

BOOK REVIEW

Fighting for water. Resisting Privatization in Europe

by Andreas Bieler. London: Zed Books. 2021. 210p. £67.50 (hardback), £21.59 (paperback), £17.27 (eBook). ISBN 9781786995087.

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(Received 20 January 2022; accepted 1 February 2022; first published online 21 February 2022)

Even though this book deals with a ‘liquid substance’ – better, the liquid substance for excellence: water –, Andreas Bieler’s *Fighting for water. Resisting Privatization in Europe* offers an exceptionally ‘solid’ critique of the political economy of water privatization and commodification. At the same time, the book analyses – through a comparative analysis of social movements in Italy, Greece and Ireland, plus a focus on the European level – several successful efforts to avoid water privatization and preserve the commons from capitalist accumulation. Before shedding light on the various merits of *Fighting for water*, I would like to point out, first of all, that it fully succeeds in displaying the relevance of water as a totally political issue, while also showing how water is part and parcel of the restructuring processes of capitalism on a global scale, and a key ‘moment’ of the ideological and hegemonic project of neo-liberal capitalism. Through a thorough analysis centred on the method of enquiry of historical materialism, combined with key insights from political ecology, Bieler manages to use water as a ‘prism’ through which interpreting changes, contradictions, multiple crises and – crucially – possible pathways of resistance.

In reviewing the book, I will restrict the analytical focus to three key points in which the volume fully succeeds: the discussion of class agency; the conceptualization of the ‘water issue’ within capitalist expansion; the comparative analysis of social movements.

On the theoretical level, the historical materialist approach put forward by Bieler understands (class) agency and structure within capitalism as a dynamic mode of production *and* social reproduction. To Bieler, ‘class’ is not formed by mere external juxtapositions between categories (labour, gender, race, environment etc.), but by an internal (ontological) relation between different positions arising from capitalism as the totality of social relations. In this respect, Bieler’s use of the category of a class is particularly effective for it manages to avoid forms of ‘ossification’ (for instance when class coincides only with the white working class, mostly comprising men) without dismissing its ongoing relevance, especially when it comes to analyse the ‘multiple forms of class agency’ (pp. 14–21). Thus the centrality of class is (i) ontological – that is based on capital as a social relation and capitalism as ‘generator’ of classes and class fractions; (ii) heuristic – namely class struggles allow us to understand the direction of the historical processes, which is always open-ended. Here, especially ‘the concept of ‘social factory’ allows us to understand class struggle as stretching across the spheres of production as well as social reproduction’ (p. 17). This last instance, importantly, includes the dimensions of gender (for water privatization disproportionately affects women), and nature (in the form of nature expropriation), in open dialogue with political ecology. Finally, this also leads to catch the specific importance of water struggles as ‘a key example of struggles across the social factory, the spheres of production and social reproduction’ (p. 18).

The solid theoretical argument allows the book to make a stance in relation to the overall understanding of the water question. First and foremost, the management of water, its circulation and relevance (in the mentioned spheres of production and reproduction) is ‘de-technocratized’: in other words, Bieler shows how the fate of water in the era of neo-liberal capitalism is not a question of ‘less or more efficiency’. Rather, water privatization is part and parcel of the ‘relentless thirst for accumulation’ (Chapter 2). Through a rich and detailed discussion of the nature of capitalism (and its intrinsic-cum-increasing competitive pressures, crisis tendencies and commodification), Bieler sees the drive towards accumulation not as the result of the ‘world market’ (as world-system theorists have it), but as ontologically grounded on the ‘underlying social property relations, that is how production is organized in variegated forms in order to ensure surplus extraction’ (p. 32). Water, then, and human labour and nature in general, are part of these processes of ever-deepening and all-encompassing commodification, namely the precondition for surplus extraction and profit generation, in turn necessary to buy time on the next crisis. Importantly, Bieler carefully avoids flattening the analysis only on the structural dimension: actually, the class agency is central for example in terms of direct lobbying and pressures put on governments by transnational corporations (as Suez and Veolia) and financial institutions, and in the light of neo-liberal ideology development. Here, Bieler easily deconstructs the neo-liberal discourse of (supposed) greater efficiency resulting from the privatization of water and public services – and, conversely, the discourse of intrinsic inefficiency of the state and public institutions –, showing the reality behind privatizations: lack of investments in infrastructures, dramatic rise of consumer tariffs, lower levels of inefficiency and poorer service quality.

In terms of in-depth research into social movements, the book makes several further accomplishments. First of all, it is interesting how Bieler outlines his research methodology of ‘incorporate comparison’. The aim is showing that, given the transnationalization of capitalist production and reproduction, national spheres cannot be isolated and separated from each other and from other spatial levels, as the European. Accordingly, ‘Italian, Greek and Irish struggles have clearly been shaped by developments at the European level, while struggles against privatization in the EU were affected by national level struggles in turn, all shaped and being shaped by neo-liberal restructuring within the global political economy’ (p. 4). Through sixty-one interviews to activists of social movements and unions, Bieler leads the reader across Europe and into the deeper mechanisms and concrete logics of the battle for water; also, to the factors that in all these cases led to full or partial victories. Here, Italian readership may find Chapter 3 particularly interesting, as it is devoted to the Italian Forum of Water Movements and the successful referendum against water privatization (12 and 13 June 2011), and to the broader political importance of commons and their mobilization potential. At the same time, Bieler skilfully calls attention to the increasing authoritarian nature of the state and to the undermining of the popular will by political parties of the center-left and center-right, which did not implement the referendum of 2011 while pursuing subtle strategies for re-privatization. More generally, in Chapter 7 Bieler outlines three factors that led to successful outcomes: the quality of water as a source of life; a long-standing tradition of global struggles against water privatization; third, the broad alliances of social movements against water privatization, actually a concretization of the multiple forms of class agency across production and social reproduction. Finally, it is also argued the potential of commons to overcome capitalist relations and develop a new democracy based on common ownership and participation.

Bieler makes an overall strong and convincing argument with a distinct contribution to the study of neo-liberal capitalism, water/commons and movements of resistance. *Fighting for water* shows that, while water has become part of processes of commodification and capitalist expropriation, the battle for commons and public ownership led to important forms of popular mobilization and new class-consciousness. Thus, the book sheds light to the ultimately political nature of water, and to the possibility to lead victorious struggles against both the expropriation of commons and ongoing capitalist commodification. In conclusion, the book stands as a reason of hope to exit the endemic crises of capitalism and nature from a progressive direction.