

Water Grabbing, Capitalist Accumulation and Resistance: Conceptualising the Multiple Dimensions of Class Struggle

Andreas Bieler, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

Madelaine Moore, University of Bielefeld, Germany

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reflect on how we can conceptualise the multiple types of struggles over water. Through a historical materialist engagement with social reproduction theorists, post-colonial interventions and eco-socialism, we argue that capitalist reproduction not only depends on the exploitation of wage labour but also the expropriation of nature and people along different forms of oppression. By focusing on historical processes and the intertwined dynamics necessary for capitalist reproduction, we reveal the internal relations of these struggles to each other and to global capitalism. Moreover, by putting forward a conceptual and methodological guide for how to approach water struggles relationally, we can point to the anti-systemic potential of these struggles. We argue that the diversity of protesters apparent in struggles against water grabbing captures internally related and mediated forms of class struggle, where the terrain of class struggle is inclusive of the whole social factory.

KEYWORDS

Class struggle; exploitation; expropriation; primitive accumulation; water grabbing; incorporated comparison

Introduction

Water grabbing is a global phenomenon. It refers to a process in which water resources are expropriated by capital to expand accumulation to the detriment of local communities (Veldwisch, Franco and Mehta, 2018: 62). Thus, water grabbing “is a form of accumulation by dispossession; water is no longer a public good but rather a commodity, shifting risk from private investors to the public, whilst profits move in the opposite direction” (Moore, 2019: 4). Water grabbing comes in many forms: from the privatisation of water and sanitation infrastructure, to the commodification of water for beverages, and to water enclosures for energy production and mining projects. It can occur in urban or rural areas, often facilitated by state power and imbricated in ongoing capitalist accumulation strategies of expropriation. Nevertheless, water grabbing also elicits strong resistance movements. These struggles may look different, occur in different geographies and mobilise different people. Alliances can be formed across unlikely groupings including farmers, environmentalists, working-class neighbourhoods and Indigenous people. While there has been much research on individual or comparative water grabs and the struggles they provoke, there has not been an attempt to conceptualise water struggles comprehensively. Primarily a theoretical and methodological intervention, the purpose of this article is to reflect on how to conceptualise these multiple forms of water struggles relationally. We suggest that by focusing on the historical

processes and social relations that mediate each struggle, namely expropriation and its many manifestations, these struggles can be theorised as mediated forms of potential class struggle. By doing so, what comes into view is the way that these struggles push against dynamics of capitalist reproduction and, while never a given, may have the potential to produce alternatives.

However, such a conceptualisation can only be successful if it comprehends the historical specificity of capitalism within which these struggles take place. Hence, rather than pursuing a typical political economy approach, which starts its analysis by taking the separation of the economic and the political as an ahistoric starting point, we pursue a historical materialist approach, which can reveal the particular way that capitalist production, organised around private ownership or control of the means of production and wage labour, ensures this separate appearance in the first place (Bieler and Morton, 2018: 6–11). This article, therefore, provides a largely conceptual intervention into the growing literature on water grabbing and water struggles, and aims to provide a template for how water struggles can be researched relationally as well as the political and theoretical implications of doing so. Drawing from feminist social reproduction theory, post-colonial studies and eco-socialism, we approach capitalist reproduction as inclusive of the conditions that make accumulation possible, namely social reproduction and nature. We focus on how dynamics of devaluation and expropriation are vital for capital accumulation to occur, acknowledging that these dynamics of expropriation are gendered and racialised. With a broader conceptualisation of the global dynamics of capitalist accumulation the terrain of class struggle expands beyond the workplace to include neighbourhood, community and nature. This broader conceptualisation is located within a historical materialist understanding of capitalism as an open and articulated system of social relations. As we will demonstrate, it captures the multiple and often successful social struggles occurring on the terrain of social reproduction and ecology in our time of climate crisis. By analysing water struggles as potential class struggles through an integrated analysis we will show that these struggles can be understood as differentiated moments of the same process, allowing for solidarity across and within struggles with potentially anti-systemic implications.

In the next section, we will provide an overview of the various ways of water grabbing and indicate some of the struggles of resistance. We then turn to the question of how to conceptualise these water struggles within a theory of capitalism. We do this in three steps. First, we discuss a theory of capitalism that incorporates ongoing expropriation and exploitation as key to capitalist accumulation. Second, we conceptualise how the terrain of class struggle (and thus struggling subjects) can be broadened by understanding that capitalist reproduction depends on the exploitation of wage labour as well as gendered and racial forms of oppression and the expropriation of cheap nature. Third, we discuss the methods that can be used to compare these struggles and what is revealed when these various instances of struggles against water grabbing are related to each other as well as the wider capitalist global political economy. In the conclusion, we sum up our findings and point to potential transformations beyond capitalism.

The Multiple Forms of Water Grabbing and Resistance

In its relentless search for higher profits, capital expropriates water in several ways. First, the privatisation of water and sanitation services has redistributed wealth from public to private capital. Masked by economic discourses of greater efficiency, better quality and lower service costs, privatisation has mainly resulted in large profits for private corporations. Water privatisation was most fully realised in Pinochet's Chile through water reforms in 1981 (Bauer, 2005: 146–148). In

1989, the Thatcher government privatised water companies in England and Wales (Hall and Lobina, 2012: 124). Some of these new private companies joined the French transnational corporations (TNCs) Veolia and Suez in pushing for privatisation elsewhere, capturing markets in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War as well as in Latin America and Africa (Hall and Lobina, 2009: 81). They were backed up by the conditionality of the structural adjustment programmes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, as well as by some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development agencies, which had bought into the narrative of privatisation as a way of securing necessary infrastructure investment. However, because of a lack of profitability and public resistance, these private corporations withdrew from the Global South (Hall and Lobina, 2009: 84–88). Instead, they began to change their focus. For instance, they demanded further privatisation in the Global North: European peripheral countries including Greece, Ireland and Portugal were pressured to privatise through bailout agreements during the Eurozone crises (Bieler and Jordan, 2018). They also targeted so-called emerging markets, where they attempted to roll out public-private partnerships (PPPs) and parcel off parts of the service to private companies (Powell and Yurchenko, 2019). The use of PPPs and concessions rather than full privatisation has allowed private companies to cherry-pick profitable services, leaving disadvantaged and thus risky neighbourhoods to the responsibility of the state and municipalities (Bakker, 2013: 258). Because they are both essential and a natural monopoly, water services are an attractive investment for private capital, often including guaranteed rates of profit and state bailouts should anything go wrong. When the global economy is in crisis, investing in service provision promises large and secure profits.

A second form of water grabbing is the diversion of water from local use towards large agribusinesses as part of the globalised system of food production. These moments of “land grabbing” by large corporations or states are also a form of water grabbing, as this agricultural land would be worthless without access to the water necessary for growing crops. Across the world, 80 per cent of fresh water is used for the production of tradable agricultural goods (Ecoton et al., 2020). The production of export cash crops, often enforced by international organisations such as the IMF and World Bank, implies that enormous amounts of water are taken away from local populations and their subsistence needs. For example, in Indonesia, where almost half of the world’s palm oil production takes place, forest clearings for plantations have destroyed upstream water sources, and fertilisers pollute water sources, on which the local population depends, which in turn then results in increased demand for bottled water (Ecoton et al., 2020).

Third, bottled water is a further source of capital accumulation in that water is extracted free or at extremely low cost, put in bottles and sold at a considerable price. The market for bottled water has grown drastically over the years. “In the 1970s, about one billion litres of water were sold annually...; global annual bottled water consumption will reach 465 billion litres by 2020 with sales topping US\$300 billion” (Barlow, 2019: 17–18). This exemplifies how capitalism draws on water as a “cheap” resource to make profit.

Fourth, extractive industries including mining, gas or oil projects are a significant burden on ground and surface water resources. As Boelens, Vos and Perreault (2018: 9) describe, “in 2014, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission investigated 22 large-scale Canadian mining projects in nine Latin American countries, concluding that they all caused profound environmental impacts, contaminating rivers, displacing people, impoverishing communities, and dispossessing water rights”. This moment of water grabbing also includes the construction of large oil pipelines, often crossing contested Indigenous land and waterways in the process. One example is the case of the North Dakota Access Pipeline in the United States (US), which threatened “water quality and cultural heritage” (Whyte, 2017: 155). This disregard of Indigenous people’s rights is a

continuation of past colonial practices.

Fifth, large dam constructions for the generation of energy as well as the increasing use of rivers as part of hydropower development put heavy pressure on local water supply and transform existing waterscapes. The Mekong River in Asia, for example, which sustains millions of people's livelihood, is under threat from numerous dam projects (Khidhir, 2019; Peter, 2019). In Europe, the rivers of the Balkans are facing hundreds of small hydropower plants, endangering local ecosystems (EWM, 2018) on the pretext that "this would produce renewable energy and help the EU accession process [of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina]" (Moore, 2019: 33).

Finally, dynamics of financialisation have cut across all parts of water-related services and infrastructure. In order to provide investment opportunities satisfying the interest in water by international banks and investment institutions, "financial innovation has led to the launch of at least four major water-focused exchange traded funds (ETFs) since 2005" (Bayliss, 2014: 298). The securitisation of water companies is based on household water bills, which have been repackaged and sold on via offshore jurisdictions, linking water consumers to global financial markets. In the United Kingdom (UK), "average household bills have increased by 40 per cent in real terms since privatisation. Over the 2010–15 price review period, nearly 27 per cent of the average customer bill of £360 was paid for 'return on capital'" (Bayliss, 2017: 388). PPPs, such as the Carlsbad desalination plant in San Diego, California, are another example of how financialisation can facilitate the expropriation of water. Profits are generated via consultancy fees for intermediary firms, which set up the finance for the desalination plant. Moreover, an agreement between the San Diego County Water Authority and the company "effectively guaranteed a market for the plant's water, with the authority agreeing to purchase a stated volume of water at a set price over a 30-year period, regardless of whether the water is needed or not by the residents of San Diego" (Pryke and Allen, 2019: 1342). Most recently, a market for Water Futures based on the Nasdaq Veles California water index was launched in the hope that "the futures will help water users manage risk and better align supply and demand" (Chipman, 2020). Yet as a scarce but irreplaceable resource there is a danger that speculation will inflate prices, affecting access and affordability (Repeckaite, 2021).

And yet, all the various forms of water expropriation have been contested in moments of resistance, often bringing together large alliances of diverse groups. In 2009, when the Italian government led by Silvio Berlusconi passed a law forcing all municipalities to part-privatise water and sanitation services, the Italian Forum of Water Movements mobilised for a national referendum; more than 57 per cent of the Italian electorate participated, of which more than 95 per cent voted to reject privatisation (Bieler, 2021: 51–78). The Forum included trade unions, environmental NGOs, development groups, citizens' committees and social movements. Re-municipalisations are also spreading globally; between 2000 and 2015, there were 235 cases of water re-municipalisation in 37 countries affecting 100 million people worldwide (Kishimoto, Lobina and Petitjean, 2015). In North America, resistance led by Indigenous people is mounting against the construction of oil pipelines that endanger drinking water sources as well as cultural heritage. Part of the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, for example, occurred "on lands and through waters the tribe never ceded consensually to the United States (US) and that remain environmentally and culturally significant for tribal members' safety and wellness" (Whyte, 2017: 155). Between April 2016 and February 2017, the camp of water protectors at Standing Rock was one of the largest gatherings of Indigenous people in North America and their allies we had seen for many years. In turn, the expansion of the bottled water industry is being challenged. First Nations Canadians who must rely on bottled water despite Nestle pumping water on Six Nations Treaty Land are pushing against new and existing extraction licences (Shimo, 2018) as are drought-

stricken communities in Australia who live near pumping projects (Davis and Carbonell, 2019). Moreover, resistance formed in Australia against the expropriation of water resources by the global gas industry, which added to the already existing pressure on water resources due to financialisation (Moore, 2022b). Resistance became inclusive of small-scale agriculture, First Nations people, some urban environmentalists and rural communities (including renters and property owners) (Moore, 2022a). The construction of hydropower plants, too, is generating resistance. Balkan communities, for example, are contesting the expropriation of their rivers. In the Serbian village of Topli Do, communities have blockaded construction works and petitioned government. The struggle is about the human right to water, but also the protection of the environment and cultural heritage (Midžić, 2018).

Many of these struggles organised under a similar call – Water is Life – and many have made links with each other, offering solidarity across their shared experiences. Yet how should we conceptualise these struggles in a way that centres these linkages? Put differently, how can we conceptualise these struggles relationally within a theory of capitalism and what are the implications of doing so? In the following sections, we will turn to these questions to explore how we can conceptualise the different forms of water grabbing and the struggles they provoke.

Capitalist Accumulation: The Twin Dynamics of Exploitation and Expropriation

To begin we need a theory of capitalism that goes beyond the economic (and counters the separation of the economic and political), while holding in tension the multiple dynamics that go into capitalist expansion and reproduction. To do this, we suggest that focusing on the internal relations between expropriation and exploitation is a good starting point. In this section we will briefly sketch out the structuring conditions of global capitalism and how expropriation is a central dynamic.

Historically, capitalism emerged in England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when, against the background of the enclosures of the commons, new social property relations were established around the private ownership of land and agricultural wage labour. Thus, it is the way that production is organised that is the key characteristic of capitalism (Marx, [1867] 1990: 279–280). Based on wage labour and the private ownership of the means of production, the extraction of surplus labour is not directly politically enforced, unlike in feudalism, because those who do not own the means of production are “free” to sell their labour power (Wood, 1995: 29, 34). Strictly speaking, nobody is forced to work for a particular employer. However, without owning one’s means of production, people are indirectly forced to look for paid employment. They are compelled to sell their labour power in order to reproduce themselves. Nevertheless, the wage that workers receive does not reflect the true value of the products they produce. “For the capitalist always makes labour-power work longer than is necessary for the reproduction of its own value” (Marx, [1867] 1990: 679). In other words, workers get paid for one part of the working day so that they can reproduce their labour power. During the other part of the working day they provide surplus labour for the capitalist for free, thereby producing surplus value, the basis of capitalist profit. Thus, the wage-form “extinguishes every trace of the division of the working day into necessary labour and surplus labour, into paid labour and unpaid labour. All labour appears as paid labour” (Marx, [1867] 1990: 680).

Hence, when identifying the structuring conditions of capitalist social relations of production, we need to focus on how commodity production centred around the private ownership of the means of production and how wage labour propels capitalist accumulation, prioritising profit-

making over need, as the rationale for the economy becomes oriented towards surplus value production (Wood, 1995: 24; Bieler and Morton, 2018: 20). Resulting from the inner core of capitalist social relations of production, the structuring conditions of capitalism are competition, market equivalence, technological innovation, crisis and expansion. Competition between fractions of capital leads to technical innovations, which can revolutionise the relations of production (Barker, 1997: 29). However, continuous innovation leads to inherent crises of over-accumulation. Attempts at crisis resolution lead to new rounds of outward expansion or internal intensification along uneven and combined developmental lines (Bieler and Morton, 2018: 39–41). Once established in England, capitalism expanded outward through an already existing international system of absolute states encompassing ever larger parts of the globe.

Nevertheless, exploitation of wage labour in the workplace is not enough to sustain capitalist accumulation; to focus only on exploitation obscures the necessarily devalued and disavowed conditions that make accumulation possible. As Foster and Clark assert:

Like any complex, dynamic system, capitalism has both an inner force that propels it and objective conditions outside itself that set its boundaries, the relations to which are forever changing. The inner dynamic of the system is governed by the process of exploitation of labour power, under the guise of equal exchange, while its primary relation to its external environment is one of expropriation (Foster and Clark, 2018: 1).

Turning to Foster and Clarke's second point, capitalism's expansionary tendencies demand that capitalism is dynamic and, drawing on Rosa Luxemburg's argument ([1913] 2003), in constant relation with a necessary outside from which to draw from and expand into. Thus, in its totalising and expansionary dynamic, capitalism is in a relentless search for new frontiers and possibilities for surplus extraction. In other words, capitalism creates a need for something outside itself into which expansion can occur (De Angelis, 2001: 3–4). As will be shown, various forms of expropriation are the hidden abode behind exploitation and, therefore, a necessary precondition for capitalist reproduction. And as described in the previous section, expropriation is also a critical dynamic behind water grabbing.

Marx's concept of primitive accumulation, which explores the moment in which the capitalist mode of production was first established, is important for our understanding of expropriation. Contesting claims that accumulation relies upon the hard work and investments of capitalists, Marx's concept of primitive accumulation focuses our attention onto the (often violent) expropriation of workers' means of production and subsistence. This separation not only allowed for the enclosure of commons into private property, but by doing so set in motion the class relation, separating those who own or control the means of production from those who do not and must now sell their labour power in the market (Marx, [1867] 1990: 874). Over time, the initial separation is obscured and the social relations contained come to be understood as natural laws (Marx, [1867] 1990: 899). By showing that expropriation was not a holdover of pre-capitalist social relations, but instead a necessary pre-condition for capitalist exploitation of wage labour to take place, Marx revealed that the foundations of capitalist political economy were dependent upon processes outside the formal equality of the law and market. Instead, capitalist accumulation was shown to be "dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (Marx, [1867] 1990: 926). Importantly, this was not simply a European process but underpinned capitalism's expansionary tendencies through processes such as colonialism. For example, when Marx states that the veiled slavery in English cotton mills needed the unqualified slavery of the new world, he is describing how expropriation goes hand in hand with exploitation, and that both dynamics are integral to

capitalist reproduction, with the profits of slave labour feeding into British industrialisation (Marx, [1867] 1990: 925).

There has been subsequent debate on the role that primitive accumulation plays in the continued reproduction of capitalism. Is it a historical process or a continuing necessity for capitalist reproduction? David Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession" is one way to understand the role that continuous expropriation plays in capitalist accumulation. He argues that capitalist reproduction requires both exploitation of wage labour and the relations between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production or spaces (Harvey, 2003: 138). What Harvey's term suggests is that the "outside" of capitalist commodity production must be continuously reproduced as such, often through legal means facilitated by the state. To return to water, what comes into view is the role of regulatory reforms that can render new water sources as sites for accumulation through, for example, expanded water mining and bottling, or the role of PPPs in opening up water services and infrastructure to private investment and increasingly to processes and logics of financialisation (Pryke and Allen, 2019). We can see this process of enclosure through the expansion of private property or ongoing colonisation in the way that water rights regimes can transform water sources into liquid and increasingly financialised assets, or the construction of new dams and transformation of waterscapes more broadly to facilitate production systems such as agriculture or energy in a way that constrains or erases Indigenous water rights. In short, drawing on these examples of water grabbing we argue that expropriation is a necessary and continuous pre-condition for capitalist reproduction and can refer to people, spaces, nature and social relations that are not yet directly mediated by market relations.

Understanding that expropriation creates the necessary conditions for exploitation through the transformation of the natural world and the proletarianisation of the working class allows us to explore how the class relation is re/produced. In exploring this process, we can start to approach class struggle as a process that emerges and is mediated by the specific socio-political context and forms of domination that exist (which we will turn to in the following section), rather than as a pre-given form or location. Massimo De Angelis (2001: 14–15) makes an important intervention when he claims that capitalism's relentless expansion necessarily reproduces the class relation in that these processes are constantly resisted and that the results of such resistance – whether that be a remunicipalised water service or blockades of new oil pipelines – sharpen class antagonisms but also act as obstacles to further expansion. Primitive accumulation is, therefore, both the proletarianisation of certain people, but also productive of agency of resistance, a potential social barrier to capital expansion and thus an emergent class struggle.

What we want to suggest is that water grabbing in its many forms captures the integral relation of exploitation and expropriation outlined by Foster and Clarke at the start of this section. Whether it takes the form of privatising water services by financial actors in search of shareholder profits, trading water futures in California, or hydro-electric power plants in the Balkans, water sources and services are reimagined as a site for accumulation. As water becomes a site for investment, the water grab slowly transforms an existing waterscape and the pre-existing social relations of production that it maintains (Sosa and Zwartveen, 2012: 372–373). Moreover, the expropriation of water sets in motion the conditions necessary for increased exploitation of those who work in those spaces. In exploring how water grabbing captures the relation between expropriation and exploitation, we can start to develop a basis for understanding the diversity of those resisting water expropriation. These resistance movements often include trade unions and other social movements, and while the former may be primarily concerned about wages, poorer working conditions and potential job losses due to privatisation, social movements may be worried about water quality, quantity, drastic price increases or loss of culture. Analysed through the rubric of

expropriation—exploitation these different actors are responding to different facets or moments of the same underlying tendencies. In the next section, we will turn to the concrete forms of expropriation that facilitate exploitation in the workplace.

Expropriation and Resistance across the Social Factory: Mediated Forms of Class Struggle

In the previous section we established that expropriation is a necessary and ongoing condition for exploitation and that it is specific to capitalism, with water grabbing being an illustrative form. In this section we will explore the different forms of expropriation related to water grabbing. What will become clear is that through engagement with social reproduction theorists, post-colonial interventions and eco-socialism, capitalist reproduction depends on the exploitation of wage labour as well as different forms of expropriation of people and nature. We want to suggest that utilising the category of class struggle mediated through these different approaches reveals that these struggles reflect different moments of integrated processes. As such, the goal is not to reduce the diversity of struggles to one category, but rather to point at their internal relation and by doing so their *potential* to go beyond reactionary or defensive demands. Furthermore, in order to move beyond the abstract, these categories must be analysed in ways that give justice to the historical political particularities or, put differently, the ways in which global capitalism has made use of and produced certain natures, and racialised and gendered oppressions.

Where Marxist thought is essential for understanding the inner force of capitalist reproduction, Marxist-feminist, post-colonial and eco-socialist interventions allow us to comprehend fully this “outside” and the ways that class struggle occurs throughout the social factory, inclusive of both the workplace and the sphere of social reproduction in all its different manifestations (Cleaver, 2000). We first turn to Social Reproduction Theory, which draws on Marxist-feminist debates to focus explicitly on the often invisibilised processes and social relations necessary for the reproduction of labour power (Bhattacharya, 2017a: 73). In broad terms, social reproduction is the maintenance of life now and intergenerationally. However, under capitalism this is a life – when reduced to labour power – that is also a necessary condition for capitalist reproduction (Laslett and Brenner, 1989: 382–383). For workers to turn up at their workplace every day ready for work, a lot of work has to go on in the background. Someone needs to buy food and cook meals, wash clothes, look after children and provide care for the elderly. These tasks are often covered by women’s unpaid labour, or they are being commodified within capitalism in the form of residential homes for the elderly or private nurseries providing childcare, where access is determined by one’s ability to pay. Such life-making and the necessary institutions, public services and social relations that go into it are necessarily outside the direct mediation of the market, but also integral to its functioning (Bhattacharya, 2017b: 1); they are intra-capitalist but extra-economic (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 57). Thus, capitalist accumulation depends on both the exploitation of wage labour in the workplace as well as unpaid labour in the sphere of social reproduction.

This has certain implications for thinking about class struggle. In understanding that social reproduction is essential for capitalist accumulation, it becomes clear that the worker’s existence extends beyond the workplace and that the workplace becomes just one moment in the reproduction of capitalism and the associated class relations (Bhattacharya, 2017a: 69). And water is precisely one of the issues that highlights the internal relations between the spheres of production and social reproduction. While water is central to many industries – such as water services, bottled water producers or extractivist companies and, therefore, directly affects the exploitation of wage

labour – water is also absolutely essential in the sphere of social reproduction, as all human beings depend on water for their very survival. Hence, struggles over, for example, public water services or clean water sources are not extra-class, but have the potential to be mediated forms of class struggle against the reproduction of capital *in general* (Bhattacharya, 2017a: 84–85, 88–89). They may start from a different vantage point – which the organising call “Water is Life” highlights – and mobilise a different segment of the population, yet they are still responding to dynamics central to and can potentially act as fetters to capitalist reproduction. Struggles around the expropriation of unpaid labour in the sphere of social reproduction, such as “struggles for access to abortion, childcare, better wages, and healthy drinking water” (Ferguson, 2016: 52), are, therefore, to be conceptualised as potential class struggle, similar to struggles over pensions, salary levels and conditions in the workplace.

Post-colonial scholarship demonstrates clearly how historically the emergence of capitalism depended on the receipts from the Atlantic slave trade, slave labour in the production of cotton and sugar as well as the genocide of Indigenous people, who were driven from their land to make place for plantations and settler colonialism (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2015: 165; Issar, 2021: 33). Against this background, Nancy Fraser articulates how racial forms of expropriation continue to be crucial for ongoing capitalist accumulation. “Even ‘mature’ capitalism relies on regular infusions of commandeered capacities and resources, especially from racialized subjects, in both the periphery and core” (Fraser, 2016: 167). In addition to wage labour, capitalist reproduction relies on access to unfree, bonded workers who never become formally “free labour”, exploited in the production process (Dawson, 2016: 151). In short, “the expropriation of racialized ‘others’ constitutes a necessary background condition for the exploitation of ‘workers’” (Fraser, 2016: 168). Understanding racialised capitalism as another form of the exploitation–expropriation nexus provides further analytical depth to locating struggles over water within a theory of capitalism. Not only does the category class struggle capture in abstract terms the ways such movements resist or act as obstacles to key capitalist dynamics, but in the articulation of these racialised and gendered experiences the category class struggle becomes relevant beyond the workplace, or the purely economic sphere.

Let us explore this through concrete examples. First, access to water is often racialised as poor neighbourhoods’ right to water – a condition for life-making – is removed in cities of the Global North as part of restructuring responses to financial crisis. When the cities of Flint and Detroit in the US were submitted to special administration due to their financial bankruptcy, water quality in Flint deteriorated rapidly as costs were cut, while the water supply to tens of thousands of households in Detroit was disconnected, as they had been unable to pay inflated water bills. “The water crises in both cities”, concludes Cristy Clark (2020: 185), “were the result of systematic racism, entrenched poverty and a complete democratic deficit caused by the financialization of the cities’ governments”. In other words, the lack of the right to water had a clear racial dimension, and conversely the struggles to restore these water services are resisting financialised capital and state capture. The category class struggle mediated through the specific socio-political history draws out how processes of racialisation and poverty have helped reaffirm one another.

Second, struggles over water grabbing are often embedded within the expropriation of Indigenous land, expropriation that then fuels expanded exploitation within new (often extractive) industries. As will become clear in the following example, the expropriation of Indigenous land is not only the enclosure of means of subsistence, but the potential destruction of a whole cosmology where nature and society are integral rather than alienated. Seen through this lens, it is much more than the grabbing of water. For example, the Dakota Access Pipeline “cut through unceded territory of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty and crossed under Mni Sose (the Missouri River)

immediately upstream from Standing Rock, threatening the reservation's water supply" (Estes, 2019: 2). Only once the camp of water protectors was forcefully removed in early 2017 could the final phase of construction go ahead. In this process, a sacred burial ground of the Oceti Sakowin was destroyed. "Because Native people remain barriers to capitalist development, their bodies needed to be removed – both from beneath and atop the soil – therefore eliminating their rightful relationship with the land" (Estes, 2019: 47). Similar examples of expropriation occurred in Canada and Australia, where Indigenous understandings of country and nature had to be forcefully destroyed for extractive industries to reimagine such spaces for accumulation.

Yet, and as many Indigenous cosmologies assert, the impacts of expropriation are more than social, and produce a certain type of nature necessary for accumulation to take place. Marxist ecologist, John Bellamy Foster, focuses our attention on the necessary expropriation of nature for continued capitalist accumulation. When Marx ([1867] 1990: 876) talks about the original process of primitive accumulation, Foster and Burkett (2018) posit that he was not only referring to the separation of labour from their means of production and thus proletarianisation, but also the separation of society from nature. Starting from an ecological Marxist perspective and turning our attention to nature, Jason Moore has developed a similar argument about the need for an outside for capitalist reproduction and the role "cheap natures" play in facilitating the continuation of capitalist accumulation. To overcome crises, capitalism depends on a combination of expanding capitalist commodity production and the expropriation of cheap natures, "a rising stream of low-cost food, labor-power, energy, and raw materials to the factory gates (or office doors, or ...)" (Moore, 2015: 53). Moore (like Harvey) highlights the integral relation between exploitation and expropriation, and the way nature is transformed through this relation. As he concludes, "the response to this imperative has been endless geographical expansion and endless innovation" (Moore, 2015: 155). Water grabbing for bottled water, extractive industries, hydro-energy projects or water markets are precisely examples of this geographical expansion and innovation. Water is neither a neutral resource nor merely an economic good but is being constantly reimaged through these dynamics. As such, primitive accumulation both creates the class relation and qualitatively transforms the natural world. In turning to water grabbing, this formulation goes beyond new regulatory regimes or enclosure, and instead focuses on the qualitative and logical transformation of our relationship with water. Is it just a resource external to us, or are we of it in a more substantive way? These competing value systems are present in many water struggles (see Moore, 2022a). For example, the development of small-scale hydro power projects in the Balkans treats these wild rivers as profitable green energy sources, whereas for many river communities these rivers are embedded in all aspects of life-making (EWM, 2018; Gallop, Vejnović and Pehchevski, 2019).

In bringing these lenses together, we can also start to draw out the ways that these different forms of water grabbing, and the different experiences (whether gendered, racialised or as an erasure of ways of being) are internally related and could be approached as different moments of interconnected processes. In turning to water struggles, Nick Estes (2019: 30–33) provides an excellent example when describing the tar sands industry.¹ First, capital's search for cheap nature includes the destruction of the environment at an enormous scale, including the pollution of large amounts of fresh water in the Canadian province of Alberta. This pollution directly undermines the living conditions of Indigenous people residing in the area. The tar sands industry, additionally,

¹ Tar sands are a form of unconventional gas and petroleum deposit. It is made of bitumen, sand, water and clay. Their extraction is much more polluting than conventional deposits while also producing toxic waste and polluting waterways.

results in the establishment of rapidly growing towns to house the workers whose labour power is being exploited in the related production process. These “man camps”, in which men heavily outnumber women, in turn are the root of widespread violence against Indigenous women. Finally, when it comes to the construction of pipelines for the transport of oil extracted from tar sands, Indigenous land is expropriated, as occurred at Standing Rock. To treat each of these points as a separate process misses this internal relation and shared logics, as well as the potential points of rupture within this system. What we want to put forward is the argument that these are not separate instances, but rather moments of interconnected processes, and by employing these different gendered, racialised and ecological vantage points we gain a fuller understanding of the experience of exploitation-cum-expropriation.

Importantly, if exploitation and various forms of expropriation around water are differentiated moments of the same processes, so too are struggles resisting such processes. Analytically, it is through focusing on emergent class struggle as a heuristic device that allows us to unravel the dynamics of exploitation-cum-expropriation and resistance. Used in dialogue with the above theorisations we do not lose sense of the way class, gender, race and the expropriation of nature are internally related in moments of contested capitalist accumulation (Bieler and Morton, 2018: 49–50). Yet in doing so, we are not arguing that all water grabs should *only* be understood as potential class struggles – this is not a call for class reductionism. Instead, our argument is that by exploring water struggles through an integrated theory of capitalism, these broader dynamics and an emergent class character are revealed. In pushing forward such an analysis, we need to reflect on how we can compare individual instances of water struggles, and the way they relate to each other as well as to the wider political economic system. The next section will explore these methodological considerations.

Comprehending the Overall Implications of Water Struggles

By understanding that each dynamic and structuring condition is internally related to each other, yet also mediated by particular socio-political contexts, we seek to hold in tension the overall capitalist political economy and its particular concrete social formations. Yet understanding capitalism as an integrated system of oppression, exploitation and expropriation, where each dynamic informs and shapes the others, problematises traditional comparative models. Philip McMichael’s (1990, 2000) incorporated comparison provides a method that is compatible with our claims. Where traditional assessments may compare two or more bounded cases based on a most similar or most different research design, the incorporated comparison is based on a philosophy of internal relations (Ollman, 2003) and brings into relation two or more forms of a process or dynamic in order to reveal an emergent totality. In this way each case is a vantage point rather than an atomised unit of analysis, and the comparison is substantive rather than schematic. The goal is to maintain a dialectical rather than functionalist (see encompassing models) relation between parts and whole (McMichael, 1990: 390). As such, the whole is only revealed through historical analysis, as units of analysis are understood as places to observe historically integrated processes rather than unique points of departure (McMichael, 1990: 392). Importantly, rather than regarding individual cases as separate, they are recognised as co-constitutive. The struggle against a particular form of water grabbing in one location co-constitutes struggles in other locations. Thus, following the methodological strategy of an incorporated comparison, one particular struggle against water grabbing is not simply a specific national or local moment of contestation. Instead, struggles over water expropriation are understood as spatial and temporal components of broader dynamics of

neo-liberal, capitalist restructuring within crisis conditions inside the global political economy.

In short, specific moments of struggles over water expropriation are at all times embedded and internally related within the wider struggles contesting capitalist accumulation within the global political economy. Thus, particular moments of contestation of water expropriation “are comparable precisely because they are competitively combined, and therefore redefined, in an historical conjuncture with unpredictable outcomes” (McMichael, 1990: 389). While global neo-liberal developments shape policies in different local and national contexts, which are compared with each other both in how they co-constitute each other as well as the overall system, the global political economy itself is in a process of changing. “In effect, the ‘whole’ emerges via comparative analysis of ‘parts’ as moments in a self-forming whole” (McMichael, 1990: 386; see also McMichael, 2000: 671). Hence, while each case in a way responds to similar pressures within the overall system, and here especially capital searching for profitable investment opportunities on the back of neo-liberal restructuring, the overall system is not a pre-given, fixed totality. Rather, it shapes and equally is being shaped by the various individual cases of struggle. It is this co-constitution of the various parts, as well as the whole through its parts (Hart, 2018: 378), which implies that transformation of the whole is possible.

There are different ways of carrying out an incorporated comparison. The multiple form relates different instances of the same process across time. For example, we could explore different instances of water grabbing by extractive industries throughout the twentieth century. The goal here is not to develop an ahistorical understanding of water grabbing, but rather to understand each instance as a moment in the historically evolving process. Another form is the singular comparison, which rather than across time is a cross-space comparison aiming to give flesh to a particular conjuncture. The singular form takes a moment in time and brings into relation different segments of a contradictory whole – for example, the way that common water management co-exists with the increasing financialisation of water services. This focuses on the points of contradiction and the multi-layered character of a specific moment (McMichael, 1990: 392–393). The third model is a cross-space comparison that takes multiple instances of the same process occurring across the same time period but in different geographic spaces. Struggles against water privatisation across the world are a good example of this co-constitutive nature of individual moments of class struggle. It was the success of the so-called water war in Cochabamba in Bolivia in 2000 that made Italian water activists realise at the first Alternative World Water Summit in Florence, Italy, in 2003 that the privatisation pressures they faced were similar to the ones faced by people in the Global South. It motivated them to establish the national-level organisation, the Forum of Water Movements, which became the main platform for the successful referendum against water privatisation in 2011. In turn, this Italian campaign inspired the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) to go ahead with a European Citizens’ Initiative on “Water and Sanitation are a Human Right”. After the successful collection of almost 1.9 million signatures in 2012 and 2013, both the European Commission and the European Parliament were forced into hearings to adopt a public position on water as a human right. This had consequences for the struggle against water privatisation in the Greek city of Thessaloniki, where activists, inspired by the European-level experience, decided to hold a referendum against privatisation on their own. Although Irish activists had hardly been involved in the European Citizens’ Initiative, when the Irish government announced plans to introduce water charges, a large movement emerged in opposition, and activists drew on the symbols of other struggles in Europe and invited representatives from other water movements to public debates. This fierce opposition eventually left the Irish government with no alternative but to suspend charges in 2016 (Bieler, 2021). These various moments of resistance responded to similar pressures of capitalist expansion within the

global political economy. Their responses clearly impacted on and co-constituted each other, shaping, and being shaped by, global developments at the same time.

Comparisons of this type cannot only be made with instances of the same type of water grabbing. Different forms of water grabbing can also be compared along these lines. Caitlin Schroering compares the struggles by the Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB) for the rights of people affected by dam projects in Brazil with the “Our Water, Our Right” campaign against the privatisation of the water services in Lagos, Nigeria, and the campaign over the public health crisis of contaminated water supply in Pittsburgh, United States. At the Human Right to Water Summit in Abuja, Nigeria, in January 2019, activists from these campaigns came together, providing a space for these struggles to co-constitute each other, while at the same time responding to water expropriation at a global level. “These three cases actually reflect a single case of a translocal movement for the right to water”, converging at the summit in Abuja “as one specific convergence space of translocal organizing for the human right to water” (Schroering, 2021: 105). It is through a cross-space incorporated comparison that each of these water struggles, whether they contest the same or different forms of water grabbing, can be brought into relation not only with one another, but related to and productive of our understanding of how expropriation currently functions and the contradictions such a process activates in the reproduction of global capitalism in our moment. While capital’s relentless search for new profitable investment opportunities puts pressure on water across the world, moments of successful resistance not only push back against these pressures in particular localities, but also directly impact the configuration of forces at the global level. In other words, if capitalism is successfully challenged in one place, this challenges capitalism overall in that it points to potential alternatives beyond capitalism. As conclusion, we will explore the space for potential alternatives.

Conclusion: Contesting Water Grabbing in the Search for Alternative Futures

In this article, we have argued that while capitalism depends on, and is driven by, the exploitation of surplus value in commodity production based on wage labour and the private ownership of the means of production, accumulation also depends on expropriation in the spheres of social reproduction and nature. As feminist Social Reproduction Theory has reminded historical materialists, capitalist accumulation not only depends on exploitation in the workplace, but equally on expropriation of unpaid labour in the sphere of social reproduction. Struggles for affordable water for all are, therefore, also potential moments of class struggle against capitalist accumulation. Moreover, post-colonial theory has reminded historical materialists that current forms of exploitation and expropriation are also the result of how capitalism has historically emerged through the expropriation of non-white people through slavery and settler colonialism, often going hand in hand with the genocide of Indigenous people. Hence, the struggles for access to water by racialised communities such as the Detroit Water Brigade or resistance by the Oceti Sakowin at Standing Rock in the United States are also contesting the expansion of capitalist accumulation and, therefore, can be conceptualised as potential forms of class struggle. In turn, as eco-socialists have reminded historical materialists, capitalist accumulation not only depends on exploitation in the workplace, but also on the expropriation (and production) of cheap natures. Hence, struggles over pipelines to transport crude oil or new open-cast mines can also be conceptualised as potential class struggle.

In short, in understanding that capitalist reproduction depends upon exploitation as well as expropriation, struggles that contest the expropriation of nature, or along racial and gender lines,

or that demand the improvement of working-class conditions in the broadest sense (such as affordable and clean water supply) are integral rather than epiphenomenal to capitalist social relations. This allows us to comprehend the diversity of trade unions, social movements, environmental NGOs, development groups and Indigenous people who come together and mobilise against water expropriation as moments of potential class struggle. Theorising water struggles as potential class struggles allows us to reveal the internal relations between exploitation of wage labour in commodity production and patriarchal, racial and other forms of oppression. By working through the different dynamics of expropriation, of which water grabbing is a concrete form, we locate these struggles as sites where expropriation and exploitation are possible and often intertwined. Struggles against water grabbing can tackle exploitation (such as changed working conditions in privatised water companies), expropriation (such as the introduction of water charges or declining quality of water supply) and the interrelated genocide of Indigenous people. Each “motivation” is not separate and only intersecting at a certain point. They are instead internally related and represent different moments in the processes that mark capitalist reproduction, and can challenge different contradictions and crises inherent to capitalism mediated by their own historical-political specificities. In other words, water struggles are mediated forms of potential class struggle, where class struggle is understood as capturing both expropriation and exploitation, while always mediated by the historical-political specificities of each context. By understanding class struggle as an analytical category inclusive of both expropriation and exploitation, the terrain of struggle is expanded from surplus value creation in commodity production based on wage labour to include the conditions upon which capitalist reproduction depends – social reproduction and nature. What comes into focus is an open, contradictory and articulated capitalist political economy (Arruzza, 2014: 3–6), which allows us to recognise that contradictions and subsequent struggles can emerge across each internally related sphere.

Focusing on how exploitation is internally related to different forms of expropriation in moments of class struggle enables several further observations. First, it facilitates enquiries into possibilities of an emerging, more coherent and homogeneous actor. While broad alliances of trade unions, social movements and environmental groups may only be ad hoc in relation to a particular struggle, there is also the potential of a more long-term alliance, including the transformation of activists themselves. In struggles against water privatisation in Europe, activists initially engaged with their particular institutional identity as trade unionist, feminist or environmental activist. Over time, however, they transformed into water activists with trade unionists, for example, recognising that water struggles are not only about pay and working conditions in the water industry, but equally about securing access to water for everybody in the sphere of social reproduction. Different organisations represent different angles from which to approach water privatisation. Individual campaigners may start out from different positions, but potentially develop into a more coherent group of water activists (Bieler, 2021: 158).

Second, pursuing a methodology of incorporated comparison we can understand how these moments of resistance are also opportunities – not automatically, but at least potentially – for developing alternatives beyond capitalism, as the whole is also always co-constituted by the individual moments of contestation. In struggles against water privatisation in Europe, one of the key contributions of the Italian water movement was the conception of water as a commons, which is jointly governed, jointly enjoyed and jointly preserved for future generations (Bieler, 2021: 158–173). It is thus a way of organising water management, which goes beyond the dichotomy of private versus public. It includes a direct link to forms of participatory democracy resulting in the movement’s motto: “It is written water, it is read democracy” (Fantini, 2014: 42). It is this combination of a new understanding of democracy and a new way of running the economy and,

importantly, of how these two dimensions are closely and internally related, which brings with it a transformative dimension beyond capitalism.

Equally, while the resistance by Indigenous people against water grabbing is clearly directed against capitalist accumulation, it also carries the seeds for an alternative beyond capitalism. Indigenous knowledge and post-colonial interventions assert that alternative cosmologies have always existed and continue to exist, running counter to narratives that there is no alternative. “For many the words ‘water is life’ are not an aspiration or a claim – it is simply an empirical fact. Water is not to be ‘managed’. It is to be related to” (Jewett and Garavan, 2019: 50). Hence, what post-colonial and especially Indigenous understandings of water struggles propose is the already existing alternative conceptions of what water is, beyond the given terms of capitalism. The common refrain that water is life refers to a life that is not reducible to life as capitalist subject, but rather that water “is animated and has agency; it streams as liquid, forms clouds as gas, and even moves earth as solid ice – because it is alive and gives life” (Estes, 2019: 19). At Standing Rock, “the protestors called themselves Water Protectors because they weren’t simply against a pipeline; they also stood for something greater: the continuation of life on a planet ravaged by capitalism” (Estes, 2019: 15). There is a clear belief that another world beyond capitalism is possible. In Australia, by redefining the “what” of water, rural communities rearticulated society and nature, revealing their internal relation and countering the underlying alienated socio-nature relation that underpins continued expropriation. Understanding water and communities as co-constitutive necessitated a disarticulation of questions of land ownership from private property, raising questions of dispossession and problematising Terra Nullius (Moore, 2022b). Current debates on the allocation of water for “cultural flows” for First Nations People through the water trading market indicates capitalism’s inability to incorporate Indigenous cosmologies into market-based understandings of nature. Water is not separate from land, but instead forms part of Country, a concept that reflects a cosmology based on the indivisible relation of human and non-human life and being. “This is what Indigenous philosophers teach us: that we must learn to see ourselves once again as part of a broader community of living beings” (Hickel, 2020: 271). In turn, this problematises the alienated socio-nature relation that underpins water grabbing in the first place. Finally, as this discussion of potential transformation indicates, these collective moments of resistance are also moments in which social movements actively create knowledge about how things could be done differently (Cox, 2014). In Terrassa, Spain, for example, in tandem with re-municipalising water services, activists have set up a Water Observatory, in charge of developing proposals of how social participation in water management can be increased (Planas and Martínez, 2020).

As always, experiments in developing alternatives to capitalism can work, but they can also go wrong. What continues to be important, however, is to comprehend how the historical materialist approach that we put forward in this article allows us not only to analyse struggles against water grabbing, but also to explore how these struggles may point to alternative futures beyond capitalism.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

MADELAINE MOORE is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Transnational Social Policy at the University of Bielefeld, Germany. [Email: Madelaine.moore@uni-bielefeld.de]

ANDREAS BIELER is Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom. [Email: Andreas.Bieler@nottingham.ac.uk]