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## How the Commons Was Changed: Politics, Ecology, and the History of Floodplain Institutions

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## Book and Film Reviews

### How the Commons Was Changed: Politics, Ecology, and the History of Floodplain Institutions

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*The Contested Floodplain: Institutional Change of the Commons in the Kafue Flats, Zambia.* By Tobias Haller. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013.

The world's great floodplains—the Amazon River basin, the Mekong Delta, the Congo, the Nile, and, of course, the largest developed river basin in the world—the Mississippi: we know floodplains exist in an ever-changing context of human activity and ecological dynamics, a relationship that is under increasing pressure as climate changes and human desire for resources expands relentlessly. While not industrially developed, the Kafue River of Zambia and its famed floodplain, known as “The Kafue Flats,” are among the most resource rich wetlands in the world. In Tobias Haller's *The Contested Floodplain: Institutional Change of the Commons in the Kafue Flats, Zambia*, we have a glimpse of how floodplains experience social and ecological reconfigurations—from an early history of indigenous resource managers regulating access and extraction to a region engulfed by heterogeneous users vying for a piece of the alluvial pie—a pie that is increasingly vulnerable to climatic shifts.

Haller's extensive examination of this particular floodplain in Central Africa offers a much needed longitudinal understanding of the history of social, environmental, and institutional change leading up to the current problems of sustainable common pool resource use. Haller's analysis uncovers the inner workings of common property regimes in the floodplain and how external forces (state, migrant, development) intersect to produce the kind of change we see. In this treatise, Haller challenges us to trace the floodplain history with him in order to grasp the very specific shifts in local/indigenous institutions (“rules of the game”; 16) governing natural resources. Haller balances his Boasian attention to detail—including agricultural, flooding, and other cyclical systems, grass and other species, diagrams of hunting and social practices, religious and social organization detail, longitudinal census data, and price changes for fish and cattle—by weaving a rigorous theoretical framework from

Elinor Ostrom's Institutional Design Principles and Jean Ensminger's Model of Institutional Change. Taken together, Haller's ethnography, framed with current theoretical discussion, results in a robust and important monograph in political-ecology, of which ecological and economic anthropologists, Africanists, environmental scientists, and historians should take note.

Scholars may know of the Ila, Tonga, and Lenje, sometimes called the *Bantu Botatwe* (three peoples) on the central Zambian Plateau, as well as the Lozi/Barotse in western Zambia, from the work of icons such as Max Gluckman, Elizabeth Colson, and the early missionary-colonial administrator team of Edwin Smith and Andrew Dale (1920). Indeed, Haller has the good fortune of a vast and deep foundation of ethnography and records from which to build his longitudinal analysis of institutional change. While doing so, he also synthesizes almost a century of extremely rich ethnographic data for one region, joining it with equally long colonial and postcolonial record keeping, and finally, with his own comprehensive ethnographic data collected in the mid-2000s.

The cattle-herding Ila are the central figures in this analysis, but Haller, in a true holistic effort, uncovers links with all of the residents of this region, especially the Tonga and Batwa, who each have long-standing claims to the common pool resources here. Hunters have followed the herds of lechwe, buffalo, and wildebeest; fish have provided seasonal additions to local diets; and small-scale agriculture (maize, sorghum, vegetables) has always provided an important supplement to the proteins gained through the other three “livelihood pillars.” Of course, institutions that seemed to work well for regulating resource access in the past have come under pressure in recent decades. These pressures take a vast array of forms: fluctuating global economies and political regimes, shifts in national land and property laws, development efforts, neighboring ethnic groups, including the famed Lozi—now ambitious commercial fisher-people—and Zambians across the country claiming their citizenship as evidence for their rights to “national” resources. It is these institutional changes that are the crux of Haller's analysis.

Deftly applying Ensminger's model of institutional change, which “takes account of the relationship between relative prices (market prices), ideology (values), institutions, and bargaining power” (21), Haller examines the history and workings of institutions tied to each of the four livelihood pillars (herding, fishing, hunting, and farming). His efforts reveal how external events, such as falling copper prices, impact pricing of local resources and simultaneously intersect with power dynamics in the form of bargaining power (local elites, state officials, migrants with ties, etc.) and ideological bases for claiming rights. Importantly, Haller argues that discourse and narrative must be included in the ideology framework, as exemplified by migrants' discourse of “citizenship” when justifying their seasonal use of the fisheries that had previously

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been managed under a common property system of exclusionary rights (preventing outsiders). With detailed attention to these factors, we can then follow the shifting terrain of common property management, from moments of “open access” (no rules) to private property (individual rules) and the enduring elements of true commonly shared and managed property. Once Haller identifies the paths of change, he then asks whether and how these reformulated institutions may offer sustainable use possibilities; that is, can the floodplain commons endure? Ostrom’s design principles provide the framework for the answers to these questions (17–18, 462–471). In Haller’s words, taken together,

Ensminger’s model enables us to explain how institutions came to be, how they change and what the relationship is between power, ideology and the development of institutions. Ostrom’s design principles then allow us to discuss questions of whether institutions at a specific time can be regarded as being robust. This provides us a proxy to assess the sustainability of common pool resource use. (461)

Haller’s answer is: “It depends.” Ultimately, sustainable common property institutions depend on multilayered power dynamics. They require that management of access and use, as well as ownership rights to resources in question, are returned to local populations; they also require state support and backing for revitalization (which includes mutual trust and accessibility of personnel); and finally, they require recognition of and collaboration among the increasingly heterogeneous groups that make up “local populations.”

The ethnographic data and detail in this volume are profound, and they stand equally alongside other classics in anthropology, as Elizabeth Colson notes in her forward to the volume. In fact, I have already turned back to some of the encyclopedic knowledge contained here for my own research; this is a resource to have on the shelf. The theoretical framework advances our understanding of institutional change, illustrated so well through this case study, and consequently stands as an example of well-integrated theory and grounded ethnography. The few weaknesses of the volume have more to do with a written form that comes from a different tradition in scholarly publication than we often see these days. Many recent ethnographies nod heavily to the creative endeavor of writing itself, partly a product of publishers’ marketing demands but also of our own desire to make anthropology more accessible to a broad audience. *The Contested Floodplain* stands as a solid scientific endeavor, which, for better or worse, sometimes means straight-forward presentation of data, with little flourish, and an organizational structure that can seem dry. However, the value of the content itself outweighs such structural constraints.

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## Qualifying Epidemiology: Emic Perspectives on Russia’s Mortality Rates

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*Dying Unneeded: The Cultural Context of the Russian Mortality Crisis*. By Michelle Parsons. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.

Michelle Parsons’s first monograph, *Dying Unneeded: The Cultural Context of the Russian Mortality Crisis*, takes an ethnographic approach to the spike in mortality rates among middle-aged Russians, especially men, during the first half of the 1990s. In doing so, Parsons makes a case that ethnography can contextualize inconclusive demographic data regarding the role of alcoholism in the mortality crisis. She also seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations about freedom and subjectivity in post-Soviet Russia.

*Dying Unneeded* is located at the intersection of ethnography of the former Soviet Union/contemporary Russia, sociocultural anthropology, global public health, and oral history of the Soviet Union. Parsons joins a rich field of ethnographers who have worked to document the experiences of Russians surviving the uncertainty of the first 15 years following the collapse of the former Soviet Union (Caldwell 2004; Höjdestrand 2009; Humphrey 2002; Verdery 1996) and tracking the intersection of health and politics in the post-Soviet world (Lindquist 2001, 2006; Raikhel 2010; Rivkin-Fish 2001, 2003, 2006).

Parsons argues for a historically contextualized understanding of the generation who had already reached middle age when the Soviet Union collapsed. Based on research conducted with aging Muscovites in 2006, the book centers on what Russians themselves say about childhood in the post-war period, working life, and the transition period of the early 1990s. This generation, Parsons shows, experienced a deep loss of both financial and social resources with the collapse of the Soviet system. Contrary to Western popular discourse, which imagined that democracy and capitalism “freed” Russian citizens following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Parsons argues that for Muscovites who were middle and working class adults, those years were actually experienced as reducing individual freedom and agency.

Parsons argues that Western bias has skewed theories of structure/agency toward a liberal individualist understanding of agency that posits structure as always limiting (160–168). Following Svetlana Boym (2010), Parsons shows how Russian subjects conceptualize social embeddedness—not only in interpersonal networks but also in identity and subject positions reinforced and (re)produced by the state and political economy—as integral to self-actualization. She elaborates on