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BOOK REVIEW

Bakker, K. 2010. Governance failure and the world's urban water crisis. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. ISBN: 978-0-8014-7464-4, 320 pages, US\$24.95.

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Karen Bakker's book is a welcome addition to the interdisciplinary literature on the world's urban 'water crisis'. The central concept articulated in the book is that of 'governance failure', which the author proposes as a strategy to move beyond the protracted binary opposition of state vs. market failures that has characterised much of the recent debate. She explicitly states that her approach is ecocentric, as she tries to leave behind the anthropocentrism underpinning conventional approaches to urban water management (p. 202). However, Bakker aims to combine her ecocentric perspective with a social-constructionist political ecology, which considers that "[g]overnance failure is simultaneously ecological, socioeconomic, and political" (pp. 204-206, 211). This is an ambitious volume, covering a very wide range of themes and attempting to provide a degree of closure to some of the most heated debates about the 'crisis'. The book provides, particularly, an excellent overview of ongoing debates about the relative merits of public and private provision of water and sanitation services, the politics of privatisation and the role of international financial institutions (IFIs) and multinational water utilities in the process, the meaning, significance and implications of considering water a human right, and the pros and cons of alternatives such as community-led urban water services. Several sections of the book are based on materials previously published as articles in leading peer-reviewed journals.

The author has made an effort to ground her arguments on empirical evidence, which includes summary case studies to illustrate such issues as the conflicts arising from the privatisation of water and sanitation utilities, the policies inspired by the 'human right to water' paradigm, or the promotion of community water services as an alternative to both state-led and privatised forms of provision. Thus, chapter 4, jointly written with Michelle Koy, draws on the privatisation of water and sanitation services in Jakarta, Indonesia, to discuss what the authors term "the techno-politics of urban water governance", while chapter 5 is partly grounded on the case of South Africa to examine the difficulties and contradictions facing the actual implementation of the 'human right to water' in real-life situations. In turn, chapter 6 takes the experience of Cochabamba, Bolivia, where the world-famous 'Water War' that led to the cancellation of a privatisation contract in the year 2000 has been followed by an acrimonious confrontation between actors promoting a return to public, state-led provision, others defending market-oriented management, and still others arguing for the expansion of community forms of management and control. Other arguments, particularly about the relationship between neo-liberal reform and regulation, are also grounded on empirical studies of the privatisation of water and sanitation services in England and Wales.

Bakker rightly, in my view, argues that "[t]he current debate over privatisation, to put it simply, has its historical roots in a crisis of water supply systems related to broader issues of development, governance and democracy" (p. 53). I also sympathise with her assertion that "the universal privatisation of the world's urban water supply systems (as envisioned by proponents) has not been, and indeed never will be, achieved" (p. 83), although perhaps this would be better presented as a highly

plausible hypothesis leaving open the possibility that it may actually happen one day (that it "never will happen" is difficult to defend on the basis of rational argumentation). Her final conclusion is that "our analyses (and political struggles) are better directed toward the terrain of 'political society': the search for models that resolve, to the extent possible, the inevitable tensions between representation and participation, technocracy and democracy, centralised oversight and local preferences, and economic exigencies and environmental imperatives. The keyactors in these conflicts will be communities and the governments they attempt to hold to account" (p. 227). I also broadly share this closing statement, especially her emphasis on the political nature of the challenge facing human society in relation to the urban water crisis, though I am less persuaded by her assessment that the key actors will be limited to communities and governments. I consider below this and other aspects of the book's arguments that may merit a more thorough examination in future revisions.

There is a tendency in the book to neglect the importance of referring to relevant pre-existing literature, sometimes compounded by the introduction of ad hoc definitions of concepts that have been the object of long-standing academic debates. Also, despite the author's explicit effort to distance herself from dominant Western-centric concepts and her recognition of the work of authors from the Global South (that needs to be praised because it goes against the prevailing self-referential character of the English-speaking academic literature), the book struggles to find a language that clearly breaks free from the dominant conceptual tangles. In particular, the author does not attempt to critically distance herself from the application of Western-born concepts such as citizenship, civil society, governance, political society, or social capital to the situation of societies characterised by highly diverse historically specific processes, whereby such concepts may not even have a significant empirical reference. In this, the book falls short of finding a language that may be appealing to communities (including intellectual communities) in the Global South, where the worst and more difficult challenges associated with the urban water crisis are to be found. Unfortunately, in this particular aspect, and clearly against her intention, Bakker's arguments tend to reproduce a Western-centric approach that is highly reductive of the complexities characterising urban water management worldwide.

In connection with the first point mentioned above, the book's definition of governance "as a practice of coordination and decision making between different actors, which is invariably inflected with political culture and power" (p. 8) is both very general and begs the question of why a new definition is needed in the first place. A more detailed discussion of 'governance' and 'governance failure', including a reference to some relevant authors, is provided on pages 41-47. However, given that 'governance' is such a structuring element in Bakker's argument, one would have expected a more thorough scholarly discussion of the concept. 'Governance' has been, literally, defined hundreds of times in the specialised literature and has been the object of wide-ranging debates, including debates on water governance, but these academic precedents are scantily reflected in the book. Another conceptual problem that needs to be highlighted concerns Bakker's reference to 'political society'. She states that "Chatterjee coins the term 'political society', which refers to the majority of people 'who are only tenuously, and then only ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens'" (p. 48). This is likely an oversight and perhaps it means that Chatterjee has provided an updated definition of this classical concept for use on the specific case of India, although on page 105 the coinage of the concept is again attributed to this author. In any case, Chatterjee's definition as quoted in the book is so vague that it is difficult to see why it is needed. Bakker justifies the reference to Chatterjee as "intended to imply a broader view [of governance beyond institutionalist definitions], in which governance is shaped by cultural norms and practices" (p. 50), but the relation between 'governance' and 'political society' is left rather under-elaborated. Similar comments can be made about the reference to other concepts such as 'social capital' or 'public sphere' on pages 105-106, where the meaning of the concepts is taken for granted despite the fact that there is a substantial literature exploring the contradictions and pitfalls associated with these concepts, not least when applied to non-Western contexts and, in particular, in relation to public policy (e.g. Putzel, 1997; Portes and Landolt, 2000).

From another angle, the book contains a number of sweeping statements and assertions about empirical facts that are either controversial or incorrect, and are worth highlighting as they may merit further analysis. For instance, Bakker states that "water markets (and associated private water rights), private sector management, and commercial principles and practices have been introduced in the water sector worldwide in the past two decades" (p. 2). However, while there is substantial evidence to support the argument about the introduction of private sector management and commercial principles, the case of water markets and their associated private rights is much less clear. In fact, there are few cases in the world (most notably Australia and Chile) that pro-market advocates feel confident enough to signal as examples of 'water markets', and these relate mostly to non-urban uses which are not the object of this book. Even in these cases, the existence of real markets where water is actually 'traded' has been called into question if not altogether dismissed (e.g. by some authors cited by Bakker, like Carl Bauer on the Chilean case; see Bauer, 2004a, 2004b). In another passage where she examines the role of the IFIs, the author states "[since the late 1980s][t]he push for big dams had passed its apogee; by the 1990s, a trend toward dam decommissioning had emerged" (p. 59). This may be true in the industrialised North, but China, India and Brazil, among the most salient cases, have continued the construction of massive dams, including the world's largest. This is actually a matter of significant conflict in these and other countries at the time that this review is written and, notably, the case of Cochabamba that Bakker analyses in some detail in chapter 6 had the construction of a large dam as a core element of the privatisation contract signed in 1999 with the backing of the IFIs.

Two other passages deserve some additional clarification. On page 104 the author says that "some of these approaches [alternative to privatisation] have received institutional support, such as the public-public partnerships promoted through the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation" (UNSGAB). However, it has to be said that institutional support for public-public partnerships has been actually very low, not least within the UNSGAB itself where only two members (out of 23) clearly support the initiative. The Board comprises a majority of people who either individually or in representation of their institutions (which include multinational private water companies) favour different forms of private involvement as preferable to public-public partnerships or public management more generally (see UNSGAB, 2011). This is an important point to highlight because the composition of the UNSGAB, where the supporters of public sector-led water and sanitation strategies are a very small minority, may be a factor helping to explain why the project based on public-public partnerships as a strategy to meet the Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation services has not taken off as expected by its promoters: in fact, it has very little institutional and material support. The other passage is connected with Bakker's reference to the "main force" behind the Spanish initiative for a 'New water culture', where the reader could get the wrong impression that the main force would be a single individual (pp. 194 [footnote 8], 198). It is worth clarifying that the main force behind this initiative is the New Water Culture Foundation, an interdisciplinary collective of Spanish and Portuguese academics from at least 70 universities. The concept of New Water Culture was coined by Francisco Javier Martínez Gil, from the University of Zaragoza (Martínez Gil, 1997). Under the leadership of Pedro Arrojo, who was the Foundation's President at the time, the organisation took the initiative that produced the European Declaration for a New Water Culture presented in Madrid in February 2005 (EUWATER Network, 2005). The Declaration, the collective work developed over 2 years by a Scientific Committee composed of around 20 people, was signed by 100 European scientists, and represents a significant contribution to some aspects of the debate covered in the book, which certainly justifies Bakker's reference (p. 198, footnote 22).

Finally, I would like to go back to Bakker's final reflection on page 227. As already mentioned, I broadly share her closing statement because she correctly emphasises the need to politicise the urban water crisis, rejecting mainstream efforts to reduce the debate to the technical and policy-administrative dimensions of urban water management. However, I am not convinced that as the author states "[t]he key actors in [future urban water] conflicts will be communities and the governments they attempt to hold to account" (p. 227). As a matter of fact, it is not only powerful

market actors that continue to enjoy a considerable degree of power, particularly – but not only – in societies where 'communities' have little opportunity to hold governments to account, but also the IFIs and the global financial governance structures more generally that will continue to retain significant levers of control over the way in which water in general, and urban water services in particular, are governed and managed. The resulting imbalance in the power configurations characterising water governance is already a major cause of social conflict and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately for human communities, even when they have the opportunity to hold governments to account, they seldom have any chance to hold to account water corporations (public or private, as Bakker correctly remarks) and much less international financial institutions and other global financial actors directly involved in the governance of the world's urban water systems. Among the clearest examples of this process are the mechanisms incorporated in different types of binding agreements signed by countries to protect foreign investments, especially bilateral investment promotion and protection agreements and free trade agreements more generally. Although there are already numerous situations where 'communities' have been able to hold their governments to account, or at least force their governments to act, as in the cases of Argentina or Bolivia that led to the cancellation of several water privatisation contracts since 1997, because of the existing binding agreements that protect foreign 'investors' the countries are being sued before the World Bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID). Even fraudulent corporations like ENRON are winning their cases in these trials, which means that 'communities' in poor countries are being forced to pay compensation to large multinationals even when the cancellation of the privatisation contract was legal (e.g. owing to demonstrable breach of the contract by the operator). Current developments in the Andean region shared by Argentina and Chile are perhaps the best illustration of what can be expected: although communities in both countries have lobbied their governments (with different degrees of success) to protect glaciers from destructive open cast mining, which among other issues is severely compromising water sources owing to the use of cyanide and other harmful substances and also through the destruction of the glaciers themselves, private multinationals have the upper hand. Some experts even predict that it will be almost impossible for the governments to stop the mining companies, even in the event of passing laws to protect the glaciers, as Argentina did in September 2010, given that the investment protection agreements signed by the governments supersede any sovereign legislation that the countries could pass. Multinational companies, IFIs, and other global actors like aid and cooperation agencies are main actors in the governance of water systems, and they are already, and will continue to also be, key actors in the conflicts over water worldwide. Although Bakker is obviously aware of these facts, as can be deduced from reading her book, I have added these remarks here because the book's conclusions seemed to play down the significance of other actors beyond communities and their national governments in future water conflicts.

For all the above reasons, I found Karen Bakker's volume stimulating and a very welcome addition to the ongoing debate about the urban water crisis. She has made an important contribution in several fronts, offering new light for the search of different alternatives that seek to overcome rigid binary discussions such as public vs. private, both in theory and practice. Bakker's book also exposes some of the myths and dangers surrounding some of the alternative strategies being implemented worldwide to solve the crisis, particularly populist and idealised forms of community water management. Inevitably in such ambitious and wide-ranging endeavor, there are some aspects that, in my opinion, deserve more consideration, as suggested above. However, this is a book that will be well received by academics, students, and practitioners and that should be read by all those interested in the struggle for the substantive democratisation of water governance worldwide.

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