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## **Contested Water: The Struggle against Water Privatization in the United States and Canada**

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*Contested Water: The Struggle Against Water Privatization in the United States and Canada* by Joanna Robinson (MIT Press; 254 pages; 2013)

A few years ago, I was travelling through Chilean Patagonia and was confronted with a vibrant populist message spray-painted throughout the region's urban centers—"Patagonia Sin Represas" (Patagonia Without Dams). Over the past decade, Chile's democratically-elected government had systematically privatized water rights on the nation's rivers, delivering the keys to many of Patagonia's largest waterways to a multinational hydroelectric company. The company was preparing to build enormous dams on the Pasqua and Baker rivers to harness hydroelectric power, which would inundate miles of scenic watershed and grazing land upstream. Near the Rio Baker, I befriended Joel and Bernardo, two gauchos whose family had occupied a few hundred acres of farmland along the river for three generations. The brothers used the river to irrigate their crops, water their livestock, and float rafts of cypress logs downstream to market. Despite the populist resistance to the privatization of Chile's rivers, in a few years, the proposed dams will inevitably flood their land and destroy their way of life.

In *Contested Water: The Struggle Against Water Privatization in the United States and Canada*, Joanna Robinson succinctly dissects why some fights against the privatization of natural resources fail while others succeed. The book is a poignant case study, juxtaposing the success of one anti-privatization movement in Vancouver, British Columbia—a fight against the city's proposal to privatize the municipal water supply—with the failure of a similar movement in Stockton, California. As a sociologist, Robinson examines the two cases in light of sociological understandings of such movements, including their underlying motivations, their use of "frames"—framing movements in sociopolitical, legal, and economic contexts—in organizing arguments, and the coalition of different interests who joined the fight (social, labor, and environmental). While the two campaigns were not identical, Robinson attempts to distill what made the fight in Vancouver successful while the activists in Stockton failed.

The two struggles shared much in common. In both cases, the activists were able to tap into strong emotional attachments to water and conceptions of water as a local resource that should not be controlled by private interests. In Vancouver, the activists made a connection between the quality of public water and the preservation of nearby watersheds (which had been damaged by logging in the past). In Stockton, the activists pointed to the potential effects of privatization on the nearby

San Joaquin River Delta, one of the most ecologically sensitive and important water systems in California, thus implicating both local and regional concerns in the public control of water. In both cases, the activists behind the movements shared a deeply-held belief that water was a public resource, and one that should be controlled by the public. However, as Robinson describes, this is where the stories diverge.

Organizers in Stockton chose to frame their anti-privatization movement as a struggle against democratic injustice. Opponents criticized the lack of public participation in the mayor's decision to outsource the city's sanitation and treatment responsibilities to private corporations. Robinson believes this narrow approach led to the movement's downfall. Framing the movement in such divisive political terms, she suggests, left organizers in Stockton unable to foster any meaningful conversation with their opponents. Robinson's argument becomes increasingly compelling through juxtaposition, as she illustrates how organizers in Vancouver took a more inclusive, "big tent" approach.

Robinson proposes that the movement in Vancouver succeeded because organizers representing various interests were able to form a collective argument, and framed their movement as one that was upholding the local public interest in the face of globalization. Organizers argued that selling water rights to multinational companies would negatively affect local employment, local access to fair water prices, and generally hinder the public's ability to control a resource that exists in their own backyards. By framing their movement broadly, organizers were able to elicit support from a variety of organizations representing environmental, labor, and anti-globalization concerns, all of which opposed the effects of unfettered globalization. In contrast to Stockton, where organizations advocated on behalf of their own narrow interests, Vancouver organizations formed a unified front via anti-globalization discourse, which allowed social justice, environmental, and labor organizations to voice a collective argument.

While Robinson effectively demonstrates the importance of framing local anti-privatization movements in global terms and forming strong cross-movement coalitions, she also briefly addresses a subtle argument that seems to have carried the day in Vancouver. Political activist Pete Clark pointed out the legal risks of selling a public resource to a private corporation; if Vancouver sold its water rights to a private company, it would have to continue to supply those rights (and that portion of water) in perpetuity. The organizers in Vancouver hired an international trade lawyer to further analyze the legal implications of privatizing water under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and submitted the findings to Vancouver decision-makers. Clark Green, an international trade law expert, warned that under the

investment clause of NAFTA, Vancouver would be financially liable for lost corporate profits if it were to change its contract with the company. In other words, once the contract was signed, under NAFTA, there would be no turning back. This sobered officials in Vancouver and was a key consideration that caused them to renege on their offer to Bechtel (the corporation that intended to purchase the rights). Robinson characterizes this legal argument as bridging the gap between the opposition movement and the political decision-makers because it addressed an issue that concerned both parties equally.

*Contested Water* offers a persuasive lesson for organizers fighting similar threats across the world. While Robinson provides a few anecdotes highlighting the consequences of privatization elsewhere (in places like Cochabama, Bolivia, where privatization led to a public uprising), she does not delve into the substantive consequences of privatization. However, in analyzing the results of two different movements combating privatization, Robinson leaves us with an optimistic conclusion: despite the failures of popular anti-privatization efforts in Stockton, on Chile's Rio Baker, and elsewhere, successful resistance is still possible.

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