

Water Struggles, Citizenship and Governance in Latin America

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ABSTRACT *José Esteban Castro explores some of the main connections between social struggles over water and the exercise of substantive citizenship and democratic governance in Latin America. He focuses the attention on some of the key analytical distinctions for the study of water struggles in Latin America and elsewhere, and explores the ongoing and emerging trends characterizing these struggles.*

KEYWORDS *water inequality; water injustice; social change; privatization; democratization*

Different forms of water struggles in Latin America

A first categorization of the events of social struggle over water identified in Latin America since the 1970s leads us to broadly split these into (a) ecocentric and (b) anthropocentric water struggles.¹ This first analytical distinction is an artificial device given that in practice most cases are likely to fall partially on both sides of the divide, but the distinction is not entirely arbitrary and it is very useful to highlight specific aspects of the process. On the one hand, water experts insist on the importance of keeping the analytical differentiation between aquatic ecosystems and the water services based on them, among other reasons because historically there has been a separation between both areas of activity and this is often reflected in the legal and institutional systems, in the water management practices and also in the division of labour between the different disciplines producing scientific knowledge about water. On the other hand, it is possible to identify a degree of divergence between social struggles concerned with the protection of aquatic ecosystems (e.g. from pollution, depletion, loss of biodiversity or the negative impacts on the water cycle and water-based wildlife caused by severe human intrusion through large-scale water infrastructures) and those directed at defending the rights of contemporary humans to volumes of water and water-based services that are essential for survival and dignified living conditions. This is an important consideration because the internal contradictions at the interior of the social and political movements concerned with water are often the expression of distinctive, even antagonistic, material interests, beliefs, values, principles, and goals, which justifies our preliminary classification. We do not assume that these contradictions are in principle unavoidable or intractable, but they are the result of specific historical processes

characterizing the development of the environmental movement at large (Martínez Alier, 2002: 1–15) and, unsurprisingly, they also characterize the internal contradictions between the actors engaged in water struggles in Latin America and elsewhere.

Contentions around development

Very often actors who are engaged with the protection of fragile water ecosystems and aquatic wildlife (World Wildlife Fund Latin America (WWFLA) <http://www.wwf.org.uk/researcher/places/latinamerica.asp>, accessed 7 November 2007) have had little to say about the rapid expansion of water privatization in the same territories, despite the far-reaching implications of these policies for democratic water governance and social justice. The opposite is often also true, as the actors that have been at the forefront of the struggle against water privatization have tended to neglect the specific problems posed by the need to preserve and recover water sources that have been historically mismanaged by public and private agents. Moreover, social actors concerned with the defence of universal access to the benefits of water management often have difficulties in assuming a critical position towards government policies that involve large-scale water infrastructures such as dams, hydroways, or water transfers, many of which have detrimental impacts on both aquatic systems and human populations. This is a crucial bone of contention surrounding many development projects across Latin America, where the construction of large water infrastructures has been often characterized by the forced displacement of indigenous and non-white (e.g. black rural populations in Brazil) populations, expropriation of water rights without adequate compensation, irreversible damage to ecosystems, public–private corruption and social injustice in the access to the actual benefits derived from these undertakings, whether it be drinking water, irrigation, or protection against extreme events such as droughts and floods (Valencio, 1995; Boelens and Hoogendam, 2002; Tribunal Latinoamericano del Agua (TRAGUA) (Latin American Water Tribunal) <http://www.tragua.com/es/>,

accessed 7 November 2007). There are currently a number of such projects in Latin America that are marred by ongoing social struggles, including hydraulic works connected with the Puebla–Panamá Plan in Mexico and Central America, the network of hydroways and related works in the Paraná–Paraguay river basin in South America, and the San Francisco river water transfer in Brazil, just to mention a few notorious cases (Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens Brasil (MAB) (Movement of People Affected by Dams, Brazil) <http://www.mabnacional.org.br>, accessed 7 November 2007; La Red Latinoamericana contra Represas y por los Ríos, sus Comunidades y el Agua (REDLAR) (Latin American Network against Dams and in favour of Rivers, their Communities, and Water) <http://www.redlar.org/>, accessed 7 November 2007).

Socio-economic confrontations

An arguably more fundamental analytical distinction, in our perspective, concerns the confrontations between the socio-economic and political forces spearheading the expansion and consolidation of capitalist relations, in particular through the relentless process of water commodification, and the different forms of resistance against the advance of capitalist forms of water management and governance that follow a wide range of strategies and, borrowing from Guha and Martínez-Alier, ‘vocabularies of protest’ (Guha and Martínez-Alier, 1997: 11–16). The analysis of this aspect of the water struggles requires detachment from the particular discourses and stated objectives of the actors, and a careful consideration of the structural tendencies and actual direction of the processes under observation, which are often largely autonomous from the immediate concerns of the participants and that may not be fully grasped by them owing to the multi-scale and trans-temporal character of the process. For instance, in contemporary debates over water privatization in Latin America there is often a reification of the tension between ‘public’ and ‘private’ which tends to obscure the fact that despite the apparent contradictions between public and private agents, overall both ‘sides’ may be fostering the advance and consolidation of

capitalist forms of water management grounded on merely formal and not substantive democratic governance and citizenship. This can be seen in practice, and not just in Latin America, in the reforms introduced since the 1980s in publicly owned and managed water utilities, which are required to deliver life-sustaining services such as drinking water and sanitation on the basis of commercial principles and have been requested to *de facto* abandon the notion that these essential services are a social right or a public good, not to say a human right. This process is well under way in Latin America, including some countries currently governed by nominally left-of-the-centre political actors, which demonstrates that the commodification of water is largely autonomous from the public or private character of the agents in charge of delivering these services.

Public versus private

Needless to say, the identification of this ambiguity in the 'public' versus 'private' confrontation does not mean that we should blur the distinction between water privatization and public water management. In this regard, there are important lessons to be learnt from excellent examples identified in Latin America, notably in Brazil, but also in Venezuela, Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina, El Salvador, Bolivia and Peru among other cases, where the actors have developed a very clear understanding of these intricacies: their struggles against water commodification are directed against both public and private initiatives. This is expressed in the fact that their struggles combine multiple targets: opposition to the commodification of essential water services, which includes resistance against open or disguised forms of water privatization (e.g. public-private partnerships or the mercantilization of public water utilities), attempts to revitalize the notion that these services are a social right of citizenship, a public good, and a human right, and strategies directed at empowering local authorities and developing public-public partnerships for the efficient and accountable management of essential water services (Balanyá *et al.*, 2005; Red de Vigilancia Interamericana para la Defensa y el Derecho al Agua (RED VIDA) (Inter

American Monitoring Network for the Defence of and the Right to Water) <http://www.laredvida.org/>, accessed 7 November 2007). The initiatives and practices of these actors are developing embryonic, potentially emancipatory forms of water management and governance that must be supported and enhanced. We argue that these initiatives form part of a wider struggle for substantive democratization in Latin America.

Some emerging challenges

This review of water struggles in Latin America does not pretend to be comprehensive, but we cannot fail to also mention here some of the emerging challenges facing the democratic management and governance of water in the region. In addition to the trends already discussed, which include the depletion and pollution of freshwater sources, the negative impacts of large-scale water infrastructures and the pervasive expansion and consolidation of water commodification in different forms, I want to highlight two sources of ongoing and potentially worsening confrontations over water, which are to some extent interlinked.

The first one concerns the likely negative impact of the rapid expansion of water-intensive agricultural processes such as for example the dewatering and depletion of fertile soil owing to the mass cultivation of eucalyptus destined for cellulose production or of soybean, sugar cane, corn, and other crops at the heart of the biofuel revolution taking place across the region. While much of the debate in Latin America has been centred on the impact of these processes on food security, the impact these may have on water sources and water-based services has received much less attention so far despite the fact that it is already significant.

The second aspect is related to the potential for military confrontations over water and other natural 'resources', which is the object of serious discussion. Although the actual bases for military conflict have probably been exaggerated, the fact is that this subject has become a matter of concern in the region, and particularly in South America. This is the case, for instance, of the debate over the Guaraní Aquifer, one of the world's largest

underground natural reservoir of freshwater which is shared by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Some governments have even developed war hypotheses around the potential for military invasions by foreign powers to gain control of the aquifer. While it is likely that, similar to the many existing hypotheses of water wars around the planet, the grounds for actual military confrontations over water are thin, this reflects the existence of a potentially worsening agonistic future for the management and governance of water in the region. And there is also a dark side of this debate: the discussion at the level of governments over the potential for inter-national military conflicts over water may contribute to obscuring the persistence of intra-national conflicts fuelled by water inequality and injustice.

Conclusion: Water struggles and the democratization process in Latin America

Overall, historically water management and governance in Latin America have been characterized, with few exceptions, by paternalistic and largely top-down and exclusionary practices. Water governance, in our perspective, is a political process involving the exercise of power by social and political actors who seek to define the ends and means that must be pursued by society, in this particular case, in relation to the ownership, management, and access to the benefits of (and protection from the risks and threats posed by) water and water-based services.

Note

1 This short piece only aims to broadly sketch out our understanding of these issues, which has been discussed in more detail elsewhere (Castro, 2004, 2006, 2007a, b). Also, for reasons of space I do not consider here in detail the characteristics of the actors of the water struggles, a topic already covered by a wealth of literature highlighting the roles of class-, ethnic-, and gender-based identities in Latin American water struggles (Laurie *et al.*, 2002; Bennett *et al.*, 2005). I address only water struggles in their specificity and do not look at their interconnections with other conflicts, although a comprehensive analysis would require examining the interweaving between different struggles such as those flaring up in the whole region around land ownership and management.

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As a trend, this process has been characteristically undemocratic in the region, in particular if we reject the reduction of the democratic process to the formality of electoral events or to the realm of party politics, and defend an understanding of democracy as the substantive exercise of citizenship. Unsurprisingly, in many Latin American countries the history of water management has been punctuated by social conflicts, some of which have been aggravated since the mid-20th century owing to the rapid processes of urbanization and industrialization. The politics of water services privatization introduced since the 1980s, and the overall expansion of water-intensive commercial activities often dependent on already fragile aquatic ecosystems have tended to exacerbate pre-existing conflicts and fuel the emergence of new ones. This, however, has been taking place in a context of increasing awareness in Latin America, partly expressed in the mushrooming struggles over water in the region, about the environmental consequences of the prevailing capitalist order, which is marked at best by the neglect of the ecological dimension and at worst, regrettably as a pattern, by relentlessly destructive environmental behaviour.

Although we should be warned against romanticized visions of the water struggles, we are convinced that, with relative autonomy from the awareness and stated objectives of the actors, they are intimately connected with the ongoing struggle for the substantive democratization of society in the region. This is a process deserving our full support and commitment.

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