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CONSUMER PROTEST: WATER

Humans consume water in many ways. In addition to meeting essential daily needs such as drinking, cleansing, cooking or producing food, water is also consumed in leisure activities such as fishing and other water-related sports or through the enjoyment of urban waterscapes. In this general sense human beings have always consumed water. More narrowly, the vending and consumption of drinkable water has also been long practiced by humans as suggested by historical records of private water vending in societies as dissimilar as the Aztecs and the Arabs. However, in the context of this entry we are only concerned with the emergence of the water consumer as a social category since the expansion of domestic urban water services from the late eighteenth century onwards. The emergence of a consumer culture in relation to basic urban services such as water supply and sewerage contributed to the rising awareness among the population about the material implications of the access to these services (e.g., for living standards) as well as about the social and political considerations associated with their organization and control. Thus, networked water consumption in urban centres opened new spaces for citizen participation, often in the form of social protest, as water consumers became increasingly aware of the potential political importance of their actions.

It is worth highlighting that water consumption has not received much attention within the field of consumption research until recently, which may be explained perhaps by the fact that although water consumption is a permanent and universal human necessity, like breathing, it tends to be largely inconspicuous. In this connection, it is important to remark that the concept of “consumer” in relation to domestic water use has to be qualified, perhaps with the exception of bottled water consumption. This is relevant because one of the key

characteristics associated with modern consumers, the capacity to make informed consumption choices between alternative products, has rarely been available to water users. This has been the case mainly for two reasons: firstly, humans cannot avoid consuming water; at best they can control the volumes and the quality of the water they consume. Secondly, the provision of water services has historically taken the form of a monopoly, whether publicly or privately owned and managed, which means that choice of provider has not been an option available to consumers. In fact, modern domestic water users have always been, for the most part, captive consumers, which has often prompted bitter social confrontations.

Early Development

The emergence and expansion of the water consumer as a social identity is part and parcel of the development of capitalist forms of production and circulation of public services as commodities, including water supply and later also water-based sanitation services. England and France, specially the first, were the pioneering examples of this development.

However, the commodification of domestic water services and the creation of a consumer base for water-based commodities have been punctuated by recurrent social and political confrontations. Historically, these confrontations have flared up around a number of critical issues including disputes over the ownership of water sources and infrastructures and over the funding for developing water services, resistance to compulsory household connections, and struggles over issues of service access, affordability, and quality. More importantly, political confrontations around the status of essential water services (is it legitimate to treat these services as commodities or should they be considered a social or public good or a citizenship right?) have been a central feature of their development. With hindsight, the process of commodification of domestic water services has never been fully

accomplished, has faced significant setbacks not least because of recurrent social protest and resistance, and its future development is rather uncertain.

The best known modern examples of the commodification of domestic water services date from eighteenth century London, where a number of small private undertakings to deliver fresh water to wealthy neighbourhoods were set. By the mid nineteenth century the private delivery of water supply was well established in British cities, and was underway in France, the United States and other industrial countries. However, the expansion of commodified water services often faced the lack of interest of the potential consumer, when not their open opposition. Thus, in the name of public health (but also for financial reasons) governments made the connection to networked domestic water services compulsory, which prompted much resistance among citizens who had alternative means of water supply such as wells or other sources. Also, users who resisted (or were unable to afford) paying for the water delivered were prosecuted under new laws that criminalized the use of water without a contract with the private provider: in the process of creating water consumers the system also created water thieves, according to Colin Ward. Water theft has been one of the expressions of popular resistance to the commodification of essential water services ever since.

As a pattern, this early development of commodified domestic water services was characterized by the lack of regulation of the private providers, which were granted monopoly control over their service areas. Also, the tariffs were usually high while the quality of the services was irregular and often inadequate (i.e., low pressure and flow, intermittence and shortages, water quality problems, high levels of leakage), a situation that worsened as the nineteenth century progressed. This was compounded by the unforeseen outcomes of the introduction of water-based sanitation since the early nineteenth century, which accelerated the pollution of water sources and also prompted recurring social unrest. Moreover, the most significant problem was that even in the late nineteenth century only a

relatively small minority was connected to the water services, and strictly speaking only a fraction of them could be formally considered water consumers, noted Frank Trentmann and Vanessa Taylor. This situation was intertwined with the increasing social inequalities and spatial segregation characterizing the development of urban areas in the nineteenth century, including the spread of inequality and injustice in the access to water services. As a result, by the turn of the century most domestic water and sanitation services in England, France, the United States and other leading capitalist countries had been subject to strict regulation and public control or directly placed in public hands.

The eventual municipalization, and later nationalization, of essential water services did not substantially change the agonistic aspects associated with water consumption. Firstly, the full universalization of access in developed countries was only achieved after World War II, but even then the essential attribute of captive clients characterizing water consumers remained unchanged. During the twentieth century most water services continued to be delivered by monopoly providers, and for the most part these remained unaccountable to citizens and consumers. Moreover, with rare and short-lived exceptions full universal coverage for water services was not achieved outside developed countries until today. Despite the significant progress made since the late nineteenth century, the main causes of water-related social conflict continue to be essentially the same.

The Pattern of Contemporary Water Protests

There is a wealth of literature documenting the contemporary occurrence of water protests (e.g., Barraqué 2006; Castro 2006). In developing countries a major reason fuelling water protests continues to be the struggle by would-be water users to gain access to publicly provided water services, which encompasses a large part of the world population: around 17 percent lacks access to a safe water supply and 40 percent has no adequate sanitation. For the

large proportion of the unserved population, water is often provided by mostly unregulated water vendors or directly taken from uncontrolled, frequently unsafe water sources. These are major causes of water conflict worldwide. However, water protests are also often carried out by users who have access to networked water services but are affected by a range of problems, including poor quality (intermittence, interruptions, unsafe water, etc.), unfair pricing and unaffordable tariffs, lack of accountability and power abuses by the providers, etc. The protests take different forms, from peaceful demands to the authorities and public demonstrations, through civil disobedience (e.g., nonpayment of water bills), to open violence including water theft, the destruction of property, and the loss of human life. Owing among other issues to their historical role in relation to domestic water use, women are key actors in these different forms of water protest.

Since the 1980s governments in both developed and developing countries have introduced radical reforms in water and sanitation services oriented at transferring the responsibility for management, and often also the ownership, of these services to private companies. Although water privatization has often been promoted as a way to empower consumers, the introduction of privatization does not change the essential characteristic of water users as captive clients. Privatization has become a major source of water protest in all continents, and in countries as dissimilar as the United States and Bolivia. The main reasons behind the protests range from the open opposition to privatization of public water services to complaints about the lack of compliance with contractual arrangements, poor or lack of regulatory control, or problems with the quality, affordability and accountability of privately provided services. A major bone of contention, as in the nineteenth century, concerns the status of the services: should water services be fully commodified or should they be delivered as a social or public good, a citizenship right, disengaged from the market?

Given that the world is facing a worsening water crisis with direct consequences for

the provision of essential water services, water protests are likely to play a major role in the twentieth-first century. A crucial task for social scientists will be to better understand the politics of water consumption, and particularly the interweaving between the formation of consumer identities and the development of substantive citizenship in relation to the governance and management of water and water-related services.

José Esteban Castro

See also Citizenship; Commodification; Consumer protest: anti-capitalism; Consumer protest: environment; Consumer rights; Infrastructures & utilities; Public goods.

FURTHER READINGS

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