CONTENDING ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES: MULTILATERAL AGENCIES, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND WATER

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the conflicting discourses surrounding water. A theoretical framework shows the influence of postmodernism on disciplines related to water management and social movements. Case studies compare the World Bank water policies to the arguments of Vandana Shiva, and then relate these discourses to World Bank practice in Ghana, where divestiture of urban water systems is being resisted. World Bank discourse is not monolithic, but is changing and assimilating concepts from alternative development theory. This new breadth of policy is not reflected in practice, but as ‘discourse overload’ it does enable the World Bank to deflect or neutralise less nuanced criticisms.
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ABBREVIATIONS

CAP   The basic position statement of GNCAPW
CCG   Christian Council of Ghana
CWSP  Community Water and Sanitation Project
CWSPA Appraisal of the Community Water and Sanitation Project
FDI   Foreign Direct Investment
GEM   Global Environmental Management
GoG   Government of Ghana
GNCAPW Ghana National Coalition Against the Privatisation of Water
GWCL  Ghana Water Company Limited
IMF   International Monetary Fund
MCAS  Memorandum on Ghana Country Assistance Strategy
NGO   Non-governmental Organisation
PPP   Private-Public Partnership
TNC   Trans-national Corporation
WSRS  Water Sector Restructuring Secretariat

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INTRODUCTION

This paper considers water as a site where contending perceptions meet, and as a social and political resource. Water conflicts reflect the physical and symbolic character of water and can therefore focus on issues as diverse as particular physical infrastructure or non-site specific ideology. The contested cultural aspect of water will be demonstrated by case studies of the discourse of the World Bank (the Bank) and social movements opposed to the Bank’s theoretical framework and resultant projects. The construction of environmental crisis narratives will be explored, including of global water shortage and destruction of local cultures, and their use in emphasising the urgency behind each actor’s recommendations. Foucault’s (1980) reconfiguration of truth as power underlies this focus on discourse, also cautiously informed by Escobar’s (1996) proposition that ‘nature is socially constructed’, and the assertion (by Routledge, 1996) that actors are significant not only for what they achieve, but the language in which they express their aims, discontents and ideology.

That water is requisite to human life inevitably means that water is also fundamental to culture. Systems must be in place to distribute water in ways that reduce the possibility of conflict. Water is not only central to Hindu, Muslim and Christian rituals and teaching; in Ghana for example, access to water has been governed by the necessity of conciliating spirits inhabiting watercourses (Mensah, 1998). Traditional water management regimes are now under pressure in those places where urban growth and increasing food needs lead to physical water scarcity, and where changes in religious beliefs and social obligations affect cultural constraints.

Any water management system cannot simply treat water as a physical resource, because culture does not treat water as a physical resource. Tradition is one factor in the creation of a ‘sanctioned discourse’ of water truths; a declared national drive to modernity may also form part of this discourse, in which large dams symbolise control over nature (Tripp, 1996, Allan, 2001). Drawing on Foucault (1980), this sanctioned discourse can be seen as a regime of truth that is accepted by a society. For Foucault, the interaction of power relations is sufficiently produced and reflected by discourse for him to declare that
truth is synonymous with power. Power is itself seen as a diffuse network throughout a society, subject to multiple forms of constraint. To minimize social unrest and maintain their power politicians must operate within the discourse that will be acceptable to the expectations of their citizens. Where a large proportion of the population depend on agriculture, politicians may be expected to respond to demands for irrigation water by mimicking the free provision of water by nature. Farmers may see their entitlement to such water as a ‘right’, whether provided by the state or nature. To deny accepted water ‘rights’ would be to step outside the sanctioned discourse, and incur high political costs (Allan, 2001).

Until the 1960s-1970s the water discourse of multilateral agencies can be described as the ‘hydraulic mission’ (Swyngedouw, 1998, and Reisner, 1984, in Allan, 2001), commensurate with the drive towards modernity, in which settlements and ecosystems submerged during construction of dams were seen as necessary sacrifices for the greater good. Since then, Wade (1997) describes the upsurge of environmental projects, assessments and strategies within the Bank as ‘mission overload’, responding to pressure from beyond areas immediately affected by dams, especially as powerful executives transmit demands from Northern civil society. A negotiated ‘complex multilateralism’ results, as development agencies are influenced by, and form links with, social movements (O’Brien et al, 2000). This relationship with non-state actors is new, but the depth and extent of policy ‘greening’ is unclear, as it is still emerging, and the movements and multilateral agencies are diverse, and internally differentiated. This paper explores resistance that reasserts the spiritual significance of water and rejects the economic instruments favoured by some multilateral agencies. The most radical discourse presents such policies as sufficiently ideologically incompatible with water’s spiritual status to make the use of tools such as pricing for economic cost recovery morally bankrupt.

A theoretical framework will consider the applicability of postmodernism and social movement theory to water. Postmodernism is relevant for its emphasis on discourse and for its influence on ways of conceptualising the South, and North-South interactions. Two case studies are presented, first contrasting the Bank’s general water strategy with the
broad criticisms of Bank policy levelled by Vandana Shiva, and second investigating social movements’ response to specific Bank water policy in Ghana.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTMODERNISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Postmodernism: Definitions and Criticisms

There are various discourses on water, which result from water’s physical or spiritual qualities; from political imperatives to exaggerate or understate volumes of internationally shared waters; from water’s ability to generate hydropower or reflect administrative power; and its economic functions for government, small traditional communities, or multinational corporations. By taking as its primary assumption that ‘each society has its own regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980) discourse analysis assumes that each actor’s regime of water truth will be indicative of its own perspective.

Almost by definition postmodernism rejects any single definition of itself, and postmodernist writers expand the applicability of postmodernism without explicitly redefining it. To be uncomfortable with the amorphous, dynamic nature of postmodernism is to open oneself to accusations of authoritarianism and intellectual inflexibility that postmodernism levels at modernism. It is generally accepted, however, that postmodernism is critical of scientific rationality and sceptical of metanarratives. Instead it finds that a sensitivity to difference that is inclusive, especially of paradoxes and discontinuity, is not illogical but pragmatic and closer to reality. It highlights not only the ethnocentrism of the bulk of Western positivist knowledge, but the exclusionary process of its construction (Gregory, 1987). Postmodernists argue that it is the dominance of this knowledge that gives it the power to define what is intellectually and culturally legitimate (Bourdieu, 1988). Postmodernism has influenced various fields that study the relationship between people and water, including the theory and practice of development, anthropology and ecology.

Pile and Rose (1992) criticise postmodernism as insufficiently emancipatory, offering one totalising theory for another, also overwhelmingly constructed by white, middle-class, Western men, to overcome their own problem in of relating to other voices—a difficulty ‘only from the perspective of the dominating group’ (Harding, 1986: 657,
quoted in Pile and Rose, 1992). Nygren (2000) highlights the dangers of focusing entirely on discourses of development, as this reductionism reduces development to texts. Artz (1997) warns that postmodern abstractions to such a level can sacrifice precision and lose sight of reality. An ‘inflation of discourse’ can become ridiculous; he somewhat sarcastically points out, for example, that the transformation of thousands of Nicaraguan peasants into wage workers following dispossession from their land ‘was not the result of a collective decision to change their significations of reality’ (p.101). A narrow poststructuralist focus on discourse ignores non-discursive conditions and actions, including economic power and social relations, which effected the change.

Beck (1994) argues that postmodernity is not yet a reality, instead modernity is still in a reflexive phase. Reflexive modernity is gradually recognising risks that undercut modernity’s success and outgrow the capacity of modern institutional control, for example ecological and military risks. This confrontation raises questions of self-limitation and uncertainty, addressed by ecological social movements that reject the construction of risk as solely scientific, as this shifts power onto elite technical experts, ignoring risk as political and value-laden (Mehta, 1998). Nederveen Pieterse (1998) identifies a transfer of risk awareness from North to South, forming part of the mobilising discourse of social movements. Campaigns against dams in India, for example, are significant for their ability to politicise risks (Dwivedi, 1998). That risk tells society what to avoid without offering specific alternatives is reflected in the united ‘no’ of anti-globalisation resistance, and ‘postdevelopment’, discussed later.

Foucault’s approach to truth as ‘a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements’ (1980: 74) is postmodern in its rejection of a single means of constructing absolute truths, verifiable through logico-deductive methods. It can be applied to water because truth, so defined, produces and regulates the sanctioned discourse on water. This discourse in turn distributes and regulates the physical resource. Allan (2001) shows that the resulting distribution is often contrary to economic considerations and may ignore physical water scarcity. It may be politically expedient to deny national water scarcity; this is made possible by the
availability of imported food, thus the national water budget is balanced using ‘virtual water’ from grain-exporting countries.

Postmodernism in Environment and Development

In common with postmodernism, political ecology deconstructs barriers between academic disciplines. Blaikie (1985) highlighted socio-cultural drivers of environmental change. More recently, demonstrations of the centrality of politics include environmental research constructed to justify political ends (Potts, 2000), and water piped exclusively to white-owned farms as representative of the flow of political power (Turton, 2000). Escobar’s ‘post-structural political ecology’ (1996: 46) takes the discourse further, by arguing that ‘the environment is socially constructed’. Thus analysis is broadened beyond the impact of physical practice on the environment, to construction of environmental knowledge through discourse. Turton (2000) describes the late phase of political ecology as an ‘emancipatory phase’. Like postmodernism, this questions the dominance of discourses of scientific rationality and desirability of economic growth. It reconstructs environmental crisis as, fundamentally, crisis of culture. Social movements are instrumental in constructing environmental discourse, and are therefore critical to addressing or reconfiguring cultural/environmental crises.

Adger et al (2001) find that for deforestation, desertification, biodiversity loss and climate change there is in each case a dominant discourse of Global Environmental Management (GEM), based on a technocratic view of an environmental crisis, requiring science based solutions and external policy interventions, often built around blueprints and international agreements. Opposing this, they find a populist discourse, which presents local actors as heroic victims, unwillingly forced to degrade their environment, while external involvement is overwhelmingly negative. Adopting the discourse of either narrative constrains the solutions that can be offered. This paper will demonstrate the use of both GEM and populist discourses in debates over water.
Slater (1992) suggests that postmodernism can confront a crisis in critical development theory, in which Marxism is rejected as too narrowly focused on class, state and economic productivity, and offering a development pathway as prescriptive as the modern paradigm of progress. Where Marxism focuses on exploitation and relations of production, Foucaultian power operates through systems of social, economic and cultural truths. In Gramscian postmarxism contending forces struggle to redefine hegemonic discourse, resulting in a constant state of flux. By reconfiguring power as truth, and exploitation as the construction of hegemony, conflict can be considered to be entirely intradiscursive (Steinmetz, 1994). Applied to natural resources, this shores up Escobar’s theory of the socially constructed environment and essentially cultural conflicts. At this point, however, Artz’ warning of the absurdity of entirely reducing social and material conflicts to battles over significations should be remembered. Radical post-development theories question all aspects of ‘development’, including the concept (‘there are no genes governing the shape of human society’), and intentions (‘development finance is cheaper than colonialism but just as effective’, quotations from Frank, 1986: 263, 266). The widespread influence of postmodernism suggests that it is more than an intellectual release for disillusioned Marxist academics.

Said (1978) demonstrates the relevance of postmodernism to Northern discourses of anthropology. Non-western peoples’ lack of a voice resulted not from the need to translate linguistically, but an imposed representation of the ‘Other’ in opposition to a rational, modern Western culture. Modernity is based on the ‘logos’ that need no explanation, for example the first of each pair: man-woman, modern-traditional, science-culture (Munck, 2000). For Said, power is exercised through representation. The GEM discourse, global water crisis and the need for development also assume that they are self-evident truths. Crang (1992) discusses the repressive processes whereby narratives are produced and consumed, and suggests polyvocal writing as one means to address this, by opening academic discourse to people in the South. Polyvocal writing and pluralistic social movements can both be seen as having potential to centre the construction of knowledge; as responses to Foucault’s call to ‘detach truth from the forms of hegemony’ (p.75). Limitations of polyvocal writing may also apply to pluralistic movements: that
`ambiguity need not necessarily diffuse representational power’ (p.540), and that postmodern form does not necessitate emancipatory content.

Development practice has changed in recognition of the need to include previously marginalised voices in the construction and use of knowledge. Since Chambers’ (1983) work on ‘Putting the Last First’, the discourses of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)\(^1\), partnership and empowerment have become ubiquitous, in development agencies in the water sector, and elsewhere. PRA’s emancipatory intentions can be lost, however, for example, Kalahari community consultations used manipulative language that reinforced discourses of marginalisation. Only one environmental management outcome was presented as in the communities’ best interests. Furthermore, by superficially involving communities in decision-making and then bestowing new, limited ‘rights’ on them, the Wildlife Department intended to secure co-operation and affirmed its own dominance (Twyman, 1998). Thus participation brought about integration, rather than emancipation (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992). This could be dismissed as manipulation of PRA, but Mosse (1994) points out that even well-intentioned PRA generates knowledge that is strongly influenced by power relations: the public formality of meetings may restrict open debate, the focus on consensus may smother difference, and knowledge most accessible to PRA is likely to be codified within the community, already associated with authority. Thus ‘participation’ can officialise dominant private interests, or be reduced to shallow neo-populism (Dahl, 1970, quoted in Nederveen Pieterse, 1992).

\(^1\) PRA is a set of methods and behaviours that identify the researcher as the ‘outsider’, whose function is to facilitate the visual representation of local knowledge for public analysis by the group of people who generate it. PRA methods such as mapping (of natural resources or social networks), ranking (of problems facing communities or wealth indicators), timelines and pie charts are intended first to empower illiterate users to communicate between themselves and with the outsider, and second to plan actions based on analysis of issues raised.
New Social Movements Theory

Habermas (1981: 33) discussed ‘new social movements’ that address the encroachment of economic and administrative systems on the ‘life-world’ (the personal form, perception and daily practice of life). Development agencies’ redefinition of friends and family as social capital, and water as an economic resource, could be seen as part of this encroachment. New social movements are defensive counter-institutions, which place high value on identity, decentralised forms of interaction, and new means of communication. Their resistance to the hegemonic construction of truth within the lifeworld can be interpreted as validating postmodern ideas of power and discourse. Habermas termed them ‘new’ because

Conflicts no longer arise in areas of material production; they are no longer channelled through parties and organisations… the question is how to defend or reinstate endangered lifestyles, or how to put reformed lifestyles into practice.

Such quality of life issues cut across class boundaries (Habermas, 1981), for example unquantified risks of unsustainable groundwater extraction. Habermas argues that even unrealistic expectations for new social movements form an important part of their rhetoric and self-image. Steinmetz’ (1994) considers Fordism to be critical to this post-materialist reaction in the North (as raised standards of living and free time accompanied environmental degradation and cultural homogeneity). This could apply to water in the South, where it is regulated by vast infrastructure, metered, or sold in branded packaging, and to the reductionism of viewing water as an economic resource.

‘New’ social movements such as environmental movements have been claimed to have characteristics including diverse participants, non-materialist values, non-hierarchical coalitions, and against the state rather than seeking state intervention. However, D’Anieri et al. (1990) and Tilly (1984) put forward nineteenth century examples with these same features. As these characteristics are not uniquely new, they cannot be explained by structural conditions of postmodern existence. The action taken by a social movement will, however, invariably be historically specific, from satirical theatre of the nineteenth
century to the internet (Tilly, 1984). Therefore this paper will not refer to contemporary social movements as ‘new’.

Social Movement Form and Action

Tilly (1984) defines social movements by focusing on interactions, not groups, or even networks (p.306):

A sustained series of interactions between power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support.

This definition of social movements as a way of doing politics is particularly useful for the network of protestors against the Bank: it allows for members and tactics to change, and for them to be considered as a movement, despite including a range of views. From below, participants are likely to see a movement as fragmented and in flux, while from above they appear as a coherent challenge to the power structure. The ‘group’ notion of social movements is a necessary lie for both the organisers and focus of a demonstration, who wish to portray it as committed (Tilly, 1984). Environmental group formation can have purposive benefits (moral satisfaction from fulfilling an ideological goal) and social rewards (including solidarity), to be understood through society’s norms and values. Groups evolve as discourse changes in its appeal and solidarities are shaped (Jones and Smith, 1995).

Actions of social movements can include non-confrontational ‘weapons of the weak’ (described by Scott, 1986) such as foot-dragging and false compliance. Characteristics vary according to the nature of the target authority, so a change in the ‘repertoire of collective action’ reflects a change in the power structure (Tilly, 1984). Everyday resistance to dominant discourses can evoke religious practice to articulate a counter-
hegemonic position (Routedge, 1996), for example, emphasising spiritual, rather than economic aspects of water. Reeves (1995) includes stories of Muslim saints aiding the poor and punishing corruption among the ‘weapons of the weak’ because these offer protection against low self-esteem and hegemonic bureaucratic ideologies, even when tellers cannot actualise their ideal lifestyle.

Bayat (2000) distinguishes between organised resistance and ‘quiet encroachment’: the ‘non-collective but prolonged direct action by individuals and families to acquire the basic necessities of their lives…in a quiet and unassuming illegal fashion’ (p.536). This advance on propertied groups, public spaces and services includes illegally accessing water or refusing to pay water bills. Although perceived as a moral necessity, this may shift subalterns into politics, as defence of gains can be collective and audible.

Nederveen Pieterse is concerned that postmodernism cannot distinguish types of collective action. For him the pervasive nature of Foucaultian power means that the emancipatory potential of collective action is limited to its ability to ‘level and disperse power’ (1992: 32): there can be no emancipation from the truth-power network, and social movements cannot radically change the future. Bayat (2000) warns against ‘reverse essentialism’: confusing expressing an awareness of being oppressed with actual resistance. He contends that quiet encroachment is not deliberately political, nor ‘essentially non- or anti-modern’ (p.549). He also points out that NGOs may have limited abilities to mobilise genuine grassroots activism, especially if they have unaccountable, middleclass professional leadership.

**Social Movements and Postmodernism**

Social movements occur where culture, politics and practice meet (Escobar, 1992), so postmodernism’s inclusivity makes it a common analytical tool. Furthermore, just as postmodernism is perceived as having emancipatory potential for changing discourse, by embracing cultural diversity and creating new theoretical constructions of truth, so social movements have potential for constructing emancipatory discourses through resisting
cultural invasion and practicing new forms of antisystemic activism. Thus the philosophical (postmodern theory) is reflected in the practical (social movement activism). For postmodern theorists, social movements and their study are vital parts of the same overall process of resistance. The postmodern rejection of positivist objectivity allows writers’ own activism to validate rather than discredit their analysis (for example Routledge, 1996). Social movements based around natural resources demonstrate particularly clearly that relations of resistance and knowledge are based in physical spaces, as well as the ‘imagined spaces’ (Harvey, 1989, quoted in Routledge, 1996) created by discourses.

The cultural possibilities of postmodern social movement theories make them particularly relevant for broadening geopolitical analysis beyond the state (Routledge, 1996) and state control of natural resources, and for the diverse power relationships involving Southern social movements (Escobar, 1992). Escobar (1996) calls on social movements to reconstruct nature as public ecological cultures. This would confront utilitarian environmental economics and resist the modern capitalisation of nature (e.g. water valued according to its generation of hydropower). Instead communities should control the construction of postmodern values of nature (e.g. indigenous ecological knowledge). Thus struggles are over cultural meanings as much as over economic conditions and natural resource management.

Social movements have challenged Marxism and fed postmarxist theory because they are not defined by class composition (Steinmetz, 1994). Postmarxism can equate neo-imperialist exploitation (of people and the environment) with capitalist exploitation, and equate emancipation from poverty or false conceptions of necessity with revolutionary struggle (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992). However, Mouffe (1988: 98, in Nederveen Pieterse, 1992: 22) warns against idealising social movements as ‘privileged revolutionary subjects’ or a new ‘international proletariat’ (Jameson, 1989), because their discourse can be easily assimilated by dominant discourses. Escobar (1992) condemns equating Southern peoples with an oppressed proletariat as ethnocentric, portraying them as responding to events beyond their influence and struggling for material advancement. This overlooks their potential for the active construction of alternative political and
environmental cultures. Both the GEM and populist discourses identified by Adger et al (2001) also suggest that poor natural resource users are powerless to prevent degradation of their own environment.

Postdevelopment is described by Nederveen Pieterse as a ‘radical reaction to the impasse of development theory’ (1998: 360), reflecting disillusionment after repeated failed ‘Development Decades’. It is based on the extreme scepticism of postmodernism, and uses a Foucauldian approach to power and discourse. Within postdevelopment theory, Esteva and Prakash (1998) discuss the construction of a ‘grassroots postmodernism’ by social movements of the South, propelled, counter-intuitively, by their illiteracy and distance from the ivory towers of postmodern academics. People’s on-going marginalisation forces them to find alternative means of physical survival, rejecting the market-based solutions of economic discourse, and global environmental crisis narratives, such as ‘scarcity’ of water. Esteva and Prakash place the Bank among ‘global thinkers’, which construct these crisis narratives in order to impose global solutions, and to justify portraying themselves as essential to GEM. For Esteva and Prakash ‘global thinking’ is an oxymoron, because it concocts unrealistic expectations of human rights and modern life as Homo economicus. This inspires a counter-construction of new postmodern social identities by movements that do not seek solutions from Western science (water technology) or the state (water laws), but from ‘something new’. This cannot be defined, because it is context sensitive and therefore plural (Esteva and Prakash, 1998).

The lack of concrete solutions offered by postdevelopment is often identified as its major flaw. For Nederveen Pieterse (1998) the implication of a radical alternative, while offering nothing practical at all, is fuzzy to the point of hypocrisy. Artz (1997) and Van Ausdal (2001) both find that a focus on discourse ignores material and political problems, which postdevelopment is then unable to confront. This recalls the constraints discourse place on responding to environmental issues, identified by Adger et al (2001). Van Ausdal also warns that the generalising condemnations made by postdevelopment are likely to trap those who make them. Nederveen Pieterse (1998) draws together other criticisms: that postdevelopment is unsophistically rejectionist of development and
neo-Luddite in its attitude to science; that it glorifies the local, the purity of poverty and the authenticity of the indigenous; that it makes exaggerated claims to represent a ‘grand oppositional coalition’ (p. 363) and ignores discontinuities in mainstream development discourse. For him this ‘quasi-revolutionary posturing’ (p. 364) amounts to a ‘neotraditionalist reaction against modernity’ (p. 366).

Given the importance of development as ‘an icon for our era’ and its influence of its ‘political economy of truth’ (Artz, 1997: 601) this paper will focus on the development discourses of water, but will do so cautiously, bearing in mind the criticisms of taking such an approach to extremes. The variety of interpretations of causes, philosophies and action espoused by social movements calls for specific case studies.
WATER, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE WORLD BANK

Paterson (1999) points out that the diversity of actors with environmental impact means that environmentally-focused protests take various forms and have many sites. They can combine to form coalitions around specific physical targets (e.g. the Sardar Sarovar dam), or project themselves as united against ideologies such as capitalism. This means that when such networks reconfigure themselves as one green anti-globalisation movement, it could be seen as postmodern in its disparate, shifting participants. The difficulties of studying such amorphous interactions necessitate the narrow focus of the following case studies, first on specific voices: Shiva and the World Bank Water Resources Sector Strategy (draft, 2002, hereafter the Bank Strategy) and second on a specific place: urban Ghana. This selection recognises water contests as both discursive and material. Shiva is chosen because of her influence on radical ecological and postdevelopmental thinking, and because of the detailed attention given to water issues in her new book ‘Water Wars: Privatisation, Pollution and Profit’ (2001). The World Bank is chosen as a long-standing focus of radical protest.

Water as an Environmental Challenge

The Bank Strategy opens with ‘the gloomy arithmetic of water’ (p.3), highlighting the six-fold increase in water use and predicting that 4 billion people will live in conditions of severe water stress by 2025. Shiva also cites quantitative evidence of global water scarcity. Both construct crisis narratives including climate change, although the Bank Strategy’s language of ‘sustainable development’ and ‘enabling legal frameworks’ conveys less urgency than Shiva’s assertion that ‘water wars’ are underway. Shiva’s explicit agreement with the Bank begins with the first line of the preface where she quotes Bank vice president Serageldin “If the wars of the last century were fought over oil, the wars of the next century will be fought over water” (p. ix). She is not a post-structuralist nor sceptical of positivist discourses of global environmental catastrophe. There, however, the agreement ends.
Shiva projects partial responsibility for water shortage at the Bank itself, which is on the wrong side of water wars fought by ‘millions of species and billions of people seeking enough water for sustenance…[against] a handful of global corporations…assisted by global institutions like the World Bank’ (p.x). This ‘other side’ has ‘converted abundance into scarcity’ through promoting non-traditional Green Revolution crops and tubewells, resulting in erosion, salinisation and desertification. The Bank Strategy acknowledges that irrigation accounts for 70% of water use, but together with the Green Revolution this is lauded for enabling a 30% increase in per capita grain production. It admits, however, that 10% of food production is based on ‘unsustainable pumping of ground water’. A decline in Bank investments in irrigation is presented as being in recognition of this. The crisis is one of ‘conflicts between irrigation and environmental conservation’ (p.14), but unlike Shiva’s ‘wars’ the conflict is to be reconciled, not fought out. This requires redefining water and water management as not simply hydrological. For example, some of the Bank’s ‘greatest and most publicized failures’ (p.5) were at least in part due to initial perception of dams ‘as synonymous with water resources management’ (p.1). The Bank has responded by creating new teams to explore ‘cutting edge issues’ beyond technical fixes of the hydraulic mission or blueprint economic solutions, including water rights and management (p.36-37). A new interdisciplinarity is reflected in the deliberately ‘fuzzy organisational arrangement’ of the Water Resources Management Group (p.46). Thus the Bank presents itself as confronting environmental risks and concerns, in line with Beck’s reflexive modernity concept (1994).

**Water as an Economic Resource**

The Bank Strategy states that an ‘overriding thrust of the World Bank Group’s work on water and sanitation is to ensure that the poor gain access to safe, affordable water’ (p.19). Accordingly it presents water as having particular economic significance for livelihoods and poverty reduction. Costs of water are considered with the emphasis on the poor: the urban ‘unserved poor pay ten or more times the price for a liter of water’ (p.6). Water economics should therefore be context-specific: subsidies targeted to the poor, and
different urban and rural pricing. The political difficulties of actualising different economic rural and urban price schemes require realism and an outlook ‘from the point of view of users (as one must [have] when considering political economy of reform rather than theoretical elegance)’ (p.25). Water may have economic value but in terms of cost recovery ‘it is not enough to just extol the virtues of pricing’ (p.23). A ‘different approach’ to appropriate pricing intends water economic frameworks to bend slightly with context, and be constrained by perceptions, concern for the poor, feasibility and ‘good environmental and social practices’ (p.22-23). These water management frameworks still hinge on market-based solutions, a key aspect of the GEM discourse.

The Bank Strategy therefore intends to move from a narrow economic focus ‘away from slogans based on principles and focus directly on issues of political economy’ (p.70). This suggests a discourse of reflexivity, recognising the constraints to certain market-based solutions. The best proof given, however, is the theoretical possibility of overriding an economic analysis of an Indian scheme as ‘not the best use of limited financial resources’ because ‘political and security imperatives are great’ (p.58). No evidence is given that a shift in rhetoric has had an impact at the operational level. It claims that diversity requires a search for ‘what is feasible in any particular natural, cultural, economic and political environment’ (p.2) but does not cite a project where local context has taken precedence over economic aspects of water. Thus policy and practice are presented as based on an adaptive economics framework, but it is not clear whether there is a genuinely new application of social principles. The change may be largely semantic, for example redefining neoclassical ‘economic’ concepts as ‘institutional’ priorities, for example competition and efficiency.

Shiva’s stance against the commodification of water is summed up in two of her nine ‘Principles of Water Democracy (p.35-36):

\[
\text{2 Financial costs of supplying water dominate municipal/industrial use, as the opportunity cost (of not using water for alternative agricultural use) is low. In agriculture (except high-value crops) the opportunity cost of making water unavailable for industries and cities exceed financial costs.}
\]
4. Water must be free for sustenance needs.

9. Water cannot be substituted.

Water is intrinsically different from other resources and products. It cannot be treated as a commodity.

She asserts that economic tools and theories violate these principles and must not be applied to water, nor used to find a solution to the water crisis. Such concepts as the Bank’s are reductionist, denying that ‘what the irrigation ditches produce is not merely a market commodity but a denseness of life’ (p.27). Shiva describes the Bank as wrongly assuming that other resources can be substituted for water, and with a purely economistic perception of ‘water scarcity as a crisis resulting from the absence of water trade’ (p.14). The market assumptions of the Bank are portrayed as denying scarcity and ‘blind to the ecological limits set by the water cycle’ (p.15). This reconfiguration of the Bank serves to portray economics as exacerbating a crisis in which water is devalued, with the life that it supports. Shiva thus constructs a simplified version of Bank discourse, which ignores her similarities with the Bank’s environmental crisis narrative, overlooks the Bank’s apparent recognition of political factors in water decisions, and contradicts the conventional understanding of economics as a framework reliant on the scarcity of resources to organise their distribution. Shiva is therefore critiquing a caricature she herself has drawn. Shiva echoes Esteva and Prakash’s (1998) denial of the Bank’s international solutions as arrogant, without going so far as rejecting all global action as illusory.

**Water Rights**

Both the Bank Strategy and Shiva emphasise water ‘rights’, but with very different implications. The Bank Strategy discusses rights to water as part of an ‘institutional framework’ (p.12). It is not entirely clear whether water rights that have to be ‘recognised’ (p.16), rather than given, are seen as natural human rights, for example ‘the rights of traditional users’. The aim that ‘water rights become secure property rights for
individuals and communities’ (p.16) indicates a crucial distinction between any such initial water rights, and legal, transferable property rights that would then give traditional users the incentive to sell water rights voluntarily (for example to a city prepared to pay more than the returns to traditional water use). The Bank’s solution to the ‘great challenge for irrigation’ of ‘how to make farmers take account of the opportunity cost’ (outlined in note 2) can therefore be found in ‘vesting of communities with ownership rights’. The legal/political mechanisms by which this is to be achieved are unspecified (p.19). Potential problems increase given the Bank’s goal of facilitating entry of private utilities; these might be expected to push for rights to be allocated to themselves. The Bank Strategy acknowledges that difficulties facing water markets appear vast, including the infrastructure for plumbing and monitoring, and institutions for transparent regulation.

Shiva claims that water is ‘a right arising out of human nature’ (p.20). Traditional water regulation systems are used to construct a discourse of timeless rights inherent to human existence, rather than conferred by the modern state. Her belief that ‘buying and selling [water] for profit violates our inherent right to nature’s gift’ presents water wars as paradigmatic conflicts, as ecological cultures challenge the perception of water as an economic resource (p.36). Shiva’s concept of water human rights relies on robust social resources for equitable distribution of water. However, one alleged ‘water democracy’ depended on the caste system, whereby only the landless Harijans could control the flow of water to the landowners (p.30). The contradictions inherent in extolling this as ‘democratic’ are not explored.

Shiva and the Bank Strategy both advocate community empowerment through ‘water rights’, but with very different implications, validating Mouffe’s (1988) caution of the ease with which current radical discourses can be assimilated, and Esteva and Prakash’s (1998) warning against inappropriate metanarratives of human rights. For the Bank, property rights over water are tools allowing users access to water as an economic resource. In Bank discourse, a genuine ‘right’ includes the right to sell that right itself; for Shiva, sale of rights is heresy—a water ‘right’ is more like the ‘right’ to vote, which must not be sold if a just democracy is to function.
Water as a Social and Spiritual Resource

The Bank strategy emphasises social aspects to its response to the water crisis—whether learning from ‘many successful NGO-led watershed management projects’, organising ‘groups of landless farmers into small cooperatives’ or involving women in decision-making (p.7). In Yemen ‘reinforcing strong traditional community-based management systems’ is important, though these are only specified as extant in the traditional field of flash-flood management (p.66). The Bank uses the well-known environmental economics narrative of the Tragedy of the Commons to describe a ‘classic “open access resource management problem”’ where new technologies have drastically altered the rate of aquifer depletion. In this case national Yemeni legislation is ‘unrealistic’ and hydrogeological data are rare, (p.65) so communities may have a role in management that must be ‘aquifer by aquifer, at the local level…beyond the usual blueprints’ (p.67). Bank realism acknowledges that in Yemen options ‘may not be optimal’ (p.66); similarly elsewhere actions are to be ‘tailored to the political realities’ (p.57). Thus a crisis narrative and elements of reflexive modernity are combined with the GEM discourse.

Critics would dispute the Bank’s claims that large dams can be pro-poor (by evening out the seasonal demand for labour), even though the Bank Strategy does acknowledge that too often dams have been ‘economically and environmentally destructive’. The social benefits claimed by the Bank Strategy from ‘the entry of alternative service providers’ (p.19) would also be disputed, as fundamentally impossible (e.g. ‘fair competition between conventional utility and small-scale service providers’), undesirable (‘financial policies and instruments’), unlikely (‘empowering communities’), or based on wrong ideologies and economic metanarratives (‘vesting communities with ownership rights’ and efficiency based on ‘modernisation’ of traditional systems).

The Bank Strategy does see itself as facing cultural challenges: ‘this is not to suggest that introducing rights-based systems for a fugitive resource with deep cultural implications is easy’ (p.17). Although ‘the culture and principles of the major water using sector’ are
influential, (p.13) it does not consider whether these culture clashes could not only affect the reform timescale, but make its property-rights approach inappropriate. The challenge of diverse cultures is not of maintaining the wealth of alternative solutions they offer, but reconciling their diversity with the single water market solution.

Shiva sees water as a social resource intrinsic to the ‘contemporary fact’ of traditional community management (p.25). Innovative non-mechanised systems include water harvesting, ‘people’s dams’ (p.26) and traditional tanks built by the Tarun Bharat Sangh youth organisation. She decries new tubewells and pumps, but does not suggest ways in which they can be regulated: she gives no examples of community management of groundwater extraction. Her eulogising of the traditional (even when not reliant on a caste system) is ‘new traditionalist’ in that it is a reactionary rejection of modernity, ignoring the possibility of reflexive adaptation to changes in technology and social structures (Sinha et al, 1997).

Transnational corporations (TNCs) are presented by Shiva as invariably harmful. The aid given to Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) is ‘a subsidy for private firms’. For example, the Bank’s loan condition guaranteeing ‘a 33% profit margin to the French company Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux’ exemplifies the erosion of the ‘democratic right to water’ (p.91). In response Shiva calls for cooperation between movements for water rights, and against dams and intensive irrigation, because the ‘water war unleashed by multinational corporations can be won only through massive movements for water democracy’ (p.127). Echoes of Habermas’ theories of colonisation of the lifeworld include the disappearance of earthen pots offering free water in markets and temples, as these are ‘replaced by plastic bottles, and the gift economy has been supplanted by the water market’ (p.101-102). TNC entry thus results not only in an environmental crisis of plastic waste, but a crisis of culture and loss of democracy, as the right to quench one’s thirst is restricted to the rich. Shiva thus uses elements of poststructural political ecology, an environmental crisis narrative, new traditionalist populism and spiritual resistance.

The widespread spiritual significance of water underpins Shiva’s concept of universal water rights. Where spiritual resources are ‘metaphors for our relationship to the planet’
economic valuation is illogical and impossible (p.138). The 30 million devotees who gathered to bathe during Allahabad’s Maha Kumbh Mela in 2001 were not responding to market incentives; they ‘did not see the value of the water in terms of its market price but in terms of its spiritual worth’ (p.139). Although Nehru briefly equated the drive to modernity with a spiritual exercise, in the contention between global institutions and counter-hegemonic resistance, only the latter utilise spiritual discourse. Shiva’s use of religious texts has been criticised as new traditionalist, because it constructs historically invalid, romanticised relations to nature and is uncritically based on texts to which access was traditionally restricted by caste (Sinha et al, 1997). Despite such criticisms, religious discourse remains uniquely powerful because, unlike the language of rights and community-based development, its power cannot be assimilated and neutralised.

Shiva contrasts Hindu mythology with the commodification of water, exposing as inappropriate or even sacrilegious ‘the colonisation of India by Coca Cola’ (p.134). The Bank Strategy’s language of ‘consumer-oriented’ utilities (Bank Strategy p.19) jars with non-consumptive acts of devotion. Shiva’s concluding argument is that the mythological struggle over the sacred water pot ‘between gods and demons, between… those who nurture and those who exploit, is ongoing’ (p.139). Clearly, the World Bank and TNCs are on the side of the ‘demons’, and those heroic movements that resist them are on the side of the ‘gods’.

**Hydropolitics**

Shiva contrasts traditional ‘water democracies’ with dams. The latter distort and centralise power just as they divert and concentrate water. Roy describes both dams and nuclear bombs as ‘weapons Governments use to control their own people’ (quoted on p.63), suggesting a political ecology framework in which submergence of settlements embodies imposition of an alien culture. Thus hydropolitical infrastructure is allied to social disintegration as dams and bombs ‘scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens…water to rivers…and the earth to human existence’. Both result from staggering illogicality, ignoring concepts as fundamental as Shiva’s concept of water rights. Roy’s
language could be seen as a response to Foucault’s demand to release knowledge from hegemonic control (in this case control by the dominant GEM discourse). Her language also endorses Dwivedi’s (1998) thesis that ecological movements aim to politicise risk, by moving risk out of neutral, scientific constraints. Protests are as much about cultural meaning as resource management, endorsing Escobar (1996).

Shiva does not present a positive role for the state, in part because its sovereignty has been lost under IMF and Bank conditionality, and under GATS (the General Agreement on Trade in Services). For example, GATS’ stipulation that ‘services supplied in the exercise of government authority’ must be ‘supplied neither on a commercial basis nor in competition with one or more service suppliers’ (p. 95, quotations from WTO, 2001) leaves public water management that charges fees or operates with multiple service providers open to legal challenge. National and international laws are presented as insufficient to ‘ensure justice…in the light of ecological diversity’ (p.80). Like Habermas’ (1981) new social movements, Shiva finds legal and state-based solutions to be inadequate.

The Bank Strategy asserts that since earlier dam and irrigation failures the ‘World Bank has learned a lot’ with ‘major changes in the World Bank Group’s practices and portfolio’ (p.2). One of the two principle conclusions from this reflexive, learning experience, is that ‘development and management of water resources is a highly political process’ (p.2). In international relations theory the Bank’s position falls within the functional/idealist school, which sees international cooperation over water as a catalyst not just for economic growth, but with potential to pay a ‘security dividend’ in terms of broader cooperation and dispute resolution (p.6) (Allan, 2001). However, currently ‘tensions over water rights are increasing’, and some ‘are spilling over to international river basins’ so water cooperation is not assured (p.3). This recognises the unpredictable impact of politics on economic models of resource distribution.

At a national level, the Bank’s attitude to public administration appears to be contradictory: in India as elsewhere ‘public irrigation agencies…have largely become inflexible and ineffective’, but in the following paragraph the ‘extraordinary political and
bureaucratic leadership’ of the government of Andhra Pradesh is cited as crucial to the
great success of new water user associations (p.56). The Bank Strategy emphasises water
as a hydrological and national-political resource, downplaying the roles of the Bank,
private sector, and sovereignty issues such as challenges under GATS. Despite
recognising water as political, subject to contending perceptions, the ultimate goal of
institutional changes such as ‘strengthening government capacity’ remains firmly
economic, to ‘contract services to private parties’ (p.19). Rather than engaging with
political diversity to explore alternatives less favoured by the Bank, diversity is seen as a
problem to be overcome, not part of the solution.

Solutions to the Water Crisis

Shiva uses hermetically sealed dichotomies to juxtapose water problem and solution:
economics-society, global-local and modern-traditional. Together with her use of a
romanticised past as a template for alternative development policy, this builds a
conservative and new traditionalist framework (Sinha et al, 1997). The crisis has
‘commercial causes but no market solutions’ (p.15). Tools such as tradable discharge
permits are rejected, because their trade between companies excludes citizens and
‘violates ecological democracy’ (p.33). Shiva’s final warning of the on-going water war
between ‘gods and demons’ includes a call to action: ‘each of us has a role’ (p.139).
Unlike the Bank’s claimed rejection of blueprints Shiva commends the ‘blueprints
provided by people’s movements’ in India for reclaiming the commons and preventing
the commoditisation of human rights implicit in privatisation of water (p.126-7). Her
focus on heroic local actors fits with the populist environmental narrative identified by
With economic solutions denounced as inappropriate and harmful, and politics dismissed
as inadequate, the negotiated influence and compromise of O’Brien et al’s ‘complex
multilateralism’ (2000) are not an option. Urgent action by social movements is the only
solution.
In contrast, the Bank Strategy does argue for market solutions that combine community rights with physical interventions, including NGO-led terracing, reforestation, improved drainage and water-efficient or drought-resistant crops. Water must produce more crops per drop or more jobs per drop (by increased productive efficiency or increased allocation efficiency). Release from dams is to be reanalysed to ensure ecologically appropriate flows. Despite acknowledging the complexities of pricing, and that water markets are not ‘simple, or a panacea’ (p.26), economic tools and institutional reform are fundamental to Bank Strategy solutions. For example ‘perverse subsidies’ for electricity for pumps, should be replaced by ‘virtuous subsidies’ for land improvements, efficient technology and poverty reduction. Although many consider the prerequisites of property rights-based systems to be ‘so onerous that they cannot be made to work in most developing countries’ the Bank Strategy claims that ‘all such established systems are working, after initial adjustments, reasonably well’ (p.26). The sanctioned discourse of the Bank is broadening, but solutions are still based on the technology and economics of the GEM.

The Bank Strategy chooses its language with great care: it avoids mentioning ‘privatisation’, anathema to Shiva and Bank critics, instead advocating ‘private sector entry’, PPPs, ‘institutional reforms’ and ‘private financing’. Ambiguous phrases such as ‘private involvement’ can refer to poor farmers, newly endowed with transferable water rights, or divestiture of national water management to TNCs. The latter are mentioned very rarely, although it can be assumed that the successful submission in the ‘competitive bidding process’ for the Lagos water ‘private management’ contract will be a TNC. The word ‘conditionality’ is also avoided, even where the Bank has ‘decided to discontinue financing of urban utilities unless they are associated with major institutional reforms’ (p.57). Sources of ‘public’ finance for PPPs are also unclear: this could mean the Bank, governments, or communities.

Despite an alleged ‘consensus’ on ‘separating the role of providers (increasingly private)’ from public regulation, the public-private division is indistinct. The World Bank Group

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3 Unfortunately a bibliography and more details on these successful systems have yet to be added to the draft Strategy.
‘has a major role to play’ in reversing global declines in private infrastructure investment: 40% of current Bank-funded urban projects involve ‘private sector participation’ (p.19). At a local level in Nigeria communities contribute to construction costs of facilities that the private sector operates and maintains. This appears to invert descriptions of PPPs where investment is private, and infrastructure is community-managed. Despite the assertion that PPPs ‘must take place within a publicly-established…legal and regulatory framework’ (p.11), in Lagos legislative reform and planning is part of the ‘longer-term’ third track (p.60), while the concession is currently being prepared. Politics of regulation are therefore secondary to the imperatives of private sector entry.

**Presentation of Alternative Water Paradigms**

Shiva emphasises pervasive, violent conflict: current ‘paradigm wars over water are taking place in every society’ (p.x). The division between combatants is clear-cut—‘diverse cultures and ecosystems’ face a ‘corporate culture of privatisation, greed’ (p.x). The danger from this enemy is presented as cataclysmic. The steps from water pollution by bauxite mining companies to armed international conflict are covered in a single leap: ‘Bauxite is used for aluminium, and aluminium is used for Coca Cola cans, rapidly displacing India’s water culture, and for fighter planes, like those that are carpet-bombing Afghanistan as I write this’ (p.xiii). This quotation follows discussion of the 9/11 attacks, so the enormity of such ‘corporate terrorism’ is obvious. President Bush’s ‘war against terrorism’ is claimed to be ‘a war against the planet-its oil, its water, its biodiversity’ (p.xiv). O’Brien et al (2000) argue that policy influence is greatest when social movements enter into dialogue with power holders, showing respect for each others analytical tools; Shiva, however, chooses apocalyptic imagery to maximise the emotive effect.

Shiva places the Bank and TNCs on the side of the ‘demons’ (p.139), part of a monolithic united front with the WTO and the IMF, demonised for having subsidised electrified groundwater extraction in Maharashtra, and again for pushing privatisation when this failed (p.13). The general criticism of dams condemns the Bank’s involvement, and its
flawed, reductionist ‘logic of returns to investment’ (p.66). While the Bank depicts its use of economics as apolitical and neutral, Shiva describes the bank as deliberately manipulating ‘grossly exaggerated’ benefits to exceed social and environmental costs. This recalls Potts’ (2000) political ecology of the relationship between science and politics. Shive ignores reflexivity apparent in some Bank discourse, and processes such as ‘vigorou debate within the World Bank’ (about Yemen, p.66), which portray the Bank as less of a monolith than she suggests. Shiva thus undermines the strength of her own arguments, by ignoring the ‘discourse overload’ within the Bank. Through this discourse overload the Bank ensures a wide diversity of politically correct answers to criticisms.

To legitimate their own position, and thus undermine that of their opponents, the Bank Strategy portrays itself as part of a ‘global consensus’ (p.18-19) around the International Development Targets and the Dublin Principles. The Bank Strategy gives limited recognition to the controversy surrounding private sector involvement: the consensus becomes ‘broad although not unanimous’ (p.37). The Bank Strategy presents itself as moderate: views that equate water management with water infrastructure or ‘stigmatized hydraulic infrastructure’ are both ‘wrong’ and ‘extremes’ (p.10). In ‘too many cases’ in India controversy results in “‘stand-off’ and polarisation’ (p.55).

The ‘pain’ resulting from dam failures (p.2) is not only to those living near dams, but the Bank’s reputation. These ‘reputational risks to the World Bank as articulated directly and indirectly by activist NGOs’ should, however, be secondary to other risks, first to people in developing countries should the Bank not engage, then to the Bank’s reputation among borrower governments, followed by private sector perceptions (p.40). This refusal to prioritise perceptions of activists reinforces the discourse of consensus, which explains why they are not mentioned elsewhere the report. It is problematic, however, for the Bank to prioritise the ‘perspective of civil society in the borrowing country’ and de-prioritise perceptions of Northern ‘common sets of NGOs’ (p.43): the anti-globalisation movement is a network involving North and South, and Shiva is part of Indian civil society, but with influence in the North. There is a danger that Southern movements could be dismissed as illegitimate for linking to Northern NGOs, despite the latter’s crucial role as demonstrated by Wade (1997) and O’Brien et al (2000).
WATER IDEOLOGY AND PRACTICE IN GHANA

The ideological discourses in the previous section do not show how principles translate into practice, or how the construction of truth reconfigures power, in terms of the policies and operations of water management. The Bank Strategy claims not to be a blueprint for action, but instead is secondary to the water resources and government approach of a given country. Water policies will also be governed by the relationship between the Bank and the country (embodied in the Country Assistance Strategy). A country case study is therefore necessary to explore the Bank Strategy’s claims of socially responsive policies tailored to a national context. Ghana is chosen because national and international debate surrounds the current urban water divestiture to private companies. Although in-country research is beyond the scope of this paper, documents referring to the Government of Ghana (GoG), civil society (particularly the poor), and the private sector clarify the prioritisation of political, social and economic aspects of water. Criticisms are compared to the Bank memorandum on its Country Assistance Strategy (‘MCAS’, World Bank 2000), which addresses the privatisation of water and public sector reform, and the standard letter of response to criticism from the Bank country director (Harrold, 2002)⁴. The rural Community Water and Sanitation Project (CWSP) will also be referred to. The Ghanaian critics of the Bank include the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG), NGOs (including ISODEC, a human rights and social justice NGO), trade unions, women’s groups and students, loosely joined in the Ghana National Coalition Against the Privatisation of Water (GNCAPW, whose basic position statement (GNCAPW, n.d.) is referred to as ‘CAP’).

The Government Role

MCAS avers that the Bank approach in Ghana is ‘premised on country ownership of the policy agenda’ (annex C, p.2), demonstrated by the government role in preparing the CAS, which aims to strengthen ministries. Harrold (2002) assures international critics

⁴ No more specific document for the Ghanaian urban water sector was found on the World Bank website.
that it is ‘not the World Bank’s debate’ so questions of public policy ‘must be addressed to the Government of Ghana’. This firstly demonstrates the political usefulness of any process of ‘participation’ in enabling the Bank to distance itself from the decisions allegedly made by GoG. Secondly, by redirecting criticisms, it recalls the Bank Strategy’s de-prioritisation of Northern NGOs. MCAS, however, rather than suggest that GoG is free to follow its own policies, repeatedly criticises GoG as unresponsive to ‘long-standing Bank support for the process of privatization’ (p.4), slow in implementation, with dubious commitment to divestiture, ‘still bloated’ public services despite Bank efforts (p.5), and suspected of ‘political interference’ in the process (p.12). The Water Sector Restructuring Secretariat (WSRS) emphasises that ‘GoG is not rushing the project…delays have been necessary’. Much of MCAS therefore refers to the efforts of the Bank to bring about policy reform against resistance from GoG, including regarding public sector management and strategies to promote the rapid divestment of sectors where the decision to privatise has been made (including water).

Despite the Bank Strategy’s emphasis on perceptions and solutions tailored to national context, no consideration is made of why GoG may be slow in privatising water, for example in response to public feeling and the national sanctioned discourse of water. The MCAS was written a year before GNCAPW was formed in 2001, but civil society is only mentioned as an assumed ‘partner’ in the process. This suggests that the Bank was neither exploring government perceptions nor aware of the potential reaction of civil society. It is apposite then, that the MCAS ‘client survey’ reports low Bank ‘respect’ (for Ghanaian social priorities, knowledge and expertise), and low ‘flexibility’ and ‘realism’ (Box 2). No strategy to raise flexibility or respect for Ghanaians is suggested. In contrast, private sector views on GoG are explored in much greater detail, including mistrust and high interest rates.

CAP describes the CAS as a ‘conditionality framework’ restricting GoG’s options, because it refers to ‘triggers’ and the possibility of cancelling $100 million allocated funds. In contrast Harrold (2002) argues ‘there are no special conditions’, but also states incongruously that the Bank ‘will not lend more resources to the GWCL as it stands today’, which GNCAPW (2002) identifies as a condition. MCAS lists only one ‘key
trigger’: progress on ‘the program to increase private participation in infrastructure’ (p.16). If there were ‘little progress’ (the program is stalled or considered non-transparent) then two projects, one worth $50m, would be lost. Only with ‘substantial progress’ (this is not defined) will $100m be released for urban water restructuring (Table 2 and Annex B1). A further ‘lending instrument’ is a reduction of direct finance to ‘infrastructure that the private sector could finance (e.g., electricity and urban water)’ (p.5). Seven ‘conditions’ for IMF and World Bank loans to Ghana’s water sector are listed by a US NGO (IWWG, 2002a). An international-sign-on letter endorsed by NGO representatives of 18 countries points to these conditions’ lack of consistency with Bank commitments to ‘genuine national ownership of policies’ (IWWG, 2002b). This letter, distributed over the internet, also shows how the web is used by a diffuse movement to achieve collective action.

CAP sees the water sector as an asset of the Ghanaian people, so it should remain nationally owned and operated, and reformed through democratic processes. CAP criticises the ‘loan conditionality and the recent fast-tracking of the process’ as ‘foreign interest driven’. It describes the divestiture decision as taken by ‘arbitrarily-chosen “stakeholders”’. This conflicts with the WSRS description of a 3-day workshop including politicians and NGOs in 1995, where the lease was chosen from various PPP options, following the failure of a $200m investment to improve performance of GWCL (the loss-making state Ghana Water Company Limited). Although the Bank Strategy recommends a strong public role in regulation, Christian Aid (2001a) claims that US consultants proposed TNC exemption from the state regulatory body. The national institutional control recommended in parts of the Bank Strategy would be further constrained by an automatic tariff adjustment formula to tie tariffs to changes in the exchange rate and inflation. This is to improve ‘full cost recovery’ and the IMF states ‘its implementation should be a condition for completion of the fifth review’ (IMF, 2002). WSRS directly denies this, claiming that GoG will regulate tariffs and ‘the IMF is not even involved in this project at all’. The association of water and political change, whether through ‘conditionalities’, ‘triggers’ or ‘structural benchmarks’ demonstrates the nature of water as a political good, through which international power relations are expressed. The
carefully chosen, even contradictory words show the construction of each actor’s sanctioned discourse.

**Civil Society, Poverty and Rights**

The preparation of the CAS is claimed to have been ‘highly consultative’, in line with the Bank Strategy (p.2). This is questionable simply from its failure to plan for any reaction of civil society against privatisation. Box 1 accounts for this omission: the ‘highly consultative’ procedure comprised six two-day meetings with 35 pre-selected representatives of NGOs, small businesses and local government. CAP describes this process as woefully inadequate. MCAS does, however, call for a framework for civil society’s more systematic involvement in ‘the policy debate’ (p.3 Annex C), and condemns ‘mistrust between government and civil society’, in part because ‘the flow of information is inadequate’. The minimal consultation did not, however, put these policies into practice, and could be seen as token participation, used to legitimate the decisions of the powerful. MCAS recommends an increased dissemination of information, including by the Bank, but MCAS itself was the most relevant document found in Bank web searches for urban water policy in Ghana.

CAP claims that the divestiture was not subject to debate in the media or in public meetings, and that as the foreign consulting firms had track records of favouring privatisation, none would be expected to recommend any alternative. Thus the ‘IMF/WB have hijacked the government’s accountability to its citizens’. This challenges MCAS’ support for civil society involvement in debate, and Harrold’s description of discussion in parliament and in the press, for example after visits to countries with reformed water sectors. A difficulty in evaluating the claims and counter-claims is that the bid documents are being kept from the Ghanaian public until finalised, at which point Harrold (2002) ‘fully agrees’ with ‘full disclosure of all details of the proposed lease’, and WSRS states that draft final tender documents ‘will be submitted to GoG (cabinet) and Parliament for approval’ (emphasis in original). Many of the calls to action from GNCAPW and the sign-on letter are focused on improving public debate and full disclosure of all
transaction details. Reminiscent of the concerns identified for ‘new’ social movements, these issues cut across lines of class and political interest, and respond to power relations within the global market place.

Like the Bank Strategy, the MCAS recommends a more pro-poor focus, and agrees with GoG that basic services in poor, underserved areas should be prioritised. However, whether the divestiture is indeed likely to do this is hugely contentious, so the claims of probable gains for the poorest will be compared with gains for the bidders. Stone & Webster (US consultants who produced the divestiture framework and were retained as transaction advisors) recommend that in the early stages the focus will be on rehabilitation of the system, ‘rather than expansion to LICs [low income communities]’ (Stone & Webster, p.41, in CAP). Bacterial counts are not among the performance criteria. One consultants’ study rejects outright a social tariff to subsidise access to water for the poorest, although WSRS asserts that there will be a ‘lifeline tariff’, below 10% of current price per-bucket, and that reductions in unaccounted-for water will mitigate tariff increases. TNC profits would be protected from the impact of any such tariff, as its costs would be born by GoG. Christian Aid (2001a) and CAP express outrage that the TNCs could collect all fees, reclaim the value of any social tariff from GoG, and be under no legal obligation to invest this in serving the poor despite two companies’ annual sales figures being in excess of Ghana’s 1999 GDP. Without access to the bid documents speculative scenarios include one whereby Bank loans to GoG for pro-poor subsidies are paid out to the TNCs, while adding to Ghana’s debt. The magnitude of potential payments is also speculative, but 40% of the population is classified as poor. The public/private roles are blurred, begging the question of who will support whom.

Similar to Shiva’s concept of water rights, GCC asserts that ‘the right to water is a fundamental, God-given right’ (Christian Aid, 2001b). GNACPW espouses rights not to free water, but water ‘at an affordable price’ (GNACPW, 2002, emphasis in original), renouncing prices that produce the profits sufficient to attract foreign investors. The Ghanaian movement thus rejects the definition of water as an economic resource, and resists encroachment of profit-driven systems into national water management. Human, rather than economic values, are paramount. CAP is ‘almost certain’ that the confidential
bid documents do not obligate TNCs to respect the ‘rights of the poor’, but treat these rights ‘shabbily’ (p.7). As Bayat (2000) suggests, conceptualising access to public services as a basic moral necessity shifts Ghanaians into collective politics. Harrold avoids mentioning ‘rights’, and ‘caution[s] against the assertion that because water is essential to life it must be provided by the state at low cost’. He too supports the goal that ‘the poor get affordable access’, but as this is the responsibility of the state, the above scenario is not ruled out.

In rural areas, the CWSP is more explicit in its intention to reduce poverty by providing water and hygiene training. However, the demand-led approach to ‘prioritize investments where willingness to pay is highest’ seems to contradict intentions to reach poor, remote communities, which may be least able to raise the required 5-10% of investment costs (World Bank 1999). ISODEC (Amenga-Etego, no date) found disproportionately low participation among guinea worm endemic communities, for example Gushegu town was excluded despite raising half the required contribution and having 900 cases, about 12% of the entire national disease burden. The inability to pay tariffs denied borehole access to 80% of Karanga’s population, despite 300 cases in 1996 and 1997. The exclusion of the poorest and sickest presents a powerful part of ISODEC’s argument for an approach that is needs-driven, not demand-driven, and that views water a social, not economic resource.

Welle (2001) argues that CWSP reconfigures the meaning of ‘partnerships’ from mutual solidarity to contract-based adherence to an economistic framework. In an Indian project new NGO ‘partners’ became similarly accountable to donors, rather than local people (Joshi, 2002). Rigid assumptions and strategies were incompatible with professed goals of empowerment, while the demand-led approach led to a ‘bias against equity’. The structure and problems of this Bank project is similar enough to CWSP to suggest a common blueprint.
The Private Sector and Privatisation Ideology

Although divestiture might be expected to enhance FDI, MCAS only mentions privatisation as a source of government revenue when suggesting this be used to reduce domestic debt (p.3, 10). CAP is appalled that the companies are under no obligation to expand supply, only to rehabilitate, and are expected to finance improvements ‘strictly by ploughing in tariff revenues’ (p.5). CAP claims that the companies will have the right to repatriate 100% of profits in hard currency and draw from a $500m investment fund to be established by GoG using Bank loans and other international aid. As the water sector generates no foreign exchange this would damage the balance of payments, exacerbated by encouragement for TNCs to import inputs (p.5). However, WSRS explains that such concessionary loans would not need to be recouped from tariffs within the lease period, unlike more expensive commercial investment, which would raise tariffs. Harrold (2002) asserts that Bank loans are available because full recovery of all commercial costs ‘would indeed push the tariff too high’ unlike operating costs, where ‘we certainly encourage full recovery’.

CAP claims that if the tariff adjustment took it beyond the means of some, ‘the foreign company will pass the difference between the former and adjusted bill to the GoG’ (p.6), bearing out the speculative scenario described above. GoG will install meters and retain responsibility for the less lucrative sewerage system. Worker retrenchment is required before transfer of assets, financed by a Bank loan to GoG. Despite MCAS goals of reduced GoG expenditure, CAP argues that GoG’s responsibility for pay-offs, investment, pro-poor subsidies, and sewerage leaves it with vast costs and minimal regulatory power, while TNCs benefit from ‘intense cherry-picking’ of the most lucrative parts of the water sector, able to repatriate all profits and draw from the GoG fund (p.6). Given these performance expectations it is no surprise, then, that CAP asks, ‘Who then is more efficient?’ (p.6).

Like the Bank Strategy, Harrold (2002), will not discuss ‘privatisation’. He declares ‘there is no privatisation involved in the proposal’ (emphasis in original), because the lease leaves GWCL with nominal ownership, in addition to the many GoG
responsibilities described above. MCAS, in contrast, openly backs ‘privatisation’ with funding ‘triggers’ discussed above. The ideological response to privatisation from critics varies: Christian Aid (2001a) is ‘not opposed in principle to every privatisation’ but because water is essential to life it ‘should not be treated as a common commodity’ (p.16). With CCG, it opposes this particular model of privatisation. ISODEC concedes that private management of small town systems ‘may not be a bad idea’, but with the caveat that it should target ‘Ghanaian entrepreneurs as against foreign private monopolies’ (Amenga-Etego, no date, p.2). Unlike the rejectionism of Shiva and postdevelopment, this suggests a reflexive response to modernity, acknowledging that privatisation might be an option, but should be carefully managed.

Although the Bank Strategy applauds competition, MCAS never refers to the creation of a competitive environment, or enhancement of competition. Instead the proposed urban water contracts are to create supply monopolies. MCAS refers to corruption in the public sector but never in the private sector, despite accusations of corruption surrounding four of the TNC bidders (Christian Aid, 2001a, CAP). Corroborating Shiva, US supporters place the divestiture within a global, cultural crisis of invasion by corporate economic interests: it is ‘only part of the global agenda on privatisation’ (Communication Initiative, 2002). The Bank’s support for divestiture is therefore widely claimed to be ideologically motivated ‘very deft political manoeuvrings by a consortium of donor countries committed to promoting the interests of their own corporate citizens’ (CAP p.3). The allocation of the most profitable activities to TNCs, the placement of many costs with GoG (necessitating multiple Bank loans and payments to TNCs) and the shallowness of ‘pro-poor’ and ‘participatory’ rhetoric do nothing to negate this claim.
CONCLUSION

The Bank Strategy presents policy as reflexive, rejecting the hydraulic mission and recognising the collateral damage of modernity-exemplified by large dam projects. It confronts questions of how much environmental and social risk should be accepted, and how this is to be distributed: risks should be minimised, and not borne disproportionately by the poor. It recommends greater national ownership of policies, participation of civil society, and realism-afterall, the Bank’s mandate to alleviate poverty is far from necessitating rigid interventions. A ‘fuzzy’ organisational structure reflects a broader construction of water as social, political and environmental, as well as economic, recognising a ‘need to see water through an expansive lens, going well beyond hydrology to the political, social and cultural underpinnings’ (p. 70). However, the divestiture in Ghana shows a wide gulf between Bank rhetoric and reality.

To a certain extent, a time lag between a draft policy strategy and its implementation is inevitable, and a sign of dynamism, but all of the above recommendations are also found in the 1993 Bank policy paper on water (World Bank, 1993). Furthermore, research elsewhere found wide disparities between Bank reality and rhetoric, for example failure to comply with its own social and environmental policies in Cameroon (Horta, 2000), and in an Indian project similar to CWSP (Joshi, 2002). This latter mistakenly and simplistically paralleled efficiency with empowerment, attempting to mould complex social realities (gender and caste inequality) to a depoliticised economic framework. Like in CWSP, economic responsibility was decentralised but genuine decision-making authority was not (Welle, 2001, Joshi, 2002). Local political realities and perceptions were overlooked.

A reflexive Bank is not the monolith of radical mythology: it now speaks with a diversity of voices. These include elements of discourses of modernity (market-based water management tools and GEM), reflexive modernity (political awareness, learning and risk management) and alternative development (community empowerment). This could be seen as constituting ‘discourse overload’, used to make available ready answers to most criticisms, whether mainstream or radical. Inclusivity is apparent in discourse of localism,
context-specificity and water rights, but the case studies show that these have meanings very different to their use by postmodern movements and alternative development theorists. Buzzwords such as ‘partnership’ are ‘fluffy word[s] with the connotation of a harmonic “we”’ (Welle, 2001), easily adopted by ‘revisionist neoliberalism’ (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Chambers’ original meaning of ‘participation’, extolled since the 1980s, has been standardised into inflexible consultations (Francis, 2001), ‘partnership’ includes TNC entry into the water sector, ‘empowerment’ and ‘decentralisation’ are depoliticised and reduced to transfer of economic responsibility, without decision-making power. The recent Bank Strategy distances itself from vilified ‘privatisation’ by avoiding the term almost entirely. Nederveen Pieterse (1998) describes postdevelopmentalists as evoking a broad ‘we’, inclusive of grassroots movements and intellectuals. This study shows that Shiva, the Bank and the Ghanaian movement all work to portray themselves as part of larger coalitions, whether as ‘those who nurture’, or as an international consensus, or as part of a global NGO network. This construction of the ‘we’ serves to legitimise each respective position, by emphasising its democratic base (and simultaneously undermining the opponent).

Paradoxically, while the Bank’s discursive construction of water broadens for discussions of solutions and identification of problems (e.g. as global-environmental or local-perception), diversity is excluded from actual practice, dominated by PPPs and property rights based on water as an economic resource. Another paradox is that, given the Bank’s stated recognition of social realities of conflicting perceptions of water, the attention to the inevitable national political conflict over the sanctioned discourse is relatively little. In the contested triangle between the Bank, Ghanaian state institutions and civil society, outcomes of Bank-state and Bank-civil-society relations are considered, but the Bank ignores the possibility that these may be rejected during national political processes between the government and its people. Focus on government is on the institutional management reform necessary for the desired economic outcomes. The only result planned for from ‘consultation’ is acceptance of the Bank’s suggested solutions, reminiscent of Twyman’s description of PRA abused for cooption (1998). Bank discourse is in flux, as Foucault suggests, and is using increasingly expansive constructions of water truth as a system to operate diverse statements. This discourse
overload gives it a broad assimilative power over alternative discourses, in addition to answers to criticisms.

Where global processes are held responsible for environmental problems, multilateral agencies are implicated as part of associated global power structures including, as Foucault shows, systems of knowledge (Paterson, 2001). The demands for Ghanaian national sovereignty over water management show water to be a political resource: a conduit for international power relations. Criticism of tools of economic pricing, hydrology and modern market principles as Northern products of scientific rationality constitutes a political demand for redistribution of power over knowledge systems. Anti-globalisation discourse rejects these as a cause of environmental problems not a solution: their dependence on scientific knowledge excludes communities from environmental management. Corroborating Adger et al’s (2001) findings for other environmental issues, there is a GEM discourse for water. In this a global water crisis must be confronted using complex technical tools (such as pricing ecological functions of water) supplied as project blueprints that are unlikely to be designed by water users. The Ghanaian movement criticises Bank practice as driven by profit and repressive ideologies. This is not negated by the apparent potential for generating massive TNC profits while increasing national debt. Irrespective of Bank Strategy principles, the Ghana case appears to show externally imposed practice that is neither pro-poor nor participatory.

The Ghanaian movement does not appeal to traditional practice or religion in demands for reform in urban Ghana, although specifying that solutions are to be found only in local and national processes. In contrast, Shiva presents water as a spiritual resource, appeals to fundamental water human rights, and rejects any private sector involvement. She uses a discourse of cultural identity, described by Habermas as resistance to invasion of the lifeworld by economistic concepts presented as universal. Cultural and religious discourse are least susceptible to assimilation. Her absolutist rejectionism and glorification of the local and traditional are new traditionalist (Sinha et al, 1997), and require her to present the Bank as a monolith and ignore the changes in its discourse. Demonising the Bank while accepting the metanarrative of global water scarcity creates urgency vital to her thesis that water wars are underway. Despite urging local solutions,
postdevelopment radicals such as Esteva and Prakash would question her use of global narratives of rights and environmental crisis. She not only describes Bank scientific rationality as alien to local realities, but constructs a caricature that obscures actual Bank concepts, for example redefining its economics as blind to scarcity and based on an ‘assumption that the Third World will urbanise by 2025’ (Shiva, 2001: 90).

Shiva, like Escobar (1996), calls on social movements to reject the modern capitalisation of nature, apparent at the small scale of pumping, and at the large scale of dams and privatisations that concentrate power. She suggests Indian social movements as ‘blueprints’, and uses timeless community structures, religion and nature’s free provision of water to demonstrate the inherent nature of water rights. However, she does not show how these can respond to social and technological change, showing new traditionalist inflexibility, despite her claims to holism.

The implication for social movements is that Bank discourse is coming closer to addressing some of their criticisms in theory. However, the extent that such policies remain rhetorical recalls Mouffe’s (1988) caution of the ease of assimilating new radical development theory into neopopulism, or ‘revisionist neoliberalism’ (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Indeed, Bank assertions such as ‘environmental problems are, “at their root, social problems”’ are sufficient for The Economist to wonder ‘does the WDR [World Development Report, 2002] really add up to a neo-Marxist call…?’ (The Economist, 24-30/8/2002: 62). The broadening of Bank environmental discourse may be ‘mission overload’ (Wade, 1997), but as discourse overload this is useful, making available ready answers to criticism. As Mouffe warned, radical discourse is thus neutralised: the assertion of civil society ‘consultation’ and GoG ownership of water divestiture policies is used to deflect international criticism from the Bank, without empowering local voices who claim that consultations were superficial and inadequate. Criticism is also neutralised though the metanarrative of consensus on a global water crisis: this downplays contention over water discourses, while justifying urgent implementation of global solutions on a single framework (PPP/property rights).
In conclusion then, the reflexive adoption of elements from outside the modernity paradigm into Bank discourse is new and would be commendable, were it not obscuring standardised processes and a lack of translation into practice. Attacks on a monolithic caricature of the Bank cannot be certain of hitting the target, or are easily deflected. Nuanced analysis must differentiate between rhetoric and reality, and examine the reasons for their divergence. As alternative discourses are assimilated, criticisms should be focused on practice in local realities, and on internal inconsistencies of the Bank’s own making. Without sincere application of their new rhetoric, the usefulness of the Bank’s discourse overload will be limited, and make the Bank vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy.
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