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Guest editorial

Water sharing and the right to water: Refusal, rebellion and everyday resistance

Recent newspaper headlines have featured US-based humanitarian groups facing criminal charges. The alleged crime? Placing water canisters on desert routes used by undocumented migrants along the US-Mexico border. Migrant advocates note that this criminalization contradicts the basic moral principle that all people deserve access to water, regardless of legal status or ability to pay, in line with the human right to water doctrine (endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010). Nonetheless, such charges have led to detention, felony and smuggling charges for US citizens, and deportation threats for non-citizens.

What is interesting about the stories of water sharing at the border is not just that people provide water to those in need, but that these acts of water sharing are deemed by the state to be subversive, criminal, or even a threat to the established order (although juries have refused to convict individuals in high profile cases). We might pause to consider how something as simple as sharing water gets elevated to a punishable offence. We might also ask why some people persist in providing water for others despite the risks of fines and imprisonment.

In this commentary we draw attention to water sharing as political, highlighting the stakes and concerns around such practices. We engage a broad definition of politics, capturing everyday acts and practices that might be interpreted along a gradient ranging from mundane and banal forms of resistance, to refusal, to more obvious and visible acts of rebellion. Explorations of water sharing frequently touch on, but do not often fully explore, the deeper political implications of these acts. Our contribution is thus to explore the politics, both explicit and implicit, related to diverse acts of water sharing. We suggest that water sharing offers a diagnostic of, and a challenge to, power geometries embedded in dominant hydrosocial relations. While some acts of water sharing may not be attention-grabbing or overtly political, we argue that attention to these instances is nonetheless important for understanding the broader political geographies of refusal, rebellion, and everyday resistance. Relevant to historical and emerging debates on society-water relations, our analysis of water-sharing practices also highlights key contestations related to the human right to water and its possibilities.

While there has been much attention to market relations around water (e.g., privatization, vending), relatively little research has explored non-market exchanges and transfers between households (Beresford, 2020). In previous work, we have shown that water sharing—through gifts, exchanges, and other transfers between households—is practiced to mitigate water insecurities in a variety of contexts (Wutich et al., 2018). In some contexts, water sharing can be deeply embedded in religious, spiritual, or cultural systems of symbolic meaning. Water sharing may be conducted through different forms of generalized reciprocity, ranging from charity (often thought to expect no payback) to gifting (in which givers can accumulate prestige or goodwill). In other cases, water sharing may take the form of balanced or even negative reciprocity, in which something of equal value (e.g., water) or greater value (e.g., money, food) is demanded or expected in return. Water sharing is thus potentially important in revealing key insights about the material and socioeconomic processes behind household water insecurities, including how and by whom water is accessed, and how that affects differentiated bodies, livelihoods and identities (Jepson et al., 2017).

In what follows, we elaborate on and illustrate the multiple and complex ways in which water sharing extends beyond the mere provision of water as a physical substance, to instead highlight sharing as a modality of politics. We set out three distinct ways in which this occurs: first, everyday acts of resistance (Scott, 1990); second, refusal to recognize and participate in particular policies or enforcement regimes (McGranahan, 2016); and, third, more direct rebellion against state authority or legitimacy (Scott, 1990); all of which show how water sharing can be linked with political strategies to challenge power relations and rework hydrosocial relations.

As mundane acts of resistance that challenge dominant power structures and dynamics (per Scott, 1990), water sharing can offer insight into the everyday, unobtrusive realm of political struggle. As an example, a prisoner in the US collected bottles of water in his cell with the intent of distributing them to other prisoners, only to be punished with solitary confinement. In this case, the prisoner explicitly framed the act of collecting and distributing bottled water as a response to the prison's failure to fulfil inmates' human rights to water, given that the water available was deemed to be unsafe.[1] Another example of everyday resistance that similarly may not be overt, nor intentionally political could be the widespread phenomenon of illegal connections to utilities' piped water systems—a common strategy in urban informal settlements across the Global South. While not overtly political these practices nonetheless constitute everyday acts of resistance— that is, a means to obtain water in the face of formal service gaps, and/or in light of the inability to afford connection or consumption charges. As such, these acts expose and challenge the failures of the prevailing system, and, with it, the inequitable hydrosocial relations that produce and sustain uneven piped water systems (Swyngedouw, 2013).

While resistance might work *within* the terms of power of a dominant worldview, refusal signals the possibility of working *outside* of those relations—and in so doing implicitly or explicitly rejecting dominant

[1] Personal communication, Dr. Christine DeMyers of Arizona State University, Tempe, March 2018.

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socio-political orders and dynamics (Simpson, 2007). This lens is useful to consider the US Border Patrol's policy of "prevention through deterrence," which uses the conditions of the Sonoran Desert—heat and water scarcity—to deter migrants from entering the United States (Doty, 2011). As noted above, humanitarian activists place water along migrants' travel routes to stem the hundreds of deaths from dehydration and heat exhaustion documented along the border each year. This is at once an act of human solidarity, an affirmation of human rights, and a refusal to work in alignment with the risk, suffering, and death inherent to this policy. These instances of water sharing simultaneously engage broader debates regarding morality, compassion, and human rights (including the human right to water). Refusal in this example offers an implicit challenge to dominant hydrosocial (and geopolitical) relations, refusing to work within the terms of policies that serve unjust and inhumane outcomes, thereby implicitly challenging the legitimacy of those policies.

Following James Scott (1976) and others, rebellion is often a more overt form of politics, involving struggles to overthrow elements of a given social or political order, particularly one that violates moral principles concerning equity, rights and wellbeing. Rebellion is thus a more obvious form of opposition to state practices, politics, and institutions, and can include visible, wide-scale protests, forms of civil disobedience, or organized violence. Some anti-privatization protests mobilized globally can be considered as rebellion, such as the 'water war' of 2000 in Cochabamba, Bolivia. While many accounts hold that these protests sought to oppose water tariff increases and connection charges, it is noteworthy that they occurred in response to legislative reforms that overrode customary water rights and infrastructure used by community drinking water systems and indigenous-peasant farmers. The reforms granted exclusive water rights to a private concessionaire that henceforth had the right to charge these users at commercial rates. The protests resulted in a direct, ultimately successful, popular challenge to neoliberal water governance and the Bolivian state (Bakker, 2013).

A recent protest against state-led groundwater drilling in Northeast Brazil is another contemporary example that connects water sharing and rebellion (Meireles, Melo, & Said, 2018). Between 2011 and 2018, in the face of the worst drought in a century, the State of Ceará drilled deep wells in the coastal aquifer and constructed water transfer pipelines from lakes to supply an industrial park. Large-scale protests, blockades, and encampments at extraction sites disrupted the completion of these projects. In this case, state efforts to improve "water security" for corporate interests undermined residents' own longstanding aquifer water sharing arrangements that supplied nearly 30% of residents' water needs. Such instances may be fairly common around the world as recent publications by Sultana and Loftus (2019) and others suggest.

This commentary has highlighted diverse water sharing practices, with examples of water gifts to migrants and prisoners, as well as informal tapping and transfers to those excluded from water provision. We offer an analysis for these practices that highlights key dimensions of politics inherent in each, ranging from muted and invisible practices of everyday resistance, to refusal to work within the moral and humanitarian constraints of unjust policies, to outright rebellion as direct challenge to dominant power dynamics and hydrosocial relations. In all such cases, water sharing can be meaningful as a touchpoint in broader debates and policies related to norms, ethics, and goals related to the human right to water, or as a challenge to elements of existing hydrosocial relations that undermine community goals and expectations of water security and wellbeing (cf. Jepson et al., 2017). We suggest that there is a need for greater attention to, and theorization of, water sharing—particularly to consider what such instances reveal about spatial politics of resistance, refusal, and rebellion, or how sharing itself may be a useful diagnostic of key failures of achieving the human right to water, or of the inequities associated with specific state practices or neoliberal governance forms. Moreover, attention to sharing and linked elements of hydrosocial dynamics can enrich current debates within contemporary political geography about borders, boundaries and the right to move (e.g. Fregonese, İşleyen, Rokem, & Sigona, 2020), identity and belonging (e.g. Mason, 2020) and the biopolitics of citizenship (Sarmiento, Landström, & Whatmore, 2019). As the examples show, sharing can also shed light on broad and important questions of state failure, the abrogation of basic rights and responsibilities, dispossession or resource capture, and situations where state practices are out of step with citizens' sense of ethics and morality.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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