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Contesting Global Landscapes Theme Project

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Fluid Empires: Hydraulic Regimes across the “French” Mediterranean

“How much land does a man need?”¹ Leo Tolstoy’s famous question ignores a fundamental issue that people living on the land confront on a daily basis: how much water is available on that land? As residents of upstate New York, the Amazon, and the Maghreb know, albeit in quite different ways, the value of land is measured not just in hectares, but also by the availability, accessibility, and cost of water. My second book-length project—a historical study of water management regimes in southern France and French North Africa during the colonial and postcolonial eras—highlights this inextricable connection between land and water. Thus, hydraulic knowledge, water management technologies, and water itself are central to understanding the motives, politics, and implications of both contemporary and historical land acquisitions.

Tentatively entitled, *Fluid Empires: Hydraulic Regimes across the “French” Mediterranean*, this book explores connections across—and beyond—the Francophone Mediterranean through the lens of water and its regulation. I examine the development and movement of experts, knowledge, technologies, and practices related to hydraulic science and various forms of water management (wells, irrigation networks, dams, etc.) between France and French North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) since the invasion of Algeria in 1830. My research charts the reconstitution and reconfiguration of hydropower in the modern Francophone world: from hydroimperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to hydrocapitalism over the past generation.

My research thus far suggests how knowing and managing water were critical tools by which the colonial state, French *colons*, corporations, technical elites, and other interested constituencies exerted control over land and its human inhabitants in both colonial and metropolitan peripheries. It also suggests how uneven power dynamics have continued to shape the management of water in “postcolonial” nations. Overall, approaches from the history of technology and science studies enable me to unpack hydraulic management regimes in order to explore the (contested) visions of and ambitions for newly acquired land—from pressuring North African nomadic herders to become sedentary and promoting industrial agriculture to fostering urban development and environmental protection.

As an ISS Theme Project Faculty Fellow, I intend to continue developing and researching my second book, write several related articles, and submit large grant applications for long-term support of this project (ACLS, NEH, NSF, etc.). I propose using the generous discretionary budget to conduct research in French archives and hire a graduate research assistant to compile relevant primary and secondary literature available through the Bibliothèque Nationale’s online collection.

¹ Institute for the Social Sciences, 2012-2015 Theme Project on Contested Global Landscapes, Call for Faculty Fellows, Description, p. 3.