



Critical review

Complimentary intersections? Water commodification through the lens of philosophy and geography



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ABSTRACT

This review looks at the issue of water commodification, and how such an issue is approached by philosophy and geography. I bring up recent geographical literature that examines water commodification, and then I proceed to explain water commodification through the scope of philosophy. I argue that David Schlosberg, Avery Kolers, and Iris Marion Young are a few of the philosophers that can improve the study of water commodification by way of their investigations of power and empowerment, and they can combat water commodification. I also assert that philosophy and geography are complimentary studies, and it is mutually beneficial for both studies to engage each other. Philosophy, and specifically ethics, provides normativity, while geography can provide the necessary descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative elements which can lead to change in the real world through ethical norms.

1. Introduction

Humanity is currently confronted with a period of severe consequences regarding water, in both an environmental and a socio-political sense. Climate change, coupled with the extensive possession of water by the private sector, renders the study of water commodification and privatization a particularly timely and necessary endeavour. Some methods used to investigate water commodification and privatization involves philosophy or geography, where the latter offers a normative angle to explore a geographical concern. Hence, a combination of both disciplines might be the most beneficial route to create meaningful change in the study of water commodification and, by extension, our world. In addition, I will assert, briefly, that water must not be commodified and privatized. I will broach a few works in the recent geographical literature regarding commodification and privatization of natural resources to show that this work is timely, and I will also review some contemporary philosophical work from David Schlosberg, Avery Kolers, and Iris Marion Young, which can improve such study. Philosophy and geography are complimentary. The normativity of philosophy, and specifically ethics, can be combined with the descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative powers of geography to create a study that delves into the practical and real world *with* aims at how the world ought to be.

2. Philosophy and geography as partners

Philosophy and geography ought to be partners in the investigation

of water privatization. Indeed, my use of *ought* indicates a normative proposition, and it is this normativity that geography can benefit from. The study of water commodification is, in the field of geography, empirical; in addition, water commodification is approached descriptively and normatively. Geography, as a social science, uses empirical evidence to analyze the politics around water commodification – and to outline likely future scenarios. However, the issue of water commodification is more than an empirical problem. The empirical world alone is incapable of creating ethical, normative maxims concerning how people *ought* to live, or how things *should* be. To argue otherwise is to align with those of the Vienna Circle and logical positivism, an abject and deceased failure of thought consigned to history.

Some strands of Geography explore the descriptive and analytical aspect of water commodification, while philosophy explores the normative and ethical aspects. Questions concerning ownership and property, commodification, and distributive justice are within the purview of philosophy. Should water be considered common property and commonly owned? Is it impermissible to commodify water? What is the most efficient, yet just, form of ownership of natural necessities? The answers to such questions can be made effective and real when partnered with a study that is empirical and normative. The importance of combining normative and descriptive thought rests at the crossroads of theory and practice, between the way the world is and the way the world ought to be. Philosophy can complement and inform geography when the descriptive power of geography may not answer ethical issues, or the question of *why*? Likewise, geography can complement philosophy when the avenue of philosophical thought that is being

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pursued (e.g. ethics or property) becomes too abstract or impractical. Geography grounds philosophical thought concerning water commodification—it keeps philosophy *in the world* and provides answers as to how the natural world functions. Philosophy provides an ethical framework concerning the best ways to distribute water. When one concerns one's self with the idea of *justice* regarding water, or the environment at large, one is pursuing a philosophical line of thinking and participating in philosophy.

The study of water commodification, and privatization of the natural world, has been taken on in recent geographical literature, and I will offer some examples in this critical review. To assert that a collaborative approach is the best way to study water commodification is not to say that current research is lacking. Important work is being done in the study of water commodification and privatization that does integrate philosophy and geography.

To wit, Karen Bakker's interdisciplinary Program on Water Governance connects the public with geographical scholarship and initiatives concerning water distribution and ownership (2017). Lisa Sharma-Wallace (2016) considers justice and geography in her recent work, while Hill (2017), in her study combines concrete analysis of the natural world in Malaysia with normative ideas concerning why the “enclosure, appropriation and dispossession taking place in the guise of marine conservation” is destructive and wrong (2017: p. 97). Bellver-Domingo et al. (2017) saliently unite geography with philosophical ideas concerning property and ownership.

James Angel and Alex Loftus (forthcoming) take the study of water commodification, privatization and distribution by using philosophy and geography, uniting real-world study of South African policies with theories of justice and ownership. They argue that the best route to distribute water must go beyond the state—researchers and theorists must not “reify” the state – and they see a weakness in political ecology “lack[ing] an adequate conceptualisation of the constitutive role of struggle in producing the state form” (2017, awaiting publication). Such “adequate conceptualisation” can be obtained through social and political philosophical thought and research.

Water commodification and ownership has not only been taken up in recent geographical literature, it has been investigated in recent philosophical literature. David Schlosberg has written about environmental justice and structures of injustice, and he adds *recognition* and *political participation* to the study of water commodification and distribution. In addition to Schlosberg's use of geography and philosophy, Avery Kolers connects geography and philosophy. He presents a piquant distinction between territory and property that can aid in the improvement of water issues. Kolers notes that property rights do not entail a notion of stewardship, and they also permit eviction from land and the denial of certain aspects of a land (2009: p. 27–28), and goes on to explain that territorial rights entail that:

The state may not evict tenants *en masse*; the state may not wantonly destroy objects of great worth; the state has positive obligations to outsiders and future generations that property owners lack. But these limitations on territorial rights are not due to the subtraction from property rights, they are due to the addition of consideration of non-owners, including those who do not consent to the state and do not own land in it—in some cases, because they do not yet exist. In short, property and territory are distinct, and territory is not derivable from property... (p. 29).

Kolers (2009) maintains that there is a stark difference between *property* and *territory*. Kolers' conception of territorial rights makes explicit the importance of land and its *resources*, such as water. The universal importance of water is expounded upon by Kolers (2009). Land and water have universal value, and access to water satisfies an essential and universal need (Kolers, 2009, p. 107). Water is a scarce resource that is necessary for human life and, thus, must be subsumed under Kolersian territorial rights. Water fits under the designation of “territory” because of the idea of *stewardship* that accompanies

territory. The state “may not wantonly destroy” water, and the state “has positive obligations to outsiders and future generations” because water is so important to the existence of humanity.

The very stability of a society rests upon land and water as territorial; moreover, Kolers (2009) states that if systems that are built on access to natural resources and waterways are disrupted, “the social systems built on them are at risk of collapse” (2009: p. 78). Water, as a part of land, is “composed of resources that we need in order to survive, prosper, and express ourselves; literally, the land constitutes both our physical bodies and virtually every material good we can find or fashion” (2009: p. 23). We would cease to exist without good land and water (Kolers, 2009, p. 23). Water's importance elevates it above property and into territory, and the aspect of stewardship exemplifies the necessity of the resource.

Philosophy can speak to acting on ideas, to empowerment. Iris Marion Young focuses on *power* and *justice* in her writings, and her structural form of injustice can account for, and satisfactorily ameliorate, current issues concerning the unjust management of natural resources, such as water. A meaningful and potentially effective method of change *can* alter the structure of injustice and transform it into one that is just through the contemporary literature of Iris Marion Young, David Schlosberg, and Avery Kolers. Young's structural account of injustice finds domination and oppression and, thus, injustice in the denial of water. Young's notion of collective responsibility, stemming from her structural model, might be able to ameliorate issues of water inequality by making *everyone* able to change structures through unified action and *empowerment*. Furthermore, Schlosberg can complement Young, and further ameliorate issues, by way of his addition of *recognition* and *political participation* to distribution and the structure of injustice. These philosophers add a normative and theoretical dimension that engenders analytical power of geography.

The commodification and privatization of water has led to an inequality in its distribution, leaving it inaccessible to many. The denial of water to people is a current issue that spans the globe, and this problem is ubiquitous enough to warrant an investigation of how people can overcome, and ameliorate, issues of water commodification. Geography can speak to how water is being commodified, while philosophy speaks to the normative aspect of making changes in the world. The study of water commodification can be improved by considering ways to empower people. For example, Iris Marion Young argues that the societal *structure* itself is a problem. For Young, structural injustice exists when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them. Structural injustice and domination is present in the privatization of water as such a practice denies people the ability to not only “exercise their capacities,” but to *live*. To be denied water is to be denied that which sustains life.

Young (1997) also writes on empowerment. Amy Allen (2008) investigates Young's account of empowerment, delving into the importance of *dialogue* amongst individuals to spur a “consciousness raising collective” of change:

The model for this vision of empowerment is the consciousness-raising collective, which encourages its participants to engage in dialogue with the aim of connecting their personal life experience to broader social-structural phenomena such as relations of oppression and domination, economic structures, cultural forms, and so on. Such groups, when successful, denaturalize forms of social life that have up to now seemed natural and necessary, making clear that they can be changed through collective action and providing the normative critique that gives direction to such change (p. 167).

Young's (1997) process of change is “reciprocal,” whereby one agent is empowered to enact justice by empowering others as well, creating an autocatalytic process of empowerment and change. The

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