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Final Report

The Midwest Political Science Association hosts a regional academic conference every year where scholars from the United States and abroad to present their work in the field. At their 77th annual conference held in Chicago, IL (April 4-7, 2019), I presented my paper entitled “The Neutral State: Political Performances and Knowledge Practices in Karachi’s Waterscape” at a junior scholar’s symposium (JSS). JSS sessions are invite only presentations where advanced graduate students are encouraged to present their work to experienced academics and each other. Traditionally, JSS sessions, unlike panel discussions, allow for an extended discussion of the work and hence a much deeper level of feedback.

The paper I presented explores everyday water access in Karachi, Pakistan’s largest and most water-stressed city. This paper was significant for the field of Pakistan Studies in two ways. First, it presented original data about water access in the city at an everyday level. While national and international discourses are quick to point to Karachi’s daily water shortages in terms of numbers at the city level, there is very little (if any) information about how individually water-stressed settlements make do amid such crippling shortages. My paper addressed these gaps by carefully recording and presenting data on water levels and access over a three-month period. In my presentation, I emphasized the importance of gathering and interpreting this data precisely because it could help answer important questions such as; to what extent do shortages structure local urban politics in terms of ethnicity, class, and voting? How is authority dispersed and exercised amid daily water shortages, and by whom? And what policy implications exist at the neighborhood level to better manage urban water resources?

Second, this paper made a theoretical contribution to the field of Pakistan Studies by using everyday water access to better understand how the state functions in a context of scarcity. In my presentation, I introduced the concept of “everyday formalization” which I discuss at-length in my paper. In short, I suggested that daily practices of water access can be used to understand how distinctions are made between formal and informal urban space to give what Timothy Mitchell calls the “effect” of the state as separate from society. Presenting various ethnographic vignettes and interview data, my paper showed that everyday practices of knowledge production and circulation in Karachi’s waterscape are a crucial basis upon which the effect of the state is established.