



Book Review

The Politics of Water: Urban Protest, Gender and Power in Monterrey, Mexico

Vivienne Bennett

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995, XVII + 232 pp.

Few subjects are as central to the survival and sustainability of human communities as the distribution and use of water. Understanding the politics of water is vital to understanding the dynamics of political power, particularly local political power, in any community and is arguably seen as a critical window on the very nature of political systems. It may be just as vital for understanding the progress and problems of regime transition or understanding the scope and limits of certain reform policies often associated with these systems.

Vivienne Bennett's smart study of water politics in the Mexican city of Monterrey provides an example. It explicitly aims at using the case of Monterrey water politics to explore the political character of public service provision in Mexico, in the process shedding light on a range of interesting questions related to the nature of urban social movements and the merits of certain reform options for improving public services across a range of issue-areas. The Monterrey case is interesting because it involves one of Mexico's largest and most economically important industrial cities, because Monterrey's water services for half a century were woefully inadequate in the face of pressing public needs, and because Monterrey's economic elite has historically distanced itself from Mexico City, the national political centre. This historic tug-of-war between Monterrey's provincial capitalist elite and centralizing national politicians sets the stage on which the urban struggle for water provision is played out. This tension between local and national elites is methodologically useful, allowing Bennett to examine the role of popular protest movements in expanding the provision of urban water services and to compare and assess the effectiveness of various policy mechanisms in dealing with the protracted crisis over water supply and distribution.

The origins of Monterrey's water services predicament are located in the failure of the city's water company to keep pace with rapid urbanization and municipal expansion from the mid-1920s onward. The water company, founded as a modern, state-of-the-art private enterprise at the end of the Porfirian era, failed to meet its contractual obligations by 1940. The company was purchased by the Nuevo Leon state government in 1945 but languished for a decade as the state authorities reorganized it. By 1956, with a new water planning commission and water services agency in place, the demands on the system were acute resulting in steady water rationing throughout the city. Under the new arrangement, Monterrey's industrial elite, the Grupo Monterrey, dominated the planning commission board of directors; the water commission, however,

depended heavily on federal financing for any infrastructure development. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s persistent differences between Mexican national water authorities and the local board on how to meet Monterrey's burgeoning water needs further impeded progress on infrastructure development into the 1970s, reflected at the state level in little federal investment in Nuevo Leon's hydraulic resources and little federal investment in social services generally. Yet, in 1980, and by 1984, the federal government reversed itself and committed substantial funding to the expansion of urban water services in Monterrey as well as amplifying Nuevo Leon's hydraulic infrastructure.

The reasons for the reversal, Bennett argues, are found at two levels. At the bottom of the system multiple popular protests largely organized and led by neighbourhood women transformed what had theretofore been a balkanized neighbourhood problem into a city-wide problem, thus heightening its political visibility and pressing the issue on to the agenda of state and federal politicians. At the top of the system Nuevo Leon's new governor, closely allied as he was with a new Mexican president, persuaded the president to direct federal water administrators to give Monterrey a special priority, even at a time of severe national economic crisis. In particular, the bottom up protests forced federal officials to modify the 1980 Plan Hidraulico, aimed at augmenting the city's water supply, to accommodate the distributive demands of the popular neighbourhoods in the 1984 Agua Para Todos programme, resulting in a more equitable and responsive water services policy.

The lessons of Bennett's analysis of Monterrey's popular struggle for the development and expansion of water services, however, go beyond the simple identification of the structural forces in play in bringing about a change of policy and extend to a refinement of the role of protest movements in social movement theory. Bennett shows—contrary to the arguments of some social movements theorists—that multiple, concurrent, and sustained protests by neighbourhood groups may work effectively in pushing an issue on to the government's policy agenda even when such movements fail to coalesce into a larger, more unified social movement or otherwise generate a greater level of internal organizational cohesion. The lesser organizational demands of such issue-specific protest movements and, consequently, the difficulty of coopting them, and the cultural advantages enjoyed by women in advancing anti-system demands are some of the factors enhancing the effectiveness of this type of protest movement in advancing reformist objectives.

Bennett's analysis of the pattern of policy development in the Monterrey water services case also sheds light on the prospects for privatization of urban water services, a matter of great contemporary relevance for Mexico and Latin America. Monterrey's experience is graphic proof that privatization, particularly in a non-competitive market, is no guarantee a public interest will be served either in principle or in practice. In general, the privatization of public services must be carefully designed if it is to achieve intended and enforceable public purposes. In particular, the provision of urban water services in rapidly industrializing countries, whether by private firm or government or some combination thereof, must carefully balance the twin goals of equity and efficiency. To maximize efficiency, the managing entity must offer incentives to water users to comply with applicable regulations; to maximize equity, service must be universal and subsidized, with careful consideration given to a mix of incentives and sanctions that both advances water conservation, cost recovery,

and infrastructure development in a sustainable manner. Bennett's analysis also points to the historically restrictive and highly corporatist approaches to including urban publics in water policy development in Mexico and consequently the importance of policy designs that amplify public participation the policy process of delivering urban water services.

In sum, Bennett's study is instructive reading for those who wish to learn more about the role of state and society in framing the delivery of urban water services in Mexico as well as those who are interested in the changing political landscape of urban Mexico and the opportunities for socially marginalized groups to influence the policy process. It is particularly timely given Mexico's recent emphasis on policy decentralization, privatization, and the amplified role of municipios in the delivery of urban services.

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