

Who Owns Water?

Privatization of Water

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It comes as little surprise that *Fortune* magazine recently defined water as “the oil of the 21st century.” This means our freedoms are being assaulted on a whole new level. Who owns water?

Recent comments from Nestle CEO Peter Brabeck imply that the world's water will soon come under the control of corporations like his. His corporation is a food corporation that is one of the largest in the world. It sells and moves billions and billions of dollars worth of food and water. Brabeck makes the dumbfounding claim that water is not a human right, but should be managed by business people. He wants water controlled, privatized, and delegated in a way that “sustains” the planet. Sounds like a noble reason, but is it?

This means that Brabeck's future plans include monitoring and controlling the amount of water people use. Laws like these are already in motion in the United States. In many states, people already have to obtain permits to dig wells and even to collect rainwater. People who break these laws are fined or imprisoned.

One day, cities and towns will be forced by international law to limit each household to a set amount of water. What might happen if international controls are placed on water sources as a select few corporate dictators rule over the water supply? What could possibly go wrong with that?

If influential corporations put a lock on the water tap, then they could dictate which farms received water. Corporate farms would get water first, of course. What is left—if any—goes to the rest.

More and more, corporate executives and, increasingly, fascist government officials throughout the world are proposing to transfer the control of this precious resource from the public sector to the private sector. This is commonly called “privatization.”

Privatization is primarily the process of transferring ownership of a business, enterprise, agency, public service or public property from the public sector (i.e., a government) to the private sector (i.e., a business that operates for a profit). It may also mean government outsourcing of services or functions to private firms, as they already do for some revenue collection, law enforcement, and prison management.

Given the track record of corporations that have begun to privatize water systems, and given how privatization has wreaked economic, social and environmental havoc on other utility industries, there is no reason to believe that corporations will demonstrate more responsible stewardship practices if they gain control of drinking water systems. They have already shown they are not to be trusted by what they have done with the water systems they already own.

The Public Citizen Health Research Group gives 10 reasons—among many—why the privatization of drinking water supplies could spell doom for many of the world's 7 billion people.

1. Privatization leads to rate increases, including maximizing profits and paying exorbitant executive salaries. When you cannot afford the price increases, water delivery is simply shut off.
2. Privatization undermines water quality because the profit motive drives the corporate agenda. Rather than serving the public interest, environmental standards are continually compromised and ignored by corporations.
3. Companies are accountable to shareholders, not consumers. A company is under little pressure to respond to consumer concerns, especially when the product in question is necessary to the lives of consumers. Water is something we cannot do without.
4. Privatization fosters corruption/. With water contracts being worked out behind closed doors—that is, in secret—executives and government officials are free to make deals in their own rather than in the public's interest.

As a side note, Jeremiah agonized over something similar happening to ancient Israel:

Lamentations 5:1-4 Remember, O Lord, what has come upon us; look, and behold our reproach! Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens, and our houses to foreigners. We have become orphans and waifs [strays], our mothers are like widows. We pay for the water we drink [this was happening in ancient Israel, and it is prophesied to happen again. If anyone has ever bought bottled water, you have been subject to this very prophecy.], and our wood comes at a price. [This means, everything is expensive.]

5. Privatization reduces local control and public rights. When water services are privatized, public control is transferred to a corporation, be it domestic, foreign or transnational.
6. Private financing costs more than government financing. The consumers—who are already paying executives' salaries and dividends to shareholders—are also forced to make these higher payments on company loans.
7. Privatization leads to job losses. Layoffs are commonly used to reduce costs and increase profits by corporations.
8. Privatization is difficult to reverse. A private company can use NAFTA's closed tribunals to challenge any attempted reversal of privatization as being a NAFTA-forbidden action tantamount to an "expropriation." Under GATS, once a service is privatized, the WTO's rules also give special protection for private investors.
9. Privatization can leave the poor with no access to clean water. The role of the IMF and World Bank in water privatization schemes in the developing world actually results in a reduction of access to water for the poor.

Notice the condition prophesied of people in Israel as a result of her sins:

Isaiah 41:17 The poor and needy seek water, but there is none, Their tongues fail for thirst. I, the Lord, will hear them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.

10. Privatization would open the door to bulk water exports. Groundwater is currently being extracted at unsustainable rates. For both economic and technical reasons, once aquifers are emptied or polluted, they are almost impossible to restore. We know that one of the main oil magnates has moved into investing in water because he sees more profit in water. He has begun to buy up property that has access to the aquifer in the central part of the United States with the intention of mass-producing bottled water to send overseas.

Ezekiel 4:16-17 explains why this shortage is happening:

Ezekiel 4:16-17 (NIV) He then said to me: "Son of man, I will cut off the supply of food in Jerusalem. The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair, for food and water will be scarce. They will be appalled at the sight of each other and will waste away because of their sin.

The real issue regarding charging money for water, water shortages, and corrupt corporate ownership of water, is sin. More specifically, greed for money and lust for illicit power and control.

It is interesting that water is used in the Bible in three main ways: As a force that only God can control and govern; as a source of life; and as a cleansing agent. Nevertheless, there is a conflict at work in the 600 biblical references to water. Water can mean both life and death, blessing and affliction, or order and chaos, depending on human obedience to, or rebellion against, God.

Who owns the water? Is water a human right? King David proclaims,

Psalms 65:9-10 You [God] visit the earth and water it, You greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; You provide their grain, for so You have prepared it. You water its ridges abundantly, You settle its furrows; You make it soft with showers, You bless its growth.

Eight times in just these two verses, David acknowledges God as the One who supplies water to the earth for mankind. It was important to David, and David was inspired to write that so we would have no doubt that God owns the water and gives it freely. God has provided water as an element essential to life. The waters are so abundant that they could have no other source than to come from God.

Isaiah, rejoicing in the prospect of the return from exile, prophesies God promising,

Isaiah 41:18 I will open rivers in desolate heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys

Isaiah 41:20 That they may see and know, and consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it.

Spiritually, fountains and springs also express the movement of God's Spirit within the individual. The refreshment of one's spirit, the surge of new strength, and the impulse of joy are all evidences of God's effectual presence.

But just as the waters of the deep are tamed as they flow from the throne of God in the New Jerusalem as a resource for eternal life, so also in the book of Revelation the magnificence of water is inherent in the voice of the heavenly Christ. His Word forever gives life, like life-giving streams:

Revelation 22:1 And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

This is the spiritual water of life that anyone who is thirsty for God's Truth may receive as a gift.

Evil men may for a short time be allowed to take away the physical blessing of water, freely given by God, however, they cannot touch the far more important spiritual water of life.

The private companies are under no obligation to provide water or service when water is defined as a marketable commodity rather than a human right.

Water is one of the most basic human needs. Many nations, traditions and religions, in fact, consider water a human right. If water rights are handed over to entities whose declared purpose is to greedily maximize profits rather than to lovingly serve the public good, hundreds of millions—perhaps billions—of people will be elbowed out of their access to water.

Multinational corporations are quick to argue that market forces would bring more efficiency to water systems. But the bottom line is that water resources—by their very public nature—require wise and virtuous public oversight to ensure that people, not profits, come first.

Without God's Holy Spirit, and without love for one another, there is no way that water can always be available to everyone.