

Antipode

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Farhana Sultana and Alex Loftus (eds), *The Right to Water: Politics, Governance, and Social Struggles*, London: Earthscan, 2011. ISBN 978-1-84971-359-7 (paper); ISBN 978-1-84971-360-3 (cloth)

Not so long ago the question of the availability of potable water around the world was seen as one of the straightforward mismatch of demand and supply. Presumably, a few pipes here and a reservoir there and the problem could be solved. Henry Ford and Lenin alike shared this belief in the technical fix. The engineering approach to water access has hardly disappeared. But it has been in retreat in the face of trends, particularly calls for improved efficiency in water provision through privatization of distribution in particular and the commoditization of water in general, often associated with neoliberalism as an emergent global ideology, that have reframed the world ‘water question’ as one more of resource management than of physical availability. As counterpoint to this reframing, academics and activists alarmed by the extension of market logic to the provision of one of the most basic requirements for all life have called for the declaration of ready access to potable water as a human right. In this light the water question is quintessentially a political rather than a managerial one.

The book at hand is an interrogation of what it can mean to claim a right to water and of the sorts of political struggles in various places that can follow from the claim, particularly, if not entirely, in the context of marketization and privatization. Following a thoughtful overview of the volume by the co-editors, particularly its focus on the overarching conundrum of universal right versus locally-specific struggles and solutions, five chapters raise and address most of the main theoretical issues concerning the right to water: commons versus commodities (Karen Bakker); the right to water as intrinsically a right to govern it (Jamie Linton); the legal consequences of a right to water (Chad Staddon *et al.*); access to water as conditioned by understandings of ownership and property (Kyle Mitchell); and water rights as differing in meaning and practice according to different public-communal norms in different places as opposed to dominant utilitarian understandings based on aggregating individual preferences

(Jeremy Schmidt). The subsequent nine chapters have more specific empirical content as they engage with political struggles over the right to water rather than with the more abstract questions of rights. Jacinta Ruru relates how legal disputes on behalf of indigenous peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand illustrate the intertwining of the right to water and the right to identity; Marleen Van Rijswick and Andrea Keessen survey the legal protection of the right to water in the European Union; Ilaria Giglioli discusses water politics on the Palestinian West Bank in terms of rights and citizenship; Katharine Meehan explores how water ‘wrongs’, or illegal practices for capturing and sharing water, can further the right to water with examples drawn from the US and Mexico; Cristy Clark examines the role of community participation in realizing the right to water using South African examples; Patrick Bond brings together discussion of the right to water with the right to the city in terms of lessons from South Africa; Krista Bywater surveys anti-privatization struggles over water in India; Rocio Bustamante *et al.* consider the limits of the concept of water as a human right in Bolivia; and Verónica Perera provides a summary of recent water struggles in Colombia and Bolivia.

As Maude Barlow suggests in her foreword, the book as a whole raises questions about rights that go well beyond the specific case of water, particularly from those of individuals to those of communities, collectivities, and indigenous groups. While consideration of species other than the human is not central to this volume, many of the arguments could be extended to a more generic ‘right’ to water for all life forms. Its praxis orientation to political struggles is also a major contribution of the chapters taken as a set, resisting the temptation to read off types of political action from any sort of universalist understanding of the right to water beyond the most basic and seeing local cultural meanings and practices in relation to water as fundamental to how water should be acquired and distributed. Some of the chapters offer welcome contributions to these wider issues even as they also highlight crucial aspects of the right to water. Bakker’s chapter, for example, sorts through many of the confusions endemic to contemporary debates about the privatization and marketization of water, particularly those failing to distinguish ownership mechanisms from those relating to allocation and distribution. Schmidt’s contribution usefully indicts the tendency to discuss the right to water almost entirely in terms of utilitarian thinking about governance. Bustamante *et al.* argue that the right to water discourse tends to empower states as dominant actors in providing for ‘their’ people and that this can contribute to a depoliticization of alternative approaches involving communal groups and traditional

mechanisms for acquiring and distributing water. In this light, suspicion of states, then, seems almost as justified as suspicion of privatization.

One edited book cannot do everything connected to its theme. This one certainly succeeds in laying out many aspects of what it means to claim a right to water and how this claim has figured into contemporary struggles over access to water and sanitation around the world. But the book does rest on a number of orientations and assumptions that tend to characterize the literature of which it is part, and that probably deserve more reflection. One is the lack of a historical-geographical dimension to the discussion of how water is delivered. Nowhere is there any empirical engagement with the historical geography of water shortages or methods of water organization and distribution at a world scale. Water and sanitation crises are by no means new. What has happened is that the geographical focus of discussion about them has shifted from Europe and North America to the rest of the world. Yet the absence of renewal of water infrastructures inherited from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the so-called rich world is a potential disaster waiting to happen. In this sense, the right to water engages with a truly global problem. With respect to methods of organizing provision, privatized delivery of water is also by no means new. In some countries, such as France, much of the water supply has long been in the hands of private companies. Metering and pricing of water also hardly came in with the ideological wave of neoliberalism. They have been widespread for years. But how widespread is the privatization of suppliers and marketization of water today? We are not told. I have seen various estimates of privatization, from as much as a seventh of the world's population (including both street sellers and multinationals) to as little as less than one percent. Surely, we need to know the magnitude of this aspect of the problem at hand? My guess would be that an overwhelming majority of the world's potable water supply (95%?) is still in the hands of states and public agencies of one sort or another. Perhaps focusing so much on privatization detracts from engaging adequately with the deficiencies of how water is or is not delivered publicly?

A second orientation that only Bakker and Schmidt really begin to address in a full way is the basis to the 'rights' discourse itself. Are rights such as the 'right to water' natural rights or do they have some other justification in a public goods framework deriving, say, from the collective evolutionary return to cooperation which requires that water, given its essentiality to life, is available to all at least at levels commensurate with the maintenance of life? When appealing to

rights, the danger is of accepting the claim on conventional grounds of the UN Charter or something equivalent without grounding it ideationally or materially in some more adequate justification. The particular grounding has consequences. For example, do people have a right to as much water as they want unimpeded if we claim the right as a natural one in the sense of the Scottish Enlightenment? Or, is this right constrained necessarily by collective and future needs that would be mandated by the logic of rights relying on cooperative principles of life and social solidarity? Crucial, one would think, is how any particular modus operandi of water governance helps to maintain both current life for everyone and the long-term viability of water supply to given populations in particular places. As Mitchell says in his chapter (p. 90), we need to radically change not only how we conceive of ‘rights’, to being more about how we relate to each other than about ourselves as individuals alone, but also of how we construe our relationship to water as well.

The world faces a dire water problem. There is no doubt about it. Huge numbers of people live without access to clean water or adequate sanitation. This book provides an excellent way of trying to face up to these challenges. Its strengths lie in offering some intellectual resources for recasting debate away from technocratic towards political understandings of the water question and in laying out some of the main arguments for thinking of the ‘right to water’ as a focal point for making claims about water as a communal or public good. These are no small things.

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