged at the centers of power, then it becomes very difficult to wage a total war—what Gramsci (1971) calls a war of maneuver. Because of that, the notion that we can somehow fix identity is illusory. Controlling more of the terms of our own subjectivity lies in our ability to take control of the details of our daily lives—what Gramsci (1971) might call a war of position. Struggles over the definition of water resource availability, scarcity and abundance, and the immense number of issues one has to tackle in the process are precisely the type of struggles that create identity effects.
Bibliography


In other words, rather than assuming a fixed and singular narrative of identity politics, this paper recognizes identity as a moving target—its meaning at any time and place is contingent on relations of power.

This does not mean that water was never political before then in Palestine. As a matter of fact, it was an important element in determining the boundaries of Palestine in the negotiations between 1918 and 1922. However, my claim here is that water was not deployed as a strategic political resource in the management of daily relations between Zionist and British Mandate forces in Palestine until the mid-1930s.

For the complete text of what came to be known as the Balfour Declaration (after … Balfour, the British Foreign Minister at the time), see …

There is a great deal of controversy over population numbers. However, none estimate the Jewish population of Palestine in 1918 to be more than 10% mark.

The term “absorptive capacity” and its use in Palestine to depoliticize and technicize Jewish immigration into Palestine is treated more fully in Alatout forthcoming.

Picard 1936 and 1939; Lowdermilk 1944; Hays 1948.

For example, at the time Mekorot was established, two water companies were in existence, owned by different communal settlements: the Jordan River Valley Society, jointly owned by five settlements in the Jordan Valley, and the Harod Valley Water Society, owned by seven settlements in the Harod Valley. In addition, there were 16 water cooperative societies in smallholder villages.

This was not limited to water resources. Since 1936, when the Peel Commission’s hearings were underway and it became clear that the Peel Commission’s report would suggest the partitioning of Palestine into two states, Jewish companies were increasingly organized on a national scale. Witness, for example, the established of, in addition to Mekorot, the air transportation company, Aviron Ltd., and the national employment fund, Bizur, both established in 1936. At the time, these were the only three companies organized by the Zionist national institutions: the Histadrut, the Jewish National Fund, and the Jewish Agency.

Mekorot is the Hebrew word for resources.

Even though the idea of diverting the Jordan River to the Negev have circulated in Zionist circles for some time, the most serious treatment of such a plan started with Walter Lowdermilk (1944), who described a general plan for a diversion scheme along the lines of the Tennessee Valley Authority, James Hays (1948) who paid more attention to technical details, and Hays and Lowdermilk (1948) that updated the Hays study. The Israeli plan for the diversion scheme was initially based on what came to be known as the Lowdermilk/Hays plan.

For a very helpful set of writings on water politics during the last three decades that touch on the changing nature of water politics and its policy networks, see Feitelson 2002, 2005, and 2006 and Menahem 2000. For primary material on the same, see reports by the Israeli Comptroller 1990, the Arlosoroff Commission’s report 1997; and the Parliamentary Report on the water status of 2002. In addition, my understanding of the shifts would not have been possible to the numerous interviewee subjects, all of them water experts in Israeli water policy institutions, some of whom worked since the late 1940s. I will try to give credit when it is due, but for many points, when I do not credit particular interviewees, the reason is that almost all of them gave similar replies.

Emphasis added.
The Mountain Aquifer is the only source of water for the Palestinians, yet it is only important for Israelis in supplying water to settlements in the West Bank. The bulk of Israeli domestic water needs are supplied from different sources. In addition, the Palestinian Authority needs additional permits from the Israeli Civil Administration (a military government administration) for water projects in Area C of the West Bank. Area C is the area of the West Bank which is under full Israeli military control as stipulated by the Oslo Agreement, which was agreed to by the two sides in 1993.

"Israel is a water superpower," Siegel writes. "Thanks to decades of planning and sacrifice, everyone in Israel today gets all of the safe water on demand that they want provided they are prepared to pay for it. The country benefits from wise water laws. It has a large cadre of highly qualified regulators and utility managers. And due to technological advances introduced by Israeli professors, scientists, and entrepreneurs, Israel’s water security is only growing. If people are wise, water will trump politics," he tells ISRAEL21c. "People ultimately come to pragmatic conclusions, but the question is how much pain they’ll go through till they get to that pragmatic conclusion."

Even before Let There be Water hit stores on September 15, Siegel was already deluged with speaking invitations. The Israeli government must put access to potable water at the top of its list of national security goals and forsake any attempt by the Trump administration to open its energy reserves to development and extraction. The Politics of Change US President Donald According to the Central Intelligence Agency’s World FactBook, Israel has a population of 8,174,527. In addition, approximately 21,000 Israelis live in the Golan Heights and approximately 201,000 in East Jerusalem. Israel’s future depends on access to sustainable levels of potable water. Further, its supply depends on waters that flow into Israel from Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.