

**Jeremy Rifkin (2024). *Planet Aqua: Rethinking our home in the universe*. Polity Press. Hbk. 263pp+notes+index. ISBN: 978-1-5095-6373-9. US\$20.**

My first reaction upon starting to read Jeremy Rifkin's (2024) new book, *Planet Aqua*, was that its 'big picture' arguments have no bearing or relevance to small (mainly island) states and territories. Nothing less than the future of the planet is at stake. The text is strewn with references to large civilisations – deemed 'hydraulic', because of how they mastered and controlled water resources – and large problems surely call for large solutions. And yet, upon second thought, I remembered how small jurisdictions may have been pioneers of water catastrophe – whether via flood or drought, hurricane, or tsunami – and would therefore have had long years to ponder and plan for how to deal with the climate threat. With that thought, reading Rifkin assumed a new urgency and interest.

Rifkin's argument is clear enough. Since the agricultural revolution – driven by mastery over grains, which consume a lot of water – humanity has been following a development trajectory which has led to impressive results, but at devastating costs. It is only now that many are realising that serious mistakes have been made regarding humanity's relationship with nature, and these need to be corrected, even though it may be too late. Rifkin summarises the problem thus:

A fast-warming climate and a rewilding hydrological cycle is now the new normal. Suddenly the earth's great spheres – the hydrosphere, lithosphere, atmosphere and biosphere – thought of as atemporal domains to be extracted, sequestered, propertized, commodified and consumed, have come alive with agency, even though that agency was always there but unrecognized during the long stretch of a mild climate and seemingly docile nature (p. 173).

The evidence of climate change is now hard to disregard. And, in some parts of the world, such as the Mediterranean region (as Rifkin reminds us), the rate at which the planet is warming and drying is faster. Countries are scrambling, at different speeds, to adopt climate mitigation and adaptation measures.

Is Rifkin proposing a doomsday scenario, a dystopic 'end of the world' setting, where nature and its waters reclaim the land, reminiscent of another Great Flood event? Not necessarily. Rifkin turns to some small countries – he mentions Greece as one apt example – for evidence that a suitable response, of sorts, is coalescing, albeit fragmented and patchy.

Small states and territories may, after all, be suitable places to look at and scrutinise during this historically significant moment, as the planet teeters on the brink of ecological collapse. Many small islands are "the posterchildren of the Anthropocene", as Jon Pugh and David Chandler remind us: like so many miners' canaries, they wear their environmental tragedies on their sleeves. Perhaps the best example is treeless Rapa Nui (Easter Island). But such places and their citizens are not just the unfortunate, hapless, and blameless victims of a changing and unforgiving climate, that they had the least part in causing. These small jurisdictions are often relatively densely populated; they have been grappling with water issues throughout their history. Sea level rise risks the elimination of their coastal infrastructure and even the wholesale drowning of their territory. They have spent decades pedalling the notion that they are structurally and permanently vulnerable. But they are also resilient and agentic. Not having experienced an industrial revolution means that their citizens' relationships with water and the ocean may differ from and defy Platonic, Kantian, and Lockean notions of (masculine) control and exploitation over nature which have gripped Western ontology and practice.

Water conservation is as old as island life. And when countries, by virtue of their smallness, lack mountains, rivers, and lakes, and even suitable rainfall, they must guarantee fresh water by other means. We know of innovative water saving, ‘rock garden’ strategies, even amongst the early inhabitants of Rapa Nui. We know various small island residents who store rainwater runoff from their houses’ roofs into cisterns dug below ground. We know of a shift to salt-tolerant crops in Pacific Island states where king tides and saltwater intrusions have compromised their water table. We know that small countries like Barbados, Kuwait, the Maldives, Malta, and the United Arab Emirates use and have perfected reverse osmosis technology to produce drinking water.

But the engagement of small island and coastal states with water goes deeper. These countries have not had the scale, resources, or ambition to allow for the commercialisation of the ocean; nor for the use of the sea lanes in pursuit of conquest, empire, or profit. The waters adjacent to their land have been the locations of their creation myths; the sites for artisanal fisheries and tidal pool foraging; and only more recently, the settings for promising tourism infrastructure. Their art, music, and literature are replete with aquatic inspirations. As I wrote many years ago, my own life – just like the lives of many millions of island and coastal residents – continues to be an on-going affair with the sea.

We may be landlubbers as *Homo sapiens*, but our engagement with the sea remains an elemental force of nature and culture, especially for those of us who live alongside riverbanks and coasts or on small islands. Aquapelago, terraqueousness, littorality, beaches as ‘third spaces’ ... we use words and phrases to describe how water *and* earth, land *and* sea, are imbricated and intertwined in our lives; but never quite do so properly. The fluidity of water unsettles; the immensity of oceanic expanses belittles; the wrath of ocean storms frightens; the richness of marine protein sustains; the mystery of seabed resources beckons; the frolic of warm water along a beach relaxes; and yet the rise of sea levels threatens. Writing in 2013, Pete Hay was right when he argues that we, as land-loving humans, are still slowly uncovering ‘what the sea portends’.

The sea is and remains the greatest natural mystery of our planet. Which is why it is quite *à propos* to speak of a Planet Aqua. Rifkin drives the point home: this affordable book – a semi-academic text with an impressive number of references – offers a strong and steady argument about the “complex, adaptive socio-ecological systems” (p. 98) and “hydrologic urban infrastructure” (p. 29) humans have created and which now threaten our species and our planet.

We may find Rifkin’s statement that “our species’ future depends on how we choose to relate to the waters that animate life” (p. 233) to be somewhat excessive and deterministic. But his advice to ‘get our feet wet’ and move beyond ‘grounded’ is well worth heeding. More so when we are in troubled waters.

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