Water is Not a “Natural Resource”: De-Commodification of the Means of Life

Many experts have predicted that water will become the “new oil” in the twenty-first century, that is, a commodity that makes fortunes as it is privatized and traded on the open market. The hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”) boom in the United States and the expansion of urban areas (often situated in ecologically precarious environments) mean that water will become increasingly scarce, a problem compounded by climate change and drought. Water rights issues have already made their way into courtrooms around the country, as states jostle for access to rivers. Georgia, Alabama, and Florida have long been engaged in battles over the Army Corps of Engineers regulation of water flows out of Lake Lanier via the Chattahoochee river, which has negatively impacted wildlife and agricultural use farther south. Legal actions between the states have now continued for over two decades, since 1990 (Baroni 2012). Similarly, North Carolina and South Carolina engaged in legal action from 2007 over use of the Catawba River, which feeds the city of Charlotte as well as numerous hydroelectric projects, a dispute which reached all the way to the Supreme Court (Vernon n.d.). In 2008, American Rivers named the Catawba America’s most endangered river (now downgraded to fifth most endangered), due to coal ash and arsenic contamination by Duke Energy as well as mismanaged development in the watershed (Hamilton, Kober, Hewes 2008).

Efforts have been made by scholars to situate water as a special natural resource, since a few days without clean drinking water produces death in human beings and non-human animals. Indeed, water does have transboundary features (Keterere, Hill, Moyo) that make it difficult to manage in the way that, say, forests might be, and it is a different kind of natural resource (Boyce), but the very category of a “natural resource” ought to itself be questioned, in that it automatically assumes that nature exists in order to be controlled and exploited by humans. In a way similar to my work on the commodification of human organs and other biological materials, I argue that water should not be viewed as a natural resource. Rather, more holistic notions that focus on ecosystem health rather than property rights should be employed in the management of water, both in the United States and in countries around the world.