

Emergency Management in Michigan: Race, Class and the Limits of Liberal Democracy

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What is it about Michigan and water? Michigan, the Great Lakes state, a state with 3288 miles of coastline, a state within which there are almost 63,000 lakes of all sizes, with 98 lakes over 1000 acres and 10 lakes over 10,000 acres (for reference, that is over 15 sq. mi. or 40 sq. km), a state that is bordered on three sides by Great Lakes (Superior, Michigan and Huron) and very close to a fourth (Erie), a state arguably with an abundant source of free water, perhaps the most of any state and perhaps many countries. And yet, its residents suffer over access to water, over the availability of clean drinking water on demand.

Access to water may well be the most important challenge facing the globe, to the clean and safe water required to sustain life. We are made up of water (estimates range from 50 to 75% of our bodies, depending on age, gender, weight, height and fitness level), and access to safe water is critical. We use it to drink, cook, bathe, and a host of other activities we often take for granted. And yet, due to a range of environmental problems and the spread of global poverty, we face serious challenges. ‘In a world of unprecedented wealth, almost 2 million children die each year for want of a glass of clean water and adequate sanitation’ (Watkins, 2006: abstract).

‘As human populations continue to grow, regional conflicts over water, ecological degradation, and human illness and death are becoming more frequent and serious’ (Gleick, 1998: 571). Given the abundance of water in Michigan, one could not be faulted for assuming this is one place where these concerns are, at worst, far into the future. Yet, Michigan has become the proving ground for neoliberal expansion and the taking of critically important social resources for private gain. For some time now, concerns have been raised by conservationists and citizen groups who question the appropriation of ground water by bottling it and selling it as spring water. Nestlé Waters North America has wells in Michigan that draw water (some argue by drilling under the Great Lakes), bottling about 700,000 gallons a day at its Ice Mountain facility, and more in its operations in Guelph, Ontario. ‘The question is whether bottling water from the aquifers that feed the lakes, the largest repository of fresh water on Earth, should be seen as ordinary human consumption, commercial production, or export of a treasured natural resource’ (Lydersen, 2008). And this activity goes on unabated. A recent study published by Green Lifestyles.org (Truman, 2015) finds that:

Since 2000, Nestle has been packaging and selling water from the Great Lakes Basin (mostly from aquifers in Mecosta County, Michigan) and calling it ‘carefully selected spring water.’ Nestle Waters sells its bottled water worldwide and makes billions of dollars with no profit given to the local communities. Even with Lakes Huron and Michigan at record-low levels in 2012–2013, Nestle was still allowed to draw 218

gallons of water per minute at its Ice Mountain (Michigan) site, further lowering the water table, creating problems for shipping in the Great Lakes and causing property owners' wells to run dry.

It doesn't stop there. In drought-plagued California, the Nestlé water-bottling plant in Sacramento 'is draining up to 80 million gallons of water a year from Sacramento aquifers during the drought' (Bacher, 2015) while paying the same price as the average residential user, generating enormous profits shipping bottled water around the country and around the world. An important, and clearly crucial, natural resource that is a public asset is being systematically converted into a profit-generating commodity with no benefit to society. '[W]ater use is unsustainable if the services provided by water resources and ecosystems, and desired by society, diminish over time' (Gleick, 1998: 573). Perhaps we need to remember that production decisions are not made by society writ large, and the system is structured to rationalize the appropriation of resources from the public sector (natural or otherwise) for private gain under capitalism.

Since 2009, eight Michigan cities (Allen Park, Benton Harbor, Detroit, Ecorse, Flint, Hamtramck, Lincoln Park, and Pontiac) have operated, or continue to operate, under an Emergency Manager (EM) appointed by the state's governor. In total, according to the 2010 US Census (See: <http://1.usa.gov/1GCdRvE>), these cities have a combined population of 955,843, representing just 9.7 percent of the state's total population. At the same time, the cities accounted for a total of 699,225 African-American residents, representing just under half (49.8%) of all of the African-American residents in the state of Michigan. Under the control of the state, to mitigate what they view as severe fiscal distress, the governing powers of local officials are substantially reduced, and in many cases removed altogether, completely dismantling the municipal governing body and depriving residents of democratic political engagement at the local and community level. Although it may be unintended, such political disenfranchisement has disproportionately impacted working-class people living in communities of color.

Further, the solutions tailored by state-appointed EMs tend to singularly focus on budgetary strategies to alleviate short-term fiscal problems, which may, in the long run, culminate in the re-emergence and exacerbation of fiscal crises. Structural problems like the loss of revenue through lower tax rates, a declining tax base from outmigration and declining property values, and changes in state revenue-sharing are ignored. Remedies instead focus on the costs incurred through public employee wages, post-employment benefits, and public services. This has led to cutback management tactics that adversely impact the financial well-being of public employees and retirees and the quality of life for community residents, while at the same time protecting corporate investors and elite financial institutions. Moreover, because of the racial and class disparities associated with the EM process, poor black and brown communities will seemingly bear the brunt of the deleterious outcomes caused by Michigan's EM laws.

Which brings us back to water in Michigan. Two events put into sharp relief the deleterious consequences of such a neoliberal focus on cost reduction and the returns on equity to investors (a problem that goes well beyond municipal debt financing; see Panitch and Gindin, 2014). The first was an action taken by the Detroit Water and Sewage Department to recoup unpaid water bills by shutting down service. The city handed out about 46,000 shut-off notices to households and businesses, threatening termination of service if outstanding bills were not paid. As reported in the US edition of *The Guardian*, a 'right-wing state and corporate push to cut off water is economic shock therapy at its most ruthless and racist' (Lukacs, 2014). While the argument is that Detroit needs to recoup millions of dollars, Lukacs goes on to point out that high-end golf clubs, major sports facilities (the hockey and football arenas), and over half of the commercial and industrial users in Detroit owe upwards of US\$30 million, and yet no action was being taken to shut off their water. Cutting off water received wide condemnation, even resulting in a UN Human Rights report (n.d.),

stating that ‘Disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights’. Rather than cutting off service to an essential resource that could mean the difference between health and illness, and even life and death, the report goes on to state that, ‘According to international human rights law, it is the State’s obligation to provide urgent measures, including financial assistance, to ensure access to essential water and sanitation’. The nation and the world were treated to images of water being shipped to home owners and residents of Detroit. A basic resource was being denied with no concern for the structural circumstances that led to the problem in the first instance.

The second, and perhaps more shocking, situation – again in a city under an Emergency Manager – is the decision to forego safe water from the city of Detroit by not renewing a contract, and thereby to provide Flint, Michigan, drinking water from the Flint River. Heralded as a cost-saving act, the city leaders and Flint Water Treatment Plant officials held a ground-breaking in March 2014, promising that the city would see drinking water from the river by mid-April of that year. But, as Newby (2016) reports, ‘While the emergency manager actions in Benton Harbor and Pontiac undermined the governance and quality of life for these communities, the most outrageous outcome of [Michigan Governor] Snyder’s EM policy was providing poisoned water for one of the state’s most historically significant cities, Flint – the birthplace of the United Auto Workers’. City officials, representing the working-class and non-white residents of Flint, voted overwhelmingly to return to Detroit water, but that vote was voided by the EM of Flint. What is most egregious in this story of disregard for the safety of the citizens of Flint is the way officials first hid evidence of high levels of lead in the river, poisoning those who drank the water and impacting children their whole life, then persisted in perpetuating a lie about how it all unfolded. Investigative reporting by Curt Guyette of the ACLU of Michigan uncovered the lie, revealed that tests ‘proving’ the water was safe were faulty, and brought this whole disaster to light (Clark, 2015).

There are two parts to this story. First, we need to be mindful that water is important, and how it is used and distributed matters. ‘Ultimately, until discussions about the sustainable use of water become an integral part of long-term water planning, the world will be faced with continued unsustainable water use and threats to both human and ecological survival’ (Gleick, 1998: 578). But second, much as the bankruptcy of Detroit was the proverbial canary in the cage alerting us to the dire consequences of capitalist disinvestment when urban development is defined by capitalist social relations, the events in Flint are examples of how neoliberal policies and programs proceed with one goal alone: the search for ever greater returns on investment, the effort to secure financial capital’s rights over the needs of the community, and the disregard for democratic rights whenever it is possible or feasible to do so. Never is this more pronounced than when the community is poor, non-white and powerless, when the veneer of democratic processes is exposed to be a sham, and when the implicit collusion between public elected officials and private capital results in a set of actions that have no regard for the people who put them in office.

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