Rivers of Scarcity. Utopian water regimes and flows against the current

Rutgerd Boelens (iD) *a b c d e*

a CEDLA, b University of Amsterdam (Fac. Humanities), c Wageningen University, d Catholic University of Peru, e Central University of Ecuador

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Rutgerd Boelens [1]

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Abstract. Utopians organized space, nature and society to perfection, including land and water governance – rescuing society from deep-rooted crisis: "The happiest basis for a civilized community, to be universally adopted" (Thomas More, 1516). These days, similarly, well-intended utopian water governance regimes suggest radical transformations to combat the global Water Crisis, controlling deviant natures and humans. In this essay I examine water utopia and dystopia as mirror societies. Modern utopias ignore real-life water cultures, squeeze rivers dry, concentrate water for the few, and blame the victims. But water-user collectives, men and women, increasingly speak up. They ask scholars and students to help question Flying Islands experts' claims to rationality, democracy and equity; to co-create water ontologies and epistemologies, and co-design water governance, building rooted socionatural commons, building "riverhood".

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[1] Rutgerd Boelens is Professor 'Political Ecology of Water in Latin America' holding a part-time special chair with CEDLA and the University of Amsterdam (Fac. Humanities). He also works as Professor Water Governance and Social Justice at Wageningen University (Environmental Sciences Group, Water Resources Management), and is Visiting Professor at the Catholic University of Peru and the Central University of Ecuador. Email: rutgerd.boelens@wur.nl

Resumen. Los utopistas organizaron a la perfección el espacio, la naturaleza y la sociedad, incluida la gobernanza de la tierra y el agua, rescatando a la sociedad de una crisis muy arraigada: "La base más feliz para una comunidad civilizada, ser adoptado universalmente" (Tomás Moro, 1516). Hoy en día, de forma similar, los regímenes utópicos de gobernanza del agua bien intencionados sugieren transformaciones radicales para combatir la crisis global del agua, controlando las naturalezas desviadas y los seres humanos. En este ensayo examino la utopía y la distopía del agua como sociedades espejo. Las utopías modernas ignoran las culturas del agua de la vida real, secan los ríos, concentran el agua para unos pocos y culpan a las víctimas. Pero los colectivos de usuarios del agua, hombres y mujeres, alzan cada vez más la voz. Piden a los académicos y a los estudiantes que ayuden a cuestionar las pretensiones de racionalidad, democracia y equidad de los expertos de las islas volantes; a crear conjuntamente ontologías y epistemologías del agua, y a diseñar conjuntamente la gobernanza del agua, construyendo bienes comunes socionaturales arraigados, construyendo la " comunidad del río ".

Palabras clave: utopía, distopía, ríos, bienes comunes, justicia medioambiental

"*Utopias can inspire passions strong enough to drive or drag multitudes beyond their immediate circumstances, they even may try to take heaven by storm or steal fire from the gods. But this idealism readily turns into fanaticism and dogmatic rejection of anyone who does not share in them*" (Alberto Flores Galindo 1988:418).

Introduction: Esteban, Munodi, and the Flying Island

Some time ago, I got an emotional letter from Esteban Barrera, community leader from Senyera town, in Valencia, Spain. He wrote: "The story I will tell you is about our longtime dream… to improve our irrigation system..." (personal letter 17-3-2016). Don Esteban and his fellows had designed a low-cost reservoir for guiding water by gravity, to secure community surface irrigation, '*riego a manta*'.

Senyera families have been renovating their ancient irrigation system since Moorish times (constructed during the 8th -16th centuries). Collective governance and canal cleaning secures water rights for 240 families. Shared dependence and

collaboration sustain all members' livelihoods, especially the poorest. The water system affirms territorial bonds of belonging, among water users *and* among families and their water sources: it forms Senyera's rooted water culture and dynamic 'hydraulic identity'.

But, Esteban writes, "Here our dream was stopped…" (Ibid.). Regional elites, a water-expert company and a State agency had set up a classic Public-Private Partnership: to combat water scarcity, the World Water Crisis. With only 'public and private partners', it entirely by-passed the community's history, knowledge and proposals. The company designed a high-tech drip technology system, extremely expensive to construct and operate but fashionable and State-subsidized (Sánchis-Ibor et al., 2017; García-Mollá et al., 2020).

Investigating with Senyera we found how the high-tech system acted as a Trojan horse. Senyera was seduced into a 10-year contract, modernizing and privatizing water management. Supported by university experts, applying universal efficiency and profit criteria, results were dramatic. Farmers' operation and pumping expenses rose six-fold; fee payment was non-transparent; the company neglected maintenance to boost their profits; harvests diminished; a nameless computer system replaced families' daily water planning with the local *regador* in the town's bar. The community lost its authority and autonomy. Farmers complained: "Nobody comes to speak to us. The company is like a satellite controlling us". Or as a leader said: "We continuously have to remind the company that *we* are the owners, that they are only service providers, but they don't not listen" (Sánchis-Ibor et al., 2017:43).

Despite costly but deficient services, experts celebrate the project, predicting efficiency and production increase, proud of its newly designed GIS system. Official objective was to improve self-governance, but the company wants to extend the profitable contract indefinitely, saying: "The farmers can hardly be expected to manage the drip system by themselves" (Ibid.).

A few absentee landlords saved on labor costs, but for the peasant majority living under privatized and commodified management is extremely harsh. They lost their income margins, trust, and most of all, collaboration and autonomy. Esteban asks: "Why so much hurry to glorify this model as '*modernization example*' in the newspapers? An example of *what*?!" (personal letter, 17-3-2016).

Esteban's experience and similar ones abound in far too many places worldwide. They echo Jonathan Swift's fascinating satire, '*Gulliver's Travels*', three

centuries ago (Swift, 1726, pp.151-189). Part of his travels into known and unknown nations – from Japan to the Land of the Houyhnhnms where racist horses dominate humans –, Gulliver strands on the rocky Island of Balnibarbi, near India. Desperate, fearing starvation, he finds his salvation in the sky: "The reader can hardly conceive my astonishment, to behold an island in the air, inhabited by men, who were able to raise, or sink, or put it into a progressive motion, as they pleased".
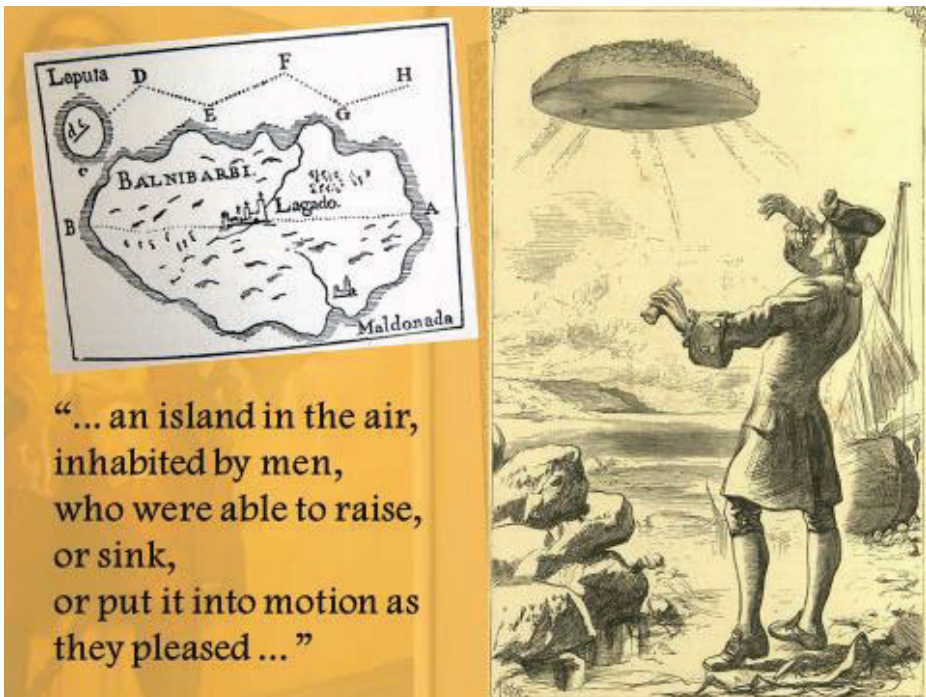
Image 1: Gulliver detects the Flying Island of Laputa (Swift, 1726). (Source: Creative Commons)

After being rescued, Gulliver admires the wonders of Laputa: a flying, entirely technoexpert-controlled island. Male inhabitants are wholly occupied with mathematics – in their language, behavior and thought. "The knowledge I had in mathematics gave me great assistance in acquiring their phraseology... Their ideas are perpetually conversant in lines and figures. If they would, for example, praise the beauty of a woman, or any other animal, they describe it by rhombs, circles, parallelograms, ellipses, and other geometrical terms …".

Language, society and even Nature are entirely technified, transformed and mastered by the expert governors. Brilliantly, this includes water: "The slope of the

upper surface ... directs all dews and rains to be conveyed in small rivulets toward the middle, where they are emptied into four large basins... From these basins the water is continually exhaled by the sun in the daytime, which prevents overflowing. Besides, as it is in the power of the monarch to raise the island above the region of clouds and vapors, he can prevent the falling of dews and rains whenever he pleases".

Water is power. Laputa governors know how to govern humans *through* water, and climate change. In a hydraulic, linguistic and political sense, expert-based water control is the crucial force to discipline the underlying, uncivilized Island of Balnibarbi: "If any town should engage in rebellion, fall into violent factions, or refuse to pay the usual tribute, the King has methods of reducing them to obedience […] by keeping the island hovering over such a town, and the lands about it, whereby it can deprive them of the benefit of the sun and the rain, and consequently afflict the inhabitants with dearth and diseases …".

Unlike common people and women, Laputians deeply despise on-the-ground reality, uninterested in practical use for expert knowledge. Upside down, reality is to be transformed into the imaginaries of expert society. Laputians had scientificized their own society and nature, but also go down to impose modernity upon Balnibarians. Gulliver explains: "[Laputa experts] ... disliked the management of everything below, and fell into schemes of putting all arts, sciences, languages, and mechanics, upon a new foot". They had erected the Academy of Projectors. Here, "... the professors contrive new rules and methods of agriculture and building, ... whereby one man shall do the work of ten. … The only inconvenience is, that none of these projects are yet brought to perfection; in the meantime, the whole country lies miserably waste, the houses in ruins, and the people without food or clothes. Instead of being discouraged, they are fifty times more violently bent upon prosecuting their schemes …".

Gulliver's host, peasant-farmer Munodi, continues to work with his own techniques and norms, with optimal results. He is therefore labelled "ignorant", an "enemy to progress" – "setting so ill an example to the kingdom". Soon he will be forced to destroy and rebuild his land- and waterscape after "the form modern usage required". Not for the first time. Munodi had always used his water mill, nurturing family and neighbors' livelihoods. But like Don Esteban in Senyera, he tells how Academy Water Experts arrived: "About seven years ago, a club of those projectors came [...] with proposals to destroy [my] mill, and build another on the side of that mountain, on the long ridge whereof a long canal must be cut, for a repository of water, to be conveyed up by pipes and engines to supply the mill [...]".

Legal and social pressure made Munodi comply. Gulliver tells: "After employing a hundred men for two years, the work miscarried, the projectors went off, laying the blame entirely upon Munodi, railing at him ever since, and putting others upon the same experiment, with equal assurance of success, as well as equal disappointment". Actual failures, rather than slowing them down, fanatically encouraged the modernizers.

This *utopian* desire to engineer the ideal water society, transforming and controlling humans and nature at once, resembles how Big Brother dominates all socio-natural life in Orwell's *1984*. "We control life, Winston, at all its levels. You are imagining that there is something called human nature, which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us. But we *create* human nature" (p.216).

In this essay, I will explore how water governance utopias and socio-environmental domination dystopias are two sides of one coin: deeply impacting social-justice issues in everyday water control. For understanding this dreadful, fundamental connection among the dream and nightmare society – in imaginaries, designs and practice –, I argue that we need to go back and down to the roots of 'utopia' in order to see how it has subtly planted its colonial, disciplinary, techno/social engineering seeds. And despite full contemporary book shelfs of 'utopian alternatives' or 'utopias otherwise', critical scholarship needs to reflect on the inconvenient awareness that utopia and dystopia are necessarily interwoven. The collective project entwining societal makeabilty, rational production, united implementation, radical break with past & presence, purity and entirety are at its core; just as the visibilization of deviance and the invisibilization of power. After traveling to different utopias, I will briefly turn to examining responses from below and from within. They challenge the illusion of technically and socially engineering water cultures, and domesticating unruly behavior of humans and nature.

The utopian river Anydrus – symbol of makeable water order

Let us start with Thomas More's foundational book *Utopia*. It deeply influenced humanity's thinking about how to order society – from Communism to Capitalism and beyond. Written in 1516, More recounts the fascinating visits by Portuguese sailor Raphael to this ideal New-World island-nation. Utopians neatly organized space, nature and society, including land and water governance, furthering Plato's ideal in The Republic.

Image 2: The island Utopia (source: Creative Commons)

Founder King Utopos dug an impressive 15-mile-wide channel to separate Utopia, once a peninsula, from the barbarian mainland. Anydrus is the island's main river, feeding the country; the springs of its secondary rivers are urbanized behind city walls to isolate them from intruders' attempts to block or poison the water. From there, a pipelined system brings water to the districts. Rain water is also controlled and harvested in huge cisterns (p.72).

Utopians created society and nature to perfection, to maximize happiness by "wise social planning" (p.40). For More, it was the opposite of Europe, where "injustice is legally described as justice ... a conspiracy of the rich to advance their own interests under the pretext of organizing society" (p.130), a protest against misery, hunger, power abuse. Long before Karl Marx (1867) and David Harvey (1996), he criticized early capitalist exploitation, particularly the enclosure of the commons. Capitalist sheep farming denied rural people access to their common lands, leading to monopolies and massive poverty and starvation (p.46-47).

In contrast, Utopia is a cooperative society with representative democracy and shared resources: no private property; equality and uniformity make materialism and status unimportant (p.66, 128). Food is stored in public warehouses, people get what they need; no hunger and poverty. Houses are un-locked, completely transparent with no stealing (p.73). With six hours working days, there is no unemployment. Laws are simple, so everyone knows what is right and wrong. In an entirely human-designed world, people are "living according to Nature" (p.91). Therefore, More writes: Utopia's governance system should be "universally adopted ... the happiest basis for a civilized community" (p.131).

Following Thomas More, with starting Enlightenment now going 'beyond God', humans themselves would be capable of creating society and nature. Hundreds of social, technical and ecological utopias have been published since then, seeking to design society and materialize 'the art of utopian governance'.[3] Utopias characteristically attempt to rescue society from structural Chaos and deep-rooted Crisis. A landmark was Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), whose residents achieve happiness thanks to natural science, utter domestication of nature, and abundant technology guaranteeing societal perfection – a radical split from a traditional subsistence economy.

In *Utopia's Heritage*, Hans Achterhuis (1998) defines 'utopia' as a *makeable* society that can be neatly designed and rationally produced by its founders. Next, it is not about individual dreams and lives but a *collectively constructed and implemented 'new society'*. Also, beyond partial improvements or social movements, it is an *entire* society.

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3 While utopias were first located in distant, hitherto unknown regions (e.g., undiscovered islands), later they were situated in the future or in space (e.g., Kumar (1987); Levitas (1990); Turner (1965).

Therefore (as manifested in world history and literature), utopia requires a *radical break with the old society* to construct a new one, pure and unspoiled.

In practice, this inescapable rupture justifies violent interventions and repression of dissenting action or deviant thinking, destroying the 'old, backward cultural norms' and 'chaotic structures'. Building a utopian society necessarily results in its opposite: violent dystopia – nightmare society.

More's book calls Utopia "*the best country in the world*" (p.128). Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump use the same words. Utopias contain the germs and building-blocks for dystopias. Already in 1600, Joseph Hall wrote the first dystopian satire, *Another World and yet the Same*, showing that utopia and dystopia are mirror societies. Utopia is dystopia, but the latter is seen from the perspective of deviant inhabitants, who are oppressed. Though the same sort of societies, in dystopias, commonly, the travellers' view 'from outside' is replaced by utopian life and policies as experienced by the (dissident) inhabitants *themselves* – a view one from the inside (Achterhuis, 1998; Lukes, 1995). As George Orwell asks in *1984*, or Aldous Huxley in *A Brave New World*: how is it *to live inside utopia*?

When we read Utopia with critical eyes, we see oppression, colonizing and displacing the Other. More observes: "If the natives won't do what they are told, they are expelled from the annexation area" (p.80). Inside Utopia, we find large inequality and discrimination. Each Utopian household has two slaves; Utopians don't do the dirty work themselves because "it destroys one's natural feeling of humanity" (p.81). Both Nature and women are domesticated; every month they have to kneel before their husbands, "confess all their sins ... and ask to be forgiven" (p.126).[4] The discourse is tolerance, but without freedom of movement, customs or belief systems, just forced uniformity: everyone wears the same clothes and follows the same rules.

In Utopia, "everyone's conduct in public is watched by those responsible for discipline" to ensure "good behavior" (p.126). Deviant thinking is punished, private gatherings are absent, everyone is in full view – or as Michel Foucault would say "*Subjection by illumination*". Sailor Raphael explains how "everyone has his eye on you"

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4 In Campanella's utopia, City of the Sun (1602), oppression of women and nature would get even worse, and utopian planning is equally worrisome. Society is founded exclusively on common (i.e., public) property - "all things are common with them" (p.5) because from private property "self-love springs"[...] "But when we have taken away self-love, there remains only love for the State" (p.5). Dystopian authors as Zamyatin (1993(1921)), Orwell (1977(1949)) or Foucault (1995(1975)) could have copied it. On dystopian women's oppression, see also Atwood (1986).

(p.84). Young Utopians "are given the right ideas about things ... calculated to preserve the structure of their society" and to avoid "moral defects arising from wrong ideas" (p.124). Like Orwell's 'reality-control': active self-disciplining and 'right-thinking' to preserve order and *shape* reality. As Big Brother's 'Doublethink' officer O'Brien explained, you will *want* to see reality only through the eyes of the experts' doctrine: "Only the disciplined mind can see reality" (p.199).

King Utopos designed the huge water channel to separate Utopia from historical roots and mainland backwardness, and create perfect nature and ideal modern society at once. But it was dug by their *slaves,* the same natives who were colonized and governed to accept agricultural civilization and rational organization. In that same vein, deploying a political ecology lens addresses 'Water Governance' not as the mere governance of water, but as governing humans and society *through* water (Boelens, 2015a; cf. Bridge & Perreault, 2009).

Hereafter, I will visit some influential, utopian-inspired water-governance regimes, in Spain, Chile and Ecuador, but it could have been any country. Is it a matter of good intentions but bad implementation? I skip the too obvious nightmare manifestations, from the 'Great Stalin Plan for Nature Transformation' to the Three Gorges Dam in China, or the 'multi-million-hectare-water-grabbing-projects' in the global South. My particular interest is the many well-intended water policies that lead to often invisible nightmares. They produce 'slow violence' (Nixon, 2011) – slow, but with just as many casualties. Utopian water development as with Esteban in Spain and Munodi in Balnibarbi, make us challenge our *own*, invisible water expert knowledge worlds.

Hydraulic Utopians – recreating 'natural order'

Late 19th-century Spain faced profound economic and existential crisis, known as the 'Colonial Disaster'. It lost its last colonies, its global Empire. A strong, socio-political and intellectual movement arose to *revive* the country – 'Regenerationism'. Inspired by the country's Arab water management heritage, it aimed to empower small farmers, decentralize governance, end elite power, resolve scarcity, and build a new national identity through techno-political modernization. The pillars of this progressive regenerationist ideology were: hydraulic mastery; boosting food security for all; solve social inequality; value local knowledge and customary laws; decentralized management and 'people-based authority'.

Rather than colonizing overseas territories, the idea was to *colonize the country inwardly*. Water development would recreate the soil, morality, culture, and the whole political-economic system: creating the 'new man'. Regenerationist leader Joaquín Costa proposed *Hydraulic Policy*: extending dams and irrigation to all spaces. This would "combat the *misfortunes of geography and our breed* ... our inferiority in both respects" (Costa, quoted in Ortí, 1984:93).

Water was central to escape the apocalypse: "*have water or perish...*, the conversion of all the nation's forces toward that titanic enterprise" (Macías-Picavea, 1977:318). Costa exhorted: "... if, in other countries, it is enough for humans to help nature, here we have to do more, we have to create her" (1911, p.3). Utopian ideology meant *civilizing nature and people* at once, linking water, progress and liberty. In 1899, writer-intellectual Macías-Picavea would proclaim: "Half of the reconstruction work involves hydraulic policy, to civilize our land; the other half falls to pedagogical policy, to civilize the populace: the two are complementary" (quoted in Gómez Mendoza (1992:233-234).

Similar to Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, progressive ideas of plannable society were based on techno-managerial rationality, positivist natural sciences, with 'hardware' governance solutions. Decentralized River-Basin Confederations would unite all stakeholders; mega-dams and canals would unite all regions in solidarity. Ironically, hydraulic utopians saw the centralist State as fundamental to enforce decentralization; if necessary, guided by an enlightened, compassionate dictator: Joaquín Costa's 'surgical policy' already foresaw the need for "an *iron-hearted surgeon*, familiar with the Spanish people's anatomy and feeling infinite compassion for them ..." (Costa, 1967:86; see also: Costa, *Política Quirúrgica*, 1914). This crucial contradiction of a decentralizing, self-governing mission, based on authoritarianism and violent planning, was not just a mis-implementation of basically benevolent regenerationist ideas but was *intrinsic* to the ideology itself; "... visible in the seeds of hydraulic utopia" (Boelens & Post Uiterweer, 2013:57). They praised local farmer knowledge and self-governance but, first, wise engineers had to discipline chaotic folk wisdom of these noble savages: through hard science and universalist expert rules.

When social reality proved too stubborn to shape 'natural order', two military governments offered to make Costa's dreams come true. Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) turned the hydraulic utopia into radical violence (Ortí, 1984; Swyngedouw, 2015; Duarte-Abadía & Boelens, 2019). Like King Utopos, Franco sent thousands of civil-war prisoners as slaves to build mega-hydraulics, declaiming:

"We will make sure that not a single drop of water is lost so that not a single injustice remains" (F. Franco, 1959 (p.1), quoted in Swyngedouw, 2007:12). Changing 'nature and race' was cast as fighting against *injustice* (Bono et al., 2004; Camprubí, 2013; Lafuente, 2002). Inaugurating large hydraulic works, the dictator explained: "Spain hurt us with its dryness, its poverty, with our needy towns and villages, and all of Spain's pain is taken away by these great national hydraulic projects..." (F. Franco, 6-8-1952). All Spain's climates, watersheds and rivers were to be bundled into one hyper-managed interbasin system, taming and purifying nature. Franco built over 600 mega-reservoirs and turned regenerationist dreams of autonomy and decentralization into centralist despotism.

Hydraulic Policy established 'natural order'. For instance in Malaga's Guadalhorce Valley large dams repressed all water flows and river life; a large, dysfunctional government system, managed by a technocratic River Basin Confederation, overlaid and destroyed independent peasant irrigation systems (Boelens and Post-Uiterweer, 2013). Water was provided to the powerful few (again dystopian seeds were already sown in regenerationist utopian rationality: hydraulic policy aimed to 'benefit all classes' when bringing new land under irrigation, increasing property values 'for all'. Obviously, allocating water to *land areas* rather than *families* benefits large owners disproportionally – in terms of water, subsidies and property values). The policy also ensured watering numerous golf courses (the Guadalhorce region shows 76 golf courses with 56 clubs, the valley has 8 golf courses

with 5 clubs). Upper-basin towns such as Peñarrubia were flooded (Duarte-Abadía and Boelens, 2019).

Image 3: Franco's political prisoners: building mega-hydraulic dams as nation's slaves (source: Creative Commons)

Water distributor Manolo Rengel, whose community was drowned, explains: "*I still remember how they came in with machinery to tear up the groves we had tended so lovingly ... The expropriation, dam-building, uprooting people from their land and customs, was all traumatic*".[5] Utopian-inspired designers and fascist planners supplanted water governance diversity and autonomy. This also destroyed the valley's livelihoods and social relations. Displaced families had to live in '*pueblos de colonización*' – uniform 'colonization towns' –, as in Utopia. Manolo and Cristina explain their suffering: "*Territorial planning under Franco was to colonize ... whenever someone stood up against Franco ideology, they were neutralized and taken somewhere else*". Franco aimed to de-localize people, uproot identities and exterminate their water culture, molding a new society according to fascist hydro-planning (Camprubí, 2013; Fernández Clemente, 2000; Swyngedouw & Boelens, 2018).

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5 For quotes, see Duarte-Abadía & Boelens (2019).

Even now, after decades, it is hard to describe the everyday nightmares thousands of Spanish families still live in. Old man Juan Pozo tells us, with tears in his eyes: "*I still have the keys to my home there ... Half of my nights, I dream about Peñarrubia*". Or as Juan Mora recalls, "*... accustomed to wandering freely in our town, many elderly were buried alive in a flat. After five or six months they died of grief*". Ever since they flooded his town, Juan keeps going back to the lake shores, every week. When interviewing Juan, suddenly he starts singing: "*... I was born in Peñarrubia, where I grew up. You might not know, but Peñarrubia no longer exists. In the name of progress, they made a swamp there. And flooded my cherished little town underwater. I will always remember what they did with you, tearing you all up and then demolishing everything. And as if that were not enough, they sunk you underwater ...*".

Manolo also feels that their land and life were flooded because of outside interests, faceless modernization. "*We were displaced in time and in space ... We have never been able to get back to what we had before.... It all dramatically changed forever*". Hydraulic utopia expected peasant families to sacrifice their past, present and future for the 'happiness of the majority'.

Neoliberal Utopians, calculated happiness and 'Survival of the Fittest'

In 1780 Jeremy Bentham, utopian founder of utilitarianism, defined "*justice*" as "*the greatest happiness for the greatest number of citizens*" (1988 (1780)). Bentham, a founding father of liberalism (and of neoliberalism, according to Milton Friedman (1962)) designed the famous Panopticon to bring happiness, morality and efficiency to prisons, schools, factories and, as he explained, all spaces of society (Bentham, 1995 (1787-1791)). Inspired by Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* he also aimed to purify chaotic language and create a new, universal one, similar to mathematics. Thereto he coined words as 'maximize', 'international', 'codification', now crucial in the water governance world (Achterhuis, 1998:262).

Bentham wanted to organize society as a scientific laboratory, neatly calculating and constructing utopian happiness, through efficient laws, universal morals and social control. This calculated design of happiness would be the task of moral and justice experts; common people would lack reason (Bentham 1988(1781)). In his societal organization, humans would naturally follow the '*self-preference principle*', now very popular in new-institutionalist water-governance studies: water users are seen as individual, self-interested water-utility maximizers (Duarte-Abadía et al.,

2021; Espeland, 1998; Roth et al., 2015; Vos & Boelens, 2018; Zwarteveen & Boelens, 2014). Later, Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek and Ayn Rand framed this concept as '*rational greed*' or '*selfishness*': the universal driving force that, with private-property rights and free markets, will ultimately lead to neoliberal utopia. Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism (1988; 1992), altruism is seen as a societal evil, while selfishness and private property appropriation are positive key values. In his days, Bentham already paved the way, by advising world policymakers to privatize the commons.[6]

In the 1970s, looking for a suitable laboratory to experiment with, Nobel laureates Friedman and Hayek partnered with General Augusto Pinochet, who had bulldozed Allende's Socialist society in Chile. They suggested further shock treatment. Friedman said that Pinochet, responsible for thousands of people tortured and executed, was "sympathetically attracted to the idea of a shock treatment" (cited in Grandin, 2006:164; cf. Gray, 2007; Klein, 2007). Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* (1944) had already pictured the dystopian nightmares of state regulation and public property, counter proposing a 'liberal utopia' (see chapter 'The Great Utopia').[7] He explained that "the system of private property is the most important guarantee of freedom", especially for the poorest (1944:78). Chile's new constitution, fiercely debated these days, got the name of Hayek's The Constitution of Liberty (1960). It enshrined economic liberty and political authoritarianism as complementary qualities. This was followed by Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), which made economic freedom the precondition for political freedom. The 'Friedman doctrine', then, would sustain that enterprises do not, and should not, have any social responsibility to the public, but need only to focus on profits in order to shape a free society (M. & R. Friedman, 1990). With the Chicago School economists, they designed Chilean free-market policy.

In 1981, exactly two centuries after Bentham's book, the water world witnessed a ground-breaking event to realize his 'greatest happiness for the majority':

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6 Long before Garett Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons (1968), Bentham advocated actively destroying and subdividing the commons into private properties. "The condition most favorable to agricultural prosperity exists when there are no entails, no unalienable endowments, no common lands, no right of redemptions" (Bentham, quoted in Polanyi 1944:18).

7 Cf. Robert Nozick's "Anarchy, State and Utopia", which suggests a Lockean 'night-watchman state', whereby the (neoliberal) state protects (just) individual rights and guarantees the well-functioning of market contracts and transactions.

Chile's revolutionary Water Code, a radical break with existing ideas on public and common-property water management. Water resources, rights and services became private, transferable commodities on a water market. Economic experts, scientific calculations and universal laws would determine rational behavior of water flows and profit-maximizing water users. This brings overall efficiency, productivity, and even equity.

The announced World Water Crisis, as a dystopian horizon, ensured international policy support. Policymakers were happy to close their eyes for neoliberalism's disastrous impacts on smallholder communities, nature, and overall water security (e.g., Bauer (2004), Budds (2010), Cardoso & Pacheco-Pizarro (2021), Höhl et al. (2021) and Prieto (2021) show the profound socio-environmental impacts of Chile's model, in terms of water rights concentration; declining productivity and operation of community systems, water and food security, disintegration of water user organizations, and inter-sectoral water conflicts). Nevertheless, without *any* field studies, the World Bank quickly glorified the new Water Code and its utopian model, forcing developing countries to 'copy Chile'. Echoing Hayek and Friedman, the Bank claimed that "secure [private] water rights are particularly beneficial for smaller farmers. [...] Tradable water rights, by empowering existing users, help to reduce the abuses of administrative allocation and give assurance to poor farmers that their water availability will not be reduced" (World Bank 1996, pp.11–12). The World Bank defended the "superiority of markets" [...] "Water users are particularly pleased by the flexibility and control over their water rights… the humanitarian and equity aspects of water allocation are likely to be better under a market regime" (World Bank 1996:1,8,15).

However, indigenous leader Rodrigo Villablanca tells a different story; Chile's mining-based water grabbing "... is drying up our basins, it is devastating the water cycles that have sustained our valleys for centuries, it is sowing death in our territories..." (quoted in Yacoub et al., 2015). Historical community water rights were labelled 'unused', massively expropriated and auctioned off to the highest bidder in the capitalist market. While the Bank labeled this water stealing "voluntary", Mapuche leaders experienced it differently: "The big landowners here have registered the water rights in their names. We Mapuches, not knowing about the Chilean State's laws, were never given a chance to claim our rights" (documentary '*La Sangre de la Pachamama*', Solón, 2003).

These social and environmental costs were deemed insignificant, considering the utopian free-market future. Friedman sustained: "No external force, no coercion, no violation of freedom is necessary to produce cooperation among individuals all of whom can benefit" (M. and R. Friedman, 1990, p2). But as Karl Polanyi (1944) had already made clear in '*The Great Transformation*', producing neoliberal utopia requires strong state support. In fact, also Hayek very well knew that 'neoliberalism' does not result from a voluntary, spontaneous process; the forceful State is crucially instrumental in installing the legal order and institutions that make market competition among individuals possible (1944:31). State bureaucracies are not replaced but 'reformed' to support and shape market-societies. As in More's Utopia, Pinochet conveniently offered 'laboratory conditions', coercively controlling water user communities' dissent to make the model a success; silencing deviant voices through state-organized torture and executions. Hayek defended Pinochet's massacres stating that he had "not been able to find a single person even in much maligned Chile who did not agree that personal freedom was much greater under Pinochet than it had been under Allende". As Grandin comments: "... of course, the thousands executed and tens of thousands tortured by Pinochet's regime weren't talking" (2006:173). Friedman's speech in Chile –'*The Fragility of Freedom*' praises Pinochet for putting Chile back on the "right track" (p.166); in Eduardo Galeano's words: "*torturing people so prices could be free*" (Grandin, 2006:175). As founding father Bentham once had argued: there is no social right that should not be abolished if this benefits society's majority.

These days, neoliberal water doctors have changed medicines; now they call for "participation". Rather than exclusion, they aim for "inclusion". As influential World Bank advisor Hernando De Soto stated: "Everyone will benefit from globalizing capitalism, but the most obvious and largest beneficiary will be the poor… they will support the agenda of reform enthusiastically" (De Soto, 2000:190–191). Water-user communities must adapt and adopt, changing their common water-rights cultures in order to become 'equal' and *fit* free-market utopia. If not, they have to suffer, dry up, and evaporate.

Indeed, it was *not* Charles Darwin but Social-Darwinist Herbert Spencer who coined the phrase "*Survival of the Fittest*" (1864: 444), introducing liberal economics into evolution theory. He "scientifically justified" that common, ordinary societies need to surrender to more efficient market economies: the inescapable evolution towards free-market utopia, civilization's ultimate objective. Walt Rostow (1960) would make this idea world-popular. Following Enlightenment thinking, 'natural

states of underdevelopment' needed a big modernization push and then follow linear stages of evolutionary modernist development.

Neoliberal utopia, beyond assuming universal laws, actively *imposes* them, disciplining diverse, non-commodified water worlds. The latter are called inefficient and backward, obstructions to water trade who do not fit and must be purified, or forced to join neoliberal dystopia on unequal terms. Neoliberal discourse, moreover, blames the victim: 'stubborn' water user collectivities are reproached for not responding to the universal market logic and fail to act 'rationally'. When powerful free market actors (e.g., mining, hydropower, agribusiness) aggressively encroach their territories provoking breakdown of community water systems, the model presents itself as the inevitable way to solve this. As a self-fulfilling force, the remedy prescribed is to introduce free market rules and externalize communal authority. Therefore, more than Pinochet's brutal violence, this *slow violence*, joining neoliberal dystopia as underdogs, produces both overall Indifference and world-wide Suffering.

How on Earth is it possible that these neoliberal water doctors, champions in preaching *accountability*, cannot themselves be held accountable for the misery they are creating day by day for millions of water users?

Post-neoliberal Utopians. 'Good Living' under the Citizen's Revolution

In Steven Lukes' famous novel, *Professor Caritat* (1995) visits a number of enlightened utopian societies, only to find out that, once inside, they all turn out to be violent dystopias. Will it be different this time?

Latin America's scholars and grassroots movements have elaborated a broad range of visions and discourses around 'Buen Vivir' or 'Good Living' to construct alternatives to classic modernist Western development approaches and extractivist practices (under diverse and diverging concepts as 'Sumak Kawsay', 'Living Well', 'Ecosofía Andina', etc.). They span from indigenist, romanticized to radical political ecology, more-than-human, post-structuralist or post-colonial conceptualizations (for reflections, see e.g. Acosta, 2011; Gudynas, 2011; Thomson, 2011; de Castro et al., 2016; Escobar, 2010; Radcliff; 2012; Teijlingen & Hogenboom, 2016). On the (initial) waves of this intellectual school and intercultural movement, during the previous decade, leftwing Latin American governments had set out to construct an entirely new, post-neoliberal society. Ecuador's then-president Rafael Correa, for

instance, promised to end the "long, neoliberal nightmare", and build the "Citizen's Revolution": 21st-Century Socialism.

Ecuador cherished Good Living in its new 2008 Constitution, responding to grassroots demands for equal distribution, cultural diversity, indigenous autonomies, and water as a human right, a ban on privatizing water. Even Nature was given constitutional rights, for the first time ever. Making national, harmonious Good Living possible was funded by state-supported mining, oil and hydropower projects. Affected families in all 'national strategic areas' were compensated with model communities ('Millennium Communities'), hyper-modern schools ('Millennium Schools'), and public works.

Hidalgo-Bastidas' research on Ecuador's coast shows how mega-dam building, for instance, goes far beyond infrastructure development. As in Chone, where the Government explained: "Here we build dreams, change is happening and nobody will stop us" and "the soul of this infrastructure is sown in our minds, in our children's purity ..." (inauguration Chone dam, 24/Nov/2015, in Hidalgo and Boelens, 2019). Families from the flooded area were relocated in a utopian, neatly planned, government-controlled model community (Hidalgo-Bastidas et al., 2018). Uniform houses, clean streets, modern traffic signs, purified gardens. Farmers are not allowed to have homesteads, chickens or livestock. It rings familiar old bells…

Image 4: The "Millennium Community" (Source: own photos, Hidalgo-Bastidas & Boelens)

Hosted by villager Jairo in the model village, we enjoyed playing the game that the Government gave all inhabitants: "*Resources that Construct Happiness. Dreams Come True, Thanks to Natural Resources*". It has three editions: 'Hydropower', 'Oil', and 'Mining'. We played 'Oil'. Moving the arrow on the playing board and giving correct answers leads the winner to the ultimate goal: "HAPPINESS".

Besides technical questions, "What are the phases in oil production?" and "What is the etymological meaning of 'petroleum'?", there were the socio-economic ones: "Who owns the oil?". Right answer: "All Ecuadorians, represented by the State". Or: "How are revenues from strategic resources utilized?" Right answer: "To generate national development". For us, some questions were quite difficult: "What does oil mean for Ecuador?", but Jairo quickly helped us out: "Development, Prosperity, and Well-being". I admit that, despite my chair on water governance, I had no response to the most difficult question: "Does oil extraction help protect

water resources in Ecuador?" Correct response: "Yes". Unfortunately, the cards gave no further explanation.

Image 5 : The game "Resources that Construct Happiness" (source: own photos Hidalgo-Bastidas & Boelens)

Indeed, extractive industries and Nature's conquest are deeply compatible with governmentalist *Buen Vivir*. During the past decade, in Ecuador's and Peru's streets, government billboards partnering Living Well and Extractivism were very common. In Bolivia, the government of Evo Morales used Buen Vivir to justify capitalist exploitation of indigenous territories and to legitimize its own "rightful indigenousness" (versus deviant indigenous identity groups), as well as its forms of governmental control (e.g., Roca Sánchez, 2022). Correa's project of territorial redesign and 'community participation' neatly fitted official Good Living, stripping communities of self-representation. It molded 'convenient communities' aiming to produce self-correcting subjects: required for intensifying petroleum, mining and hydropower development. Inclusion and plurality, *as long as they behave* (Valladares & Boelens, 2017, 2019; Galarza, 2019; Hidalgo & Boelens, 2019; Bebbington & Bury, 2013; Boelens et al., 2015; Goodwin, 2019; Teijlingen & Hogenboom, 2016).

Marx and Engels once observed that capitalism "creates a world after its own image"; in fact, "it compels all nations, on pain of extinction, ... to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst ..." (Marx & Engels, 1969(1848):16). Obviously, the same is true for 21st-Century Socialism: it equalizes, commensurates, it tolerates no rivals. Commensuration makes comparisons across vast cultural distances possible, which facilitates governmental control and enables market transactions (Espeland and Stevens, 1998). In fact, commensuration does not just

produce new governance relations, but also new water subjects and societies (Espeland, 1998; Vos & Boelens, 2018; Zwarteveen, 2015). Consequently, local rights diversity and plural land and water-governance forms are viewed as irrational and, especially, uncontrollable, disobedient, unruly. Ecuador's Good Living project of state-directed 'capitalism' needed a uniform, expert-controlled playground, transforming complex realities and disciplining local rights and resource users. Very similar to King Utopos' recognition and toleration policies in Utopia, it differentiated between 'acceptable' local water governance cultures – compatible with Good Living –, and 'unacceptable' ones, that is, those who claimed redistributing power and resources (cf. Hale, 2004). (For sure: King Utopos installed a constitution with total toleration of religious diversity, but only one belief is true and superior, and will win by Utopian "reason" (More, 1516:119) : a disciplined 'multi-cultural/multi-faith' ethics).

In the Amazon, Andes and coastal 'strategic areas', people who defended their territories against extractive industries and water pollution suffered violent state repression. The President called them "ignorant", "nation-backwardizers", "interfering with good life" (Valladares and Boelens, 2017; Hidalgo et al., 2018). In Chone, families who protested were not living in the utopian village, but violently displaced from their homesteads, without any compensation. Thomas More's Utopia in the 21st century.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman used the 'utopian *gardener* metaphor' (Bauman, 1989:113; 2007:99). In *Liquid Times* (chapter 'Utopia in the Age of Uncertainty') he explains that "*It is the gardeners who tend to be the most keen and expert (one is tempted to say, professional) utopia-makers*" (2007:99): modernist experts neatly design and cultivate harmonious, purified garden society. Any plant that grows autonomously, not according to utopian design, is called a 'weed' and must be removed. Our model community was named: '*Garden City*' – a cruel joke not even Thomas More could have invented.

(*Intermezzo:* While Eurocentric, colonial, disciplinary utopian visions have proliferated in North and South, overtly and covertly, I am fully aware of how many Latin American authors, activists and movements have re-conceptualized and embraced 'alternative (or even: 'good', 'Southern', 'de-colonial', 'concrete', 'real', 'people-based', 'multi-cultural', etc. etc.) utopias'. Not anymore is Utopia-production monopolized by Western thinkers and academic-activist epistemologies. Obviously,

fundamental reflections then relate to whether the scholarly-activist versions (as in Buen Vivir) may *also* contain germs of dystopia. And if there are parallels among how Correa's and Franco's projects are based on the reworking of progressive utopian ideals. Politico-historical analyses will tell. What I do notice is that many 'alternative utopias' have troublesome tendencies to essentialize indigenous wisdom and identities, stress presumedly harmonious intracultural traditions as well as nature-society relationships, and portray 'living well' as originating from the 'inside' while explaining all 'bads' as coming from the Western, capitalist outside. [Note: Empire's as the Inca's brutally colonized peoples from Colombia to Chile, trying to impose a one-world view, one language, one hierarchy, and a uniform indigenous-colonial discourse]. Next to well-grounded ethnographic literature (which I cannot deal with in this essay), most utopia-otherwise inspired texts tend to be deeply binary and dichotomous (typically starting with: "Different from the West, in the Andes ...". However, romanticization and essentialization will always deny contradictions, contain people in erroneous categories, and thereby affect the most marginalized groups.). Radical purification may be an unconscious ingredient. The urgent reflection thus remains: can 'dominant utopias' be undone or curbed by 'better utopias'? Or is the core threat rather *inside any utopianism itself*? Is utopia these days allowed to invisibly multiply its dangerous seeds on the wings of 'decolonial' and subaltern discourse? Should we not once and forever demask the subtle downsides and traps that underlie its attractive imaginaries? Flores Galindo's (1988) early, brilliant work on Andean utopian history is telling: If you play with fire, you get burned.).

Rivers of Scarcity. Or: the modernist trap of utopianism

Climate change, contamination and growing competition among water users and uses breeds rapidly growing conflicts, affecting especially the most vulnerable, including nature. Thereby, the announced global Water Crisis loudens the call for utopian policies, justifying radical interventions. Calls as from The World Bank and other dominant international water players (World Development Report, 2010:137) suggest that local communities will not be able to respond to climate change and should accommodate to state authority, economic experts and market rules (Lynch, 2012). The remedy is often worse than the disease. This strips local communities of water governance authority, and simplistic formal rules are introduced that reduce their capacity to creatively respond through collective water control arrangements. One enduring assumption of modernist water law making is that Western property

institutions and standardized agreements would be for the benefit of all and produce efficient rights and rational organization (Boelens, 2015b; cf. Jackson, 2018; Paerregaard, 2018; Wilson, 2019).

To understand on-the-ground water realities and their interaction with utopian and mainstream water governance frameworks, it is fundamental to understand local water cultures' rights frameworks, water's multiple values and meanings, and examine how water rights express the working of power among humans. Everyday water control often is a dynamic mixture of local, national and global rules or indigenous, colonial and recent norms; organized complexity; 'river commons' and cultures with '*living* water rights', producing and applying territory-based local law.

But diverse authorities, autonomies, and community rules complicate State domination and free-market operation. As in Utopia, the latter need uniformity, purity, a single political order. Bureaucratic, expert and market-based governance depend on universalistic governance frames, de-personalized and disembedded water rights, and the commensuration of multiple water epistemologies and ontologies: as objectified H_2O without cultural values and meanings.

But universalizing 'good governance' and 'best practices' tend to deny people's own ability to create and regenerate. 'Rationalizing water governance' tends to consist of a missionary commensuration process geared towards substituting community relationships, local property, knowledge and ethics. Local rights frameworks are commonly seen as irrational systems that escape justice and control. And whenever these are formally recognized, the dominant system tends to essentialize their expressions. Often, moreover, formalization and legal recognition of some groups' water rights implies that the rest, often small-holders, automatically become illegal, open to occupation by powerful water interest groups (Boelens et al., 2018). "Commensuration changes the terms of what can be talked about, how we value, and how we treat what we value. It is symbolic, inherently interpretive, deeply political" (Espeland and Stevens, 1998, p.315). Only experts on Flying Islands have sufficient distance and indifference to the hugely diverse water cultures on-the-ground, to the problems, solutions and sufferings of real-life water users. This asks for examining the dominant water culture's assimilation projects (as well as simplifications in counter-ideologies). Why are certain worldviews and knowledge

systems seen as legitimate but others denied existence? How does this influence distribution of water, benefits, and burdens?

Understanding real-life water control, and the impacts of dominant water policy and intervention projects, also asks for understanding the constitution and transformation of territories as actively produced socionatures. Water and society are co-produced in hydrosocial territories that embody the representation of particular worldviews, knowledge frames, cultural patterns and power relationships (Boelens et al., 2016; Damonte, 2019; Flaminio, 2021; Goodwin, 2019, 2021; Hoogesteger et al., 2016; Whaley, 2022; Ženko & Menga, 2019). Hydro-territorial spaces are sites of contested control over socio-natural configuration. To define their 'convenient order of things' and make people behave 'properly', dominant groups deploy particular Foucauldian 'government-mentalities', rationalities of those in control (Hommes et al., 2016; Hommes and Boelens, 2018; Hoogendam, 2019).

Presenting these territorial constructs as bio-physical 'nature' portrays them as merely technical and 'natural'; and water problems and solutions come to be seen as objective and politically neutral. But they organize benefits and burdens, in different ways for different groups. Therefore, from Utopia to Spain, from Laputa to Chile, a fundamental question is: how is socio-natural order produced (and contested) via the control over water resources, infrastructure, investments, knowledge, truth, and ultimately, water users and authorities?

How do governmentality projects try to re-pattern diverse water worlds and align humans, nature and thought within dominant techno-political systems? And how, thereby, is also water technology (hydraulics) itself 'moralized'?, bearing its designers' class-, gender- and cultural norms. Infrastructure performs as 'hardened morality' and 'materialized power', organizing inclusion and exclusion, enforcing particular organization and ethical behavior. (Pfaffenberger 1988; Latour, 2002; Shah and Boelens, 2021). Modernist governance commonly seeks to produce hydro-political order by re-shaping and re-signifying hydrosocial territories to produce "communities of convenience" (Valladares & Boelens, 2017; Mills-Novoa et al., 2020; Rodríguez-de-Francisco & Boelens, 2016). Beyond eradicating, subtler territorialization strategies seek to "recognize" and discipline, encapsulating local norms, resources, practices and water actors in the spatial/political organization of dominant governmentality schemes. It recognizes the 'convenient' and sidelines

Image 6: The Utopian hydrological regime and main river Anydrus (source: Creative Commons)

'problematic' water cultures.

Let me now come back to Utopia's main river, *Anydrus*, literally: '*River NoWater*', '*Waterless River*': River of Scarcity – a deadly joke of modernist dreams. Rather than solving water scarcities, utopian regimes actively *create* them.

Utopian water regimes are never realized. Mediated by stubborn practice, they are an illusion. But in the water-policy world, illusions are powerful and have very tangible, often dramatic impacts. In multiple colors, neoliberal policies like Chile's have spread worldwide. Supposedly *fighting water scarcity,* they relocate water rights from smallholders to high-water-consumptive agribusiness and extractive industries. Presumably water use efficient – the model to be followed –, these squeeze aquifers and rivers dry, concentrating water for the few. Often, the victims are blamed, as with Gulliver's host, Munodi. Food-producing communities are dispossessed, claiming they are 'water-wasteful'. They must disappear, or correct their misbehavior, following market-utopian rules, or state- and expert-controlled Good-Living socialism. Utopias neglect and destroy real-life water cultures.

Therefore, to understand *marginalized water cultures*, we need to understand the Water Culture that *marginalizes* them. Invert the spotlights. Utopia has shown us that 'making the poor, the women, or the indigenous *visible'* is often to better control and correct them. Foucault argued: "*Visibility is a trap*". This made him to fiercely warn against modernist projects to visibilize the subaltern, "the formula of power through transparency" (Foucault, 1977:200, 154).

This inverted spotlight on the world's Water Lords shows that, in most cases, water scarcity is not a natural hazard. Confirming More's NoWater River or Swift's Laputa-controlled droughts, the United Nations reported: "Water scarcity is manufactured through political processes and institutions that disadvantage the poor" (2006, p.2). Water scarcity for the many and water abundance for the few usually go together.

Spanish hydraulic utopia recklessly dried many rivers while drowning and colonizing communities. But recently, millions of citizens and a new generation of water professionals stood up, taking the streets successfully. Among them our friend Manolo. After the dams drowned his community he fought for decades to 'bring his river back to life'. Recently, his river flows again, ecological flows nurture the landscape. Manolo became a water distributor to fulfil his dreams: day after day, he brings water justice to the valley's small farmers.

Their tragic history is today a mirror for the *neighboring* valley. A large, creative coalition of peasants, ecologists, teachers, local business and water professionals have successfully networked to stop damming *their* river. They have also joined the multi-scale New Water Culture movement, networking throughout Spain. Contesting Jeremy Bentham's state-calculated happiness that was outlined earlier, *their* concept is: '*fluviofelicidad*', step-by-step co-creating a dignified, joyful river-community life.

'Water community', far from an egalitarian micro-society, is not a fixed condition but a process and a capacity, to merge collectivity with diversity and to exercise mutual dependence on nature and each other.

Choosing Not to Survive as the Fittest

Bentham saw no problem in sacrificing minorities for the majorities' happiness – a lesson readily applied in many large-scale water projects. '*You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs*'. Philosopher Hannah Arendt (1994 (1951)) criticized this revolutionary slogan (attributed to Lenin), that justifies purification and violence in utopian designs. Her famous article was entitled: "*The Eggs Speak Up*".

Indeed, people work to 're-moralize' territories and hydraulics, to make their *own* water societies. Often, such responses show the importance of upscaling and diversifying water-defense struggles, building alliances among diverse groups and scales horizontally and vertically. Combining grassroots, academic and policy worlds is central in water-justice research and action: engagement across differences. Here, academic and policy institutes are not monolithic. Many state employees, professionals and scientists struggle 'from within', enlarging scope for agency within the state to support autonomous community water control (e.g., Goodwin, 2021; Shah et al., 2021; Stensrud, 2019). Illustrations range from Europe's Right2Water movement (Berge et al., 2021) to myriad public-community coalitions for solidary water governance in Latin America (e.g., Goodwin, 2019; Dupuits, 2019; Vos et al., 2020). State Transdisciplinary co-creation of knowledge, policies and infrastructure, among scientific and societal partners, can challenge the Flying Islands. Thereby, opposing and overlapping configurations shape 'territorial pluralism' (Hoogesteger et al., 2016).

To understand these co-creation strategies and reconfiguration processes, recently, we have started a cross-continental program: to study and support the large variety of 'New Water Justice Movements' (www.movingrivers.org). NWJMs are rooted, transdisciplinary, practice-based, often organized in multi-actor networks and multi-scalar coalitions. They deploy a variety of institutional and political strategies, new languages of valuation, vernacular water rights frameworks and pro-active 'commoning practices', to claim environmental justice, restore or defend 'living rivers', and enhance nature-entwined water governance and 'pluriversal water cultures'.

In this endeavor, reviving an old, overlooked concept is key: '*riverhood*' – "the state of being a river" (Oxford Dictionary 2019), that is, river systems in all their possible senses, as co-production among humans and non-humans. 'Reviving the river': as a *socionatural being* and simultaneously *ecological, cultural and political subject*. Communities network with nature and mutually produce their environment; social actors inscribe their life worlds in particular environments following ideologies, epistemologies and power structures, developing territory and riverhood. Similarly, the movement of water co-creates social, material and symbolic linkages, lived spaces and boundaries.

Certainly, the eggs speak up. Commonly, however, large-scale egg-breaking in the modernist water world is not contested through loud-speaking water warriors. Most eggs speak up in silence, often invisibly. I suggest Political Ecology studies 'the politics of silence': silent water dispossessions and silent water society responses.

My Andean-countries work shows that open water struggles are less significant than the thousands of invisible daily battlefields (cf. Armijos, 2013; Boelens, 2015b; Goodwin, 2021; Hoogesteger et al., 2016). In underground rootzones, communities build their own rights systems, questioning the self-evidence of formal state, science, or market-based water governance. When these undertows show up in public, it is often in disguised forms: imitating the dominant protocols, organizations and rules, but just to make use of these formal powers. A 'mimicry' or camouflage strategy that uses the appearance of conforming to external rules. Below these formal shields, in layered autonomous spaces, they harbor a tremendous organizational and hybrid rights network. Rather than classic resistance *against* the current, these intangible undercurrents flow in *any* direction. These resistance strategies both bring together *and* disorient: they "con-fuse" (Boelens, 2015b).

Understanding *living* water cultures demands modesty. Far from utopian proposals focused on what justice 'should be', let us start by understanding how, in the mud, they themselves express water security, shape water rights, and experience water justice. Not taking them for granted, but as collective starting-points. This includes seeing how they suffer from utopian justice regimes that impose liberal, collectivist or post-neoliberal models for becoming 'equal' and 'modern'. In her fascinating book "*Ríos, Utopias y Movimientos Sociales. Reviviendo flujos de vida en Colombia y España*", Bibiana Duarte-Abadía (2022) dives in the policy, academic and activist worlds of utopian models and discourses, but in particular, and profoundly, in the everyday lives, livelihoods, copying strategies and modes of 'navigating in the mud', by those families and collectives who face the downsides of utopian policies and

counter-utopias. "*Son las mismas familias y comunidades afectadas, que día a día experimentan las injusticias socioambientales, las que se movilizan y se alían, con éxito ambivalente, para construir territorios hidrosociales menos utópicos, pero más libres, más dialécticos, más diversos*" (2022:291).

Water justice and governance cannot be constructed from detached, value-free ivory towers, flying islands, eyes in the sky, god-like positions representing the universal good. It asks for engagement and making positions explicit, to start political dialogue and polycentric governance.[8]

Rather than uniform utopias or revolutionary abstractions, local water societies are very down-to-earth, rooted in history and schemes of belonging among people, place, and water. Context-based trial and error, learning by doing. They continually invent new rules, identities and traditions.

Conclusions

I started my essay with Esteban and the Senyera farmers. They stood up against the Public-Private-Partnership transforming their community, to regain control over their water and livelihoods. Government and experts were shocked that their authority, knowledge and profits were challenged. "But we refused. We were fed up with them!", said the farmers. As a result, costs have drastically lowered, production increased, and profits are not taken away anymore but invested in the collective system.

Farmers re-installed the *regador* water distributor and hired a local technician, creatively mixing new drip and ancient techniques.[9] Trust, transparency and well-attended water meetings in the bar have returned. "We are proud to have the system back in our own hands". Autonomous decision-making, shared management and

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8 This asks for a relational (non-universalist, non-relativist) comparative and historical approach; knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1991). Inverting the notion of "objective science and policies", water users are subjects who should be fully enabled to object: against what we scientists and policymakers say about them, as "interested, active, disobedient actors" (Latour, 2000:111). These objections make it possible to start political dialogue.

9 Senyera water users show that irrigation technology is not an autonomous agent. Sociotechnical designs can be challenged and "re-moralized". The reservoir, community well and watering schedule are accommodated to combine surface and drip technologies, and autonomous management (see Sánchez-Ibor et al., 2017).

flexible, self-mastered technologies. Government and experts had never understood that water efficiency is both technical, economic, political and cultural.

The intimate connection among people, water, space and identity fuses struggles over material control of water, with the battle to culturally define and politically organize these water territories. Unlike 'Golden Triangle' expert-industry-government thinking – so powerful in water governance – these thousands of water struggles around the world do not reach the newspapers but *are* deeply innovative. They are about water, but also about meaning, identity, and legitimacy. About the right to self-define the nature of water problems and solutions. About claiming the freedom to deviate. About the right to exist.

Dear Mr. Herbert Spencer, Mr. Bentham, Mr. Lenin, Mr. Trump, Mr. Good Living, Mr. Utopos, ...

Let us try to understand those millions of water users who do not *want* to Survive as the Fittest. They don't want to *survive* but to live in dignity, creatively building socionature commons. Their '*not* fitting' is often a *conscious* choice.

Senyera farmers, like millions around the globe, refuse to accept the water identities assigned to them: as backward locals, obedient State servants, or individualistic water-market clients. While rooted in local water cultures, their dynamic networks link the local, national and global worlds. Their ideas and notions travel, translate and hybridize. Their struggles show that very much is at stake.

Unmasking utopian water regimes means critically engaging with those who experience water injustice, questioning established water truths, power structures and their claims to rationality, democracy and equity. Water-user families, men and women, integrating social and ecological communities at once, ask scholars and students to help question experts' Flying Islands and Rivers of Scarcity: to combine water knowledges, co-design water governance, and actively interweave struggles for water justice.

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