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Wits University Wolpe Series

05 May 2011

JHB

Topic:

POLITICS OF WATER : A DISTORTED DISCOURSE

Speakers:

Mike Muller

Ahmed Veriava

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.



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Wits, Dept. of Sociology and Harold Wolpe Dialogue

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Notes for presentation on:- The Politics of Water : a Distorted Discourse

Mike Muller

(An introductory remark: I come to this from background of engagement - Harold Wolpe was one of the “northern suburbs” intellectual radicals disapproved of in my parents’ household, which was much more trade union and Southern suburbs aligned (my father, Mike snr) and a human rights lawyer/attorney, doing the hard work in the field rather than the polite supreme court advocacy (Shulamith, my mother). According to my father, “they were only interested in the working class when they needed someone to protect them during fights on the steps of the City Hall”.

*I engage as a practitioner, trained in Brixton, South London, educated in the field in Mozambique during the tough times, sceptical about the divide between theory and practice; as an engineer, know we have **got it right** when the structure stands up or **when the water comes reliably out of the tap**. We learn as much from walking and talking on the ground as reading and debating in the academe - the challenge is to put them together. Recognise role and value of activism, but worry when it is not informed since uninformed action often leads to unintended consequences.)*

Mamdani’s Problem of the African University : A PERVASIVE CONSULTANCY CULTURE

“Today, the market-driven model is dominant in African universities. The consultancy culture it has nurtured has had negative consequences for postgraduate education and research. **Consultants presume that research is all about finding answers to problems defined by a client. They think of research as finding answers, not as formulating a problem. ...**

Today, intellectual life in universities has been reduced to bare-bones classroom activity. Extra-curricular seminars and workshops have migrated to hotels. Workshop attendance goes with transport allowances and per diem. All this is part of a larger process, the NGO-ization of the university. Academic papers have turned into corporate-style power point presentations. Academics read less and less. A chorus of buzz words have taken the place of lively debates.”

So, what then is the problem?

- **Suggest that, because**
- **Water, is a “common pool resource”, open to all**
- **its management is particularly challenging,**
- **But also, water is also a medium through which to make social and political waves,**
- **that make navigation even more difficult**

The thesis: academic interest in water as a resource and a service is limited. It is a complex resource whose characteristics are often locally specific and offers few opportunities for grand theory.

Technicians who master the art of managing probability and extreme events can make far more money in hedge funds than in hydrology – and are actively recruited into the financial services industry. Yet water is viscerally understood by the broadest public as essential to their interests, as many polemicists recognise. So, at a political level water is often annexed to promote particular agendas ... often at the expense of peoples’ water needs or of the water environment itself. This review starts at the global level (because that’s where a lot of the SA discourse is imported from), then moves to the local; the way local issues play out often copies international debates.

Language and content, important: So, securocrats (and consultants) like to warn that:

“The wars of the next century will be for water”

They don't go on to the second half of the quotation:

“unless we change the way we manage water”,

it does not suit their agendas, they want money for war not water, a nice example of my thesis.

Climate change and water :

Climate change is not particularly important to water management but water is important to climate lobbies mainly for the imagery it offers. At the opening ceremony of the Copenhagen Climate Summit in December 2009, the words and images used by the world's leaders to describe the potential impacts of climate change were all about water - children stranded in trees by floods, whole communities displaced by droughts, water related diseases like malaria spreading where they had never been seen before and water supplies in coastal areas rendered salty and useless by rising sea levels. And that was before the discussion of the agricultural impacts and food shortages expected as a result of changing rainfall. As U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon summarized it: “The evidence assaults us: melting ice caps, advancing deserts, rising sea levels.” Yet in the final declaration, the word “water” was not even mentioned.

Meanwhile, human and financial resources for the monitoring and management of water resources are in decline as funds are directed to climate research at the expense of day-to-day natural resource monitoring and management. There is no regular annual monitoring of trends in water availability in many countries (perhaps one reason for this is that there has been no significant trend due to climate change over the past 40 years).

What water managers are trying to achieve is to convince policy makers that:-

To meet water's climate **challenges**, a small proportion of climate funds should be allocated to support better water management to meet today's needs which will make society more resilient tomorrow **As the example of Cape Town demonstrates in the slides**

The contribution of water management to development:

A more substantive question is how water resource management can contribute to “development”, whatever we mean by that (the ANC's “a better life for all” was a good attempt at a definition)

“water security” is one way to phrase the objective for the water, which can be helpful.
(summarised in **Slides of water security** presentation)

But water and its management is a complex and controversial business ... although **Woody Guthrie** seemed to understand it well enough in the 1930s (see slides...)

Dams and (under)development

For the past couple of decades, there has been an effective embargo by donors on the adoption in Africa of the technology that provides Europe and the US with 10% of their energy – and a much larger proportion of their renewable energy. Environmental groups in Europe and the USA, unable to enforce their preferences at home, insisted that their governments impose them on Africans and Asians. The story, as told by John Briscoe, is ongoing:

Overreach and response: The politics of the WCD and its aftermath.

“ ABSTRACT: This essay recounts the story of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) from the perspective of a former World Bank official who is often credited with first creating and then destroying the WCD. The story is consistent with the (in my view) only accurate previously published description of the politics of the WCD, that of the anti-dam leader Patrick McCully. In essence, this assessment is that ***the WCD was an extraordinarily audacious process, which aimed to substitute the legitimacy of the states in developing countries (elected in most cases, accountable in all) with the will of anti-dam NGOs that are not accountable to anyone except their fellow advocates.***

This essay outlines the reasons why no dam-building country has accepted the central recommendation of the WCD – the 26 Guidelines. While the rejection of the Guidelines (by countries and by the World Bank) is bemoaned by anti-dam NGOs, this essay argues that this well thought-out rejection represents a positive and long overdue turning point in the governance of development assistance. ***Accountable representatives from the developing world eventually did their duty – they developed a coherent and united position rejecting the WCD Guidelines and articulated a vision of why water infrastructure was central to growth and poverty reduction.*** This essay shows how this coherence evolved and how ***important it is in counterbalancing the moral hazard ('I decide, you live with the consequences') that pervades most discussions of development.*** Finally, the essay outlines the hope which this evolution and broader changes in global economic geography hold for bringing accountability and some common sense to the often Alice-in-Wonderland world of development cooperation “

(available at:

<http://www.johnbriscoe.seas.harvard.edu/publications/publications/113.%20Briscoe%20Overreach%20and%20Response%20The%20Politics%20of%20the%20WCD%20and%20its%20Aftermath-%20Water%20Alternatives%202010.pdf/view>

From a longer history, as a polemicist myself (part of the successful campaign which provided one of the first global agreements to regulate and control the way multinational companies operated in developing countries), I measure the impact of policy choices and organisational behaviour in terms of dead children and I take the issues into mainstream forums in the north in those terms ...

Using that approach, in just one country, the poverty resulting from electricity shortages, industry closures and as a result of environmentalists blocking of a hydropower project was responsible for the deaths of perhaps 10 000 babies over 5 years. The attitude of one NGO leader when confronted with this: “trading off child deaths against the environment is so 20th century”. The children died in the 1st decade of the 21st century. Africa, which has developed only a few percent of its hydropower potential, is not allowed any more while Europe and North America enjoy most of their potential

Meanwhile, successful developing countries (China, Brazil, Turkey are those that have rejected the mantra and developed their water resource for national benefit

So what's the alternative? What should we be doing?

Dublin Principles – a rich world consensus to reject multilateralism

The anti-dam movement was part of a larger alliance between environmentalists and the neoliberals during a period when donor water policy (enshrined in the “Dublin Principles”) was moulded to reflect the broader Washington Consensus (see table in Africa in Focus, Chapter 12) (or prior draft Muller M, Fit for purpose: taking integrated water resource management back to basics, Irrigation and Drainage Systems: Volume 24, Issue 3 (2010)
<http://www.springerlink.com/openurl.asp?genre=article&id=doi:10.1007/s10795-010-9105-7>)

What are the real issues??? I contrast it as a conflict between an approach that is inherently

Developmental , focused on **Public administration**, supporting **continued Multilateralism**, **Balancing needs of people and environment**

Against an approach based on the politics, economics and interests behind the

Washington Consensus , the doctrine of **New Public Management**, a **Retreat from multilateralism**, and rigid application of the European **Ecosystem approach**

In this, the “progressives?”, “left?”, in South Africa and elsewhere, are often found to be in confused alignment with some forces that are plainly anti-developmental and worse.

Now that China is filling the funding and engineering gap, it is amusing to watch the rethink as the World Bank and European donors suddenly wake up and acknowledge that if climate change is such a serious problem, they really should let developing countries use hydropower, by far the largest, greenest, and most efficient solar energy technology currently in use. But the anti-dam campaign provided a smooth ride to the top for German environmentalist Achim Steiner, now head of the German-supported UN Environment Programme. Unfortunately, the opportunity to meet SA's power needs with clean green hydropower from Southern Africa instead of two big coal fired stations was lost.... And the Washington Consensus water agenda is still promoted, unwittingly, by groups that consider themselves to be progressive, even as they override the interests of those concerned and African countries are still subject to a funding boycott although China is helping to break it. The trend is persistent: as shown by a recent survey of International assistance (the SADC case) April 2011 summary of assistance:

“While monitoring the current ICP activities in the framework of the RSAP-II framework it can be summarized that all basins are covered and most widespread support to river basins in the SADC region is provided by WMO (14), Germany (8), UK, Australia, UNDP (each 5) and AfDB (4). Few ICPs are involved in the Buzi, Cuvelai, Incomati, Pungwe, Maputo-Usutu-Pongola, Save/Sabi and Umbeluzi basins. As recent studies found out, that infrastructure development is crucial for development of the water resources in the region it is important to note that only few ICPs are currently supporting infrastructure developments.”

Back home in South Africa, consider water services (much of this from *Amanzi, Wabenzi and the National Democratic Revolution: the Politics of Water Supply During South Africa's First Decade of Freedom* (in) *The Politics of Service Delivery* (Wits University Press)

SA's water supply success (services were, correctly, the priority for 1st decade)

92% coverage – based on survey question, where did you get your water today? SA's successful policy rejected global conventional wisdom of full cost recovery etc., that "people will pay" both locally and internationally, rejected NGO recommendations that development should wait for full participation, implemented the RDP to the letter, "lifeline tariff to cover operation and maintenance" and then improved to "free basic water". So why the attack from the "left"?

Cholera : of roads and rivers

As part of this, people blamed the spread of cholera on "infected water", missing the point that the disease was clearly spreading along roads, and up rivers not down them. (According to the senior local doctor, the starting point, or index case, of the epidemic in KZN was a beer drinking party, a fatal combination of shared food and alkaline drink, in an area with extensive migration from neighbouring Mozambique, not water tariffs in a community 10km away)

It is not considered to be politically correct (or perhaps it is simply not politically expedient) to link poor peoples' behaviour to the causation of disease, often because that behaviour is driven by poverty. Yet it is well demonstrated that, unless hygiene behaviour changes, health benefits gained from water and sanitation investment are limited. That leads to the obvious conclusion that the infrastructure will be most effective if people actually want it and intend to use it (which is why education and income are the most effective measures to prevent water-related disease).

(So, a quote oft-repeated by the "left" to "prove" that government was intent on neo-liberal policies is that "our policy was too market oriented"; they carefully omit the context: it was talking about the provision of toilets where government was encouraging participative, "social marketing" approaches, to encourage people to ask for toilets, not just dumping them from the sky. That is done because it is recognised that it is peoples' behaviour, not toilets that makes the big difference to transmission of diarrhoeal disease.)

Shit in the water – a matter of public preferences?

So address the real issue and enquire about peoples' priorities. Why is there such a discrepancy between the high priority (and efforts to perform) that municipalities claim for water supply, as recorded in the DWA's Blue Drop reports on drinking water quality and the very low priority they give to shit management as recorded in the Green Drop reports on the quality of municipal wastewater management?

Is there shared concern about sanitation reflected in personal behaviour? Is there shared concern about the environment, reflected in revealed political preferences? Does the prioritisation not reflect the (logical) position that until our toilet needs are met, we will not prioritise treating the wastewater from other peoples' toilets? (That's what happened in other countries, after all ...)

Creation of privatisation where none existed?

The focus on an imaginary privatisation programme, attempts at which were already contentious within the state, turned into an attack on effective public management of the services (because, the confused campaigners argued, commodification is the same as privatisation, and if you measure water use in order to manage it and share it equitably, that's the same as privatisation). This has weakened public management and, throughout the world, it is the collapse of effective public management that has opened the door for private engagement. In just the same way, campaigns for radical expansion of free basic water (a true "decommodification" programme in support of a social wage approach) have led to the inevitable response, with municipalities, scared by the growing costs, restricting the benefit to "indigents" through insulting and inefficient means testing (just like ESTA contributed, predictably, to massive farm evictions).

But why was it supported? In part, this was a global campaign of the public service trades unions ... they have an understandable concern about job security and the threat of privatisation, but is it appropriate to engage in a way that actually damages service provision? (The global debate on public education and organised labour's response is ... educative)

Similarly, blaming government policy for causing cholera rather than empowering people by explaining the way diarrhoeal disease is spread does not appear to be very progressive. But the campaigns help to build alliances and personal profiles; the leading figure in the anti-privatisation campaign is now part of what US presidential hopefuls would call an "exploratory committee" to set up a new international organisation of the global left an SA crisis would suit him well

(Back to the natural resource) Fracking – the risk to groundwater compared to the septic tank

While talking about shit and water, consider the opposition to "fracking" nominally in the interests of protecting the water of the Karoo. Fracking is widely used for purposes other than gas extraction. The British Geological Survey recommended it as the method of choice to improve low yield or failed boreholes. The US Environmental Protection Agency produced a manual on how it can be used to clean polluted groundwater aquifers.

Most of the people who are complaining about the effects of fracking on water worry about the use of diesel oil in the fracking process. Yet most of them have used diesel cars, generators and pumps at some stage, and probably spilled some diesel when topping up their fuel tanks. Most will also have some acquaintance with septic tanks and other forms of on-site sanitation. And almost all will benefit from boreholes drilled to provide them with water (and conventional well drilling is far more likely to contaminate the more important, relatively shallow, freshwater aquifers, as do surface fuel spills and on-site sanitation).

But they do not complain that drilling for their own water might contaminate the aquifer. Nor do they campaign to ban the use of diesel or septic tanks, both of which can and do affect the quality of groundwater. This is just the NIMBY – Not In My Back Yard - principle at work; people would prefer not to have a mining activity (albeit a very low impact one) in their area. For other objectors, who seek to promote a low-carbon economy, the concern is that new gas supplies will reduce the pressure to introduce the more expensive and less reliable renewable that they promote such as windmills and solar cells. Again, water is not the real issue.

Acid Mine drainage in Gauteng: Environmental threat or commercial opportunity

Back to the natural resource: The AMD debate has been more about the liabilities of private mining capital and the viability of their marginal projects than protection of water (See slides)

This is another debate that has not been technically informed. So why does the issue gain so much attention? Why is government under pressure to privatise the profits and nationalise the liabilities? Did we learn nothing from the World Cup?!

So perhaps, following Mamdani, the problem summarises well as : “Is there a water crisis?”

AMD etc has certainly served to distract from some real problems.

Like, what can we do about water quality around Gauteng?

Where is the water for Gauteng over the next 20 years going to come from? What are the options? What are the implications for the different interests? Is that important?

But raising the question: “Is there a water crisis?”, indeed “what is the water crisis” was helpful

It has created an environment in which issues can be raised and addressed. Question is how that will happen and whether it will be captured by “interests”?

More generally, how do we communicate complex science and social policy issues in a complex society? How do we manage the impact of strong interests and lobbies where the state is weak?

Optimism: Water is a systematic and patient teacher,

For anyone who can be bothered to learn; every season is a learning cycle.

As this rapid review has tried to show, too many interventions in water debates are not about water at all, but about water as a metaphor, or as a vehicle reach other objectives. The intervenients are often neither interested in learning about the vagaries of water’s behaviour, the challenges of its use and management nor in helping others to understand and engage; they seek rather to use water as a medium through which to promote their own interests.

The impact is simple:- it distracts attention and diverts resources from more urgent priorities; it confuses rather than informs the decisions that need to be taken. And water is important for social and economic development, as well as being an ecosystem in its own right. So, at worst, the approach taken damages both people who seek to use water and the water resource itself.

But every season tells its own story; water is soft but very powerful; it will eventually wear away the obstructions and reveal the true contours that guide its path ...