

**Andrea Muehlebach**, *A Vital Frontier: Water Insurgencies in Europe*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1983-1 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-1713-4 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2440-8 (ebook)<sup>1</sup>

The frontier is an evocative metaphor that recalls images of Western expansion, and the logics of colonialism and capitalism. In *A Vital Frontier: Water Insurgencies in Europe*, Andrea Muehlebach uses the frontier metaphor to describe the frontiers of financial capital and its encroachment into public water utilities. In each example, she demonstrates how water movements challenging financialisation also ask important philosophical, moral, and legal questions over the meaning of life, value, property, and sovereignty. In many ways, *A Vital Frontier* is an expression of Karl Polanyi’s “double movement”. In *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi (2001: 79) traces the evolution of liberal capitalism, famously arguing that industrialised capitalist economies experiencing marketisation will always face “counter-movements” that restrict the perils of the market’s influence on society. This dialectical relationship always brings about new ideologies, policies, and values for what societies and economies should look like. Muehlebach takes readers to Italy, Ireland, Germany, and France, describing how financialisation transforms public water, and how water insurgencies fight and shape this financial frontier.

Financialisation is a somewhat ambiguous term, but generally refers to profit accumulation accrued through interest rather than trade and commodity production, and to new forms of power financial actors gain during the shift from a real to a financial economy (Loftus et al. 2019; Schmidt and Matthews 2018). In the book, frontier is used both to describe the frontiers of financial capital, and the frontiers of new political imaginaries presented by the various water insurgencies we follow. We begin in the southern Italian region of Campania, where a coalition of environmentalists, trade unionists, and public water utility workers staged protests in Naples, condemning a recently passed law that would set the stage for water privatisation. Italians roundly rejected water privatisation through a national referendum in 2011,

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<sup>1</sup> Open access version available at <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/62549> (last accessed 14 December 2023).

committing to a “new water culture” and the “defense of life and against life’s commodification” (p.47). Pitting what she calls the “law of the few” (p.40) against the “law of the many” (p.47), Muehlebach describes how contested zones of lawmaking become tools of financialisation by both de-democratising and centralising water. After the Italian parliament passed mandates allowing water utilities to become joint stock companies where 40% of shares went to private capital, water movements sought to “recover pieces of a sovereignty” (p.37), experimenting with ideas of law, democracy, and property, and creating a referendum that essentially revisualises ownership and the commons. Although Italian public officials ignored the vote despite its massive public support, Muehlebach makes clear that the water movement referendum shifted the legal landscape, incorporating different ways that water, the commons, and participatory governance were understood.

The financial frontier is explored further as a zone of state violence for profit seeking in Ireland, where the installation of pre-paid water meters in public sidewalks incited the largest social movement seen in the country since independence. Irish protestors sought to protect public property (i.e. sidewalks) by blocking the installation of new water meters or removing those already installed. As a response, the state deploys violence against the water insurgency, with police viciously removing protestors from construction sites and jailing them. One of the most interesting analytics that Muehlebach theorises in this chapter is what her interlocutors call the “violence of austerity” (p.70). She has a twofold explanation, which reveals how violence “articulates itself through institutions like taxation and debt systems that create new forms of collective fiscal bondage across generations” (ibid.). When people can’t fulfil financial obligations imposed by these systems, violence is articulated “through the brute force of the police” (ibid.). Both dynamics are at play in austerity-era Cork. Muehlebach includes the media in her analysis of the violence of austerity, describing how they portrayed protestors as “terrorists”, “lazy nationalists”, and “sinister” people who only wanted to engage in violence and “don’t want to pay for anything” (p.90). Contempt towards working-class and poor people who contest unfair pricing is a commonly deployed tactic, and *A Vital Frontier* rejects this assumption, demonstrating that the Irish water protestors consistently said they had no issues with payment in general, but it had to be *fair* payment. Muehlebach returns to the issue of fair

pay throughout the book, in addition to how insurgencies reimagine the role of the state. The Irish water movement in this case presented the state as engaged in a social contract with its citizenry, not a private one.

Contracts as an object for ethnographic inquiry is the focus of the third chapter, and Muehlebach follows a group called the Berlin Water Table (Berliner Wassertisch), who used court cases and a popular referendum to force disclosure of their private water contracts. Water prices had been steadily rising as private companies absorbed shares of the public water utility, and the financial frontier is explored both as a zone of illegibility and as one of clarity on capitalism's need to accumulate through appropriation and theft. By politicising the contracts and forcing their exposure, the Berlin Water Table reveals capitalism's inherent, contradictory secret: "it relies on expropriation and exploitation, not free markets organized around contractual equals" (p.107). The contracts, often between 800 and 36,000 pages long, obscured methods of accumulation, through a dizzying network of opaque partnerships with shares in the utility. Ultimately, Muehlebach shows that Berliners objected to increased water prices that reflected projected rather than actual costs, and that people were prepared to "pay for the real costs of water provisioning but not for returns on investment" (p.121). The Water Table's ability to render visible what private companies want to remain invisible—in this case, the contracts themselves—raises questions about law, sovereignty, and what a "social infrastructure" (p.131) could be.

Muehlebach returns to Campania in the final chapter and focuses on *bollette pazze*, or "crazy bills" (p.136), that water users received, sometimes to the tune of thousands of dollars, to discuss the financial frontier as a struggle over differing understandings of value. The case in Campania is an expression of a long line of debates on the price/fee dichotomy, important distinctions that reveal deeper struggles over what should or should not be priced according to markets (Bakker 2001, 2003; Guyer 2009). Similar to the Irish water insurgency, Italians accept water fees that are used to maintain services and infrastructure but refuse to pay prices that produce surplus value to investors. High water bills ("so crazily high that people were unable to pay them" [p.136]) cause immense frustration and anger amongst water users, as does the brutality that follows nonpayment. In a vivid description of what her interlocutors called "savage

water shutoffs” (p.163), Muehlebach explains how an 80-year-old resident had her water shut off by unidentifiable employees of the private water company, who entered her residence without knocking because she didn’t pay a bill of over 2,000 euros. The cruelty of payment enforcement methods resulted in the Italian water insurgency resorting to creative and combative collective action, including publicly burning their *bollette pазze* in protest. Muehlebach profiles the anti-water shutoff resistance movement Gruppo Antidistaccho Popolare (GAP), a group of “men and women guerrilla plumbers dressed in blue overalls and Super Mario masks, [who] had begun to hook people back up to the water supply after their water had been shut off because of nonpayment” (p.165). These efforts are demonstrative of people’s insurgent actions to protect their fundamental human rights and ability to determine what a just price for water should be.

The book concludes in France, where the author takes the readers to the Laboratoire Eau de Paris, the laboratory that conducts research and analysis for the city’s public water utility. Muehlebach uses this brief conclusion as a call for re-municipalisation, a demand that’s becoming increasingly popular amongst cities with formerly privatised water utilities. *A Vital Frontier* offers the reader a rich, grounded ethnography on the many tactics used by European water insurgencies against private encroachment into public life, tactics that also work as a “a renewal of critiques of capitalism and of ways through which the world and its life-giving substances can be imagined as inappropriable” (p.177). The book itself is quite localised, and specific to the European context, and I found myself wondering how these strategic, philosophical, and moral struggles would translate into other geographies with different socio-political contexts, particularly in the Global South. Nonetheless, in our increasingly financialised world, Muehlebach provides a timely intervention on groups fighting against the fundamental contradiction of valuing priceless resources like water.

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