
Water: For some a sacred element, for others a common property, and yet for others a mere commodity

“The surface of the earth had not appeared. There was only the calm sea and the great expanse of the sky. There was nothing brought together, nothing which could make a noise, nor anything which might move, or tremble, or could make noise in the sky. There was nothing standing; only the calm water, the placid sea, alone and tranquil. ... Only the Creator, the Maker, Tepeu, Gucumatz, the Forefathers, existed in the water surrounded by clarity.” (Fragments from Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Maya, explaining the origin of the world).

In chemistry water, with the formula H₂O, is explained as a substance that comes from the reaction of hydrogen and oxygen. It has a molecular weight of 18 gr/mol and serves as a basis to measure the density of substances. Heat transforms it from a liquid to a gaseous state and cold changes it from liquid to solid. Water is vapour, cloud, ice, hailstone, snow, liquid, rain, brook, river, sea. It is also an acid, a hydroxide, a salt, and an oxide.

Only a small 2.5% of the total amount of water existing on the planet is fresh and therefore fit for human consumption. For the western and modern urban concept, water is a renewable resource and the growing trend is to consider it as yet another consumer element, a good that can be purchased and sold, appropriated, wasted and polluted.

But for ancient cultures and even for those that have not yet lost all links with nature, water is a sacred element, inspiring myths and legends. In some cases, because it was so hard to obtain and conserve it, it was given an almost divine value. The fluidity of water is birth and in sprouting is eternity (1). For this reason it appears as an element of origin, associated with what is sacred in most religions: in the texts of the Jewish Torah, in the Christian Old Testament, in the Muslim Koran, in the codex of Pre-Colonial religions, in Hindu practices with the River Ganges as their centre, in Egyptian mythology marked by the annual floods of the River Nile, in Greek, Roman and Chinese traditions.

In the present, the Indigenous Peoples at the 3rd World Forum on Water, held in Kyoto, Japan in March 2003, declared that they commit themselves to “... honour and respect water as a sacred being which sustains all life. Our knowledge, laws and traditional ways of life have taught us to be responsible, caring for this sacred gift that connects all life.” When water is conceived of as something sacred, it is priceless and its value transcends the human species.

Beyond the belief in the sacredness of water, another line of thought holds access to drinking water as a basic human right. The first United Nations Conference on Water, held in Mar del Plata, Argentina marked the starting point for a world reflection on a global water policy. There, for the first time, the international community agreed that all people have an equal right of access to drinking water in sufficient quantity and quality to cover their needs.

Today, 1,400 million people -1 out of 4 of the planet’s inhabitants- lack access to drinking water. Differences and tensions increase unceasingly. While the inhabitants of California, USA have an average consumption of 500 litres per day, in Sudan this figure drops to 19 litres.

In 1992, Agenda XXI of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, took up this idea once again. In 2000, the Special meeting of the United Nations General Assembly established the goal of reducing by half the number of people who do not have access to drinking water by 2015. The First World Alternative Forum on Water (2), held in Florence (Italy) in 2003, inspired by the Water Manifest (3) and by the reflections of the World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre (Brazil), made a proclamation in favour of «another world and local water policy» seeking to ensure «the right to water for all the 8 billion people who will be living on the Planet in 2020 ».

But all these are proclamations have not been upheld for lack of political will on the part those entrusted to enforce them. On the contrary, all over the world pressure is increasing to privatize water services, like many other items and services. The transnational water companies, such as Bechtel, Veolia, Suez, Saur Bouygues, Nestlé, Vivendi Environnement, Danone, RWE, Thames Water, Southern Water, Coca-Cola, Aguas de Barcelona, just to name a few—rely on multilateral funding bodies that impose privatizing recipes on the countries of the South to achieve this.

Appropriation of water and generally its pollution by the industrial sector, also occurs through the – generally unpaid - use and abuse by enterprises such as pulp mills (which require vast amounts of water), mining, shrimp farming. Some of these activities also involve forest deterioration and destruction which in turn also has a direct and negative impact on the water cycle insofar as the forest is one of its key elements.

Large scale monoculture tree plantations are also a way of appropriating water, as fast-growing species act as siphons on the groundwater level, to the detriment of other activities in the surroundings of the plantation.

At the First People's Workshop in Defence of Water held in Mexico in 2005, “some of the modalities of water privatization” were identified (4). Among them:

* Privatization of territories and bioregions. The companies that trade and/or need bulk water for their activities seek the privatization of territories and entire bioregions to guarantee monopoly control over the resource, protected by changes in law.

* Privatization through diverting existing sources. Abundant water is provided to industrial users and agribusinesses through canals that divert whole rivers from their natural courses, and through the construction of infrastructure megaprojects like waterways and dams.

* Privatization by contamination. When major corporate users pollute the resource through use and abuse (for example mining, oil drilling, paper pulp, electricity companies, and agrochemical-intensive industrial monocultures) as a “collateral effect” they in fact appropriate a resource belonging to all and make it impossible for less-privileged sectors to use it.

Nigerian communities affected by oil companies, such as Shell, can testify to this. These companies pollute the waters of the Niger Delta which, according to a European Community study, contains hazardous oil levels both for aquatic and human life.

Industrial oil palm plantations, in addition to altering the water cycle through the deforestation they usually cause, additionally involve the scourge of agrochemicals used for pest, weed or plant disease control. These agrochemicals end up in surface and groundwater. In places where there is abundant rainfall, weed-killers such as glyphosate or paraquat are swept by the rain into streams and rivers, the only source of water for entire communities around the plantations, with the consequent effects

on their health.

Finally it is all a question of politics. As appropriately explained by the Swiss ecologist, Rosmarie Bär, “when talking about water you have to talk about politics. Water policy goes hand in hand with soil policy and agricultural policy, with trade and economic policies, with environmental, social and sanitary policies and with equality policy.”

Policies currently imposed all over the world are far from taking into account that we are part of a greater system that in turn belongs to other systems and others and others: from atoms to galaxies. What is done in one part of the system has repercussions on the others. As humanity, the urgent and enormous task before us is to reverse this deviation in order to recover the future and, with it, the marvel of life flowing, like water.

(1) “El agua”, Comfama, <http://www.comfama.com/contenidos/bdd/6358/AGUA.pdf>;

(2) “Florence Declaration for another Water Policy. Alternative World Water Forum Declaration” (21-22 March,2003), <http://paginadigital.org/articulos/2003/2003terc/noticias5/agua25-4.asp>;

(3) “El manifiesto del agua”, Ricardo Petrella, Barcelona, Meeting Icaria Editorial-Intermón Oxfam, 2002 ;

(4) “Las caras de la privatización del agua”, Silvia Ribeiro, La Jornada, April 2005, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/04/30/027a1eco.php>