H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kartika Liotard, Steven P. McGiffen. *Poisoned Spring: The EU and Water Privatisation.* London: Pluto Press, 2009. 176 pp. $28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7453-2788-4.

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Published on H-Water (September, 2010)

Commissioned by John Broich (Case Western Reserve University)

European Disunion and Water Privatization

âThe world is facing a serious and deteriorating water crisis: the human race is running out of waterâ (p. 1); this is the warning Kartika Liotard and Steven P. McGiffen issue at the opening of *Poisoned Spring*. They describe the book as a âcall to activismâ aimed specifically at the âlevels where authority is exercisedâ because it is at those levels where the crisis has been created (p. 16). It is their contention that the world is not running out of water in the sense that there is not enough, but rather that there is limited availability and access to global resources due to mismanagement. The authors set out to provide âa critical survey of EU [European Union] water policy, both internal and externalâ as a vehicle for understanding that the worldâs water crisis has as much to do with human factors in the management of water resources as it does the exigencies of nature (p. 1).

However, the reader who is drawn to this book in the hopes of a clear understanding of water policy within the EU will be sorely disappointed. Of the bookâs eight chapters, four address issues of extreme weather occurrences, such as flood and drought (chapters 1 and 2), the effects of water management on socioeconomic organization (chapter 3), and climate change (chapter 4). Much of what is said in these chapters is neither new nor particularly insightful, and has been better dealt with in literature of environmental history.[1]

Liotard and McGiffen finally begin their examination of EU water policy in chapter 5. Most of this examination is a regurgitation of the Public Service International Research Unitâs reports on EU water policy. There is some good information in these sections, if the reader is willing to trudge through the disjointed organization of the material. Drawing on the neo-Gramscian ideas of Stephen Gill and Andreas Beiler, the authors cast EU water policy as an instance of a neoliberal organization that removes vital economic decisions from the democratic process. The EUâs Water Framework Directive, for instance, established rules that forbid the cross-subsidy of water systems by tax revenues, thereby making it illegal to subsidize household water systems by taxing corporate use, such as agribusiness (the larger strain on water resources by far). Although taxation decisions supposedly fall well

within the autonomous democratic rights of EU member nations, both Hungary and Ireland have been told to stop such subsidy programs. It is difficult to determine who told them to stop, however, as the authors are not clear on this point; they provide no information as to the overall organization or operation of the EU, and as a result many of their points seem to be lost on non-European readers.

In a number of other examples, including France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Estonia, Lithuania, and Bulgaria, public provision of water gave way throughout the 1990s and early 2000s to privatized water systems. The authors fail to link this transition to the administrative policies of the EU, however. Instead, many of the policies they describe, including various elements of the Water Framework Directive, sound more like EU administrative checks on the privatization of water services in individual member states–or at least attempts to mitigate the negative effects of privatization. Even in their strongest example of water privatization, Great Britain, the laws of the EU do less to encourage privatization as they do require member nations to maintain adequate investment in infrastructure and maintenance. The fact that the British government subsidizes the investments that corporations are required to make is not a function of EU policy, but rather a result of the internal politics of Great Britain.

Ultimately *Poisoned Spring* fails on two accounts. First, Liotard and McGiffen do not effectively demonstrate that the âEuropean Union is one of the worst culprits, in favor of the failed private modelâ (p. 223). In fact, they contradict their very premise again and again by demonstrating that EU water policy is vague enough to be interpreted very differently by member nations. Whereas Britain may favor a private model, the laws of the land regarding water management in places like the Netherlands or Luxembourg work to mitigate the undue influence of private corporations in setting water policy. Second, the authors conflate the policy and directives of the EU as a corporate body with the water management practices and policies of individual members. In short, their argument ultimately presumes homogeneity within European water policy, which their evidence does not support. That said, *Poisoned Spring* highlights some truths that are crucial to addressing water management in the modern age: the processes and relationships of the biophysical world transcend boundary lines drawn on a map, and the scarcity or abundance of natureâs bounty is as much the result of management decisions as it is an environmental reality.

Note

[1]. For instance, the intersection between politics, social organization, and the environment has been duly explored in Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).