

ANDREA MUEHLEBACH. *A VITAL FRONTIER: WATER INSURGENCIES IN EUROPE.* DURHAM: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS 2023. 274 P. ISBN: 9781478019831

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One in four people cannot access safe drinking water. Nearly one in two people cannot access 'safely managed sanitation' (UNESCO 2023: 2). Climate change, armed conflict, economic inequality and crumbling infrastructures have fueled devastating disparities in access to water. As the world faces extreme water scarcity, can anyone truly 'own' water?

In *A Vital Frontier: Water Insurgencies in Europe*, Andrea Muehlebach, Professor of Maritime Anthropology and Cultures of Water at the University of Bremen, chronicles popular resistance to water privatization across Europe, exploring the 'frontiers' of water politics and ownership (3). In richly-detailed, ethnographic case studies across Italy, Ireland, and Germany, Muehlebach argues that contemporary resistance movements to water privatization challenge existing notions of democracy, law, property, and 'value' (33-34) – and the political and economic ideologies that sustain them. By 'conceptualizing these fault lines' where water's financialization encounters resistance as a frontier, '[she] insist[s] on financialization's contingency and volatility... at this frontier, the extraction of wealth from life is met with a resounding affirmation of life as the only form of wealth' (12). As in the Italian water movement, water is revalued as a '*bene comune* (a commons) that ought to be governed democratically and outside of the logic of profit' (47) – a life-giving resource that cannot be bought and sold as a product on the private market.

Muehlebach is an engaging and persuasive writer. Her prose integrates social and economic history, from the 19th-century waterways of Naples (40) and Berlin (108) to British colonial restrictions on Irish water access (75). Muehlebach weaves these histories with rich and vivid ethnographic encounters, from the 'meter fairies' vandalizing Ireland's water meters (88) to German parliamentary officials (117). She is persistently sympathetic to the aims and activities of the water mobilization movements, taking an 'engaged' approach to her anthropological inquiry. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner, defending the 'engaged turn' in anthropology, writes that 'to take an engaged stance does not in any way conflict with an adherence to the principles of accuracy, evidentiary support, and truth which are the basis of any kind of scholarly or scientific work' (2019: 1). Muehlebach's thoroughly researched arguments support that assertion.

Though not the central concern of her text, the resistance movements Muehlebach describes act in the shadow of the climate crisis. Climate change has dramatically escalated humanity's water crisis and the stakes of the debate over water's privatization – as well as created financial incentives for private investment in water (9). But Muehlebach reminds us that 'humans are not free to decide whether or not to use water' (17). She concludes, 'Water

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movements offer us ways to think outside of the proprietary logics wrought out of recurrent enclosure, challenging us to ask what a relation to the world as inappropriable would look like' (177). Notably, the demonstrations and political mobilizations in Italy, Ireland, and Germany occur in social and political contexts that permit political mobilization. Likewise, the resistance Muehlebach chronicles, from a practical perspective, may be ill-suited to the climate emergency, where acute crises threaten access to water. Future research might investigate alternative forms of resistance in such contexts. Nevertheless, in a world riven by socioeconomic inequality, and on a planet enduring escalating wildfires, warming temperatures, droughts and natural disasters, water mobilization efforts prod us to imagine a different future, one that protects the natural resources human activity has compromised.

Bibliography

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