

# Antipode

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Karen Bakker, *Privatizing Water: Governance Failure and the World's Urban Water Crisis*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010. 978-0-8014-4723-5 (cloth), 978-0-8014-7464-4 (paper)

In the last three decades, Canadian scholars and activists have been at the forefront of global water rights advocacy and critical research on international water policy. For a country that is well endowed with expertise in the water resources and international development fields, this should come as no surprise. Often, this advocacy has informed research and vice versa as is the case with the work of Maude Barlow, whose activism and work have crucially informed the debate around the human right to water.

For almost a decade, with many significant contributions in this journal, and other mainstream development studies periodicals, the University of British Columbia scholar Karen Bakker has helped develop and strengthen geographical and political ecological perspectives on water issues. She has also added to our understanding of trans-boundary water policy issues within Canada and between Canada and the United States. *Privatizing Water* is a welcome addition to scholarship in water related issues and will rank as an important contribution because of its nuance, inter-disciplinary focus and sheer lucidity of exposition of complex debates. Within the discipline of human geography, scholars advocating methodological pluralism will welcome this book. Every chapter of *Privatizing Water* displays Bakker's conceptual and methodological grasp of a very diverse literature from political science, public economics, human geography, political ecology and development studies; and how these fields relate to the politics and policy around water provision in cities of the developing world. In my opinion, the book's main strength lies in the author's ability to unravel the conceptual and normative underpinnings of various strands of political-economic theory, which have informed water policy. She employs her analytical erudition to engage in some fine empirical analysis of the practical policy and welfare implications of water privatization in urban areas of developing countries, in the process revealing the failure of privatization policies in various national

contexts. Her goal is to sketch out the ideological arena in which debates over water supply privatization take place, and to provide historical context for the emergence of the privatization argument.

A key thesis of this book is the idea of ‘governance failure’ which Bakker uses to diagnose the failure of both state organizations and private corporations in providing water to the urban poor in developing countries. Drawing from a broader literature in political science, public policy and anthropology, Bakker’s use of the term seeks to explain how the institutional dimensions of water management and decision making do not effectively take into account the needs of all citizens (p 45). By highlighting the complex organizational terrain of water delivery systems in cities, Bakker alludes to the unhelpfulness of the neat dichotomies of states and markets or public and private in delineating the contours of the water problem in urban areas. In a useful and critical reformulation, Bakker employs the writing of the Indian political scientist Partha Chatterjee to argue that urban governance is shaped by the cultural politics and practices of citizenship in cities in developing countries. Drawing on Chatterjee (2004), Bakker moves beyond the simple opposition between state and civil society in social and political theory, invoking a third term, political society, which allows her to repudiate the notion of public versus private in debates around the water sector. Instead, she contends that the exclusion of the poor from water services in these cities is integral to the process of modernization in contexts where developmental states lack the resources for universal provision of public services such as water, and where various forms of identity politics complicate questions of access. In other words, social ruptures within post-colonial states have frequently meant that only a small subset of populations were granted recognition as full citizens, with the attendant retinue of rights and entitlements - constitutionally guaranteed to them; the remainder - the demographic majority - were forced to negotiate for rights and resources from state and parastatal entities on a particularistic basis, as ‘communities’. Bakker utilizes this conceptual lens to show how the universal promises of water privatization have failed to materialize, ensuring water access to some but not all; and where, as a consequence, the majority of urban residents have struggled to secure water through a variety of sources, including case-by-case negotiations with politicians and state agents<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, Bakker does not lose sight of the failures of the public provision of water supply in cities of the developing world - what she terms the ‘municipal

hydraulic model'. She forwards the idea that privatization and public ownership are not necessarily in opposition and are not the only alternatives in water provision.

Bakker's case study of Jakarta in collaboration with her doctoral student, Michelle Kooy (chapter five) illustrates the book's broader theoretical and empirical arguments in the book. Bakker and Kooy show that the failure to supply water to the poor parts of the city is rooted in the social and cultural biases of colonial planners, which continued with postcolonial Indonesian governments. Their chapter demonstrates that the continued lack of access to water for the urban poor in Jakarta is an outcome of the complex interplay of the economic un-affordability of water, political factors, as well as the cultural prejudices that have influenced urban planning and infrastructure development.

But ultimately, this chapter is one of the less satisfactory parts of the book. There are no insights into water and sanitation technology as it evolved in an important outpost of the Dutch Empire. It also leaves open the connections of Dutch water technology with other European empires. It also does not give sufficient account of why postcolonial Asian governments chose to reproduce forms of scientific technological expertise from their former colonial rulers (on this, see Shenton and Cowen 1996; Rajan 2007: chapter 6).

While it can be claimed in the author's defence that *Privatizing Water* is neither a historical book nor styles itself as a contribution on the social dimensions of technology, it would nevertheless have been interesting to examine the interplay of water technology with political economy and environmental history. An example is the interesting work done on the interface of science and technology studies and water politics by Esha Shah (2004). In her study of irrigation systems in South India, Shah argues that the design of a technological system - which refers not just to the dimensions and locations of physical structures, but also to the rules and roles that operate, maintain and manage these physical structures - is strongly shaped by social relations of power. Thus, while some of the implications of the Bakker and Kooy chapter on Jakarta are similar to that of Shah's, the socio-technological dimensions of water provision are not brought out as vividly. These minor omissions should not distract from some the considerable merits of Bakker and Kooy's analysis of the continuities between colonial and post colonial socio-political structures and how they have impacted water provision and access.

In conclusion, as a scholar who is interested in the tools scholars use to research water politics, I wish to note one significant contribution arising out of the book's choice of method.

In my view, this book, in some respects, makes the case that contemporary public policy dilemmas around water provisioning can be satisfactorily resolved if policy makers and stakeholders recognize that the problem of water provisioning is also a problem of ‘context’. Bakker argues that stronger attention to the specificities of cultural and geographical setting would go a long way in imagining sustainable and just solutions to the myriad injustices of the inequality in water access in cities of the developing world. Thus, in chapters five and six, Bakker directs our attention to her central argument that neither privatization nor atomized community responses are viable responses to the failure of public water supply. There is now a growing consensus amongst heterodox economists (for instance, Hodgson 2001), and even mainstream development economists, that the application of general economic principles to problems of economic policy and development have often assumed away the importance of context and that there should be a greater appreciation of contextual variables within policy. Let us hope that Bakker’s book will help those who are leading the call for developing a better understanding of the role institutions and cultural-political norms play in policy around water. Let us further hope it will help reformulate and relocate the nature of expertise and aid the case for a greater policy role for non-economists in water management.

I expect this book will reach an audience well beyond human geography and will be read by water researchers in political science, sociology, public policy and environmental studies. *Privatizing Water* performs a signal service in clarifying the terms of debate in social science disciplines, and particularly within urban studies, around water privatization. Since the book is very accessibly written, it is highly recommended for both graduate and undergraduate courses on water management and infrastructure provision in global cities.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> In the context of urban governance, John Harriss (2010) has provided a useful critique of how the concept of governance has been applied in cities in developing countries. Harriss shows how the democratization of governance in Indian cities is promised through development policies of the central government but simultaneously undercut by an urban planning agenda that revolves around market de-regulation.

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