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A CASE BASED ANALYSIS OF NEOLIBERAL APPROACHES TO WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IN INDONESIA, BOLIVIA, CANADA, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Abstract

Within the last several decades governments around the world have been experimenting with neoliberal approaches to water resource management in an effort to alleviate financial and operational constraints of public sector management. As these socioeconomic political experiments go unnoticed in a broader global context, important questions arise regarding the aggregate outcome of similar policies. Determining whether such policies have net positive impacts necessitates a case based analysis of neoliberal experiments. Though limited by secondary analysis, the findings of this paper conclude that neoliberal approaches to water resource management have had a largely negative impact on populations where implemented. These findings, though not exhaustive, suggest that neoliberal approaches to water resource management should be a bastion of last resort for governments, especially where regulatory mechanisms are weak or unenforced.

Keyword: water resources; resource management policy; neoliberalism; commodification; sustainability; sustainable development

1. Introduction

Environmental governance has become one of the most interesting and engaging areas of policy development in the past several decades. A major reason for this is the need for original approaches to old problems. Consideration of the environment in human decision-making adds another facet to issues which were already made complicated by social and economic dimensions. Academics from a variety of fields have engaged in debate focusing on adapting both old and new ideological tenants for modern environmental management problems (see Bakker, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2013; Castree, 2008, 2010, 2011; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004). Though no discourse can be declared the dominant global force, neoliberalism may be a strong contender (Anderson, 2000; Peck, 2001). The flow of resources and



environmental services from public control into the private sector ownership is occurring at a rapid rate (Bakker, 2013; Bailey, 2005; Castree, 2008). Private corporations are gaining ownership of resources, taking control of environmental management in entire geographic regions, and acquiring the rights to regulate key services including water and waste management (Peck, 2001; Bailey, 2005). Mirroring these transitions is the growing body of literature debating the merits and flaws of this trend (see Bakker 2013; Bailey, 2005; Castree, 2008).

Proponents of the market based oversight of nature and natural resource management argue that it provides the necessary tools to improve management practices, increase the quality of deliverables, spur markets in environmental proxies such as carbon permits, and reduce the economic load on the private sector (Anderson, & Leal, 1992; Bailey, 2005). Opponents of this trend discard the notions of societal and environmental benefit (Prudham, 2004). Instead, they see this as the corporate capture of environmental resources, regions, and services, and argue that governance by profit-driven entities will increase stress brought to bear on the environment, society and human health (see Anderson, 2000; Bakker, 2010).

This paper analyzes existing literature on the neoliberalization of water services monitoring and management. The theoretical argument of this work is grounded in Polanyi's (2001) theories of the 'fictitious commodity' and 'double movement' and contextualized through case-based analysis. The literature focuses on privatization of water supply services in several different regions via case studies of Jakarta, Indonesia; Cochabamba, Bolivia; Walkerton, Ontario, Canada; and England and Wales. Though the scope of this commentary is relatively narrow and limited by the number of cases explored, the lesson is broad, far reaching and starkly evident in the small sample of neoliberal experiments explored herein.

This work provides the reader with an overview of the historical roots and ideological tenets of neoliberalism and its relationship with environmental issues in a broad sense. It then discusses the benefits and pitfalls of neoliberalization of water resources and services noted in specific case studies



which focus on various regions, geographies, economies, and states. The analysis focuses largely on the negative implications of poorly executed policies to highlight the importance of robust and responsive policy frameworks when relying upon market actors. It intends to explore the consequences of various styles and 'levels' of neoliberalization, identify reoccurring themes, and highlight problem areas and prescriptive policies within the ideology. It is beyond the scope of this work to determine what – if any – neoliberal policies would facilitate successful water resource monitoring and management, instead this work highlights the vast array of circumstances under which such policies miss the mark. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that neoliberalization fails to provide a socially equitable and environmentally sustainable framework from which to deliver water resource management.

2. Overview of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism can be described as a political ideology dedicated to reducing the size and scope of government while simultaneously increasing market omnipotence (Liverman, & Vilas, 2003). As it is simply put by Noel Castree (2010), “[neoliberalism] designates an approach to the conduct of human affairs in which the so-called ‘free market’ is given priority” (p.1726). The concept of neoliberalism stems from thinkers such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek. These individuals vehemently condemned protectionist economic practices and the welfare states that arose out of the end of the Second World War (Castree, 2010). In opposition to prevailing trends of western society during the period, these academics proposed more libertarian policies which empowered ‘capable individuals’ and freed markets to dictate flows of wealth and investment (Anderson, & Leal, 1992).

Though influenced by the said academics, contemporary neoliberal policies are most often traced to the late 1970s – early 80s when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan embraced the tenets of the ideology. The two championed free-market policies, favoring practices that pushed ‘the market’ into realms previously under governmental control, and increased its power in traditional territories (Rees,



1998). As a result, Britain and the United States projected neoliberal tenets throughout the world in the form of international trade agreements and reform packages, foreign direct investment, competitive market-friendly regulations, and individualist rhetoric (Cohen, 2007). The international nature of neoliberalism is part of what many academics argue differentiates it from previous liberal capitalist endeavors (Anderson, 2000).

Proponents of neoliberalism then and now assert that government ownership and management of the commons is not optimized for social progress; therefore it fails to meet society's standards (Andersson, 1991). These positions center around several key arguments, which denounce public control and ownership because governments are insulated from the competitive nature of free markets, susceptible to undue influence from special interest groups, and lack the proper checks and balances to permit effective use of public recourse when the needs of society are not met (Andersson, 1991; Rees, 1998).

Castree (2010) provides an easily digestible breakdown of the characteristics of neoliberalism in his paper entitled "Neoliberalism and the Biophysical Environment 1". Essentially he argues that neoliberalism can be broken down into seven practices, which include: privatization, marketization, deregulation, market-friendly regulation, market-mimicking government policies, encouragement of flanking mechanisms, and promoting individual and community empowerment (Castree, 2010). Though these seven practices are endorsed by neoliberal proponents, one should not assume that they are uniform or even present in every instance of neoliberal restructuring (Bakker, 2010). Neoliberalism is employed to varying degrees – with varying amounts of success – in states throughout the world. Therefore, this paper focuses on several cases of neoliberal restructuring in an effort to identify reoccurring issues and trends in its implementation.



3. Water Supply Challenges

In developing nations and developed nations alike, water supply services are an ongoing and often insurmountable undertaking. Projects to increase access to water, prevent the contamination of water sources, and regulate water usage have spanned several decades and stretched many societies to the breaking point (see the case of Bolivia in Liverman, & Vilas, 2006). Proponents of the privatization of water as well as water supply services and mechanisms argue that privatization is a means of improving the amount resources delivered, as well as their quality and cost-efficiency; all while reducing tax burdens and governmental mismanagement (Andersson, 1991; Bakker, 2013; Rees, 1998). Neoliberal proponents claim that the restructuring of water systems will have positive benefits for all stakeholders; however a review of case studies pertaining to its implementation throughout the world suggests that there are many pertinent factors at play.

3.1.Indonesia

Karen Bakker (2007) conducted an analysis of private sector participation in the water supply systems of Jakarta, Indonesia during the period between 1998 and 2005. Jakarta has suffered the fate of many large urban centers in developing nations. The city rapidly increased in population over the past several decades, from 6.5 million in 1980 to an estimated 18 million in the mid-2000s (Bakker, 2007). The population consists of a high percentage of urban poor; the tax base to facilitate the growing demand for infrastructure has been all but unavailable. Bakker, (2007) notes that the Jakarta water sector was caught up in a cycle of “low cost recovery, low revenue, low investment, and low levels of service” (p.857), with less than half the residents having access to water infrastructure.

In response to these issues, the government turned to private sector investment and marketorientated restructuring of the water sector, going as far as commoditizing water rights, and establishing a tradable water-permit system (Bakker, 2007). The goal was to invite private companies



into the fray, as they would engender private investment, improve efficiency in the system, and increase access to the resource in poor communities (Bakker, 2013). The neoliberal problem solving in Jakarta attracted Thames Water International and Ondeo; British and French water services respectfully. Unfortunately, the process of private sector integration was wrought with collusion, and focused more on individual empowerment than structural security (Bakker, 2007). Without strong governance models and checks on decision makers, the marketization of water permits degraded into an oligopoly held by the aforementioned international corporations (Bakker, 2007). The contracts also took planning out of the hands of government, and failed to include direct stipulations to increase infrastructure in poor regions of Jakarta, thus corporations invested most of their time and money into middle and upper class areas where their investment would see guaranteed return.¹ As such, it is a program intended to be pro-poor refocused on moneyed regions.

A key tenet of Neoliberalization is the marketization of services. In the case of Jakarta, the marketization of the water supply services systematically disenfranchised the poor because their buying power as consumers presented a fiscally irresponsible investment for corporations. Corporations identified opportunities to increase revenue by investing in infrastructure in regions of the city that had a higher relative income. Though the actors were still investing the promised amount of capital into the city, it was centralized on areas where returns were guaranteed, meaning those citizens who required infrastructure the most (i.e. those living in regions with no water distribution systems) went without (Bakker, 2013). Further, the shift was not coupled with 'flanking mechanisms' (such as monitoring by social or environmental NGOs) to facilitate civil engagement with industry. In Jakarta the voice of the people was largely marginalized by a weakened government and a deregulated system. Without a robust framework to report issues or concerns, those making up civil society were left with few avenues for recourse

¹ Private companies were paid by municipal tax dollars so the corporations focused on regions with high tax revenues to ensure their repayments occurred. See Bakker, 2007, p. 862.



A key issue that influenced the rise of neoliberal water management in Jakarta was the rampant corruption within government. Reports of collusion between the international firms that won the contracts and national conglomerates owned by the family of President Suharto tainted the contract awarding process (Bakker, 2007). The process was not transparent in any way and contracts were designed to be lucrative for all parties involved except civil society. Additionally, the government, and thus the citizens, adopted the majority of the risk (for more information see Bakker, 2007, p. 859-860). In short, neoliberal policy failed to effectively institute a positive shift in Jakarta's water services issues because the socio-political situation was far too complex –riddled with corruption, underprivileged groups, disorganization, and elitism – to be solved via private sector integration alone.

3.2.Bolivia

Latin American states have espoused various neoliberal restructuring tools as well, often pertaining to water resource and supply issues. Advocates of the process have pushed for the privatization of water to prompt private sector investment in water provisions, though few full scale privatization undertakings have occurred. The Bolivian model, which was undertaken in the late 1990s, is one of the most ambitious neoliberal approaches to water governance in Latin America to date.

Under the influence of multilateral development agencies, the Bolivian government developed a neoliberal framework which would limit state supervision, regulation, and planning, in favor of an economic valuation of water resources. Thus resources would be sold, mortgaged, and rented to promote market oriented distribution (Assies, 2003). Though the framework also included environmental protection measures, it transferred the economic responsibility over the resource to the private sector. Critics argue that the resulting concession and licensing program – though available to any legal entity – highly favored corporations (Liverman, & Vilas, 2006).



Unlike the case of Jakarta, the Bolivian undertaking occurred on a national level. The State established a framework to support concessional relationships between major water rights holders and individuals, and acknowledged that redistribution for the poor was a necessary aspect of water supply (Assies, 2003). Nonetheless, the privatization of water meant that principles of economic efficiency and financial capitalization outweighed human need. Additionally, where private actors in Jakarta didn't succeed in privatizing ground water resources, the Bolivian model made all water the commodity of the regional rights holder, meaning off-grid supply methods like water supply cooperatives were required to pay concessions to private concessionaires (Bakker, 2007; Assies, 2003).

The failure of the Bolivian model resulted from strict adherence to neoliberal principles without consideration of societal welfare. Policy granting precedent to economic efficiency over social and environmental issues was highly contested by the citizenry. The city of Cochabamba was the site of major anti-liberalization protests, which escalated throughout the nation (Liverman, & Vilas, 2006).

Environmentalists, social activists, and the rural as well as urban poor opposed the policies because they made access to water difficult. In addition to poorly executed economic incentives to prevent pollution, and high infrastructural costs, the country was left politically weak and void of a command and control structure for water issues (Assies, 2003). Unfeasible pricing, low water quality, weak mechanisms for legal recourse against private holders, and avenues for polluters to simply pay away the damage inflicted on the environment were all failures of the neoliberal policies (Liverman, & Vilas, 2006). Citizens voiced their dissatisfaction through non-state mechanisms (flanking mechanisms); however neoliberal policies were not abandoned until prolonged work stoppages and violent protests resulted in heavy financial losses in other sectors (Assies, 2003).

The commodification of water in Bolivia ran aground for reasons outlined in Polanyi's theory of the 'fictitious commodity'. Polanyi's argument is that ecological materials that sustain life cannot be controlled by a self-regulating economy alone, as they do not respond to price signals (Castree, 2008). This places social necessities at odds with economic necessities in a competition over access to



biophysical nature. The result of this competition is often social unrest, for the reason that citizens require access to these resources, regardless of their 'free market price signal' (Prudham, 2004).

3.3.Canada

Proponents of neoliberal undertakings in the water sector may argue that the corruption and insurmountable infrastructural issues were the causes of the systems failure in the previously explored case, or suggest that neoliberal policies only have negative impacts in developing nations. Conversely, opponents of the neoliberal policies assert that the profit driven nature of corporate entities and water supply programs resulted in the social and environmental disparity of the aforementioned cases, that is, unless those entities are otherwise regulated and held accountable by strict societal standards. Prudham (2004) makes this argument in his case study of the water contamination crisis in Walkerton, Ontario. The crisis occurred in 2000 and resulted in seven deaths and twenty three hundred cases of *Escherichia coli* infections among the residents of the community (Prudham, 2004). The author argues that the incidents of death and infection are the direct result of neoliberal reforms and weak regulations, which were introduced by the neoconservative Ontario government led by Mike Harris (Prudham, 2004, p. 344).

The major tenets of the Harris form of neoliberalism were deregulation and privatization. Cuts to water quality regulations and the Ministry of Environment ensured that incidents of water contamination were far more likely to occur, while simultaneously reducing the likelihood that such contamination would be detected (Prudham, 2004). The Walkerton case highlights the fact that deregulation and dependency on for-profit entities to monitor environmental issues is inherently risk oriented; "new environmental risks are often closely tied to struggles over the apparatus of the state as a source of capitalist market regulation" (Prudham, 2004, p. 345).



In 1995, funding for Ministry of Environment's provincial water testing facilities was removed, forcing Ontario municipalities to hire private contractors to test their water samples. In addition, the provincial government failed to pass quality standards or establish reporting mechanisms for private water testing entities and municipal water facilities, effectively relying on the concept of corporate social responsibility to fill the void left by weak regulatory standards (Prudham, 2004). Without a strong regulatory framework to ensure the quality of private entities servicing the provinces' water supply, what Prudham (2004) describes as a 'normal neoliberal failure' occurred. The failure is 'normal' because marketization runs on competition, meaning failure is necessary to direct investment to private firms that can supply the best possible service. The model works when searching for the best coffee in town or a great burger; but the Walkerton case demonstrates the inherent problems that occur when shopping around for the best supplier of an essentially service like water quality testing.

3.4. United Kingdom

In the case of England and Wales explored by Bakker, (2005) the state turned to private water and sewage entities when government entities felt they were incapable of providing water services to the citizens of the country at an affordable rate. Though the change itself had little to do with environmental issues, the changing hands in resource ownership from public to private has a major impact on societies understanding of, and relationship with, the resource in question. Castree (2011) argues that the environmental effects of this change are dependent upon the socio-cultural relationship with nature. Bakker (2005) supports this claim, and argues that socio-cultural relationship with water facilitated its partial neoliberalization in England and Wales; where the government succeeded in privatization and commercialization, but failed commodification of the resource (Bakker, 2005). Commodification failed because the resource is difficult to create competition around, even with government intervention to introduce competition, the monopolization of water services is a central problem to the neoliberal dream of competitive water supply markets (Bakker, 2005). Further, Bakker (2005) found that even with the



influence of water markets, the value of clean water in England and Wales is not high enough to effectively prevent pollution through market environmentalism. Thus the neoliberalization of water, even in the best-case scenario, appears to require governmental intervention via command and control regulatory frameworks and public monitoring. Nonetheless, the project highlights the merits of privatization. England and Wales have streamlined water services workforces and induced greater private stakeholder investment through privatization and marketization of the water supply (Bakker, 2005).

3.5.Theoretical Discussion

In contrast to issues brought forward by thinkers critical of the privatization of water and neoliberal approaches to water supply systems, many academics support the use of such policies in specific contexts. Anderson and Leal (1992) argue in favor of neoliberal approaches to water control by asserting that “markets for water will ensure correct water prices, thereby promoting greater efficiency and conservation” (p. 1). This is a common theoretical argument, which stipulates that actors are not motivated unless they have a ‘stake’ in the outcome. It is based off the idea that absence of motivation arises from lack of accountability – if the official cannot be held responsible for the action then the official will be unconcerned with externalities – and an inability to properly understand the impact of inaction –officials often depend on personal valuations or special interest groups to determine the value of a resource or service (Anderson, & Leal, 1992).

In response to these complaints, proponents of neoliberalism argue for commodification. Commodifying the resource theoretically creates a stake or interest in the resource, while exposing it to market pressure determines its value (Bailey, 2005). Additionally, with property rights the intrinsic value of resources can be realized, which theoretically provides the requisite motivation to improve the quality of the resource and necessary delivery mechanisms (Anderson, & Leal, 1992). Finally, threats to commodities are mitigated by property rights (Anderson, & Leal, 1992).



Neoliberal Proponents argue that small scale private water services are already supplying the poor in developing countries with water, at prices far higher than they suggest large scale private contracts would charge, and without concern for health issues and resource quality (Bailey, 2005; Bakker, 2007). Additionally, governments in many nations are not able and often not willing to supply everyone with clean – or even non-potable – water, meaning access to water at a price is better than the access that did not occur prior to privatization (Bailey, 2005).

Neoliberal theories do not consider that water, being a necessity of human life, is extremely difficult – if not impossible – to commodify. Polanyi argues in his book, “The Great Transformation,” that society will move to protect itself from market conditions which subordinate the needs of society to the will of the market (Polanyi, 2001). The commodification of water resources and delivery mechanisms fail when the cost of maintaining the quality of the said ‘products’ exceeds what members of the society are able – or sometimes willing – to pay. Without societal control through government mechanisms, the market creates winners and losers out of water consumers. In doing so, markets force – or tempt – private actors to restrict delivery or reduce the quality of the product to maintain capital returns, which impedes the society’s access to a necessity of life. When faced with marketization dilemmas, Polanyi (2001) argues that society will create a countermovement in the interest of self-preservation and take action to re-embed the fictitious commodity within social controls – what Polanyi refers to as double movement. Polanyi argues that increased social protections will follow increased marketization; therefore, the privatization of water resources requires an exhaustive policy framework to ensure the resource remains embedded within the control of societal interests (Polanyi, 2001). Otherwise, citizens will create countermovement to regain control of the necessity, as evidenced in the neoliberal experiments analyzed above.



4. Conclusion

As demonstrated in the cases explored throughout this paper, neoliberal approaches to water supply are varying and multifaceted. Every locale, region and country exists in a unique relationship with their biophysical surroundings, meaning similar policies can be expected to have very different socio-political impacts. Neoliberal policies in Jakarta failed to achieve their desired effectiveness as a result of political corruption, an inability or unwillingness to market water to the poor, and a lack of foreseeable profitability for private actors. The people of Jakarta were not inclined to use much water, meaning the water supply infrastructure could not be constructed in a manner that was both economically profitable and financially appealing to the cities poor (Bakker, 2007). In Bolivia, regulatory frameworks were designed to rein in the profit driven motives of privatization. Unfortunately, the commodification of water put environmental and social interests behind those of the market. As a result, social unrest toppled the neoliberal structure in order to provide public control and equitable access. The case of Ontario is perhaps the most telling example of the inherent issues presented by the marketization of water supplies. A void in regulation after governmental water testing stations were shut down meant that the caliber of water quality testing was determined by market competition. The experiment resulted in catastrophic failure, causing multiple deaths and illnesses as a result of Walkerton unknowingly purchasing a subpar service. Finally, the case of England and Wales highlights the importance of strong command and control mechanisms when implementing market based policies to managed 'fictitious commodities' like water supply. When combined with strong reregulation to control private entities and protect social as well as environmental interests, private entities can play a beneficial role. Although Bakker (2005) notes that the government and business failed to commodify water, they succeeded in reducing cost burdens to society through privatization and increased private investment in the industry.

Neoliberal policies are not an effective alternative to state monitoring, regulation and enforcement as they fail to provide a socially equitable and environmentally sustainable framework from which to deliver water resource management. Though Bakker (2005) provides a clear example of



neoliberal policies at work in the water sector, they are toothless by comparison to those espoused in Jakarta, Bolivia, and Ontario. Neoliberal water policies as presented by Anderson and Leal (1992) have proven to be highly difficult to coordinate. Such policies are prone to collusion and catastrophe, and in all cases incapable of establishing a value on water resources that is simultaneously pleasing to citizens, yet capable of rendering pollution economically unviable. The neoliberal theory of commodification and market environmentalism creates a system that is complex, risk oriented, and adversarial. Balancing social, environmental, and economic interests in water has proven to be too difficult a task for the invisible hand of the market.

Although heavily regulated and toothless neoliberal tactics have had moderate success when tempered by iron-clad bureaucratic oversight, the findings of this article assert that such success is an exception to the rule. In fact, the lion's share of neoliberal experiments in water resources management have been met with nothing less than catastrophe, thereby aligning with Polanyi's argument that ecological materials that sustain life cannot be controlled by a self-regulating economy alone, as they do not respond to price signals. The overwhelming conclusion is that neoliberal policies cannot provide a framework from which to deliver socially and environmentally accountable water resource monitoring and management.

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