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Don't blame the rain: Explaining sociohydrological (in)security in Cape Town, South Africa

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While depicted as a major global threat, water insecurity usually affects the most disadvantaged and marginalized people. Current definitions of water insecurity still fail to address this injustice as they either over-simplify and disconnect human-water dynamics or disregard the politics thereof. In light of this critique, this paper aims to contribute to reconceptualise water insecurity by integrating examinations of socio-political processes in analyses of chronic water insecurity and extreme drought events. To this end, we draw on sociohydrology and critical political ecology as a way to retrace the mutual shaping of hydrological flows and power dynamics that over time produce uneven geographies of water insecurity. We do so in the face of extreme droughts to understand to what extent these events intersect with the production and distribution of water insecurity. This paper draws on empirical work on the severe drought which affected Cape Town in 2015-17 and escalated into a water crisis also known as Day Zero. Despite being portrayed as a middle-class crisis, our study found that the marginalized people were the most affected while the wealthier elite were able to water secure themselves. This unequal picture sharply reflects the same water insecurities which existed long before Day Zero. We, thus, argue that they are a legacy of the spatial and economic segregation which has shaped Cape Town since colonial times. More than producing it, the drought has accelerated a pre-existing water crisis and exacerbated the level of water insecurity of every Capetonian. Proving that water insecurity is a sociohydrological phenomenon, we believe that such politically aware conceptualization is key to address its root causes and prevent the resulting injustices. Our analysis contributes to advance understanding of water insecurity by incorporating questions of uneven distribution and sociohydrological justice.