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Water is a Right: A Critique of Curriculum Materials and Learning Experiences Sponsored by the Transnational Water Utility Service Industry

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Abstract

There is no longer an infinite supply of fresh water on the planet. In large part, the global water crisis is a result of large-scale, destructive, industrial "innovations." In just fifteen years, two-thirds of the people on the planet will feel the impact of the diminishment of safe drinking water. Given the global water crisis, the focus is this analysis is on the transnational water utility service industry as well as the larger shift from the notion of drinking water as a public right to a commodity to be privately owned and sold on the global marketplace. I discuss the very different ways these corporations are entering communities in the Southern compared to the Northern hemisphere, including attempts to re-brand their image after public failures. I then consider the particular strategies these conglomerates use to seep into cities and towns in the North. Emphasis is placed on how this sector of the water industry is becoming involved in schooling through sponsoring curricular materials and activities. I also provide initial analysis of the messages distributed in a sample of such materials and activities intended for K-12 students. While literature exists that explores curricular materials in schools provided by transnational corporations involved in direct control of natural resources, surprisingly, the privatization of the world's fresh water supply receives little attention in both education-based scholarship and media.



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There is no longer an infinite supply of fresh water on the planet. In many parts of the world, lack of access to drinking water and sanitation services is acutely felt, with a glaring disparity between water usage in the Southern compared to the Northern hemisphere. Due to ever more aggressive industrial applications, global water usage is doubling every 20 years, which is twice the rate of population growth. At this moment, 30 countries are facing water shortages and over 1 billion people do not have access to safe water to drink. In just fifteen years, two-thirds of the people on the planet will feel the impact of the diminishment of safe drinking water. The social, political, and economic outcome of water scarcity is predicted to result in an increase in fighting over water. It is thought that in 46 countries -- comprising a combined population of 2.7 billion people -- a significant risk for war over water across the next two decades exists (Barlow & Clarke, 2003; Barlow, 2007; Goldman, 2010, Public Citizen, 2011a).

In large part, the global water crisis is a result of grand-scale, destructive, industrial ‘innovations.’ Aggressive deforestation, aquifer depletion, and water diversion due to water-intensive enterprises such as industrial agriculture, mining, and high-tech industries; along with urbanization have released massive concentrations of carbon emissions into the atmosphere, thus significantly contributing to global warming. Consequences of this have been extreme weather patterns such as floods and droughts, unpredictable and exotic pathogens and pests, and the overall desertification of the planet. Such destructive forces have also resulted in jarring disruptions in the hydrologic cycle, with a specific byproduct being the rapid disappearance of worldwide fresh water sources. Not only does this have severe ramifications for drinking water access, but the depletion of groundwater has made it much more difficult to grow food. Because of such combined practices/forces, the dwindling surface water that is available is highly polluted. This water is increasingly contaminated with the by-products of industry and construction, including raw sewage, insecticides, PCPs, hormones, nitrogen fertilizers, antibiotics, and other industrial and chemical affluent. Against this backdrop, remaining freshwater sources are swiftly being drained and transformed into a commodity to be sold on the global marketplace in the form of bottled water and utility service contracts (Barlow & Clarke, 2003; Barlow, 2007; Goldman, 2010).

Given the global water crisis, the focus of this analysis is on the transnational water utility service industry and schooling as well as the larger shift from the notion of drinking water as a public right to a commodity to be privately owned and sold. I discuss the very different ways the transnational water utility service industry looks to be entering communities in the Southern compared to the Northern hemisphere (Goldman, 2006; Barlow & Clarke, 2003; Barlow, 2007). I also investigate attempts by these transnational corporations to re-brand their image after public failures. I then consider the particular strategies these conglomerates seem to use to seep into cities and towns in the North, including the US. Emphasis is placed on how the water utility service sector appears to be involved in schooling through sponsoring curricular materials and activities. I also provide initial, tentative analysis of the messages distributed in a sample of such materials and activities intended for K-12 students. The particular sample in this study was selected as it is reflective of a range of materials and activities from a larger pool of examples. While literature exists that explores curricular materials in schools provided by transnational corporations directly involved in control of natural resources (Saltman & Goodman, 2003; Saltman, 2004; Hodgkins, 2010), surprisingly, the privatization of the world's water resources receives little attention in both education-based scholarship and media. When it is discussed, it is typically portrayed as a local concern, for example, as a seasonal draught or flood, and not as connected to a systemic, global problem. Given that the very essence of life depends on water, these issues deserve consideration.

Forms of Water Privatization

At present, water privatization exists in several forms. Some of these types include the bottled water industry; water reuse, including desalination and nanotechnology; more efficient mechanisms for pumping aquifers and diverting water; renewed investments in hydro-electric dams; and the contractual management of drinking and wastewater utilities between municipalities/industry and water service transnationals. Other water privatization markets in development include atmospheric water generators, which vacuum moisture from the air; cloud seeding, which involves planting silver iodide and dry ice in clouds in an attempt to induce rain; and the buying and trading of water rights (including water futures). This entails hedging bulk water out of its habitat and transporting it to customers who can pay the most (Barlow, 2007).

In the current configuration, a handful of transnational corporations provide water and wastewater utility services to many hundreds of millions of customers in over 100 countries. In the early part of this decade, some of these entities were among the most profitable corporations in the world, with annual revenues at times outpacing the economies of nations in which they had a presence. Profit is derived from the contractual oversight of municipal drinking and wastewater utility management, and charging a fee for this service. These contracts take various forms, and are typically signed between a water service transnational and a local government for 10, 20, or 30 years. Many of the largest water utility service transnationals are European, and contracts are pursued globally. ‘Concession’ contracts, such as seen in a variety of forms in the UK and India, give a corporation license to operate the utility at a profit, involving private control of all investments and the building of new infrastructure (e.g. pipe systems and treatment facilities). ‘Leases’ are contracts whereby the company is in charge of operating the distribution system and for making repairs to the existing infrastructure, while new investments are the purview of the partnering municipality. ‘Management’ contracts entail corporate oversight of the utility service while local governments cover any investments and repairs (Barlow, 2007).

Proponents of water privatization think the services provided by transnational utility contractors will help solve the problem of the high cost of water delivery. As they variously contend, given the reality of cash-strapped governments locally, nationally, and internationally, the vast resources of the private sector remain the best hope for delivering water in the most efficient manner to as many people as possible. With private involvement in water delivery and wastewater services, it is thought slow and ineffectual public-sector layers can be bypassed for more streamlined operations. Advocates believe with the private model, world-class expertise, specialization, and therefore, efficiency can best be applied to solve the crisis of water delivery. As customers are required to pay more for this for-profit service, some purport this form of privatization will have the added benefit of making individuals and entire populations much more mindful of wasting water. Steeped in positivistic rationality, some conclude ‘consumers’ may shift their views to a conservation and protection mindset in relation to water (as opposed to wasting it), which might help in the replenishment of this resource (e.g. Bailey, 2005; Jacobs & Howe, 2005; Rachwal, 2007; Chappells & Medd, 2008). While it is important to be aware of the scope of views on the topic, the perspective presented in this article is one that is more critical. The questioning raised in this analysis is linked to a vocal and growing critique among the public on this issue.

Public to Private

In the Northern hemisphere, France especially has a long history of corporate involvement in water delivery systems. Several other countries in Western Europe have also been heavily

engaged in this practice, such as the UK and Germany. Since the Progressive Era in the US, public water and sanitation services have historically been seen to play a strategic role in safeguarding public health and thereby supporting national economic interests. As of late, new demands on urban water services have arisen in both the Northern and Southern hemisphere that debt-ridden governments cannot address, thus opening the door to the services of transnational water utility corporations. Long viewed as a public good in many countries, critics assert water has quietly been commandeered and commodified by a powerful water industry that has harnessed the exploration, production, and distribution of this life source (e.g. Barlow, 2007).

The colonial legacy in the Southern hemisphere has had the historical outcome of water utilities directed towards the wealthy. As neoliberal reform swept across the globe over the past few decades, many countries found they had to privatize their water and sanitation services, specifically those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Unable to support improvements to existing infrastructure and the building of new facilities, and/or indebted to the IMF, the World Bank, and regional banks (e.g. the Inter-American Bank, the African development Bank, the Asian Development Bank), based on structural adjustments, many nations found themselves in situations in which they had to comply to the demands of transnational corporations. Countries in this position were pressured to allow transnationals to run their water systems at a profit. With the gutting of the public sector in general, indeed all countries, including increasingly those in the West, are strongly encouraged to hand over public services (Alexander, 2005; Barlow, 2007; Public Citizen, 2011a).

At a UN conference held in Dublin in 1992, a set of principles emerged in which for the first time water was defined as a commodity. Attended by 100 government and NGO representatives, it was agreed upon that given its scarcity, water was being wasted, and to stem this waste, it should be seen as having economic value. These proceedings represent arguably the most important official recognition of water as transformed from a public good to an exchangeable economic unit. As sanctioned by this body, the notion of viewing water as a source of economic profit arguably took on a much more naturalistic sense. These principles were adopted by the UN that same year. While individual water waste occurs much more in the Northern hemisphere, critics point out that those in the Southern hemisphere (as usual) would bear most of the punishment. Since that landmark shift in thinking, the UN has continued to foster the privatization of water in numerous ways, such as by permitting water transnationals to fund UNESCO water management research. In another example, it has been revealed that corporations became founding members of the United Nations Global Compact, an initiative that involves water conglomerates in the shaping of human rights and environmental standards. In response to the world-wide water scarcity crisis, as part of its Millennium Goals, the UN pledged to halve the number of people who live without access to drinking water by 2015 based on this market model (Barlow, 2007).

Barlow (2007) specifically argues these transnationals are imposing their lobbying strength on water quality standards which they have successfully weakened, and are creating and rewriting existing trade agreements so that countries forsake their water resources. She also contends as many of the largest of these transnationals are European, the EU has been a stalwart force for the inclusion of water in trade agreements [GATS], in promoting privatized water services, and in undermining water as a basic right. The WTO has also been instrumental in permitting these transnationals to influence the liberalization of trade agreements in ways that support their growth. Corporate Europe Observatory reports that in 2002, the European Commission, which consolidates the position the EU takes in WTO talks, worked with representatives from the largest water corporations to put together its list of water liberalization requirements. These requests were

reported to seek to diminish the barriers which European corporations face abroad, to reformulate ‘water services’ to include the coverage of the GATS agreement to encompass water meant for drinking, and to allow unlimited market access for European water companies in various locations abroad (2011). Barlow (2007) also asserts that European transnationals have been attempting to influence the US Congress to require public utilities to think seriously about privatization as a condition for receiving federal funding for water infrastructure.

Privatization Weaknesses

Over the past few decades, the water privatization model, including the water utility service sector, has taken a beating in public perception and quarterly margins. Starting in the 1990s, in terms of profitability, it was partially the long-term water service contracts in the Southern Hemisphere which required more capital investment than anticipated that resulted in an accrual of mass debt. During this decade, these transnationals were more likely to be confronted with costly investments, such as building infrastructure and acquiring equipment. As these entities perhaps did not initially understand the extent of the infrastructure needed in such regions, these undertakings cut into profit, and stock values plummeted. As a way to reduce debt load, with the help of the UN, World Bank, IMF, etc., many of these transnationals have subsequently transformed their services to a more ‘profitable management-oriented framework.’ These conglomerates now appear to be focused on long-term management contracts that require less investment and cleaner cash flows (Barlow, 2007; Public Citizen, 2011b).

While concession contract formats are still in existence in some places, lease and especially management arrangements now look to be most heavily pursued in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere. Such management contracts are deemed as ‘public–private partnerships.’ On the surface, public-private partnerships seem to be egalitarian; indications, however, suggest the private side of the relationship makes out in the deal. A critique raised has been that in these contracts, the public side is most often responsible for capital investments, including expensive water system infrastructure building, expansion, and maintenance (e.g. such as updating pipes and treatment plants). In this relationship, the private side provides a service -- overseeing and coordinating aspects of operations (Barlow, 2007; Public Citizen, 2011b). With little capital investment, the private sector looks to have engineered clear ways to derive high market returns over the life of the contract.

Around the world, groups have drawn much attention to the problems of water privatization. There is a strong tradition of focused criticism surrounding this issue in the poorest regions of the world. Water utility services provided by transnationals have been seen by critics in the Southern Hemisphere to result in decreased access, especially to those who can pay the least. As a goal is to extract the most profit possible, these entities have been criticized for cutting costs at every turn. Outcomes have been found to be increased rates and fees, degradation of water quality, subpar customer service, and a loss of local control and self-determination concerning something so basic to all life (Bakker, 2003, 2007; Castro, 2008; Cinar, 2009; Harvey, 2008; K’Akuma, 2006; Madaleno, 2007; Narsiah, 2008; Scott & Banister, 2008; Suleiman & Cars, 2010; Terhorst, 2008; Vilas, 2004; Yeboah, 2006). There are other dire by-products to water privatization. Unable to afford safe drinking water after additional service fees, in many regions people are forced to turn to streams and rivers, which has led to a drastic increase in instances of cholera and other water-borne illnesses (Bakker, 2003, 2007; Barlow, 2007; Castro, 2008). Ecological disasters also abound as many privatization schemes involve aggressive depletion of already-stressed aquifers and violent disruptions to the hydrologic cycle. This has only exacerbated the depletion of safe freshwater (Barlow, 2007).

In some places, anger over the deterioration of the quality of life following water privatization has led to well-publicized popular unrest. Famously, in 2000, the people of Cochabamba, Bolivia successfully demanded the dissolution of their private water contract, which had resulted in water-fees being tripled and halted services to those who could not pay. People who resorted to catching rainwater in barrels were reportedly even charged by the transnational for this act of desperation. When thousands of protesters took to the streets, they were confronted by military aggression that resulted in the death of a boy and the wounding of dozens. Cochabamba's water system is now run by an organization of community and government representatives. The transnational has since gone to the World Bank to seek \$25 million in lost compensation from Bolivia for the loss of the profit represented in that contract (Barlow, 2007).

A developing critique is forming among many in the North as well. In Indianapolis, the private contract signed by that municipality was found to have resulted in higher rates, billing problems, the cutting of benefits to long-standing water utility employees, frozen fire hydrants in winter, and overall customer dissatisfaction (Public Citizen, 2011b). People in Atlanta reportedly experienced a string of water-main breaks, higher bills, poor customer responsiveness, and reoccurring brown water 'boil' alerts (Jehl, 2003). Over the past few years, public critique has taken numerous forms, such as citizen action groups, organizations, and networks (e.g. public citizen.org, corporate europe.org, food and water watch.org). Documentary filmmakers have also taken up this issue, which has undoubtedly helped to enlarge critique (e.g. 'Flow,' 'Tapped,' 'Blue Gold'). As politicized teachers and students have for long been involved in finding ways to raise discussion on issues such as equity and democracy in classrooms (e.g. Bell, 2010; Collins & Cooper, 2005; Fassbinder, 2006; Giroux, 1990), engagement over water privatization is certainly taking place in countless spaces inside schools.

Given the growing resistance to water privatization and its inherent problems globally, how is it that this practice is growing? Many of these transnationals seem to have switched to the public-private management model in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Despite some public failure and growing resistance, most appear to be widening their focus to other areas in Europe, North America, and Australia, where there is relatively better existing infrastructure. 'Emerging markets' in China and Eastern Europe are also likely attractive due to their less strict environmental regulatory bodies. Many of these entities also look to continue to seek out contracts in the global South, as they are thought to exert increasing influence over WTO regulations and IMF and World Bank dealings. The US may be viewed as a solid and appealing market, as it is ideologically open to corporate solutions to public problems. After notable public failures in large cities in North America, this sector may be trending towards market share among smaller municipalities that are especially strapped for cash (Barlow, 2007; Public Citizen, 2011b). In this way, these transnationals can likely proceed under the radar screen as missteps in smaller cities receive less national and international attention. Considerable thought is also paid to the presentation of the corporate image.

Re-Branding the Corporate Image

Looking to be on track to make profits with the public-private partnership model, the water service utility transnationals have what appears to be highly calibrated and strategic public relations campaigns underway. These public relations campaigns are seemingly targeted on particularly those in the Northern hemisphere, because people in those nations have more relative power if they critique injustice around the world and at home. To this end, enter the new, 'socially responsible' water service transnational. It is not to be confused with the giant multinational

sweeping in through town and leaving in its wake the jarring switch from public to private in the blink of an eye (Saltman 2007; Klein, 2008). According to this new transnational, global responsibility begins with what is most important -- the local. This is a 'humble' and 'community-oriented' multinational. It is still a giant conglomerate, but it 'recasts' itself in each area it enters as in proportion to its immediate surroundings. It likes small towns. It listens to the needs of a municipality. It donates time and money to charitable causes, and at the same time, it draws upon 'global expertise' and resources to do its formal job. It wants to work alongside residents so 'all' can become 'partners' with the goal of co-creating and preserving 'sustainable communities.' Predictably, it loves schools.

Over the last decades, 'corporate social responsibility' has been increasingly embraced as a comprehensive way to conduct business by global conglomerates. This vision involves 'partnering' with areas where business is conducted and engaging in local community service and sponsorship opportunities. Just a few years back, the notion of 'corporate social responsibility,' 'corporate sustainability,' and 'social entrepreneurship' (often used interchangeably) were considered to be fads. Today, 'sustainability' rhetoric is a corporate requirement. Such rhetoric – with its less than genuine commitments to preserve the notion of public commons and civic engagement – is worded purposefully in such a way as to establish a veneer of kindness. Similar to the UN, World Bank, IMF etc., corporations have discovered that emphasizing environmental, social, and governmental (ESG) considerations in their core philosophy results in positive press, consumer loyalty, and value creation. A compassionate reputation translates into higher profits. A good reputation is especially important right now as tech-savvy human rights and environmental groups can be prone to create media blitzes around controversial business practices (Prieto-Carron, Lund-Thomsen, Chan, Muro, & Bhushan, 2006; Newell & Frynas, 2007; Ludescher & Mahsud, 2010; Finkel, 2011).

The United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF, and other international organizations have long turned to the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility – and its appearance of compassion -- as a way to establish credibility. These bodies latched on to the idea that the private sector can play a major part in reaching developmental objectives aimed at poverty reduction. Critics contend these powerful bodies have more accurately used a social responsibility discourse as way to justify the profit-oriented needs of transnationals. Paralleling this narrative, there has been of late a growing transformation among corporations to (re)present the practice of extracting revenue from the poorest on the planet through the selling of consumer goods and services, as a form of corporate responsibility. In this way, selling cell phones to those who are poor is actually empowering those who have been denied the tools needed to participate in the local and global economy. It is a humane gesture. Clinging to the notion of corporate responsibility, corporations can now generate profit while looking to help alleviate poverty. Partnerships with NGOs, developmental organizations, and local governments have been crucial in helping corporations expand new markets in these areas. In some business contexts, the poor remain an obstacle, such as in the diamond and gold mining industry. In other instances, those who are poor can be an opportunity (Prieto-Carron et al., 2006; Newell & Frynas, 2007; Ludescher & Mahsud, 2010), such as in the case of water service contracts in the Southern hemisphere (Barlow, 2007). Presenting this idea in this way to privileged progressives and indeed all in the Northern hemisphere likely safeguards against critique and clears the path to exploiting the poor further in the South.

Economists and business leaders such as Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank, have helped popularize a similar 'social business' ethos, and that too has been sweeping

business schools and think tanks throughout the world. Yunus and others like him are steadfast in the belief that markets can be used to solve problems created by the market. Yunus began his work by extending lines of microcredit to some in the poorest regions around the globe who otherwise could not secure bank loans. Although many of these loans have terms such as high interest and structural adjustments built-in in the case of default, overall, the popular press had heralded Yunus and others like him. Now instead of mobilizing to resist the unequal access to resources, the poor can participate in the benefits of capitalism too. In 1996, Yunus was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his endeavors (Engler, 2009).

In the West, the newest class of undergraduate students has opinions on global warming and social inequality. As a result, today, business students are said to be asking for courses in corporate social responsibility (Docksai, 2010). The Wharton school of business at the University of Pennsylvania, for instance, has developed a series of programs on social entrepreneurship that address this demand. New BS and MBA degree programs are geared towards sustainability, micro finance, and corporate social responsibility with a focus on making profit and promoting social change at the same time. In these courses, it is imaginable students learn corporations outperform their competitors by engaging in business strategies based on environmental stewardship involving high-profile and press-worthy ‘compassionate’ relationships. These relationships are likely based on the concept of goodwill, with ‘stakeholders’ such as government agencies, NGOs, community groups, trade associations, and higher education (Finkel, 2011).

At present, most transnational brands/industries likely live in fear of becoming the next ‘fur.’ Through the relentless and high impact resistance campaign and use of media on behalf of PETA, the fur industry was never able to make up lost ground in terms of public relations. When this occurred, other luxury industries arguably took note, and swiftly developed models of corporate practice that on paper sound steeped in social responsibility. For example, the diamond industry successfully waged a ‘conflict-free’ diamonds campaign in defense of mainstream exposés on ‘blood’ diamonds. Those representing ‘fair trade’ artists, coffee plantation owners, furniture makers, etc. also had jumped on this trend of relaying the impression of equal trade and power relations. Corporate public relations consultants and human resource departments across industries immediately locked on. When a corporation appears to be working to meet the needs of people in their local settings, it results in a positive ‘read.’ As argued by Prieto-Carron et al., (2006), Newell and Flynas (2007), and Ludescher and Mahsud (2010), philanthropic programs, environmental ‘stewardship’ proposals, partnerships based on ‘sustainability’ -- in other words, obtuse intentions to reinvigorate public commonality and civic participation -- is typical of this discourse. The socially responsible corporation that can use its vast resources, expertise, and ‘efficiency’ to enter a community ready to help is perhaps steadily the way transnational water utility companies are making make inroads in communities in the US and Northern hemisphere. These water service transnationals may be entering municipalities promising to create partnerships with communities in which all people – including school children -- are stakeholders in the shared goal of sustainability.

Curricular Materials and Learning Experiences

The transnational water service industry is involved in various forms of corporate outreach in communities and schools around the world, although initial research indicates this is happening more in the industrialized Northern hemisphere. Such forms of outreach also exist in the US, where it appears to be a practice in its beginning stages of development. In these Northern contexts, the global water utility service industry seems to be focusing on those who are young

through, among other methods, coordinating outreach program in schools; hosting field trips to water treatment centers, creating interactive websites geared towards youth; and, distributing curricular materials to classrooms. Barlow cites an instance in which the water privatization industry is directly involved in schools. In this example, a water bottle transnational corporation sponsors Water Education for Teachers [WET], an organization that creates school curricular materials on issues such as water safety and health and the functioning of watersheds. More than 180,000 teachers in over 20 countries have been trained to implement WET curriculum. Backing the World Bank and the World Water Council, WET sponsored the Children's World Water Forum at the 2006 Fourth World Water Forum, held in Mexico City (2007). It might be the case that very little by way of outreach materials are found focused on indebted populations in the Southern hemisphere, as presumably the postcolonial terms of World Bank/IMF structural adjustments obliterate the need to 'sell' such services in these communities.

This analysis involves a review of a limited sample of corporate materials and activities intended for K-12 students. It also does not present an investigation of the materials and activities as enacted. More comprehensive research is needed to capture a fuller understanding of a dimensional and key dynamic – such curriculum as it is thought about, imagined, experienced, responded to, and acted upon by students and teachers in unknown and unexpected ways. Given these limitations, the outcomes presented here are tentative, yet they are arguably also an important first foray into an otherwise unknown curricular area. In this initial exploration, it appears a few central messages intended for school children emerge. For example, in order to take control of the water scarcity crisis, a new, level-headed, conservation-oriented way of thinking must be adopted by people in communities throughout the world. Likewise, the concept that we should trust and appreciate corporate water specialists seems an underlying message. Missing in this discourse is the role transnational corporations have played in contributing to the crisis of the growing scarcity of available drinking water on the planet.

Privatized inroads in schooling are an ongoing trend in education. The successful transference of market principles to the domain of public schooling has relied on a simple strategy – the relentless attack on the image and reputation of schools. The No Child Left Behind [NCLB] policy, for instance, has been investigated as a colossal privatization regime, created to undermine school credibility. Sounding full-court alarm, schools have been 'exposed' as bloated, unaccountable, and out-of-control taxpayer sinkholes. Using circular logic, the 'failure' of public schooling has been positioned as a large cause of US economic decline. The shift from an industrial to an increasingly deregulated, service-consumption economy is glaringly omitted in these arguments. Also absent are the actual real problems confronted by public schools, such as underfunding, racial and social class sorting, and so forth. Once again, clearheaded business representatives are willing to 'do the right thing' by picking up the pieces and setting sober reform in motion. This order involves slashed public education budgets in favor of profit-driven reform, such as charter schools, additional testing, approved textbooks, sanctions for poorly performing cutting schools, and corporate sponsored curricular materials and activities (Saltman 2007, 2010).

The corporate influence in schools has been found to result in spaces structured ever more exclusively around pro-corporate messages and the diminishment of opportunities in which to raise critique. In spite of (and in reaction to) this *dénouement*, emancipatory educators remain integral to resistance. Critically engaged teachers and students have for long been involved in finding ways to raise important discussion on issues such as privatization, equity, and marginalization in classrooms (e.g. Bell, 2010; Collins & Cooper, 2005; Fassbinder, 2006; Giroux, 1990). Given the extent of public organizing around resistance to the privatization of water, once

again, it is easy to conceive that critical dialogue is taking place on this topic in spaces within many, many schools and classrooms. Notably, in discussions in college classrooms of my own, at least once a semester, a student talks about a particularly memorable secondary school teacher who created an opportunity for them and their fellow classmates to think critically about water privatization.

Nevertheless, this preliminary review of curriculum and educational activities sponsored by water utility transnationals indicates a continuation of the ongoing attempt by the private sector and its policy networks to use K-12 schooling as a modality by which to co-op the public imagination. When it comes to these transnationals, once a contract is signed with a municipality, they then may go into that area and disseminate messages with the intent to educate about the fragile state of the world's water resources and the importance of conservation. These corporate materials routinely present the idea that the youngest members in any community are the key to the future. For instance, one statement from a corporate website reveals that primary school students and even infants are the most important group(s) to reach. The missive looks to be that water is a precious resource, and starting from birth, children need to see themselves as partners in preserving the environment and water resources (Corporate Materials, 2011). By conditioning those in their most formative years to align with this thinking, they may more readily subscribe to the belief that individuals have misused water in the past, and this wasteful behavior has resulted in the current crisis. Another inference seems to be we should be thankful for highly skilled water experts and we should trust them.

The presence of these largest transnational water utility service conglomerates in schools throughout France and the UK has the impression of being remarkably heavy-handed. Some students in contract areas in these countries take trips to corporate water purification and treatment centers, typically as part of their classroom studies on ecology and the sciences. In the UK, one of these entities boasts of their 'award-winning education team,' which runs outreach programs in schools. We learn these programs are developed to support teachers in instructional areas in ways that align with national standards. An example of an outreach program in an elementary school would be corporate educators visiting students to teach them how to conduct a 'water audit' of their school. In the water audit lesson, students learn to measure and record water usage in their building. In so doing, students may acquire skills and problem-solving abilities. However, the larger narrative in which they participate may be one in which they see their school as wasteful and inefficient, thus feeding into the greater assault on public schooling and the public domain in general. In some cases, water utility service transnationals also build their own environmental education centers in which students come to them. Elementary and high school students on school field trips supposedly utilize the grounds and wetlands of these centers to learn about gardening, ecology, and recycling. In corporate literature, we learn water service educators draw on their connections with local officials, environmental agencies, and networks with other business partnerships in their work, and have contact with thousands of students each year (Corporate Materials, 2011). Again, an intended point appears to be students must take action to conserve and respect water in their schools and communities. By going to an off campus site to receive instruction, this may encourage students to think clearer and more appropriate and efficient solutions to the water crisis are found outside of public spaces.

Through the help of water service utility transnationals, in some cases, elementary school children in France have what looks to be a special opportunity to become part of the public-private partnership. In one example, a number of students are elected by their classmates to meet with teachers, government officials, and water service transnational representatives. During the sessions

the students learn about water and conservation issues. They are taught about the efficient way water is delivered to residents in their community. Under the guidance of corporate representatives, they visit water treatment plants, conduct experiments, and write in journals. During this process, they look to be gaining knowledge on the water scarcity crisis and the importance of preserving water, monitoring its quality, and making good use of it every day. They are encouraged to pass on what they learned to their classmates and families (Corporate Materials, 2011). Unsurprisingly, students are seemingly not exposed to a line of questioning regarding the logic or ethics of whether water utility services should be contracted for profit with corporations in the first place. Rather, they look to be encouraged to learn about the good work being done by experts. By taking part in this privileged opportunity, students conceivably come to believe the public side of the public-private ‘partnership’ is vital and powerful, and their voice counts.

While there may be fewer instances of transnational water services in school curriculums and activities in the US, there is an emerging presence in some communities. For example, one K-12 school in Oregon hosted a corporate-led ‘green’ school-wide roundtable. In this experience, students, school personnel, and families participated in hands-on workshops while attending seminars on topics such as watershed management, creative reuse, water quality, and gardening. High school students shared in a series of discussions and field trips to a water treatment plant, a wastewater treatment plant, and/or a storm water treatment facility. Acting as discussant and guide was a city representative and a corporate representative (Corporate Materials, 2011). Similar to the students in France, through this experience, these youth may learn they are an integrated member of the public-private transnational water partnership in their community, and that their voice has weight in this arrangement. Nowhere does it appear they question whether private corporations should at all be involved in public water systems.

At least one of the water service transnationals has an interactive website intended for early learners and beyond. One such website is dedicated to teaching about the important role water companies play in water management and water conservation to students ages 7 to 12. The animated website features smiling students gathered around a corporate mascot, a talking faucet. The site features instructional games, click on cartoons and photos, and places to learn about careers at this transnational (Corporate Materials, 2011). It may be the case the objective of this educational software is once again to teach children the crisis of water scarcity has resulted from wasteful practices on behalf of everyday people. Addressing this problem, we arguably learn, will require a serious commitment to conserve and respect water on the part of everyone, including primary school children.

In navigating this website, another lasting impression intended for students looks to be that drinking water at home is only possible because of a complex process involving numerous stages, such as filtration, screening, flocculation, sedimentation, chlorination, and so forth. Students are informed about the various stages of water delivery and wastewater treatment. Given the ‘highly specialized’ and ‘scientific’ nature of managing water systems presented, the communication here may be for students to focus on conservation and respecting water, and to trust experts to troubleshoot problems. Luckily for us, it seems, there are such highly trained specialists working with us and for us in our communities. We learn at every step along the way, corporate professionals make sure filters are clear and changed. Pipes require constant surveillance and proper maintenance with costly and scientific equipment. We are instructed, for instance, that the diameters of pipes in cities are quite narrow, and so in diagnosing and fixing problems, acute conditions require highly advanced knowledge. Some of the accompanying interactive cartoons feature corporate trucks and crews troubleshooting repairs. We also learn individual homes are

equipped with meters used to determine the amount of water used in that household, and this is how a water bill is determined. We gain knowledge of the importance of paying the water bill (Corporate Materials, 2011).

Related to the idea we should be appreciative of the advanced skills possessed by water service workers, an additional message in this website looks to be how dependent we are on water in everyday life. We come to see water is needed for life and it saves lives. We are made to think about the water that comes out of the faucet in our homes, schools, and shops; and how it is used to fill swimming pools. It is also used in hospitals, and it is needed by firefighters to put out burning buildings. Students are also presented with the idea that water is healthy for us, that we should drink 6-9 glasses a day, and growing all the food we consume requires water. It is pointed out that unfortunately, although three fourths of the surface of the earth is covered in water, most of it cannot be used, as it is in the form of seawater and glaciers. We are taught in some parts of the world water is scarce while in other areas it is abundant. In areas where water is scarce, we learn sometimes fights break out over water. Because of this, in over 300 places around the world there is a risk of war over water, in particular in areas in the Middle East and Africa. In some cases, fighting occurs between neighboring countries that rely upon water from the same source (Corporate Materials, 2011). Given all this information, it is easy to imagine the message is that it is crucial to conserve water and trust and appreciate the way water specialists help us and those around the world be healthy and safe. Their efforts, in a sense, are acts of kindness grounded in a sense of obligation and compassion for others. Again, absent in this discourse is the impact transnational companies have played in creating water scarcity in the first place, nor how they continue to pit people against each other by delivering services to those groups who can pay the most.

Some water utility service transnationals also distribute curricular materials to schools. One transnational disseminates the same set of curricular materials in contract areas in the form of a ‘water kit,’ with only slight changes made related to learning objectives of a given region, state, or province. This transnational has distributed over 20,000 water kits to schools in numerous countries, including the US. The water kit is described as a science education resource geared to teach 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students about water, the water cycle, and water treatment. It involves scores of non-sequential, hand-on activities and experiments. Each water kit comes with the chemicals, containers, and measuring devices needed to complete every experiment. It also includes posters illustrating the natural water cycle, the water treatment cycle, and freshwater availability per capita (Corporate Materials, 2011). With these materials, students arguably learn freshwater is not available equally in many parts of the world due to climate and topography, and once again, it must be conserved and respected. Through completing the experiments students perhaps also come to understand the advanced training required by water service personnel. By partaking in these activities, students may feel like valuable ‘partners’ in this process.

Upon initial, cursory analysis of the corporate materials and activities directed towards K-12 school children, the role transnational corporations have played in creating the problem of water scarcity is a nonissue. Instead, repeated messages embedded in these activities and materials seem to emerge. The crisis of water scarcity has resulted from the daily wasteful practices on behalf people; common sense, a change in individual behavior, and an openness to be guided towards new ways of thinking regarding conserving and respecting water are seemingly put forth as solutions in these materials and experiences; to help us be happy and safe, we can thankfully depend upon highly trained industry specialists and the skilled role they play in using their know how to deliver us this vital resource; these experts deserve our trust, and perhaps in the future we

can work in this industry too. Given this pattern of ideas, being so young and impressionable, students may learn to turn to the common sense, expertise, and compassionate leanings of the private sector (and away from the out-of-step and arrogant public sector) to solve problems. These findings, as explained, are limited, in terms of sample size and also in that they do not ponder curriculum/text as alive and students, teachers, and others as co-producers of meaning within a social-historical context and a particular cultural space. While providing much to think about, future research seeking to capture student and teacher understandings is required for a more complex understanding of these materials and forms of outreach. Such work is especially needed as underfunded schools are starved for curriculum materials and hands on resources, and increasingly turn to corporate sponsored materials to meet this need (Saltman 2007, 2010).

Conclusion

Given the global water crisis, in this analysis, I trace the shift from the notion of fresh water as a public good to a commodity to be privately owned and sold in the global marketplace. I briefly discuss the very different ways transnational water utility corporations enter communities in the Southern compared to Northern hemispheres (Goldman, 2006; Barlow & Clarke, 2003; Barlow, 2007; Public Citizen, 2011b), including attempts by these transnationals to re-brand their image after public failures. I then consider the particular strategies these conglomerates may use to seep into cities and towns in the North, including the US. Attention is placed on how this industry is becoming involved in K-12 schools in the form of sponsored curriculum and other education initiatives.

Water is not simply another commodity, in that all life is fundamentally dependent upon it. Public citizen outlines numerous reasons why we should all be involved in the fight against the privatization of water, which are worth outlining. In their view, the water privatization track record is overwhelmingly seen to result in reduced access of water to the poor. In most instances in which water has been privatized, in both the US and around the world, rates have increased. Because privatization is based on deriving profit, water quality has worsened as environmental standards are often compromised. In addition, private water contracts are typically made with governments spanning decades, thus forming monopoly-like conditions, which compromises service. As some water contracts are made behind closed doors, the very nature of this transaction leaves potential for corruption. The privatization of water is much more expensive for citizens compared to public operation, as people (now customers) pay increased rates for repairs, upgrades, and infrastructure maintenance through their monthly bills. As financing for a private entity is taxable, interest rates are likely high, as is the burden of paying executives salaries and dividends to shareholders – all of which falls to residents. Layoffs for existing utility workers also have been seen to take place after municipalities sign contracts with water corporations. Lastly, yet important to note, once signed, withdrawing from a water service contract can be so expensive it is almost impossible (2011a).

According to Public Citizen, another reason to oppose the privatization of water is the stage is being set for increased bulk water exports to regions that can pay the most. Some of this is already underway. For instance, they report the Metropolitan Water District of California signed a contract with a private water service that allows the company to leverage upwards of 30,000 acre – feet of water out annually to sell to other parties using public infrastructure. Private water companies also want to pump aquifers from the Mojave Desert. So much water has been diverted from the Colorado River and the Rio Grande, that they no longer reach the ocean, with obvious severe ecological impacts (2011a). Several companies are moreover experimenting with plastic

bag technologies that can be used to transport bulk water across oceans to reach the highest bidder (Barlow, 2007).

In the attempt to normalize or naturalize the role private service providers play in a democracy, neoconservative policies have for long relied upon the tactic of pitting the relatively powerless against each other, so that many align with political ideologies that do not represent their interests. For example, getting populations to denigrate public teachers and schools as lazy and unaccountable (Hill, 2006). In the case of water and the depletion of water resources, water misuse and population growth in the Southern hemisphere is blamed. At the same time, tap water continues to be strategically presented in the mainstream media as dangerous, while bottled water companies saturate communities with ads promoting the health, safety, and purity of their water. To this end, people come to question the role government plays in protecting them, and they are glad to turn the role over to the efficiency and rational thinking of the private sector (Barlow, 2007). With its commitment to ‘social responsibility,’ involving vague and insincere intentions to preserve public commons and civic engagement, the corporation presents as acting out of a space of compassion and generosity (e.g. Saltman, 2010). Based on an initial analysis, this seems to be what school children are encouraged to think by curricular materials and experiences sponsored by the transnational water utility service industry.

In the curricular materials and experiences under investigation, the attention of students is likely grabbed by the enormity of the global water crisis. As argued in the literature, crisis situations in general provide ideal opportunities for corporations to transform the public into the private. This is desirable, as the end result in most cases is market share growth and optimized returns. For example, in the instances of both Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq wars, in the direct aftermath, many were left shaken, disoriented, and stunned. Many arguably felt a sense of collective relief when the rational, efficient, and level-headed thinking of the private sector swooped in to restore order and sanity. Disasters provide contexts for such enormous structural and philosophical realignments to happen overnight. The recalibration often happens so swiftly that many may not know it took place until after the fact. Corporate entities seemingly play on this advantage. The motivation for such transformation is clearly bound up in the core impulse of neoliberalism. In this ethos, state regulation is to be dismantled, trade laws are to be liberalized, and foreign investment is to be encouraged -- all with the expressed purpose of ‘opening up’ any potential space to the free reign of the market (Saltman, 2007; Klein, 2008). Once in town, however, corporations may earn trust, especially among school children, with ‘social responsibility’ -- involving a heavy, yet ‘gentle,’ slight-of-hand.

While water service transnationals may be attempting to shape the way school children, families, and communities relate to water, others are as well. Vandana Shiva, a noted advocate for local water rights and ‘public–public’ partnerships to protect water sources, also calls upon the creation of a ‘water culture.’ Her version is quite different from the corporate vision, which she argues is there to put in force ‘water illiteracy’ and to create and legitimize a ‘water dictatorship.’ Her understanding of water culture is based on the notion of respect, in which there is an order much higher than the one sharply imposed upon communities by the WTO and IMF. Shiva argues the world is not for sale, where all is to be pulled off the shelves. This is why, she contends, we need to encourage a water culture, or ‘consciousness of water.’ In her vision, this involves coming to realize we are all an integral part of the water cycle; an understanding that the planet, all life forms, and ourselves are mostly made of water; and to appreciate that there is a history and balance within all of this that needs to be nurtured. In this thinking, the lurching mechanisms used to capture water and lug it elsewhere, would be unthinkable (Shiva, 2002; Opel, 2008).

Perhaps because the issue of water privatization is so real, so vivid, and so potentially encompassing for all, this topic will have traction among students and teachers. This problem cannot be solved by critical teachers alone, and must also involve a network of politicians, community leaders, and others with privilege. Teachers, students, and entire communities must ask fundamental questions, such as who owns water? Should anyone own water? Should water be privatized? What does water privatization really mean? What related to this issue might be taking place within our community? How come people are shielded from this information? Who is doing the shielding, and why? What are the consequences of water privatization in the both short and long-term? Is water an infinite resource? By controlling who has access to water, corporations have unprecedented power over every single life form on this planet. Given humans are mostly made of water, and corporations increasingly own world water sources, corporations are increasingly within us, part of us. We are indebted. As they always have (especially from the perspective of those in the Southern hemisphere), the corporation now increasingly defines responses to global crisis, increasingly is allowed to create a new ethics, and increasingly writes the future.

However, as growing critical voices regarding water privatization demonstrate, when people experience this form of corporate ‘social responsibility,’ many do not want it anymore. They want instead their public spaces, their voices, and their future. As mentioned, critically orientated educators have for long been working to create opportunities in schools to open up dialogue and debate on fundamental issues that are inherent to the concept of ‘democracy,’ including all of the promise it holds (e.g. Bell, 2010; Collins & Cooper, 2005; Fassbinder, 2006; Giroux, 1990). When students share stories in college classes I teach about the high school teacher who got her/him and peers to think about water privatization, such narrations are habitually nuanced with a sense of respect and gratitude for that intellectual who pushed them to engage with the complex and crucial. Upon hearing these stories, other college students often say they wish they too were entrusted to think about this issue. A sense of wistfulness and loss for all those conversations that did not happen in their K-12 experiences, is from my view, detectable. Likely under-resourced and under intense pressure to stick to market-aligned curriculum, critical educators who dare to ask difficult questions with students – such as those who carefully prepared students in classes I teach -- need to be protected, supported, and joined. Given the sheer political and economic power of the transnational water privatization industry and its responsive policy networks, much can be learned from teachers and critical individuals from other areas who refuse to give up or in to lesser versions of ‘democracy.’

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