

Finding common(s) ground in the fight for water remunicipalization

David A. McDonald*

Abstract After three decades of privatization, cities around the world are taking water services back under public management and control. The pace of this remunicipalization appears to be growing, with an expanding international movement in favour of publicly-managed water. Does this remunicipalization trend fit with demands for a 'water commons'? Yes and no. Radically different perspectives on what constitutes remunicipalization, combined with an equally diverse set of practices and ideologies on a water commons, denies any easy comparison. Experiences of remunicipalization can run from authoritarian governments reclaiming water for nationalistic control of key resources to radical anti-capitalist politics. So too do notions of water commons cover a broad ideological gamut. The aim of this article is to identify and compare the diverse theoretical underpinnings of water remunicipalization and water commons, seeking points of overlap as well as contradiction. The comparisons reveal multiple points of intersection, and many actually-existing examples of cooperation, but these points of connection also serve to highlight larger ideological chasms in the anti-privatization water movement. In the end, it is less about the labels applied to any particular water policy framework than the philosophical content that shapes its motives and outcomes. In this regard, the terms 'water commons' and 'remunicipalization' serve to obfuscate a varied and sometimes contradictory set of political interventions, necessitating a sharper analytical account of the objectives and actors behind any water initiatives using these names.

*Address for correspondence: David A. McDonald, Global Development Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada K7L 3N6. email: dm23@queensu.ca

Introduction

After three decades of privatization, cities around the world are taking water services back under public management and control. There have been at least 267 cases of water remunicipalization in 37 countries since 2005, affecting more than 100 million people (Kishimoto and Petitjean, 2017). The pace of remunicipalization appears to be growing, with an expanding international movement in favour of publicly-managed water.

This trend prompted the Chair of *Eau de Paris* (which remunicipalized in 2010) to claim that ‘a counter-attack is underway and is spreading throughout the world...giving rise to a new generation of public companies that are beginning to play a stronger role in the water sector’ (Blauel, 2015, 2). The majority of remunicipalization has thus far occurred in two countries – France and the USA – but it is a truly global phenomenon, including cities as diverse as Accra (Ghana), Almaty (Kazakhstan), Antalya (Turkey), Budapest (Hungary), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Conakry (Guinea), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and La Paz (Bolivia). Half of all cases have occurred since 2010, suggesting an acceleration of interest (Lobina, 2015).

Does this remunicipalization trend fit with demands for a ‘water commons’? Yes and no. Radically different perspectives on what constitutes remunicipalization, combined with an equally diverse set of practices and ideologies on a water commons, denies any easy comparison. Synergies can be found, but so too can irreconcilable differences.

Indeed, it is this broad spectrum of ideas, and the profoundly different ways in which remunicipalization and water commons are interpreted, that constitute their most remarkable comparative feature. As we shall see below, experiences of remunicipalization can run from authoritarian governments reclaiming water for nationalistic control of key resources to radical anti-capitalist politics. So too do notions of water commons cover a broad ideological gamut. As Caffentzis and Federici (2014, i92) note in a previous Special Issue on the commons in this journal, ‘commons’ is becoming a ubiquitous presence in the political, economic and even real estate language of our time. Left and Right, neo-liberals and neo-Keynesians, conservatives and anarchists use the concept in their political interventions’ (see also McDermott, 2014).

The aim of this article is to identify and compare the diverse theoretical underpinnings of water remunicipalization and water commons, seeking points of overlap as well as contradiction. I do this via a comparison of water commons with a typology of water remunicipalization developed previously by this author (McDonald, 2018a). The comparisons reveal multiple points of intersection, and many actually-existing examples of

cooperation, but these points of connection also serve to highlight larger ideological chasms in the anti-privatization water movement.

In the end, it is less about the labels applied to any particular water policy framework than the philosophical content that shapes its motives and outcomes. In this regard, the terms ‘water commons’ and ‘remunicipalization’ serve to obfuscate a varied and sometimes contradictory set of political interventions, necessitating a sharper analytical account of the objectives and actors behind any water initiatives using these names. This is not to suggest that water activists and policy makers abandon the terms altogether, but rather that they are clearer about the type of remunicipalization or commons they want to see, and more realistic about the potentials for sustainable collaboration across a broad ideological spectrum.

The article begins with a brief review of the history of remunicipalization in the water sector, followed by a summary of five different remunicipalization types. I then assess how (and if) different notions of a water commons fit within these remunicipalization typologies, and conclude with some thoughts on how progressive remunicipalization and water commons activists might work together to develop alternatives to water privatization.

What is water remunicipalization?

Different terms have been used to describe remunicipalization in the water sector, including de-privatization, reclaiming public services, taking services back in public hands, in-sourcing and social re-appropriation, some of which reflect the different institutional and ideological characteristics that we shall explore below. I have opted for the (admittedly inelegant) term remunicipalization because most water services are in fact operated by municipal governments at the local level, and because it has become the most widely used idiom in the literature on this topic.

It should be noted, however, that some cases of remunicipalization are taking place at the national level, and are technically cases of *renationalization* (e.g. Uruguay). In other instances, water services are being made public for the first time, in which case the appropriate term is *municipalization* (e.g. Missoula, in the USA, which made its water services public for the first time in its history in 2017). And, as we shall see, some demands for public water do not include the state at all, with activists rejecting municipal government control, insisting instead on community management. In these cases, (re)municipalization is a misnomer, although these initiatives tend to get lumped under the same terminological banner.

It is also important to note that remunicipalization is not always intentional. There are many instances where policy makers would have preferred to have retained private service provision but are forced to remunicipalize because of an insufficient number of private-sector bidders for a contract. One example is that of Hamilton, Canada, where, in 2004, efforts to renew a private contract failed because there were no companies willing to bid on what were deemed to be overly restrictive contract conditions, obliging the municipality to bring water services back in-house, against the ideological inclinations of its elected officials (Ohemeng and Grant, 2008; González-Gómez, García-Rubio, González-Martínez, 2014). In other cases, private firms are unwilling to bid on what they see to be unprofitable contracts (as occurred in Dar es Salaam (Pigeon, 2012b)). There are also examples of private companies ending contracts early, compelling governments to remunicipalize. Such was the case in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2000, when a private consortium headed by French multinational Suez ended its contract with the city prematurely due to macroeconomic instability in the country and a frustration with its lack of profits (Azipiazu and Castro 2012, de Gouvello, Lentini, Brenner, 2012).

Having said that, the majority of remunicipalizations are intentional, with governments and communities ending contracts with private water operators early or not renewing them when they expire. Many of these remunicipalizations are driven by dissatisfaction with private-sector performance, including concerns with rising costs to consumers, worsening service quality, non-achievement of infrastructure promises, public mistrust of private companies, anti-trust activities on the part of large private utilities, and corruption (Estache and Grifell-Tatjé, 2010; FWW, 2010; Warner, 2010; Wollmann *et al.*, 2010; Valdovinos, 2012; Hall, Lobina, Motte, 2005, 2010, 2013; Le Strat, 2014; Kishimoto and Petitjean, 2017).

In other cases, municipalities may be satisfied with the quality of private service but choose to remunicipalize because of the high costs of monitoring and regulating private contracts. This is true of large, long-term concessions as well as small, short-term contracts, all of which require sophisticated and expensive regulatory management (if they are to be done well). Far from reducing the costs and complications of service delivery, many municipalities are discovering that contracting out requires costly teams of lawyers and bureaucrats, reducing or even reversing potential efficiency gains (Nickson and Vargas, 2002; Bel, Fageda, Warner, 2010; Wu and Ching, 2013; Le Strat, 2014).

Different Types of Remunicipalization

But this shared dissatisfaction with the high costs and poor performance of privatization hides a much more diverse set of remunicipalization ideologies. The typologies sketched out below are a summary of these different schools of thought, with each description followed by an analysis of how it matches up with debates on the water commons. Some of these matches are readily apparent; others less so, in part because of the often fuzzy articulations of both remunicipalization and water commons in the literature and activism on these topics.

The analysis reveals considerable overlaps between the two concepts, but my intent is not to establish a definitive account of how and why water commons maps on to remunicipalization, or to suggest an immovable set of comparative boxes. My aim is to highlight hitherto under-conceptualized intersections – as well as tensions – and to emphasize the need for more empirical and theoretical clarity in both the remunicipalization and water commons literature. As such, the analysis is intended for heuristic purposes, with the hope that it can contribute to a clearer sense of how and why progressive forms of remunicipalization and water commons might be better brought together in the fight against water privatization.

Autocratic state capitalism

I start with the most problematic form of water remunicipalization, labelled autocratic state capitalism to denote instances where the reversal of privatization is undertaken by relatively undemocratic, but market-oriented, governments as part of a larger shift back towards state control of strategic sectors and enterprises in a capitalist economy. In these cases, the remunicipalization of water is driven as much by political and social objectives as economic ones, ranging from attempts to enhance national sovereignty to regulating ethnic minorities.

In some respects, this is an old storyline, with the control of water being at the heart of many different forms of ‘despotic’ regimes over the centuries, with ‘unaccountable, unregulated and, above all, undemocratic’ forms of state water governance intended to enhance control by a ruling elite (Strang, 2016, 294). What makes this particular form of water autocracy different is its grounding in state capitalism and its use of commercialized management techniques, with publicly-owned water intended to enhance market growth at the same time as it extends socio-political control. As such, this form of remunicipalization is not necessarily anti-privatization in its orientation. Rather, it can be seen as a strategic reversal of privatization, under certain conditions, with the aim of achieving targeted social goals while expanding market-like operational characteristics such as full cost

recovery and financially-driven performance indicators to enhance other market functions in the economy.

Documented examples include Malaysia (Pigeon, 2012a; Teo, 2014; Padfield *et al.*, 2016) and Hungary (Horváth, 2016) but there are other possible instances of autocratic forms of remunicipalization which have yet to be researched, including cases in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Mali and Guinea (Lobina, 2015). These cases constitute a relatively small percentage of known remunicipalizations, but with the rise of state capitalism around the world the figures could grow.

The links between authoritarian forms of remunicipalization and a water commons are (thankfully) weak, and I am not aware of any self-proclaimed water commons movement that associates itself with such an ideology. Nevertheless, the potential for ethnic nationalism to animate a water commons discourse is not entirely absent. While many water commons are socially diverse entities whose members are 'differentiated by ownership rights, gender, status or ethnic group' (Sanchis-Ibor, Boelens, García-Mollá, 2017, 39), others are founded on place-based, culturally-exclusive forms of knowledge grounded in ethnic norms (Atran and Medin, 1997; Bowers, 2006). These highly localized practices do not always scale up to a national level, but ethnic and racial identities have been invoked by authoritarian regimes in the past to justify particular forms of water governance (Swyngedouw, 2007). Oliveira Salazar, the former dictator of Portugal, for example, would cite the 'traditional values' of Portuguese women gathering around water fountains as a validation of his government's cultural agenda (with the additional aim of keeping women occupied by menial tasks) (Saraiva, Schmidt, Pato, 2014, 7). In a more contemporary vein, far-right political groups in Bulgaria are demanding that water services in Sofia be returned to public hands because they associate water management with the revival of traditional Bulgarian cultural practices (Medarov, 2014). The language of a water commons is not being employed in this case, but with ethnic fundamentalism at the heart of a larger political project there is nothing to prevent the notion of a shared (if restricted) commons being taken up for this purpose.

Market managerialism

A second category of remunicipalization is also aimed at promoting markets and advancing capital accumulation, but in these cases the rationale for putting water back into state hands is more narrowly economic, intended to enhance the efficiency of service provision. Grounded in a neo-Keynesian reading of context-specific market failures (e.g. insufficient competition, lack of regulatory capacity on the part of the state), private-sector

service delivery is seen to be less efficacious than state delivery, creating a drag on the economy as a whole (Stiglitz, 1991). In these cases, remunicipalization is seen as a necessary (if temporary) measure to reduce operating costs and ensure sufficient investment in services to expand local production and consumption.

But it is a specific type of government that is expected here: an entrepreneurial state with cost recovery, internal competition and marketized forms of managerial incentives guiding their operation. These forms of remunicipalization can be seen as part of a broader shift towards 'new public management' (and its more recent iterations (Osborne, 2006)), resulting in a 'broadening and blurring of the 'frontier' between the public and private sectors', combined with a 'shift in value priorities away from universalism, equity, security and resilience towards efficiency and individualism' (Pollitt, 2003, 27). Remunicipalized water services driven by this logic can be characterized as quasi-commercial entities, focusing on market-based performance indicators, a 'preference for more specialized, 'lean', 'flat' and autonomous organizational forms', and a 'widespread substitution of contract or contract-like relationships for hierarchical relationships' (Pollitt, 2003, 27). They may be public in name, but these highly marketized forms of remunicipalization can serve to deepen, not weaken, the commercialization of water, while at the same time attacking the perceived failures of Keynesian-era welfarism (Clarke *et al.*, 2007; van Rooyen and Hall, 2007; Magdahl, 2012).

An example of such remunicipalization is that of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. After a brief and disastrous experience with a private concession in 2003, the World Bank reversed its policy recommendations to the Tanzanian government, promoting instead the creation of a new public water operator in 2005. The Dar es Salaam Water and Sewerage Corporation has since managed to extend coverage and improve some aspects of service delivery – 'proving that public water services can be managed well by the state, and can outperform the private sector in many ways' – but the newly corporatized entity has become much more market-oriented than before, enforcing cost recovery on the poor and 'failing to meet its obligations in the lowest income areas of the city' (Pigeon, 2012b, 41).

These forms of remunicipalization are most common in Africa (where the World Bank and other neoliberal donor agencies remain influential) and the USA (where national surveys with city managers consistently show 'cost savings' to be the primary motive for moving back to public ownership (Warner and Hefetz, 2012; Warner 2016)). Whether this is merely bureaucratic pragmatism – as opposed to an explicit form of neoliberal ideology – is unclear, but the emphasis on marketized forms of

remunicipalization in the USA is strong, and may continue to grow there and elsewhere as privatization failures force pro-market governments to seek commercialized in-house alternatives.

Overlaps with a market-oriented commons literature are evident here as well, with a widespread embrace of commons language by neoliberal policy-making institutions such as the [World Bank \(2006, 1, 5\)](#), which wants to ‘protect and improve the global commons’ via the ‘transfer of financial resources and environmentally friendly technologies, technical assistance, and development of markets for environmental goods and services’. They argue that ‘many of the practices that must be changed, many of the resources that must be employed, and many of the relevant technologies that must be applied to protect and improve the global commons are in the private sector province.’ The Global Water Initiative – a partnership of the World Economic Forum, Coca-Cola, Dow Chemicals and other corporate and multilateral agencies – is also keen to manage the ‘water commons’ with market tools and entrepreneurial incentives (see www.weforum.org/projects/global-water-initiative).

A vigorous entrepreneurial literature on the commons has also emerged to support these ideas, arguing that communal decision-making should not shut out the market but rather find a middle ground between the state and market forces that work to protect commons resources. [Barnes \(2006, xvi\)](#), for example, argues for a Capitalism 3.0 that ‘assigns new property rights to commons trusts, builds commons infrastructure, and spawns and new class of genuine co-owners’. In time, he argues, ‘corporations accept the commons as their business partner... [and] find they can still make profits’ (see also [Barnes, 2011](#)).

Social democratic

A third type of remunicipalization can be broadly defined as social democratic. This is the most frequent (and most celebrated) of the five categories, representing the bulk of water remunicipalization in Western Europe and Latin America ([Kishimoto and Petitjean, 2017](#)). In general, these types of water remunicipalization involve more robust state intervention than the marketized forms of remunicipalization outlined above. They also tend to have explicit aims of promoting social, economic and environmental justice. Cost-reflexive pricing and other market-management tools may be employed in some aspects of water management, but they are typically combined with a commitment to challenging the hyper-commodification of privatization and advancing values of water beyond its marginal price. There also tends to be a strong commitment to equity via cross-subsidization and ensuring better access to water services across a range of social, spatial and economic divides.

These broad social democratic principles are captured in an excerpt from the 'Declaration for the Public Management of Water' signed by the Mayors of Madrid, Barcelona and eight other Spanish cities in November 2016 ([Cities for Public Water, 2016](#)), which insists that water must 'necessarily be public' and 'promote new forms of social control that guarantee transparency, information, accountability and effective citizen participation....As a result, we reject the privatization of the integral urban water cycle services and we support the re-municipalisation process'.

Similar sentiments can be found within the remunicipalization movement in France. According to [Lime \(2015, 63–4\)](#), the shift back to public water has rejuvenated a new commitment to publicness throughout the country: 'We have found that employees (if not top executives) are generally willing to join remunicipalised operators. They tend to appreciate the fact that their work becomes more focused on public service values and the common good, which are often undermined by private operators' fixation with profitability and market competition.' Paris is the best known example, having reverted back to public ownership in 2010. Since then, *Eau de Paris* has advanced gender equity in the workplace, improved the protection of upstream water resources through partnerships with farmers, and developed public–public partnerships with service providers in Morocco, Mauritania and Cambodia ([Pigeon, 2012c](#); [Sinaï, 2014](#); [Petitjean, 2015](#)).

It is here that many in the water commons movement will see a strong political affinity with remunicipalization, with a shared belief in collaborative, equity-oriented, ecological and more horizontalist forms of water management. The organization *On the Commons* (nd), for example, 'seeks to transform society's decision-making about water toward participatory, democratic, community-centered systems that value equity and sustainability.' Similarly, the *European Water Movement's* goals are to 'reinforce the recognition of water as a commons...founded on the democratic participation of citizens and of workers' ([europeanwater.org](#)). And the *Milwaukee Water Commons* aims to 'promote stewardship of, equitable access to and shared decision-making for our common waters' ([milwaukeewatercommons.org](#)). Similar language can be found in academic literature on the topic ([Baland and Francois, 2005](#); [Anderson et al., 2016](#)).

This affinity applies in reverse, with many social democratic remunicipalization movements employing the same language as that of a water commons. The Spanish Mayors' remunicipalization declaration cited above ([Cities for Public Water, 2016](#)), for example, states that 'We believe water and its associated ecosystems are a common good that cannot be appropriated for the benefit of private interest'. Overlaps can also be found in social democratic struggles for water remunicipalization and a water

commons in Germany, Uruguay, Italy and Bolivia (Olivera and Lewis, 2004; Fattori, 2013; Mazzoni and Cicognani, 2013; Becker, Beveridge, Naumann, 2015).

It is important to note, however, that these social democratic forms of remunicipalization and commons are not explicitly anti-market. Reclaimed municipal water systems and social democratic forms of water commons management operate within a broader capitalist framework. And while it is true that some social democratic efforts have achieved significant improvements in equity, transparency and environmental sustainability, critics of such welfarist approaches to distribution argue that they are not able to reverse the broader commodification process or fundamentally alter socio-economic dynamics on their own (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Williams, 2005). Uruguay's renationalized water system, for example, remains captured by corporatist politics, with social movements having been 'subsumed under the left government's political project, which prioritizes international trade and continues the corporatist tradition of the Uruguayan state, thus limiting the scope of reform and restricting participation by civil society and the water sector trade union' (Terhorst, Olivera, Dwinell, 2013, 60–1).

Berlin is another example of both the achievements and the limitations of social democratic reform. A referendum on remunicipalization garnered more than 660,000 signatures from city residents, demanding greater transparency and equity from a public water provider, but legal wrangling and pressure from private capital forced the municipality to buy back the private shares of water providers at a cost of 30 billion Euros. This re-acquisition of public assets will be paid for through higher water bills for the next 30 years, 'cast[ing] doubt on the sustainability of water operations [and] threatening to undermine the aspirations of the Berlin Water Table for affordable and socially equitable charges' (Lobina, 2015, 155).

Anti-capitalist

There are also proponents of remunicipalization that are driven by more explicitly anti-capitalist sentiments. These groups share many of the same water governance goals as their social democratic counterparts – e.g. better equity and enhanced democratic control – but in theoretical terms they reject the possibility of a long-term reconciliation between water justice and capitalism, pointing to the many ways in which market economies colonize our broader lifeworlds (Williams, 2005; Ioris, 2007). While prominent in many remunicipalization debates, these voices are seldom in the ascendancy and there are no actual examples of anti-capitalist forms of remunicipalization; not surprising in a world of (neo)liberal hegemony. These voices are also fragmented in their demands, struggling to find a unified

vision of what a 'socialist' water project might look like, driven as much by a rejection of old-style communisms as they are by a denunciation of the market. A growing commitment to grassroots voices, transparent decision-making and smaller-scale infrastructure development provides some cohesiveness to this grouping, but as with anti-capitalist political movements more broadly, there is as much that pulls them apart as binds them together when it comes to (re)building public water (Tormey, 2012).

In practical terms, though, many anti-capitalist proponents of remunicipalization work strategically within existing state apparatuses, pushing for staged reform. *Barcelona en Comú*, the citizens' coalition that won the Mayoral elections in Barcelona in 2015 with the backing of several leftwing political parties, is an example. While its demands and tactics for remunicipalization have been largely social democratic in nature, there remain strong anti-capitalist voices within the broader coalition (Charnock, 2017).

Just how effective such strategic engagement can be for anti-capitalist voices remains to be seen, although Bolivia's experience on this front is not an encouraging one. The 'water wars' of the early 2000s brought together an eclectic coalition of organizations in the struggle to oust Bechtel from Cochabamba, many of which were grounded in radical anti-market politics (Olivera and Lewis, 2004), but these anti-capitalist voices have struggled to make a definitive difference on the ground when it comes to the actual restructuring of the new public water operator, despite a national government that claims to be socialist. Post-privatization water services in Cochabamba are a hodgepodge of neoliberal logic, bureaucratized decision-making and social democratic reform, with little in the way of explicit anti-capitalist policies or action (Spronk and Webber, 2007; Cameron and Hershberg, 2010; Terhorst, Olivera, Dwinell, 2013).

There are parallels here with the anti-capitalist tradition on the commons. Hardt and Negri (2009, 7), for example, point to the 'the power of property concentrated in the hands of the few, the need for the majority to sell their labour-power to maintain themselves, and the exclusion of large portions of the global population even from these circuits of exploitation,' all of which dissolve social relations and make the building of a market-friendly commons impossible. Capitalism is seen to be not only incompatible with a sustainable commons but the primary reason for its destruction (Harvey, 2011; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Giacomini *et al.*, 2018). As a result, it is not unusual to find anti-capitalist demands for remunicipalization and anti-capitalist demands for a water commons used interchangeably in activist circles. The details of what a non-marketized water commons should look like are as diverse and varied as those for non-marketized forms of remunicipalization, however, with similar types of

coalition building and compromise, serving to marginalize most anti-capitalist commons voices in practice.

Autonomous

Lastly, we look at what I refer to as autonomous forms of remunicipalization: those that reject both capitalist and socialist forms of water governance while at the same time distinguishing themselves from other forms of remunicipalization via their emphasis on community-driven water solutions grounded in a local socio-ecological context with no direct state involvement (Heller *et al.*, 2007; Laurie and Crespo, 2007; Driessen, 2008; Gorostiza, March, Sauri, 2013; González-Gómez, García-Rubio, González-Martínez, 2014).

As noted earlier, these are not remunicipalization movements per se, given that they are opposed to all forms of statist water delivery regardless of the state's ideological orientation. But as with their (state-oriented) anti-capitalist cousins, proponents of autonomous forms of water provision tend to work in broad coalitions of organizations pushing for progressive forms of 'public' water services, and often operate under a remunicipalization banner.

There are no actual cases of autonomous remunicipalization – in part because of the inherent contradictions associated with state control – but these autonomous voices are influential in remunicipalization networks nonetheless, particularly in Latin America and Europe (though seldom in the ascendancy) (Spronk, Crespo, Olivera, 2012; Mazzoni and Cicognani, 2013; Bélanger, Spronk, Murray, 2016). Bolivia once again serves as a useful example. Peri-urban communities were an important part of the fight to reclaim public water in Cochabamba but then rejected municipal control because they wanted to reclaim their usufruct rights to water, a form of collective management based on social agreements negotiated and renegotiated over time known as *usos y costumbres* (uses and customs) (Boelens, Bustamante, Perreault, 2010; Terhorst, Olivera, Dwinell, 2013; Marston, 2015). Similar dynamics can be found in rural areas of Mexico, where residents are opposed to privatization but are equally troubled by the notion of municipally-run services. As Frenk (2018, np) explains, many rural residents think that municipal government procedures 'rule out participation by local residents and instead foster clientelism and corruption'. In these cases, (re)municipalization is a dirty word.

The fit here with autonomous notions of a commons are strong. Esteva (2014, i149), for example, laments the hierarchical economism of capitalism and socialism, arguing that efforts to create a commons offers a 'radical escape from the intellectual prison of the dismal science and from the continual aggression and encroachment by economic forces to which they are

exposed.' In this regard, the notion of remunicipalization is anathema to autonomous forms of water commons. Rather than working with the state its proponents want to push for a radically decentralized system of production and consumption where water services are produced by communities. As [Esteva \(2014, i157–8\)](#) further argues of an autonomous commons, 'we can no longer wait for governments and institutional institutions to do something meaningful....people are taking the solution into their own hands....No vanguards. No leaders. No parties. Horizontal grassroots organizations. Commotion instead of promotion. Ordinary folks doing extraordinary things' ([Esteva, 2014, i157–8](#)). Theoretical tensions with state-managed forms of remunicipalization could not be stronger.¹

In practice, however, many autonomist activists work with state officials and other water organizations to make municipal water operators more accountable and democratic. One major difference with autonomous forms of remunicipalization is that there are thousands of actually-existing autonomous water commons around the world. These are typically small, rural communities where 'modern' water systems have not been introduced, or where residents have resisted both market and state penetration, retaining control over community forms of water governance ([Bakker, 2003](#); [Perreault, 2006](#); [Stahler-Sholk, 2007](#)).

Conclusion: Finding Common(s) Ground?

With such a complex and contradictory assortment of remunicipalization and water commons positions is their grounds for collaboration between (and within) these diverse water governance frameworks? Yes and No. On the negative side, no amount of coalition building is going to resolve age-old ideological tensions, and ignoring these philosophical differences can lead to confused and problematic forms of water activism and governance.

And yet, strategic alliances can and must be created amongst like-minded proponents of remunicipalization and a water commons. Indeed, many such coalitions already exist, most notably in Europe and Latin America (e.g. RedVIDA, Right2Water, European Water Movement). These movements consist largely of social democratic, anti-capitalist and autonomous organizations which have managed, for the most part, to avoid major fissions in their partnerships, in part because they have a common enemy in water privatization. But can these alliances survive when it

¹ My first experience with these tensions was at a large meeting with water activists from across Latin America in Cochabama, Bolivia, in 2008, when autonomous-oriented participants simply left the room when discussions of remunicipalization were taking place.

comes to articulating *alternatives* to water commodification? Perhaps, but the tensions inherent in these different movements cannot be suppressed forever.

With this in mind, I conclude the paper with three modest recommendations for building more sustainable common ground between (and within) progressive elements of the water commons and remunicipalization movements. The first is a call for a more explicit conversation about what it is that binds them together and what might drive them apart. Open discussions of shared principles such as participatory, horizontalist, equitable and transparent forms of water services can help to strengthen ties, while a more frank and robust debate about deep-seated differences could help to anticipate (if not alleviate) future tensions. The need for these conversations is all the more important as water movements pivot from a focus on anti-privatization (where there is almost unanimous agreement) to a more 'pro-public' position that articulates alternative models of democratic control (McDonald, 2018b).

Second, there needs to be a greater recognition amongst those pushing for state-led solutions of the potential for non-state, non-technicist water governance. Immaterial factors such as cultural perceptions of water are often overshadowed – if not entirely ignored – in statist models driven by structural engineers and municipal bureaucrats. Rather than water being interpreted as a 'rational' resource – a reified 'thing' – it should also be understood in more dialectical terms with respect to its relationships with and between water users, with much to learn from water commons' practice and literature. As Ferrando and Pol (2017) note: 'We advocate for an understanding of the commons that reflects a combination of material and immaterial common resources (e.g. fish stocks and cooking recipes). The commons also encompasses the shared social practices that have been institutionalized by societies to govern resources (referred to as 'commoning'), and collective management with a sense of common purpose (i.e. to guarantee access to food to all members of the community). Water commons are not only resources but also practices where each member of the collectivity is thinking, learning and acting as a 'commoner'. It is through 'commoning' that resources become part of the commons, and not the other way around.' Such praxis-oriented thinking needs to be built into the operational lexicon of water managers, as well as water users unaccustomed to participatory, relational thinking about water services.

But there are limits to such socialization efforts, and herein lies my final point: It is hard to imagine a world in which the state does not play a central role in the provision of water and sanitation services. There are at least 660 million people globally without access to safe potable water, and more than 2.4 billion without access to sanitation, contributing to some 2 million

deaths a year (mostly children) from water-borne diseases (WHO/UNICEF, 2015). Addressing these infrastructure needs will cost an estimated \$114 billion a year (Hutton and Varughese, 2016).

It is unrealistic to expect ‘commoning’ or any other form of non-state water governance to resolve this crisis in the short to medium term, especially in highly fragmented and transient cities in the South, where one in three urban dwellers live in desperately poor informal settlements (United Nations, 2014). Whilst I agree with the observation that such cities ‘can be seen as a frontier for a wide range of diffuse experimentation with the reconfiguration of bodies, territories, and social arrangements necessary to recalibrate technologies of control.... [with] actors from different religious, ethnic, regional or political affiliations collaborating on the basis that no one expects such collaborations to take place or work’ (Simone, 2004, 2, 9), there are temporal and spatial limitations to what can be accomplished communally. Spontaneous ‘improvisation and social collaboration’ may help in the building of ‘incremental infrastructures’ (McFarlane, 2011, 789) but it does not lead to ‘endless possibilities’ (Simone, 2004, 10; see also Silver, 2014). Water and sanitation provision in a city of several million people requires massive infrastructural investment and engineering know-how which no amount of community collaboration could possibly hope to achieve on a metropolitan scale (and for which there is no actual precedent).

This is not to suggest that state-led water services should be bulldozed – literally and figuratively – through the social fabric of a city. My point is that a growing fetishization of ‘communitization’ in the commons literature shifts our attention away from the necessity of rebuilding and democratizing state apparatuses. Sadly, the places that are most in need of water services tend to be the ones with the weakest, least accountable and most corrupt governments, but experience with reclaiming and remaking state-led public services in other difficult locales serves as a reminder of this potential, from the Philippines to Tunisia to Guatemala (McDonald, 2014, 2016; Kishimoto and Petitjean, 2017). There is also a growing movement of public-public partnerships geared towards sharing municipal experience and collaborating across jurisdictions (Hall *et al.*, 2009; Dill, 2010; see also www.gwopa.org).

State-led water services are not a panacea, of course. My point here is that the progressive water movement has been divided along deep ideological lines, with prominent fissures around the limits and potentialities of the state. There are no easy or singular responses to this important practical and theoretical tension, but a better acknowledgement of the synergies and strains that exist between (and within) the remunicipalization and water commons movements would be a good start.

David McDonald is a Professor in Global Development Studies in Queens University, Canada. His research revolves around debates over public versus private service delivery (with a focus on water, electricity and health care), but encompass a broad spectrum of related questions on urbanization, environmental justice and uneven development. Much of this research has been conducted through the Municipal Services Project (www.municipalservicesproject.org), which he founded and has been co-director of since 2000. The focus of this project is 'alternatives to privatization', with research partners in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

References

- Anderson, M. B., Ward, L., McEvoy, J., *et al.* (2016) Developing the water commons? The (post) political condition and the politics of 'shared giving' in Montana, *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences*, **74**, 147–157.
- Atran, S. and Medin, D. L. (1997). Knowledge and actions: Cultural models of nature and resource management in Mesoamerica.
- Azpiazu, D. and Castro, J. E. (2012) Aguas Públicas: Buenos Aires in Muddled Waters, in Pigeon M., ed., *Remunicipalisation: Putting water back into public hands*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, pp. 58–73. M. Pigeon, D. A. McDonald, O. Hoedeman, & S. Kishimoto. (2012).
- Bakker, K. (2003) Archipelagos and networks: urbanization and water privatization in the South, *The Geographical Journal*, **169** (4), 328–341.
- Baland, J. M. and Francois, P. (2005) Commons as insurance and the welfare impact of privatization, *Journal of Public Economics*, **89** (2–3), 211–231.
- Barnes, P. (2006) *Capitalism 3.0: A guide to reclaiming the commons*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Oakland, CA.
- Barnes, P. (2011) *Capitalism, the commons, and divine right*, New Economics Institute, Great Barrington.
- Becker, S., Beveridge, R. and Naumann, M. (2015) Remunicipalization in German cities: contesting neo-liberalism and reimagining urban governance? *Space and Polity*, **19** (1), 76–90.
- Bel, G., Fageda, X. and Warner, M. E. (2010) Is private production of public services cheaper than public production? A meta-regression analysis of solid waste and water services, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management: [the Journal of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management]*, **29** (3), 553–577.
- Blauel, C. (2015) 'Foreword', in Kishimoto, S., Lobina, E. and Petitjean, O., eds, *Eau publique, eau d'avenir*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, pp. 1–4.
- Boelens, R., Bustamante, R. and Perreault, T., 2010. Networking strategies and struggles for water control: from water wars to mobilizations for day-to-day water rights defence. *Out Mainstream Water Rights Polit Identity* 281–305.
- Bowers, C. A. (2006) *Revitalizing the commons: Cultural and educational sites of resistance and affirmation*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD.

- Bélanger, M. D., Spronk, S. and Murray, A. (2016) Work of the ants: labour and community reinventing public water in Colombia, in McDonald, D. A., ed., *Making Public in a Privatized World: The Struggle for Essential Services*, Zed Books, London, pp. 26–42.
- Caffentzis, G. and Federici, S. (2014) Commons against and beyond capitalism, *Community Development Journal*, **49** (suppl_1), i92–i105.
- Cameron, M. A. and Hershberg, E., eds (2010) *Latin America's left turns: Politics, policies, and trajectories of change*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, pp. 98–127.
- Charnock, G. (2017) Barcelona en Comú: Urban Democracy and 'The Common Good', *Socialist Register*, **54** (54), 188–201.
- Cities for Public Water. (2016). 'Declaration for the Public Management of Water', conference convened by La Red Agua Pública/the Public Water network in collaboration with the Municipal Council of Madrid, November 3–4, Accessed December 2, 2016, at <https://www.tni.org/en/article/consolidation-of-the-public-water-movement-in-spain>
- Clarke, J., Newman, J., Smith, N., et al. (2007) *Creating citizen-consumers: Changing publics and changing public services*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks.
- de Gouvello, B., Lentini, E. J. and Brenner, F. (2012) 'Changing paradigms in water and sanitation services in Argentina: towards a sustainable model?', in *Water International*, Vol. 37 (Iss. 2), 91–106.
- Dill, B. (2010) Public–public partnerships in Urban water provision: the case of Dar es Salaam, *Journal of International Development*, **22** (5), 611–624.
- Driessen, T. (2008) Collective management strategies and elite resistance in Cochabamba, Bolivia, *Development (Cambridge, England)*, **51** (1), 89–95.
- Esping-Anderson, G. (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Estache, A. and Grifell-Tatjé, E. (2010). Assessing the impact of Mali's water privatization across stakeholders. ECARES Working Paper 2010–2037.
- Esteva, G. (2014) Commoning in the new society, *Community Development Journal*, **49** (suppl_1), i144–i159.
- Fattori, T. (2013) From the water commons movement to the commodification of the public realm, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, **112** (2), 377–387.
- Ferrando, T. and Pol, J. L. V., 2017, 'Commons and Commoning: a 'new' old narrative to enrich the food sovereignty and right to food claims'. Right to Food and Nutrition Watch - <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/law/people/tomaso-ferrando/pub/146386456>
- Frenk, G. A. 2018, 'Flowing movement': Building alternative water governance in Mexico', State of Power 2018, Transnational Institute, accessed online February 20, 2018, at <http://longreads.tni.org/state-of-power-2018/flowing-movement-building-alternative-water-governance-in-mexico/>
- FWW [Food and Water Watch]. 2010. 'The Public Works: How the Remunicipalization of Water Services Saves Money', *Fact Sheet*, December, accessed online October 12 2014 at http://documents.foodandwaterwatch.org/doc/Remunicipalization.pdf#_ga=1.195248620.1743865321.1435676536

- Giacomini, T., Turner, T., Isla, A., *et al.* (2018) 'Ecofeminism Against Capitalism and for the Commons', *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, **29** (1), 1–6.
- González-Gómez, F., García-Rubio, M. A. and González-Martínez, J. (2014) Beyond the public–private controversy in urban water management in Spain, *Utilities Policy*, **31**, 1–9.
- Gorostiza, S., March, H. and Sauri, D. (2013) Servicing customers in revolutionary times: the experience of the collectivized Barcelona Water Company during the Spanish Civil War, *Antipode*, **45** (4), 908–925.
- Hall, D., Lobina, E., Corral, V., *et al.* (2009). 'Public-public partnerships (PUPs) in water.' PSIRU Research Paper, Greenwich University
- Hall, D., Lobina, E. and Corral, V. (2010). *Replacing failed private water contracts*. PSIRU report, University of Greenwich: London, accessed online on July 8, 2012 at: http://gala.gre.ac.uk/2761/1/PSIRU_Report_9823_-_2010-01-W-Jakarta.pdf.
- Hall, D., Lobina, E. and Motte, R. D. L. (2005) Public resistance to privatisation in water and energy, *Development in Practice*, **15** (3–4), 286–301.
- Hall, D., Lobina, E. and Terhorst, P. (2013) Re-municipalisation in the early twenty-first century: water in France and energy in Germany, *International Review of Applied Economics*, **27** (2), 193–214.
- Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2009) *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Harvey, D. (2011) The future of the commons, *Radical History Review*, **2011** (109), 101–107.
- Heller, L., Moraes, L. R. S., Borja, P. C., *et al.* (2007). *Successful Experiences in Municipal Public Water and Sanitation Services from Brazil*. National Association of Municipal Water and Sanitation Services.
- Horváth, T. M. (2016) 'From Municipalisation to Centralism: Changes to Local Public Service Delivery in Hungary', in Wollmann H., Koprić I. and Marçou G., eds, *Public and Social Services in Europe: From Public and Municipal to Private Sector Provision*, Palgrave, London, pp. 185–200.
- Hutton, G. and Varughese, M. (2016). 'The Costs of Meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Targets on Drinking Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene', World Bank Technical Paper 103171, Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Ioris, A. A. (2007) The troubled waters of Brazil: nature commodification and social exclusion, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, **18** (1), 28–50.
- Kishimoto, S. and Petitjean, P. (2017) *Reclaiming Public Services: How Cities and Citizens are Turning Back Privatization*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam.
- Laurie, N. and Crespo, C. (2007) Deconstructing the best case scenario: lessons from water politics in La Paz–El Alto, Bolivia, *Geoforum: Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences*, **38** (5), 841–854.
- Le Strat, A. (2014) Discussion – the remunicipalization of Paris's water supply service: a successful reform, *Water Policy*, **16** (1), 197–204.
- Lime, C. (2015) 'Turning the Page on Water Privatization in France', in Kishimoto S., Lobina E. and Petitjean O., eds, *Our Public Water Future: The Global Experience with Remunicipalisation*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, pp. 58–65.

- Lobina, E. (2015) 'Calling for progressive water policies', in Kishimoto, S., Lobina, E. and Petitjean, O., eds, *Our Public Experience: The Global Experience with Remunicipalisation*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, pp. 6–18. 2015.
- Magdahl, J. O. (2012). From Privatisation to corporatisation: Exploring the strategic shift in neoliberal policy on urban water services. FIVAS, Association for International Water Studies.
- Marston, A. J. (2015) Autonomy in a post-neoliberal era: community water governance in Cochabamba, Bolivia, *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences*, **64**, 246–256.
- Mazzoni, D. and Cicognani, E. (2013) Water as a commons: an exploratory study on the motives for collective action among Italian water movement activists, *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, **23** (4), 314–330.
- McDermott, M. (2014) 'Introduction', *Community Development Journal*, **Vol 49** (No S1 January), i1–i11.
- McDonald, D. A. (2018a) 'Remunicipalization: The Future of Water Services?', *Geoforum*, **91**, 47–56.
- McDonald, D. A. (2018b) 'Building a Pro-Public Movement in Canada', *Studies in Political Economy*, **Vol 99** (Issue 1), 59–78.
- McDonald, D. A., ed. (2014) *Rethinking corporatization and public services in the global south*, Zed Books, London.
- McDonald, D. A., ed. (2016)). *Making Public in a Privatized World: The Struggle for Essential Services*, Zed Books, London.
- McFarlane, C. (2011) 'Assemblage and critical urbanism', *City*, **15** (2), 204–224.
- Medarov, G., 2014. The Unfolding of the Bulgarian Political Crisis of 2013. LeftEast, April 25, accessed online July 12 2017 at <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/unfolding-bulgarian-political-crisis/>
- Nickson, A. and Vargas, C. (2002) The limitations of water regulation: the failure of the Cochabamba concession in Bolivia, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, **21** (1), 99–120.
- Ohemeng, F. K. and Grant, J. K. (2008) When markets fail to deliver: an examination of the privatization and de-privatization of water and wastewater services delivery in Hamilton, Canada, *Canadian Public Administration*, **51** (3), 475–499.
- Olivera, O. and Lewis, T. (2004) *Cochabamba!: Water war in Bolivia*, South End Press, Boston.
- On the Commons (2012) 'Ten Water Commons Principles', accessed online July 25 2014 at <http://www.onthecommons.org/work/10-water-commons-principles#sthash.KsZOxsum.dpbs>.
- Osborne, S. P. (2006) The New Public Governance? *Public Management Review*, **Vol 8** (Iss 3), 377–388.
- Padfield, R., Tham, M. H., Costes, S., et al. (2016) 'Uneven development and the commercialisation of public utilities: A political ecology analysis of water reforms in Malaysia', *Utilities Policy*, Vol 40 (June), 152–161.
- Perreault, T. (2006) From the Guerra Del Agua to the Guerra Del Gas: resource governance, neoliberalism and popular protest in Bolivia, *Antipode*, **38** (1), 150–172.

- Petitjean, O. (2015) 'Taking Stock of Remunicipalisation in Paris', in Kishimoto S., Lobina E. and Petitjean O., eds, *Our Public Water Future: The Global Experience with Remunicipalisation*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, pp. 56–74.
- Pigeon, M. (2012a) 'Soggy Politics: Making Water 'Public' in Malaysia', in Pigeon M., McDonald D. A., Hoedeman O., et al, eds, *Remunicipalisation: Putting water back into public hands*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, pp. 90–104.
- Pigeon, M. (2012b) 'From Fiasco to DAWASCO: Remunicipalising Water Systems in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania', in Pigeon M., McDonald D. A., Hoedeman O., et al, eds, *Remunicipalisation: Putting water back into public hands*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, pp. 40–57.
- Pigeon, M. (2012c) 'Une Eau Publique pour Paris: Symbolism and Success in the Heartland of Private Water', in Pigeon M., McDonald D. A., Hoedeman O., et al, eds, *Remunicipalisation: Putting water back into public hands*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, pp. 24–39.
- Pollitt, C. (2003) *The essential public manager*, Open University Press/McGraw Hill, Buckingham.
- Sanchis-Ibor, C., Boelens, R. and García-Mollá, M. (2017) Collective irrigation reloaded. Re-collection and re-moralization of water management after privatization in Spain, *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences*, 87, 38–47.
- Saraiva, T., Schmidt, L. and Pato, J. (2014) Lisbon water regimes: politics, environment, technology and capital (1850–2010), *Flux*, 97–98 (3), 60–79.
- Silver, J. (2014) 'Incremental Infrastructures: Material Improvisation and Social Collaboration across Post-Colonial Accra.', *Urban Geography*, 35 (6), 788–804.
- Simone, A. (2004) *For the city yet to come: Changing African life in four cities*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- Sinaï, A. (2014) *Eau de Paris*, in *L'eau à Paris, retour vers le public*, Second edition, Eau de Paris, Paris. April.
- Spronk, S., Crespo, C. and Olivera, M. (2012) 'Struggles for Water Justice in latin America: Public and 'Social-Public' Alternatives', in McDonald D. A. and Ruiters G., eds, *Alternatives to privatization: Public options for essential services in the global South*, Routledge, New York, pp. 421–452.
- Spronk, S. and Webber, J. R. (2007) Struggles against accumulation by dispossession in Bolivia, *Latin American Perspectives*, 34 (2), 31–47.
- Stahler-Sholk, R. (2007) Resisting neoliberal homogenization: the Zapatista autonomy movement, *Latin American Perspectives*, 34 (2), 48–63.
- Stiglitz, J. (1991) 'The Economic Role of the State: Efficiency and Effectiveness', in Efficiency and Effectiveness in the Public Domain, in Hardiman T. P. and Mulreany M., eds, *The Economic Role of the State*, Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, pp. 37–59.
- Strang, V. (2016) Infrastructural relations: water, political power and the rise of a new 'despotic regime', *Water Alternatives*, 9 (2), 292–318.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2007) Technonatural revolutions: the scalar politics of Franco's hydro-social dream for Spain, 1939–1975, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 32 (1), 9–28.

- Teo, Y. H. (2014) Water services industry reforms in Malaysia, *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, **30** (1), 37–46.
- Terhorst, P., Olivera, M. and Dwinell, A. (2013) Social movements, left governments, and the limits of water sector reform in Latin America's left turn, *Latin American Perspectives*, **40** (4), 55–69.
- Tormey, S. (2012) *Anti-Capitalism*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Hoboken, NJ.
- United Nations (2014) *World Urbanization Prospects 2014*, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN, New York, pp. 1–27.
- Valdovinos, J. (2012) The remunicipalization of Parisian water services: new challenges for local authorities and policy implications, *Water International*, **37** (2), 107–120.
- van Rooyen, C. and Hall, D., 2007. Public is as Private Does: The Confused Case of Rand Water in South Africa. MSP Occasional Paper no. 15. Cape Town: Municipal Services Project.
- Warner, M. E. (2010) Reversing privatization, rebalancing government reform: markets deliberation and planning, in Ramesh M., Araral E. Jr. and Wu X., eds, *Reasserting the Public in Public Services: New Public Management Reforms*, Routledge, New York, pp. 30–48.
- Warner, M. (2016) 'Pragmatic Publics in the Heartland of Capitalism: Local services in the United States', in McDonald DA, ed., *Making Public in a Privatized World: The Struggle for Essential Services*, Zed Books, London, pp. 175–196.
- Warner, M. and Hefetz, A. (2012) In-sourcing and outsourcing: the dynamics of privatization among US municipalities 2002–2007, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, **78** (3), 313–327.
- WHO/UNICEF (2015) *Progress on sanitation and drinking water: 2015 update and MDG assessment*, Joint Monitoring Program, Geneva.
- Williams, C. C. (2005) *A commodified world?: Mapping the limits of capitalism*, Zed Books, London.
- Wollmann, H., Baldersheim, H., Citroni, G., et al. (2010) From public service to commodity. The demunicipalization (or remunicipalization?) of energy provision in Germany, Italy, France, the UK and Norway, in Wollmann H. and Marcou G., eds, *The Provision of Public Services in Europe, Between State, Local Government and Market*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham/Northampton, pp. 168–190.
- World Bank (2006) 'Protecting and Improving the Global Commons: 15 Years of the World Bank Group Global Environment Facility Program' World Bank, Washington: DC
- Wu, X. and Ching, L. (2013) The French model and water challenges in developing countries: evidence from Jakarta and Manila, *Policy and Society*, **32** (2), 103–112.