

THE ‘VITALITY OF WATER: RETHINKING MODERNIST HYDROPOLITICS AND ONTOLOGIES’ INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

27–28 May 2025, Tampere University

On 27–28 May 2025, we organised an international symposium entitled ‘Vitality of Water: Rethinking Modernist Hydropolitics and Ontologies’ at Tampere University (Finland). The rationale for hosting this symposium in Tampere emerged somewhat accidentally. During a conversation about our shared interests in hydropolitics and ontologies, we realised that a more original initiative—beyond yet another ‘water conference’—was both timely and necessary. Thus, we secured funding locally and began drafting a call for contributions that emphasised active collaboration amongst academics, activists, and artists. That call also conveyed a sense of urgency.

Amid an unprecedented global environmental crisis, water cycles are being disrupted and pushed to critical thresholds. Yet, policymakers continue to treat water as an ‘object of management’ (Barnes 2014)—a resource stripped of agency and relational depth. Technoscientific discourses surrounding abstract, ‘modern’ water (Linton 2010) reinforce anthropocentric epistemologies and obscure the power structures underpinning colonial and extractivist agendas (Ross 2024). In addition, academic debates highlight the violent processes tied to nation-state formation, which

often require ‘taming water’ (Kaika 2015) and reordering hydrosocial relations through governmental resourcification (Käkönen 2020). The transnational global value chains involved in water commodification are another critical area of inquiry, particularly in the context of privatisation, ‘infrastructural coexistence’ (Furlong 2014), and the growing profits from ‘plastic waters’ (Hawkins et al. 2016).

Political ecology scholarship has underscored the need for alternative hydro-ontologies (Faletti and Wolff 2022) which fully recognise nonhuman–human relations in global water cycles, as well as Indigenous knowledge systems that challenge modernist discourses, practices, and policies. These alternative perspectives also consider the movement of humans—such as internally displaced people—following water-related disasters, alongside the circulation of nonhumans like waterborne diseases and animals. Moreover, water continues to inspire the imagination beyond academic discourse, remaining a central theme in artistic practices which tell new stories of earthly survival.

A motley crew of students—who could earn academic credits through their participation in the symposium—and researchers gathered



Image 1. Professor Erik Swyngedouw delivering the keynote lecture.
Photo credit: Ismaël Maazaz, 2025.

for the keynote lecture delivered by Erik Swyngedouw, Professor of Geography at the University of Manchester (UK). Although he has authored several pioneering works on the urban ecology of water and has spoken widely on the topic, Swyngedouw began with a quip: he was never truly interested in water itself. As is the case for many in the field, water serves more as a lens through which to examine power structures. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s aphorism ‘nature does not exist’, Swyngedouw emphasised the role of ideology and how water functions as a signifier within specific

relational configurations. He described water as a vanishing mediator, a concept foregrounding the socio-environmental metabolic circulations and processes shaping the contemporary world. Pushing further into a political critique of political ecology, he explored the political as an immanent practice. The bleakness of the current political moment repeatedly surfaced, most notably when Swyngedouw remarked that it ‘is already too late’—a statement provoking reactions from the audience.

The symposium continued with four thematic panels. Each day commenced with



Image 2. Participants to the ‘Vitality of Water’ symposium during a session.
Photo credit: Ismaël Maazaz, 2025.

a panel offering a critical analysis of the ways in which water is captured, utilised, or studied within modernist, developmental, and neoliberal political frameworks. The second panel of each day explored alternative onto-epistemological approaches, opening up possibilities for understanding, sensing, relating to, and engaging with water beyond the dominant paradigms.

Panel 1, 'Critique of Anthropocentric, Neoliberal, and Colonial Water Governance and Research', offered a critical examination of water governance. The presentations traced the historical entanglements of colonial economic production with the conceptualisation of water as a 'resource' essential to such systems (Olli-Pekka Haavisto). The panel also interrogated the epistemic consequences of this colonisation, economisation, and resourcification of water through the ontologies of partition and capture, exploring the potential for alternative, mythopoetic imaginaries of water (Iuliia Gataulina). Then, the discussion also turned to the contemporary development agenda of the 'Green Economy' in Uzbekistan, analysing how notions such as 'green modernity' and 'water efficiency' shape the realities of smallholder farming (Madina Gazieva). Finally, the panel included a presentation that shifted the focus from the political and economic production of 'modern water' to the disciplinary engagements with it—specifically critiquing the anthropocentrism of the discipline of International Relations and proposing a biopolitical reconceptualisation of the Baltic Sea (Monica Tennberg).

Panel 2, 'Sensing and Knowing Water', explored alternative epistemologies and affective engagements with water, moving beyond colonial and extractive paradigms. The speakers proposed ways of being with water that decentre dominant frameworks and foreground relational, embodied, and speculative practices. The panel

began with a presentation on hydrosemiosis, examining how meanings of water are produced through both scientific discourse and everyday interactions (Mirjami Lantto Klein, with co-authors Michał Dawid and Isabel Val Sánchez). Rather than rejecting scientific knowledge outright, this approach critically engages with the technoscientific hegemony to propose hydrosemiosis as a speculative feminist practice grounded in, whilst reimagining, scientific foundations. The panel also turned to artistic registers as a means of sensing water—and its catastrophic absence—through works focused on the desiccated Aral Sea in Central Asia (Lilia Bakanova). These artistic interventions emphasised the importance of not only understanding ecological collapse intellectually, but also feeling it viscerally. The day concluded with a presentation on the sociopolitical dimensions of water governance in Chile, Peru, and Colombia, where neoliberal and Indigenous worldviews intersect (Matti Salo, co-authored with María Cristina Fragkou, José Carlos Orihuela, Germán A. Quimbayo Ruiz, Carlos A. M. Soria Dall'Orso, and Katriina Soini).

Panel 3, 'Water, Infrastructures, and Extractivism', examined how water becomes embedded within developmental sociopolitical projects, particularly through its capture and transformation via infrastructure. The panel opened with a discussion on the accelerating infrastructuring of rivers, framed through the concept of violent fluvial volatilities, highlighting the entanglement of water with processes of slow and catastrophic violence (Mira Käkönen). The presentations further emphasised that rivers and waters are not only infrastructural entities themselves—such as through dams—but also interact with other infrastructural systems. For instance, water can become either a component of or an obstacle

to projects like road construction, which are central to state formation (Tuomas Tammisto). Beyond large-scale infrastructure, water also figures in everyday techniques that sustain life, such as public fountains. These seemingly mundane elements simultaneously shape and reflect power relations amongst various actors (Ismaël Maazaz). Empirically, the panel drew on case studies from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cambodia, Chad, and Papua New Guinea.

Panel 4, 'Indigenous Approaches to Water Governance', concluded the symposium by foregrounding Indigenous onto-epistemologies as vital avenues for rethinking human–water relations. Given that political, economic, and intellectual engagements with water have been deeply shaped—and often colonised—by the imperatives of capitalist growth and modernist development, the panel emphasised the need to unlearn dominant paradigms and relearn relational modes of engagement with water. The presentations explored alternative approaches to conservation, water adaptation, and infrastructure which challenge Euro-modern ontologies and colonial logics, to instead centre ecological common and relational worldviews. Specific case studies included more-than-modern Indigenous Sámi and Wayúu worlds (Anna Ott, co-authored with Liisa Varumo and Claudia Ituarte-Lima), Indigenous knowledge of water adaptation in Bangladesh (Shahid Mallick), and the anticolonial water practices of Palestinian pastoral communities (Danna Masad, co-authored with Muna Dajani).

When we opened the call for papers and began drafting the programme, we felt it was essential to include diverse modes of knowledge production—that is, not only those which are academic, but also political-activist and artistic-sensorial. Whilst the final programme remained

predominantly academic in orientation, we were pleased to include contributions that expanded this scope. Notably, political activist Olli-Pekka Haavisto joined us, and artist Lilia Bakanova presented her work. Bakanova's artistic contribution extended beyond her presentation: her textile installation was exhibited in the lecture room in which we convened. Her piece reflects the transformation of the Aral Sea—a once-vast lake in Central Asia that has largely dried up due to large-scale Soviet-era 'resource management' policies. Bakanova's work draws attention to the barely visible life that once thrived in the sea, offering a sensorial and affective engagement with ecological loss. Several other presentations at the symposium also engaged with artistic registers of knowledge and sense-making, further enriching the epistemic diversity of the event.

Beyond the immediate discussions on water governance and semiosis, the symposium also engaged with broader political and epistemological questions. Specifically, the keynote and several presentations raised the issue of the agency of matter—in this case, water—drawing on insights from new materialist approaches. These perspectives, however, were met with critical engagement during the discussions, sparking a lively debate. Whilst attributing agentic capacities to water and associated objects or infrastructures can serve to destabilise anthropocentric frameworks which have long dominated modernist thought—and may thus be seen as a progressive move—some participants strongly emphasised that water does not possess *political* agency. As some noted, 'matter matters', but it cannot be held responsible, accountable, or agentic within human-centred political and economic systems (Bennett 2009; Kinkaid 2020; Mihai et al. 2017; Häkli 2018).

The discussions also critically engaged with the concept of modernity, a term featured prominently in the symposium's title. In contemporary critical scholarship, modernity often carries negative connotations. It is frequently interrogated as a political and cultural formation—and a mode of subjectification—rooted in Eurocentric coloniality, anthropocentrism, domination over nature, and a pursuit of order and stability. At the same time, as Swyngedouw incisively noted, modernity has also encompassed elements of transformation, disruption, and turbulences. It has been associated with revolutionary socialist and anarchist movements, as well as with the creation of life-sustaining infrastructures. This more ambivalent heritage of modernity—its emancipatory and constructive dimensions—also warrants recognition.

Finally, on a broader level, the symposium repeatedly returned to questions concerning the role of critical theory, critical research, and the critical researcher—not only as an academic figure but, crucially, as a political subject. A substantial body of scholarship produced from critical perspectives already exists, illuminating how oppressive capitalist and state-centred structures function to enclose the common and appropriate resources and cultures across diverse contexts. All of these points raise pressing questions: What do we do with this knowledge? How can we move from critical research to transformative politics? Some participants argued that knowledge production should be embedded within and serve specific communities—particularly those experiencing colonisation. Others emphasised the importance of translating critical insights into policy interventions. Still others proposed that research and intellectual practices, even when not directly intervening in political, economic, or social systems, can themselves embody

transformative politics by opening up new creative and epistemic avenues for storytelling and meaning-making.

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