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Protecting a Sacred Gift: Water and Social Change in Mexico
(review)

Margaret Wilder

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Protecting a Sacred Gift: Water and Social Change in Mexico. Scott Whiteford and Roberto Melville, editors. La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2001. \$22.95 paper (ISBN 1-878367-46-3).

Reviewed by Margaret Wilder, Latin American Studies/Geography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA.

Mexico's national water policy was dramatically transformed during the decade of the 1990s, moving from a state-centered to a neoliberal, decentralized model. In their new edited volume, Scott Whiteford and Roberto Melville have captured much of the complexity regarding how the transformation of water policy has played out on the ground and affected local communities. With twenty-one prominent scholars from Mexico and the United States contributing 14 chapters, the volume begins to address the deficit in the environment and development literature on the impacts of the water policy on different sectors of Mexican society.

The first chapter by Whiteford and Melville is an overview of the current water situation in Mexico and an introduction to the water policy reforms. The authors emphasize the critical status of Mexican water, with a growing population increasingly concentrated in vast urban centers and along the border, growing contamination, salinization, and overdraft problems causing enhanced environmental concern, and a rising number of water conflicts due to human and nature-induced water shortages. The authors underscore the significance of the state's changing role, from one of a central, operational manager to one of policymaking and oversight as it has ceded management responsibility for water resources to local communities and irrigation users.

The reforms were introduced in 1992 as part of a new National Water Law put forward by the Salinas administration. Significantly, as the authors point out, the reforms dovetailed chronologically

with "globalization, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and a vast array of domestic neoliberal economic policy reforms" (p. 25). The water reforms included the ending of federal subsidies for water, the incorporation of market forces where "appropriate," the commodification of water as an economic good as well as a public good, and the establishment of river basin councils to help plan and manage surface water sources. Within the rural setting, water management was delegated to local irrigation users in a decentralization process called "transference," and a new policy of full-cost recovery pricing for irrigation water was established. Whiteford and Melville aptly note that the transference occurred within a landscape of existing social and power relationships, stating "Decentralization has reinforced the power *imbalance* in some cases. In others, it has led to the emergence of a new social order" (p. 19). Decentralization also featured integrally in the delivery of urban water services, which were delegated from the federal to state and municipal level governments, also giving them the option to privatize water and sewer service delivery. However, the government discontinued its policy of heavily subsidizing water just as it implemented decentralized management, thereby leaving cash-starved local water managers with few resources to deal with often inefficient water delivery systems.

Each of the book's subsequent thirteen chapters presents a case study demonstrating how this suite of water policy reforms ascribing to principles of a free market and a reduced state apparatus has

affected local populations and regions. The editors selected case studies which incorporate some of the key issues in the water policy transformation, including gendered aspects of access to water and the impacts on *ejidatario* (small communal) producers, and assess both rural and urban contexts, both the interior of Mexico and the burgeoning border region. This attention to the uneven landscape of Mexican land tenure, political economy, regional difference, and social relations of power is one of the abiding strengths of this volume. Several chapters are exemplary in terms of the complex portrayal of local impacts of the water reforms.

Within the rural context, the case study by Gabriela Monsalvo Velázquez, Emma Zapata Martelo and Pilar Alberti Manzanares (Chapter 5) on gender relations and the impacts of transference within irrigation districts makes a distinct contribution to our understanding of the changing role of women as social processes are transformed. Focusing on the Alto Rio Lerma region of Guanajuato, the authors found that women water users have distinct ways of accessing water and meeting their irrigation demands from men. Although the water reforms established water "modules" or associations of water users within irrigation districts, a form of local control believed to enhance democratic participation, none of the women in the authors' two case study communities participated in the water modules or their boards of directors. Moreover, women continue their normal responsibilities as wives and mothers even while assuming new agricultural responsibilities and negotiating their water needs. The authors conclude that these multiple responsibilities mean that women may be less focused on formal aspects of being a producer (such as having their names on legal documents guaranteeing them water or participating in policy debates within the water module) than they are in simply ensuring they receive the water through traditional means. The case study by Monsalvo *et al* also highlights the great variety of wom-

en's roles and levels of participation, differing from one local community to the next, even within the same region. This chapter, as well as one by Rhodante Ahlers on gendered aspects of water privatization in the Comarca Lagunera region, begin to flesh out the evolving roles of women producers and resource managers under new economic regimes in rural Mexico, and by so doing make a major contribution to the literature on an under researched but vital area of inquiry.

Within the urban context, the volume also makes some critical contributions in the form of chapters by Nicolás Pineda, Claudia Cirelli, and by Steve Mumme and Christopher Brown. Pineda offers a close analysis of the governing arrangements under decentralization in 35 Mexican cities located in border states, with a focus on whether more effective water service delivery is linked to national policy, the influence of the border, or to electoral competitiveness. Pineda concludes that municipalities and states have been unable to comply effectively with national water policy guidelines (sent forth from Mexico City) urging greater efficiency in water delivery, because they are hampered by insufficient revenues and a lack of technical/managerial experience. He concludes: "Much more important in promoting service effectiveness are electoral competitiveness and the alternation of political parties in elected office" (p. 163). The ability of local governments to operate and take decisions under transparent procedures anchored by public accountability was integral to their success. Pineda found that transparency and accountability were highly correlated with the existence of opposition parties in control of local governments. Similarly focused on the border between the U.S. and Mexico, Mumme and Brown address the influences of the so-called NAFTA environmental institutions on decentralization. Specifically, they consider the Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC), the Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC), and the Border XXI Program. They con-

clude that although these new border institutions have not made much of a formal difference in expanding decentralized governance or resolving border environmental problems (with the possible exception of BECC which, aided by albeit limited North American Development Bank financing, has enhanced water treatment capacity in several border communities), they have been successful in opening new spaces of participation and setting forth new models for democratic processes that in turn are likely to affect the internal decentralization processes in border states where these institutions are most active.

Finally, Cirelli takes up the critical question of water supply in Mexico City, where nearly one-third of Mexico's national population resides. She focuses on the topic of rural-to-urban water transfers, which promises to continue gaining in importance as Mexico's urban needs increase based on internal migration and industrialization patterns. In order to reduce conflicts between rural water users, such as those in the Alto Lerma basin, and urban users in major centers like Mexico City, a judicial framework that addresses equality and just indemnification is needed. Her study underscores the interdependent nature of two communities bonded by their shared water resources and recommends understanding such regions as one water system. "It is important to view the experience of the Lerma System as a precedent for future cases, from which new and more complex social, political and judicial criteria can be derived for the transfer of water. Failure to establish such criteria will lead to unequal socioeconomic conditions and...potentially to conflict" (p. 160).

This new volume by Whiteford and Melville adds richness and complexity to our understanding of the water reforms and the intricacies inherent in the manifestations of those reforms in local communities. The breadth of coverage of water topics is such that virtually everyone with interests related to the government, politics, and environment in

Mexico will find numerous case studies of interest. The theoretical issues raised by the case studies will engage anyone concerned with decentralization, privatization, rural development, urban problems, the transformation of social relations of power, and the evolving role of the state in a decentralized, neoliberal landscape.

If anything is missing from this volume, it would be a chapter (or two) to try to give some cohesion to the whole. While the book's value is in the detailed richness of its case studies, the wealth of detail at the same time makes it difficult to draw generalized conclusions about what is the current state of water, the reforms, and society in Mexico. It may be that this was the explicit intention of the volume's editors, yet it may leave the casual reader still wondering about the overall state of affairs regarding water in Mexico. Nevertheless, the book amply satisfies a scholarly thirst for a close understanding of how the water reforms are shaping—and now, after a decade's experience with the reforms—reshaping again Mexican society and culture. The volume also plays a role in structuring a future research agenda for the scholarly community, by raising significant questions about the transformation of local power relations, the role and prospects of privatization of water rights and water management, the most effective governance mechanisms for urban water delivery, and the future of ejidal and subsistence agriculture. Keywords: *water, Mexico, decentralization, state, gender, ejido*