

Review: Rivers by Design: State Power and the Origins of U.S. Flood Control

By Karen M. O'Neil

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O'Neil, Karen M. *Rivers by Design: State Power and the Origins of U.S. Flood Control*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. 278 pp. ISBN: 0-8223-3773-8. US\$22.95, paper.

Since the social and economic restructuring of the Progressive Era and the rise of the New Deal in the United States, “[e]fforts to alter the course of rivers have changed social and political structures in expected and unexpected ways” (p. xiv). *Rivers by Design* sets out to make sense of and critically analyze the relationship between the United States Army Corps of Engineers, the first federal agency to actively manage land and resource development decisions, and the outlying territories, states, and publics impacted by federal flood control policy.

Following the Flood Control Act of 1936, an act stemming from federal attempts at flood control in the 1880s, the Corps focused almost entirely on controlling flooding along the Sacramento and Mississippi rivers and weakened the power of centralized government authority leading to a renewed Corps of Engineers that found itself in a precarious position whereby the agency “unofficially engaged in local, state, and national politics” (p. 22). O'Neil navigates the winding road between federally mandated flood control and local, state, and landowner-based resource planning and management. Rivers, as the book makes clear, represent more than water flowing from one place to another; rivers are political, economic, and social. In this way, rivers bring state and society together, which in turn brings the tensions between state and federal politics to the surface of public debate.

As a social history of the United State's flood control program, *Rivers by Design* aims “to explain why the program was designed to link the (central) government with local and subnational state government institutions, including landowner-run levee districts. This involves asking who pressed for this program and why the pattern of articulation emerged” (p. xii). O'Neil tells not only a social history of U.S. flood control; the book is as much about river politics as it is about the political economy and ecology of nation building itself. Her analysis of the Mississippi River Commission and its popular critiques, including Gifford Pinchot, Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, elucidates the tensions that build between landowners and the State, or between civil engineers and the State, when the national economic interests of the Progressive Movement are challenged by the development of a nationwide program for flood control.

Rivers by Design will be critical reading for specialists in water policy, environmental studies, environmental social science, political ecology, and history. This is an exciting and readable book.

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