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Franck Poupeau

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Franck Poupeau, directeur de recherche au CNRS, CREDA UMR 7227

The return to municipal water management in Cochabamba. The Bolivian experience 20 years after

Based on two books:

- Sarah T.Hines, *Water for All: Community, Property, and Revolution in Modern Bolivia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2021.
- Nasya Sara Razavi, *Water Governance in Bolivia. Cochabamba since the Water War*, London, Routledge, 2022.

For at least the past two decades, a return to municipal management has raised high hopes in political and activist circles, eager to establish water management as a common good. Fraud, lack of pipe maintenance (and, more generally, lack of investment), price rises, excessive shareholder profits: there's no shortage of arguments for ending contracts with private companies in the sector - and the recent bankruptcy of Thames Water, the flagship of British-style privatization, is just the latest avatar. Conversely, Grenoble, Bordeaux and Paris are just a few examples in France of the process of re-establishing municipal public utilities (even if 30% of the service is still provided by private contractors in France, for almost 60% of the population).

The "water war" that took place in Cochabamba (Bolivia) between December 1999 and April 2000 was not only a founding event in the political history of the mobilizations that brought Evo Morales' MAS to power a few years later; it also marked, through its international influence, a break in the process of privatization of utilities that had spread throughout the world since the opening up of European public markets to competition in the 1980s. Although it has been the subject of a large body of militant literature and numerous works of political sociology¹, it has given rise to fewer works looking back at remunicipalization and, in general, academic literature has focused more on forms of resistance to privatization than on the fate of the processes of return to public management², which nevertheless concern more than 1,400 cases worldwide³. However, a return to municipal management is not an automatic guarantee of success, whether in terms of reducing inequalities in access to water or democratizing decision-making processes. This could be the conclusion of the two books by Sarah T. Hines and Nasya Sara Razavi on water policies in Cochabamba (Bolivia), which take stock of the difficulties encountered since the "water war".

In *Water Governance in Bolivia. Cochabamba since the Water War*, Nasya Sara Razavi focuses on the political logics that accompanied the re-establishment of the municipal company after the water war. She notes the persistence of inequalities in access to water within public management, whose various dimensions she attempts to understand through

¹ Franck Poupeau, *Altiplano. Fragments d'une révolution (Bolivie, 1999-2019)*, Paris, Raisons d'agir.

² Sarah Botton & Patricia Urquieta (eds.), *Agua y desigualdades urbanas*, La Paz, Cides/Umsa, 2020.

³ For a synthesis of the different surveys on the issue : Andrew Cumbers, Francisca Paul, « Remunicipalization, Mutating Neoliberalism, and the Conjoncture », *Antipode*, 2021 (doi : 10.1111/anti.12761).

a wide-ranging ethnographic survey of users in unserved districts, local water committees and local institutions. Her perspective on "public alternatives" to water management starts from the observation that the democratization of water management has not been achieved, and consists in studying the modalities of "social control": while privatization gave rise to a "reformist" form of participation, she notes that the return to municipal control was not accompanied by participation that "transformed" unequal structures, but by "nominal" participation that certainly legitimized the public process, but without acting on the mechanisms of domination. Indeed, the decision-making mechanisms concerning the water service were not transferred to the population, but remained in the hands of a non-transparent board still captured by local political interests. The erosion of the mobilizing power of the *Coordinadora del agua y de la vida*, which had enabled the convergence of social forces during the "water war", did not change the political representation on the company's board, where municipal representatives, technicians and engineers remained in the majority.

Efforts to equip the southern part of the city, the most disadvantaged and least well-supplied with water, have thus remained relatively ineffective, marked by nepotism and corruption, while national legislation has not encouraged forms of community self-organization, but rather institutional inertia: "The formalization of the public water sector has not resulted in much material change either. The newer institutions are associated with bureaucratic ineffectiveness due to the constant rotation of Ministers and the duplication of responsibilities across departments. More broadly, there have not yet been any updates to the century-old General Water Law that dates to 1906, resulting in competition for the multiple uses of water across sectors. The new Constitution protects the Human Right to Water, but in practice MAS does not prioritize residential water issues. Consequently, Cochabamba continues to face an increasingly severe water crisis" (ch.4). Thus, the implementation of the Misicuni infrastructure project, an emblem of 20th-century modernist management (a tunnel designed to bring water from another valley to the city), not only failed to incorporate the demands for participation of peasant and indigenous communities, but also failed to provide a satisfactory service with deficient governance that failed to take into account the needs of troubled neighborhoods. The adoption of a watershed approach imported from Europe by the Bolivian state under Evo Morales' MAS would ultimately indicate the prevalence of neo-liberal governance which, under the rhetoric in favor of indigenous communities, is content to apply managerial management where the ideal of water for all remains limited by market constraints.

In *Water for All: Community, Property, and Revolution in Modern Bolivia*, Sara Hines adopts a more historical approach. She traces the processes of dispossession by which, since the last quarter of the 19th century, Cochabamba's rural elites have taken advantage of periods of drought and famine to build a monopoly on water, against indigenous communities. While the National Revolution of 1952 brought about a profound change in the objectives of water policies, with a coalition of reformists and users, the promotion of an ideal of water for all and institutional support for local forms of management, it did not

change the neo-colonial structures that disadvantaged peri-urban neighborhoods. But Hines adopts a reading grid that focuses less on the opposition between public and private than on the contradictions between state power and community autonomy, which lies at the heart of conflicts over water and its property rights. She shows how, throughout the second half of the 20th century, users weighed in on state promises of water for all in order to reinforce a collective model of social democracy, in which reference to habits and customs enabled the implementation of more inclusive forms of management, even if they were not enough to reduce inequalities. She shows that the water war of 2000 was much more than a rejection of privatization: it was part of a process of democratization that broke with the *hacienda* system to establish independent management systems, but which also came up against ineffective national policies to promote infrastructures that were poorly adapted to local realities.

It is then her analysis of the establishment of a "hydraulic society" in Cochabamba that constitutes the interest of her historical perspective: struggles for water contributed to changing waterscapes already shaped by hydraulic engineering. It does not, therefore, take up the top-down perspective on hydraulic societies developed by Wittfogel and Worster, but emphasizes the active participation of water users: "The history of Cochabamba's waterscape offers an alternative history of hydraulic development, governance, and expertise that departs from the paradigm of destructive projects imposed from the outside and instead highlights the power and knowledge of water users. [...] In Cochabamba, watering a semiarid environment did not produce authoritarianism but rather served as a major channel for democratic imagination. Rather than falling victim to state builders and experts, Cochabambinos built a *popular* hydraulic society in the twentieth century, with the high point in the years following the 1952 Bolivian revolution" (p.13).

This popular desire to exercise collective control over water resources and the infrastructures that deliver them, takes up vernacular forms of governance established with irrigation systems and extends them to urban and peri-urban systems. Indeed, it is the organized work of communities to build water infrastructures and manage water distribution that has enabled them to put pressure on the Bolivian state to defend access to water: "Their labor has involved not only physical work but also planning, engineering, and social struggle, both for and against major water development projects" (p.14). This relation between "vernacular hydraulic expertise" and "insurgent citizenship" is at the heart of an alternative vision of modernity, one that is no longer the monopoly of the rich, the white and the countries of the North engaged in a capitalist economy, but the project of placing state and financial institutions at the service of a genuine sharing of the benefits of growth and real universality. The mobilization of the state by communities in what Sarah Hines calls a "state-med hydraulic development" thus embodies a "vernacular modernity", which the whole book follows in detail, as the conflicts over water unfold. This reading "from below" constitutes an alternative, democratic version of a modernity that cannot be reduced to the authoritarian imposition of external ideals.

One might well criticize the enchantment of the perspective developed here, which is undoubtedly linked to Sarah Hines' desire not to give in to a "passive" vision of subalterns. In a society based on the expansion of water infrastructure, the desire to highlight forms of resistance tends to conceal the fact that the water company has primarily benefited the most privileged sections of the population, leaving even after the "water war" of 2000, the southern districts to the more costly private supplies (water trucks, etc.). Despite the difficulties encountered, the author's analysis serves as a reminder of the need to anchor the right to water in collective processes of user mobilization and knowledge-sharing, without which water governance remains caught up in bureaucratic forms for which the reduction of social inequalities is not a priority. But ultimately, Sara Hines' perspective complements that of Nasya Sara Razavi: whether criticizing neoliberal governance or analyzing the historical infrastructure of local hydraulic society, both books demonstrate the importance of social logics of participation, and the failure of the remunicipalized institution to incorporate them democratically. The post "water war" era does not mark the end of conflicts, but rather their displacement into internal struggles within local societies for the control of water.