

Flowing Progress: Transforming the Danube Through Infrastructure. Edited by Stefan Dorondel and Luminita Gatejel.*

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Writing the histories of rivers has become popular in recent decades. Richard White’s book on the Columbia River and Mark Cioc’s seminal book on the Rhine provided important methodologies for scholars concerning how to approach the transformation of rivers in modern times. Most works, of course, have focused on rivers in Western Europe and North America, while many of the world’s rivers remain understudied by environmental and technological historians due to language barriers and a lack of sources. This imbalance is common across many fields of environmental history as well, but thanks to a series of influential works by a circle of environmental historians affiliated with the Institute of Social Ecology and Verena Winiwarter, this is not the case for river histories, especially not for the Danube as a whole. Winiwarter, Martin Schmid, and others have contributed numerous methodologically important and nuanced case studies on the Viennese and other Austrian sections of the Danube, as well as some tributaries of this “most international” river. Still, the historiography of the Danube remains largely segmented in at least three ways: temporally—lacking long-term analyses—, spatially—most works focus on only one, usually shorter section—and finally, methodologically. The volume reviewed here is a welcome exception regarding all three aspects, as it consciously examines a longer period, spanning the sixteenth century to the present, and covers sections of the Danube from Austria to Romania. Most notably and impressively, through its methodology, the studies consider the river’s “dynamics between hydrological processes and technopolitical and economic practices” (p. 2) as “disturbances”

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—a concept introduced by the editors Stefan Dorondel and Luminita Gatejel. Unlike many edited volumes, most articles in this collection reflect on and use the concept of disturbance to explore the changing relationships between the Danube and the people inhabiting its floodplains.

The first article by Deniz Armağan Akto and Onur İnal studies the preindustrial Lower and Middle Danube. They look at the role the river played in the infrastructure associated with the Ottoman Empire's expansion into its northernmost areas. Using previously lesser-known sources, they look at how the Danube and its tributaries facilitated (and posed obstacles to) the military campaigns of the Ottomans in the 1550s and 1560s toward Hungary.

Natural disasters, as several studies have argued, were important in nation-building processes, as on the one hand, states could show strength and solidarity for citizens during such times. On the other hand, similar crises were moments to express and enhance group solidarity and a sense of belonging. Luminita Gatejel shows that in the period of the emergence of the independent Wallachian Principality, the protection of the people of Giurgiu from the Danube floods was used to demonstrate the strength of the newly emerging polity.

Constantin Ardeleanu's contribution presents how different interests clash when transforming riverine infrastructures. He looks at the different economic and ecological interests of the actors involved in utilising the Danube Delta and its waterways in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the European Commission of the Danube facilitated and invested in creating an easily navigable straight riverbed, the Romanian state and the local board for fisheries had a completely different agenda. For the local economy, it was key to consciously manage and make use of the resources in the Danube Delta, which, with the modified Danube riverbed, made several technological arrangements necessary. The complex project, involving engineering experts from Western Europe, placed great emphasis on "grey infrastructure" in supporting the fishery economy of the delta area.

Steven Jobbitt's article focuses on a partially unexplored aspect of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. He presents one of the arguments of Hungarian scientists against cutting the Kingdom of Hungary into pieces; that is, the disturbance of the water system, the loss of Hungary's control over the watershed of the Danube in the central (Carpathian) Basin area. Interwar geographers and hydrologists recurrently argued that only central governance, i.e., Hungarian domination, over the watershed could ensure a just and fair distribution of water resources. This is somewhat contradicted by research demonstrating that large-scale nineteenth-century Hungarian regulation projects created a more polarised society in the rural countryside by prioritising the interests of the manorial economy over those of smallholders.

The chapter by Stelu Şerban also touches upon the lower section of the Danube. Similar to Gatejel's contribution, Şerban demonstrates how floods created opportunities for the Bulgarian state to express its authority while also caring for its citizens. The chapter uses the example of the flood of Vidin in 1942 and the government's response to the threat of the Danube, and how this presented the state with an opportunity to forge ties with urban dwellers. As Şerban argues, this was much needed, as flood protection measures in the region were seen with suspicion, since the drained areas were used to settle post-World War I refugees.

Robert Nemes looks at 1956's Hungary, however the focus is not on the Revolution but on the large winter flood of the Danube. He demonstrates how the flood was mediated and presented by Rákosi's regime as a war, with significant military involvement in the fight against the related events. While the contemporary press and state represented the phenomenon, including the protection of the small town of Dunavecse, as an organised and successful event, in the light of the archival sources presented by Nemes, this is far from true.

The contribution by Constantin Iordachi presents the different stages of the construction of the Danube–Black Sea Canal and the strong ties of its phases of building to the changing political circumstances and regimes. It shows how, after decades of theoretical considerations about a similar canal, the project came close to fruition as part of Stalinist planning to overcome nature, but was halted under a changing political climate in Romania in the second half of the 1950s. Iordachi also shows how the plan was revived by Ceauşescu's government decades later to demonstrate the superiority of socialist life and showcase the oversized infrastructural projects of late socialism (and the infrastructural decay following regime change).

Stefan Dorondel's contribution, in many ways, continues the previous article by pointing to the processes that followed the dissolution of the Ceauşescu regime in Romania. It presents how privatisation and unequal access to resources contributed to villages being submerged for months (!) in the aftermath of the Danube flood of 2006. Dorondel's careful analysis, based on written sources and interviews, shows how this disaster is a prime example of overreliance on preexisting infrastructure and a lack of control over water management during the years of liberal capitalism in Romania—a combination that has proven rather disastrous in several countries of East Central Europe.

Milica Prokić deals with an alluvial island at the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers in the heart of today's Belgrade. The Great War Island's history is in many ways exceptional. As a floodplain ecosystem, it was threatened with destruction for many years due to various political circumstances, as Prokić argues, but somehow always escaped and was never incorporated into urban infrastructure, making it a unique example in an urban setting and, in some ways, a fascinating ecological laboratory in the Danube valley.

The last contribution to the volume is, methodologically, perhaps the most complex of all. Gertrud Haidvogl and her colleagues' article presents three case studies from the Austrian Danube catchment on the transformation of floodplains in the age of industrialisation. Their analysis entails the transformation of the Danube in the Austrian Machland, in Vienna, and finally, the regulation of a tributary of the main river, the Traisen. The authors argue that in responding to floods and other challenges, these landscapes shift from being socio-ecological systems to socio-ecological-technical systems.

Flowing Progress is fascinating yet slightly distressing reading (something the introduction also alludes to). It is an exceptionally well-edited volume that is also richly illustrated, with contributions that consciously use the same theoretical approach to study the transformations of the Danube floodplain. Unlike many books on East Central Europe that do not reach this very audience because of their price, the one reviewed here is open access, making it an even more important study of the environmental history of the Danube. Let us hope that the authors will soon provide more stories of the Danube or another river!

