Book Reviews

The Struggle for Water: Politics, Rationality, and Identity in the American Southwest. By Wendy Nelson Espeland. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. xvi+281. $47.00 (cloth); $19.00 (paper).

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The conventional wisdom about political conflict is at issue here. It presumes a world comprised of interchangeable actors, each of whom would behave as their adversaries behave in the place of those adversaries. It presumes a world of rational actors who pursue transparent self-interests, calculating their expenditures of political capital using a universal arithmetic of cost and benefit. Long before rational choice theorists distilled this view, it had gained wide acceptance among students of politics.

This view presumes that actors readily identify their objective interests and readily identify the best way to achieve them. It presumes that actors hold culture and identity at bay when making political decisions.

Wendy Nelson Espeland takes none of this for granted. At the foundation of *The Struggle for Water,* we do not find the assumption that political behavior is transparently and unproblematically rational. Instead, we find the assumption that rational behavior is transparently and very problematically tied up with culture and identity.

That this book is readable, engaging, and entertaining is surely to its credit. What could make better political drama than a group of federal bureaucrats fighting for a dam that will turn the better part of a huge Indian reservation into a lake? But what makes this book important is that it aims its arrows at the very heart of the matter in contemporary politics, the universality of rationality. Espeland examines the institutional context and ideas behind the behavior of three key groups in a pivotal controversy over land and water in the American West. What she finds is not three groups of calculating actors predictably pursuing their self interests, but three groups of actors with entirely different visions of what their self-interests are, of how to behave rationally, and of what is fair and right.

A writer might expect readers to accept the assertion that the Yavapai Indians whose land is at stake will not hold the same view as the federal engineers who drew up blueprints for a dam. Espeland's first brilliant stroke is to begin not by comparing the Yavapai with federal engineers but by comparing two groups of federal agents: the first, a group of engineers that has championed the dam on its technical merits for 40 years, the second, a new guard of bureaucrats that has a political-accomodation model of achieving consensus. The first group believes that the project can and will succeed on its technical merits. The second group has been

schooled in a model of controversy management in which achieving consensus is a political rather than a technical matter. These two groups could not be farther apart in their visions of rationality, but for each, professional identity drives how they conceive of problems and solutions.

The Yavapai are not much interested in the technical. merits of the project—in its substantial benefits and modest costs. They are not much interested in negotiating a price that will allow them to think well of the decision-making process. They consider the land to be a part of their heritage, a part that cannot be bought or sold. Whereas the identities of the two groups of state agents are tied up with distinct professional models of decision making, Yavapai identity is tied up with the land itself. What makes the Yavapai most interesting is that they are hardly an isolated tribe untouched by modernity but a group that has self-consciously reinvented its own heritage in the image of multiculturalism. They appear to see their inalienable connection to the land, at least in part, as a product of their own construction.

Observing these groups interact through Espeland's narrative is a bit like watching *Who's on First.* They constantly misconstrue one another's meaning. The New Guard bureaucrats presume that the Yavapai are bargaining for more money when they say that their land is not for sale. The Old Guard federal engineers cannot comprehend Yavapai indifference to the benefits of the proposed dam and insist on repeating the same points ad infinitum. And the Yavapai seem baffled that federal agents know so little about current constructions of Indian culture that they do not grasp that the land is not a commodity.

The implications of Espeland's rich story of political struggle are wide-ranging. By documenting the complex connections between identity and conceptions of rationality, Espeland challenges simplistic models that read group interests and strategies directly from material positions. Each of these three groups has a modern conception of interest and rationality—one linked to a technical view of the world, another linked to a political problem-solving view of the world, and the third linked to an express multicultural view of the world. Espeland's argument is not merely that interest can be read from status characteristics, such as ethnicity and profession, but that groups' notions of their interests and of what is rational develop as their identities develop.

The Common Place of Law: Stories from Everyday Life. By Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pp. xvii+318. $42.00 (cloth); $16.00 (paper).

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This volume is the latest, and in many ways the most ambitious and impressive, contribution to sociological studies of legal meaning and prac-