

– GOVERNANCE FAILURES IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

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Water is the final frontier of capitalism, galvanizing groups mobilizing in different ways across the globe on how water should be governed. Karen Bakker, a leading water scholar, argues this in the opening part of her fascinating book, *Privatizing Water*. Bakker specifically focuses on privatization of urban water, demonstrating how it is not merely a technical or managerial issue, but a much broader political, social, cultural and ecological one. She undertakes a detailed and provocative investigation of global urban water crises, taking us on a journey that involves extraordinary theoretical breadth, conceptual depth and careful analysis. While most of the chapters emerge from prior publications and may be familiar to readers, weaving them together in the tighter arc of the book is compelling. The clarity and incisiveness of the text is excellent, the text maintaining rigor while being accessible to non-academic audiences.

As the book argues, water systems in much of the global South are not a binary of public–private, but a hybrid form of provisioning, with public–private community systems existing in more complex relationships. In this respect, Bakker doesn't take a stance on the polarizing ideological terrains in the pro-/anti-privatization debates, but asks us to critically analyze all existing forms. She encourages us to move beyond the privatization debate while critiquing the common alternative models (community, commons, human rights), and thus to reconsider what could productively foster viable alternatives. Her central focus being on governance, she urges readers to rethink and re-theorize discursive and material outcomes of 'public' or 'private' processes, how they operate in water provisioning, and what meanings they hold in broader debates around water. The focus on governance is about various actors (state, market, civil society, nature) and the importance of conceptualizing the processes involving different actors across space and time. The book provides an in-depth overview and critique of the moves towards governance that alert readers to the problematic nature inherent in the celebration of any terminology, and the slippages therein. Thus, 'governance failures' form the analytical core of the book—how states fail, how markets fail, how communities fail, in producing the urban water crises we are witnessing. These failures are institutional, ecological and technical. All have different ramifications on the lives of people, on the ways in which societies 'develop' and on modernist views of water in both public and private water management. Bakker insightfully details how the poor are denied access to water through the intersectionalities of political subjectivities (subaltern citizens), spatial issues (slum versus planned city) and infrastructural matters (network or no supply). Thus, it is neither state failure, nor market failure, but a combination thereof that makes for governance failure. She invites readers to be more reflective on paths they may want to pursue in configuring how to address urban water crises without being prescriptive.

The author's arguments on what privatization holds for broader issues of development, the roles of the state, market and community, and the subsequent environmental outcomes, are what make this book critically important in reconfiguring what 'better' water provisioning could mean. By demonstrating the potentials and the limitations of each approach, but also by outlining the synergistic tensions among them, Bakker does a great job challenging simplistic discursive thrusts in debates on urban water crises. She effectively undertakes a political-ecology analysis in engaging with the environmental outcomes beyond the social issues that are often the focus of existing debates. This is a gap in most of the literature on urban water, and her integration of environmental

governance into the provisioning of water for the poor is important. Urbanization is thus simultaneously a socio-political and an ecological process, as urban political ecology scholars have argued in recent years, and the book makes a significant contribution to the burgeoning urban political ecology literatures.

I wish to offer some minor points of critique on the book, which emerge from my own desire to read more on some of the issues raised. The first one is on the state. While the book encourages the rethinking of 'how' the state should be involved and concludes that 'the most equitable long term solution is universal provision, overseen by the state' (p. 226), Bakker could perhaps have theorized on the state beyond the issue of service delivery. It often comes across as a monolithic entity, although that is probably not what Bakker intended. The dynamics and outcomes of whether the state is developmental or not, and specific characteristics of the state, need further nuanced consideration, as the contours of urban water crises and governance forms may vary considerably depending on the context. Related to this, despite the powerful argument Bakker makes regarding the epistemological and political limitations of any category, there still remains a distinct separation between categories of community, nationally and internationally. These categories can be problematic, and the ways in which communities can be exclusionary may thwart the goal of just solutions at the community level. A second point I would have liked Bakker to pay greater attention to is the lived experiences and laboring bodies of people, especially along gender lines. Gender could have been brought in to complicate analyses of local implications and everyday life, especially in discussions of community, citizenship, power and identity formation. This would also enrich any discussion on labor: who is laboring to get water, whose labor counts, and so on. Given my own interest in gender and class dynamics of water governance in megacities of South Asia, I believe that detailing the different forms of labor in the urban landscape would enhance the analyses proffered. In addition, it would be exciting to read how gender reconfigures 'political society' in the context of privatization. Finally, I would have liked to read more on rights discourses, especially how the right to water could enable more transformative politics, since the book is excellent in pointing out the pitfalls of polarizing debates. A rethinking of the roles of the private sector, the state, the community and individuals is needed in reconfiguring rights, and the conjunctural nature of these configurations affects the outcomes in any urban setting or governance approach. Goals of transparency, accountability, participation and ecological conservation are some of the items the book underscores as being important, but with little detail. 'Political society' is presented as the best way forward, so I am curious how rights talk could enable or transform this in the contemporary moment.

Despite these comments, *Privatizing Water* is an excellent and thought-provoking book. It is an exceptional exposition on an important topic and should be an essential text for scholars across many disciplines (in the natural and social sciences), as well as for policymakers and practitioners. Its critical analysis compels readers to ponder the fate of the world's water more broadly instead of limiting it to the urban sector. We need to seriously rethink water governance and address governance failures in these neoliberal times.

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