

The rise and retreat of water privatisation: Debating (post)neoliberalism and resistance

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Abstract

Private sector involvement in water supply is one of the most controversial trends in international environment and development –generating conflict and heated debate around the world. Proponents argue that the private sector can contribute to solving the world's global water crisis –particularly with respect to supplying the poor. Opponents argue that private companies will exacerbate exclusion, inequity, and negative environmental impacts. In this paper, I document evolving patterns of private sector activity worldwide, and argue that the continued growth of private sector activity –combined with the strategic retreat of private companies from certain countries and regions– may be read as an intensification rather than straightforward retreat from neoliberalization. The paper considers the implications of these findings for resistance to privatization, and also explores debates over post-neoliberalism and putative 'alternatives' to private water supply. I conclude with reflections on broader debates over neoliberalization and the environment.

About Karen Baker

Dr. Karen Bakker is Professor, Canada Research Chair, and Director of the Program on Water Governance at the University of British Columbia.

Named one of Canada's Top 40 under 40 in 2011, Dr. Bakker is a Rhodes Scholar with a PhD from Oxford University. Fluent in French and Spanish, and the author of over 100 academic publications (including sole-authored books with Oxford and Cornell University Press), Dr Bakker regularly advises international and non-governmental organizations on water policy. Her journal articles have appeared in top 10 ISI –ranked peer– reviewed journals in six fields: Development Studies, Economics, Environmental Studies, Geography, Political Science, and Urban Studies. Her work has been translated into French, German and Spanish, and has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *British Sunday Times*, and the *London Independent*.

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