



BLUE COMMUNITY ZURICH/SWITZERLAND

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A vital frontier – Water Insurgencies in Europe

Three books were published in the last couple of months about water, its commodification, and the resistance of water movements against the international corporations making money with water.* Each one of these books is more than worth reading. All are written with a very high commitment to water as a human right, with some overlaps but based on different experience and examples they portray. A review of Andrea Muehlebachs book by Roland Brunner, Blue Community Zurich/Switzerland

Andrea Muehlebach opens the Preface of her book with this sentence: “I write this book in the midst of an endless pandemic, the beginning of which I spent (among many other things) wondering how the global water industry would respond to a planetary crisis where the consistent washing of hands we were asked to perform makes water seem more precious than ever before.” And she sets the issue with this very first statement already, challenging in the next sentence Debra Coy, moderator of a virtual Corporate Water Leaders Panel organized by Global Water Intelligence (gwi), a self-described “unchallenged leader in high-value business information for the water industry.” who was introduced by the gwi representative as the “queen of Wall Street” and the “queen of water technology.” Coy and other participants agreed that the private water sector has a “critical role in maintaining public health.”: “Most importantly, the water executives also noted that the pandemic was an opportunity since it would create new budgetary constraints for public institutions needing investments for water infrastructures. These needs could be met by private investment because a huge amount of capital was sitting idle and looking for opportunities for long-term stable revenue.”

Muehlebach got me with these first sentences, and I was reading the 250 pages book almost without a break. While Madelaine Moore in her book «Water Struggles as resistance to neoliberal capitalism: a time of reproductive unrest» brings water warriors in Ireland in dialogue with the water movement in Australia, Muehlebach too documents the struggle in Ireland, but also reports and compares based on visits, discussions and insights from Italy, Germany (Berlin), France (Paris and Montpellier) and Greece (Thessaloniki) during the last ten years. “All are examples of the fissures that open up when global financial frontiers extend into utilities that for large parts of the twentieth century provided water as a public good. (...) As public utilities are revalued and converted into publicly traded bankable corporations, they become zones of struggle, reconversion, and reappropriation as well.” (Introduction, p. 2, 3).

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Muehlebach provides the background for these European struggles: “This push to privatize in the Global North came after a wave of investments into utilities in the Global South in the 1990s led to retreat as investors realized that the infrastructures needed in poorer countries were simply too expensive to build and maintain. Coupled with antiprivatization protests and the under-performance of profits, many multinationals withdrew as dozens of cities in the Global South remunicipalized their water works, with Latin America leading the way.” (Introduction, p. 5), Later in her book, she comes back to the first water war in Cochabamba, Bolivia. But first, she draws the attention back to the 1992 Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development, which was the first global document to insist that “water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good (Principle No. 4). (...) Soon, the World Bank argued that it was state subsidies that *caused* the global water crisis, with private markets providing the solution.” (Introduction p. 30) From there she draws the line to the European Union’s Water Framework Directive, adapted in the year 2000: “while stating that water is not a commercial product, the Framework also uses economic and technocratic registers that are hard for communities to navigate (...). Article 9 of the Water Framework Directive is of particular concern for water activists as it calls for full-cost recovery and requires member states to use economic analyses in managing their water resources.” While this legislation met opposition and was somehow obfuscated, “the European Commission, in contrast, continues to demand that member states appropriately value water as assets, including rivers, lakes, groundwater, and coastal waters.” (p. 31) And further: “Against these technocratic regimes of valuation and pricing, in 2013, the European Water Movement launched an unprecedented European Citizen’s Initiative called Right2Water” - and collected almost 2 million signatures, calling for the United Nations (UN) to legislate the human right to water and sanitation at the European level. “Women were often prominent in water mobilizations, mostly because of their role in the social and material reproduction of the household.” (p.32)

I love the basic approach and committed start Muehlebach offers, when writing in the preface: “Just as water is a constantly shapeshifting substance, moving from its solid into liquid and then vaporous states, so too are the politics of water insurgencies marked by a continuous, constantly transmuting cycle of renewal that has no beginning and no end, and that will likely have to repeat itself, over and over again over time. And yet, everything I document in this book points to the conclusion that water movements are offering the world an insurgent gift—that of posing radical questions about wealth, value, and inappropriability and of working in common to continue to pose these questions.” (preface p xiii).

In the introduction, Muehlebach is challenging the notion of water as a commodity, shared not only by the private corporations in the “water business”, but intruding and hijacking also the discourse of the highest political bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union: “When global investors argue that they are more capable of understanding ‘the true value of water’ and that ‘water tends to be undervalued around the world’ (Yang 2020), they project that universal market laws will replace government and local municipalities’ seemingly arbitrary and particularistic forms of valuation. Proper pricing will, so the story goes, better regulate demand and supply, trigger transformations of behavior, and create the conditions for the superior valuation and conservation of scarce resources (Dukelow 2016, 144).”



Bringing commercial interests to the point, Muehlebach argues: “Investors bank on life’s infinite dependence on water as a vehicle toward infinite wealth. For them, the frontiers opened up by the structural imbalance between water supply and demand should be addressed through massive private investment—large- scale credit and the forms of public indebtedness they entail. Investors foreground infrastructural breakdown and the moral imperative to meet these material needs. What they obscure is what is really at stake: long-term financial opportunities through debt financing (Bear 2017, 2020; Mitchell 2020).” (Introduction, p. 9)

Andrea Muehlebach dedicates her book to her daughters Olive and Liliana, “the centers of my universe, as well as to all of those protecting the water all over the world”: “Water movements thus struggle against more than the financialization of water and water utilities. They struggle against the hegemony of finance as a measure of value and thus against the financialization of value as such (Christophers and Fine 2020, 22).” (Introduction, p.3).

As Muehlebach states: “At the heart of this financial frontier lies the household—the site from which wealth is extracted, bill by bill, month by month. The spiraling debt economies that go hand in hand with the financialization into public utilities ensnares not only public budgets but people’s everyday lives as well.” (Introduction, p. 18)

To think about water as a commodity still seems odd to most people, and it did even more so 50 and more years ago. Or as Muehlebach writes: “When Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, the prospect of commodifying water was still unthinkable. (...) Beginning in the nineteenth century however, that which was unthinkable to Smith and unknown within the Western legal canon became thinkable, even commonsensical: the turning of *res communes* into assets through which future value is earned in the present.” (Introduction, p. 19)

Discussing the privatization of water services on the background of Rosa Luxemburg, Hannah Arendt and others, Muehlebach turns to the more recent debate on so-called public-private-partnership (PPP): “The public-private partnership is contractual, not concessional, which means that “the state becomes an ‘equal’ commercial party to a legal agreement (...). As water movements across the world have shown, this arrangement almost unfailingly works to the detriment of the public because it is a contradictory marriage between two incommensurable entities: one dedicated to the maximization of profits, the other (at least nominally) to public service. Presented as a partnership, the public-private partnership is a classic frontier ruse where contracts mask expropriation.” (Introduction, p. 25ff) But not only from the financial point of view PPP are disastrous. Even more so they challenge democratic processes in their heart: “Public-private partnerships further unsettle the terms of how ownership within the still nominally public utility is organized and conceived.”

Where would the commodification of life lead us to? Just replace the term “water” in this book by the term “air” and see how absurd this all sounded in the past – and how absurd it is for the future. International corporations grabbing air and commodifying it, sold in tins and (plastic) bottles to those who can afford, building “air infrastructure” to run for profit, paid by taxpayers’ money... “Humans are not free to decide whether or not to use water” (or air). Hopefully the struggle for water as a human right and against its commodification by big, international corporations will lead our way into a future, where we value the sources of life beyond the profits they bring to the water



business. Muehlebach brings in her book all the arguments and the experience needed for this struggle. Hopefully water warriors will read it and get encouraged to withstand the water profiteers. The urgency of the climate crisis and the ongoing climate collapse shows the importance of this struggle – not just for the water, but for the survival of humanity.

Based on the extensive and comprehensive introduction, Muehlebach builds the chapters of her book: “the financial frontier as a contested zone of lawmaking, where the law of the many is pitted against the law of the few” in chapter 1 (“You can not sell us, what we all possess!”), explained on the background of the Italian water movement; “the financial frontier as a zone of state violence and policing” in chapter 2 (“No more blood from these stones!”) about the resistance in Ireland against water meters and water commodification; the successful legal and political battle of the Berlin Water Table (Wassertisch), forcing the city government to disclose a secret contract guaranteeing global investors a return on investments and the popular vote to remunicipalize the water service in chapter 3 (“We Berliners want our water back!”). In chapter 4 (“Just Price”) finally, Muehlebach returns to Italy to discuss the “financial frontier as a zone of contested valuation and of struggles over what constitutes just price”. She explores “two very different regimes of valuation—one deeply committed to the treasuring of local waters, the other to the pricing of water in ways that would allow for its value to move ‘upward’ into global trading circuits” (p. 34). Muehlebach concludes with an Epilogue “offering a glimpse into Paris’s remunicipalized water utility *Eau de Paris*, asking how it offers us insight into imaginative frontiers that are political, moral, legal, and fiscal”. And she finishes with these words:

“Water movements offer us ways to think outside of the proprietary logics wrought out of recurrent enclosure, challenging us to ask what a relation to the world as inappropriable would look like. At the heart of these movements lies one insurgent question: What would it mean to translate this challenge of inappropriability into an ethos and form of life?”

Muehlebach, Andrea. *A vital frontier – Water Insurgencies in Europe*. Duke University Press, Durham and London 2023

isbn 9781478019831 (paperback)

isbn 9781478017134 (hardcover)

isbn 9781478024408 (ebook)

*see also

Moore, Madelaine. *Water struggles as resistance to neoliberal capitalism - A time of reproductive unrest*. Manchester University Press, March 2023. ISBN: 9781526165985. Dr. Madelaine Moore was guest of the Blue Community Switzerland in October 2023 and presented her book at the universities of Zurich and Bern. [Read about here](#).

Jaffee, Dan. *Unbottled - The Fight Against Plastic Water and for Water Justice*. University of California Press, September 2023. ISBN: 9780520306622. A review of this book will be published here soon.

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