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Flowing Progress: Transforming the Danube through Infrastructure. Edited by Ștefan Dorondel, Luminița Gatejel. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2025. 324 pp.

Over the past two decades, the study of the histories of rivers has undergone substantial development. An increasing number of historians within the broader field of environmental history have devoted attention to major national and international watercourses, highlighting both the impact of development projects on their hydrological evolution and the extent to which their physical characteristics shaped – and often constrained – the infrastructural policies pursued by different riparian states. Within this burgeoning body of scholarship, however, the Danube has remained relatively marginal. Although valuable studies have examined specific stretches of the river or particular aspects of its management, many dimensions of the Danube's modern (especially twentieth-century) history remain insufficiently explored.

Against this backdrop, the publication of *Flowing Progress: Transforming the Danube through Infrastructure*, edited by Ștefan Dorondel and Luminița Gatejel, represents a timely and indispensable contribution. The volume gathers essays by a multinational group of scholars specializing in different areas of the Danube basin and united by the aim of analyzing the relationship between infrastructural development and riparian change. Central to the book's analytical framework (and the true conceptual thread linking the chapters) is the category of disturbance. As the editors note in the introduction, "disturbance as an analytical tool puts emphasis on the circular and spiraling dynamics between hydrological processes and technopolitical and economic practices" (p.2). The concept thus refers not only to the disruptive effects that certain hydrological processes (especially floods but also erosion) can exert on human societies, but also to the transformative pressures that technological systems impose on river ecosystems. Infrastructures are typically built in response to what humans perceive as natural disturbances, yet these infrastructures inevitably generate new disturbances to the river's physical evolution, compelling it to adapt and find "new, more violent ways to reply" (p.2).

The volume is commendable for several reasons. First, it constitutes one of the earliest attempts to examine the history of the Danube and its basin as a unified space, moving beyond approaches that concentrate exclusively on individual segments of the river. This is not to diminish earlier works focused on the upper, middle, or lower Danube. Given the linguistic diversity and

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the multiplicity of historical experiences across Danubian countries, such an endeavor necessarily required a collective effort. While, unsurprisingly given the editors' areas of expertise, the lower Danube receives greater attention, the volume nevertheless includes chapters on the upper (Chapter 10, by Gertrud Haidvogl, Severin Hohensinner, and Martin Schmid) and the middle stretches of the river (Chapters 4 and 6, by Steven Jobbitt and Robert Nemes). It is to be hoped that *Flowing Progress* will mark the beginning of a renewed collective engagement with the Danube as a coherent historical and ecological unit.

A second merit lies in the volume's broad chronological scope. The analysis begins in the early modern period. In the first chapter, Deniz Armağan Akto and Onur İnal examine the relationship between Ottoman authorities and the river, demonstrating how they relied on locally produced knowledge to manage it. Emblematic in this regard is the figure of the *girdap ağalığı* (whirlpool chieftain), "whose mission was to keep ships away from the whirlpools and reefs at the Iron Gates and provide safe passage" (p.32). The chronological arc extends into the twenty-first century. In Chapter 8, Stefan Dorondel shows how the Romanian government's misunderstanding of Danubian hydrological dynamics, combined with limited knowledge of modern riparian infrastructural history, contributed to the severity of the 2006 flood in Dolj County.

Another notable strength of the volume is its engagement with the river-infrastructure nexus from multiple analytical perspectives under the unifying framework of disturbance. Some chapters adopt a traditional state-centered approach, Stelu Şerban's contribution, for instance, on the Bulgarian state's efforts to restore normality after the devastating Vidin floods of 1942. Others explore less conventional angles. As mentioned, Dorondel analyses the profound effects of infrastructural construction (and removal) on local riparian communities. In Chapter 3, Constantin Ardeleanu addresses the competing epistemologies of engineering and the natural sciences and the ways in which experts from different disciplines envisioned the infrastructural development of the Danube Delta. Robert Nemes, in turn, examines divergent interpretations of the catastrophic 1956 Danube flood and the subsequent recovery measures among various sociopolitical groups. The central authorities portrayed the response as "a demonstration of Hungary's military strength" (p.158), regional elites associated the disaster and its aftermath with the inefficiencies of Budapest (particularly the inefficiency of the Directorate of Water Management), while local populations navigated the event with "a mixture of pride, acceptance, loss, and regret" (p.158). The international dimension of Danube management and

its entanglement with broader political developments are examined by Steven Jobbit in Chapter 4. Jobbit traces how hydrological discourse became central to Hungarian revisionist arguments concerning the Treaty of Trianon. The Treaty had deprived Hungary not only of territories historically under Budapest's control but also of the most significant headwaters feeding the Danube. This, in turn, left the river's middle section without a centralized governing authority and, according to contemporary Hungarian geographers and hydrologists, had substantial consequences for its overall management. Hydrological arguments in favor of restoring pre-Trianon borders were therefore mobilized on both the domestic and international levels, intertwining with and reinforcing the more familiar political claims.

In line with recent trends in river history, the volume also moves beyond the "water bias" that has historically characterized the field. Following the insights of Bathsheba Demuth, Giacomo Parrinello, and Ellen Wohl, who have recently urged scholars to view large watercourses as complex ecological systems comprising sediment, nutrients, microbial communities, flora, and fauna,[1] the book incorporates perspectives that foreground these dimensions. Exemplary in this regard is Milica Prokić's chapter on the history of the Great War Island, an expanse of sedimentary land at the confluence of the Sava and the Danube in Belgrade. Prokić demonstrates how the infrastructural development of the Serbian capital progressively "disturbed the interrelation" (p.246) between the island's human and nonhuman inhabitants.

If there is an aspect that might have benefited from more extensive exploration, it is the role of modern environmentalism in shaping the recent infrastructural history of the Danube. Environmentalist thought and social movements directly inspired by it, particularly in the late communist period, played a decisive role in steering the course of infrastructural development along the river. It suffices to recall the Hungarian opposition to the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros dam or the mobilization of the Bulgarian movement *Ekoglasnost* against the construction of new nuclear plants on the Danube's shores. A succinct reflection on this dimension might have been incorporated into a synthesizing conclusion authored by a third contributor, which also could have more firmly integrated the chapters while outlining avenues for future research. This minor observation, however,

1 Bathsheba Demuth, Giacomo Parrinello, Ellen Wohl, "Rivers Are Messy: Beyond the Water Bias in Research and Management," *PLOS Water* 4, no.11 (2025): 2.

in no way detracts from the overall quality of the volume, which stands as an essential resource for students of river history and for scholars engaging with the rich and multifaceted past of the Danube basin.

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