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In *Fighting for Water*, Andreas Bieler explores case studies where capital has attempted to privatise water services in Europe, but also where these processes have been met with significant resistance and produced alternatives for a future beyond capitalism. Bieler states: ‘Over the last twenty to thirty years, Europe has been a major location of resistance to water privatization. Against the background of relentless neo-liberal restructuring across the European Union (EU), it has been struggles against water privatization, which stood out due to their success.’ (p. 151) The book is a compelling analysis of these water struggles, which are placed within the global economic context of the ever-increasing encroachment of profit-seeking actors into the realm of public services. Although this encroachment has not been halted, the conclusion of the book offers avenues for the transformation of water management to both fulfil the human right to water and implement greater participatory democracy.

The privatisation of water services is attractive to private investors, Bieler argues, because in times of global economic crises, this type of service provision securely delivers regular profits which will also be guaranteed by the state. Thus, services which have been de-commodified will be re-commodified. The promises of privatisation are efficient, high-quality and low-cost services. However, as Bieler shows in his overview of privatisation in chapter 2, these promises consistently fail to materialise. Due to the drive for generating profits, there is insufficient investment in infrastructure and consumer prices increase. Bieler goes on to analyse examples of resistance to privatisation with a Marxist, historical materialist approach, which is broadly framed to include diverse forms of oppression. He states: ‘Provided class is understood as a relation between human beings as well as between human beings and nature, gender and environmental expropriation enter in moments of class struggle.’ (p. 20) In this way, Bieler can demonstrate capitalism’s exploitation of ‘cheap nature’ within his account.

In chapters 3 to 6, Bieler investigates the resistance to water privatisation in Italy, at the EU level, in Greece and in Ireland. The analysis of these case studies uses incorporated comparison to show how the activism in each of the regions was influenced by, and constitutive of, each another. Successful referendums were held
against water privatisation in Italy and in Thessaloniki, Greece. The European Citizens’ Initiative at the EU level on recognition of water and sanitation as a human right received almost 1.9 million signatures, and this led to changes in water policy. In Ireland, communities mobilised to block the installation of water meters and promote the non-payment of bills. Communication and connection at different scales shaped these developments at local, national and transnational levels. The interrelation between the case studies leads Bieler to state: ‘if capitalism is successfully challenged in one place, this challenges capitalism overall in that it points to potential alternatives beyond capitalism.’ (p. 156)

What then are the alternatives? In the concluding chapter, Bieler encourages investigation into managing water as a commons, not merely at an abstract theoretical level, but as functioning social systems where communities collaborate to guarantee the sustainability of the resource. Acknowledging that many of the examples of managing water as a commons are small-scale, the question then becomes how to scale up commoning and enlist the help of the state in this process. Additionally, Bieler urges a re-examination of public water services. He recognises that there have also been failures of the traditional public model, including an anthropocentric approach to exploiting nature. He states: ‘Public ownership on its own is not enough. We also need to think about new ways of how to organize the management of public companies in a more participatory, democratic way.’ (p. 169) Examples of this include where civil society representatives are given a place on the board of public water organisations.

Not all the activism and initiatives that Bieler examines led to lasting change. There are also instances of fatigue and disillusionment amongst those participating in the resistance. Further, Bieler cautions that there are constantly new attempts to privatise water services. In this sense, the book serves as a warning of future pressures towards privatisation. Nevertheless, the reader is left with hope that the efforts of those in the resistance did have results and that there are always alternatives to be considered in the provision of this essential service. Not only this, to reimagine water services provision is to take part in a broader debate about how democracy should be implemented. The management of water, then, is only one aspect of the greater transformation of our societies which can, and should, take place.
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