CRISIS OF WATER: INTERROGATING NEO-LIBERAL WATER DISCOURSES IN TURKEY

Author: Mine ISLAR, PhD Candidate in Sustainability Science, Lund University

Abstract
Neoliberalism operates as a political-economical ideology through networks and institutions which promote market-oriented policies. In order to examine neoliberalism, one should pay special attention to the ideological and discursive structures supporting particular visions of state market-society relations. This paper looks at how water discourses in Turkey are produced and constructed through the strategic interactions of different actors such as private companies, multilateral institutions (IMF, World Bank, EU) and NGOs with the Turkish state. In recent time neoliberalism has been the dominant ideology behind water discourses in Turkey leading to the privatization of water resources, decentralization of water governance and commodification of water. With the assistance of Harvey’s critique of neoliberalism discourses of privatization, new perspectives on governance and technology in water management are investigated. Due to the need for expertise, funding, institutional change and infrastructural building, Turkey seems dependent on those actors situated in the ‘core’ institutions (IMF, the World Bank, EU) and also private local actors to facilitate utilization of water resources, thus allowing free market ideologies rather than humanitarian principles to shape its water policies.

Introduction
Due to global climate change and its impact on water resources, the efficient governance of water has become an increasing focus point for states. Regarding the decision-making process of water strategies, states interact with many non-state actors like private companies, supranational organizations, media, NGOs. In the case of Turkey, its geographical location provides it with better access to scarce water resources than other states in the Middle Eastern region granting it strategic geopolitical importance. However, the lack of both proper infrastructure, insufficient water waste management, and monitoring network as well as poor governance has impeded the Turkish state’s control over these resources and consequently
also over the strategic advantages. Therefore, influenced by the global neoliberal system, the tactical cooperation between the states, the private sector, BOT (Build-Operate-Transfer)-companies and other states, like Israel, or even with multilateral institutions such as the IMF and World Bank is seen as the ultimate solution for the utilization of water resources.

The ‘ultimate-solution’ discourses illustrate that some water discourses are formed to promote the dominant interests whereby some actors can impose their definitions and solutions to the problem on others. (Hajer 1995) One of the dominant water discourses in relation to its management is privatization and will be analyzed in the further sections of this paper. Although privatization is not entirely new in Turkish water politics, the AK Party government aims to significantly increase the scope of such policies. For this reason, AK Party has suggested a reform of the constitutional definition of water as a public good in order to instead allow for the use of water resources by private companies by extending the definition of a public good. Related to this push for privatization are also negotiations with other states concerning the Turkish water resources. One example of this is the plans to sell the rivers and lakes to the private companies or even to foreign states. Another relationship which frames the water discourses is that between the Turkish state and the European Union. Thus, Turkey’s EU Integrated Environmental Approximation Strategy 2007-2027 constitutes a water discourse shaped mainly by ecological modernization, here understood as the discursive promotion of institutional adaption of environment-friendly systems (Hajer 1995) such as the development of water waste treatment, adaptation of legislative framework, establishment of monitoring network for national water resources through private contractors and investment on public education. However, this institutional adaptation too requires private expertise.

In this context, other discourses defining water as a human right or public good are underrepresented when compared to the privatization discourses. Local unions like DISK (the Revolutionary Workers Union Confederation), TMMOB (Chamber of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) and NGOs such as the Water Politics Network(WPN) and Save Hasankeyf (SH) heavily criticize the water policies but seem incapable of influencing the politics of privatization. Therefore, some of these NGOs have engaged themselves in transnational water justice movements which may increase their potential political mobilization. These NGOs have also become the voice of several marginalized groups such as landless peasants, the Kurdish minority and local women who are directly influenced by the state’s water policies. An example of one such ongoing conflict is the Ilisu dam building
project on the Tigris River which if completed will drown the ancient town of Hasankeyf and many nearby villages, thereby displacing thousands of people with mainly Kurdish background (Hoedeman and Senalp 2008). NGO groups who protest against this dam project are often labeled as terrorists or traitors which limit their ability to mobilize local people of the region.

Primarily, this paper reviews the neoliberal changes in water politics of Turkey with a historical perspective. Furthermore it analyzes the discourses of privatization, integrated water resource management and public participation approach from a critical perspective.

**Historical Overview on the Neoliberal Transition of Water Politics in Turkey:**

How and when did the neoliberal turn start in Turkey? Certainly the global oil crisis in 1973 and later the military coup in 1980 prepared the conditions for a neoliberal turn in Turkey. The serious economic deprivation, public mistrust to the state and the desire for stability allowed the post-coup government to facilitate the foreign influence on Turkish economy. Therefore, the first neoliberal turn were initiated by Turgut Ozal (prime minister and then president) between 1980 and 1993 by opening up national institutions to foreign partners in order to restore Turkish economy by uniting it with the world economy. A couple of months before the military coup, Ozal announced his economic programme (January 24 Decisions) that aimed to follow IMF and World Bank’s structural adjustment packages that were designed for the countries under economic crisis. After the coup, Turgut Ozal was reappointed by the military in order to continue this economic package. In other words, following the global trend, neoliberal policies were portrayed as the only solution to the economic and social problems of Turkey at that time. By this way, IMF and Turkey relations had also started in 1980s.

As David Harvey (2005: 29) comments, the IMF and the World Bank are the centers for the structural adjustment for a neoliberal economy since in return for debt rescheduling, countries have to implement particular institutional reforms such as cuts in welfare expenditures and privatization of public infrastructure. In Turkey, these structural adjustments were initiated with changes in legislation. In 1984, the Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) Model was introduced to the energy sector and later to the water sector with Law No: 3096 which allowed the private sector to construct operate and manage water infrastructure such as dams, water plants.
and irrigation systems under a public need provision. (Kibaroglu, Alp and Baskan, 2009) Consequently, the water sector has been opened up to the foreign and private entities.

The World Bank initiated significant changes in water management in Turkey. In 1993, a loan that was offered by the World Bank had certain conditions; adoption of neoliberal policies in macro-economic decisions, decreasing the public investments and mainly transferring the operation and management responsibilities of irrigation facilitates to water user groups (Ibid). Moreover, the World Bank cooperated closely with the staff of DSI (State Water Affairs) by sponsoring the international experts on the transfer of irrigation and drainage facilities which then help to initiate the participatory models on water governance (Ibid). In other words, the World Bank’s support led not only the technical transformation but also became basis for the ideological change in the water affairs.

It was also in this period that Ataturk Dam was revitalized and the Southeast Anatolian Project (GAP) was introduced. This multi-dam project GAP has been portrayed as the one big social and economic development project which will save the underdeveloped Southeast Anatolian region from its backwardness. With the GAP, the government didn’t only aim to develop water and land resources but also aim to prepare the necessary conditions for a ‘good’ business climate. Since 1980 Turkey has build several dams and some are still on constructed. Some of these dams have raised controversy and will be discussed later.

The EU can be seen as another institution that helps to promote neoliberal strategies in Turkey’s water sector. Although it is not explicit like IMF and World Bank, some of its objectives, such as the promotion of public-private partnership and participatory governance can be considered in line with the neoliberal ideology.

Furthermore, the EU Integrated Environmental Approximation Strategy (UCES) has also influence on Turkish water governance. Some aspects of fragile Turkey-EU relations have improved after Turkey was accepted as a candidate country at the Helsinki Summit of 1999. The UCES is one of the EU programs that Turkey has to follow in order to fulfill the EU criteria. It contains “the information regarding to technical and institutional infrastructure, and the environmental improvements that are required to be performed as well as the mandatory arrangements which are necessary to establish complete harmonization for compliance with EU Environmental Acquis Communautaire and the effective implementation of the legislation
which are the two pre-conditions for Turkey to join European Community” (Ministry of Environment and Forestry, 2006).

What are neoliberal water discourses?

Can human right be sold?

Although the earth is 70 percent water, only 2.5 percent can be used for drinking, sanitation, food production, livelihoods and development purposes. Due to the rapid increase in the world’s population, 1.1 billion of people lack access to the clean water and 2.6 billion people lack access to the adequate sanitation (UN World Water Development Report 2006). There is now an increasing realization that water is a finite source and therefore, the utilization and management of water resources and the issue of access to water have gained tremendous attention. There are attempts to recognize water as a human right since human rights “include the right to a standard of living adequate for health and wellbeing, the right to education, and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health”

This accentuates the potential conflict between water as an economic value versus as a human right.

Especially at this point, the neoliberal state provides a different perspective. The neoliberal state favors the strong individual private property rights and sees private enterprise as the single way to innovation and wealth creation. As Harvey (2005: 65) states “the enclosure and the assignment of private property rights is considered the best way to protect against the so-called ‘tragedy of commons’ (the tendency for individuals to irresponsibly super-exploit common property resources such as land and water).” The main argument usually is that the public sector cannot fund huge investments which are needed for the establishment of efficient mechanism for water utilities. Therefore, public sectors are partly or entirely are transferred to the private sector and thus the state influence is sought minimized. Such privatization discourses are often produced by the neoliberal institutions like IMF and World Bank as a part of a neoliberal structural adjustment projects. The Minister of Environment of Turkey Veysel Eroglu confirms the neoliberal rhetoric as follows; “Our ministry supports public-private cooperation by all means, with the financial means that are controlled by the central government, it is impossible to realize the projects at hand in the short run, we will

1 www.righttowater.org.uk
have to attract private investment” (Global Water Intelligence, 2008). Although today there is enough evidence that shows the private sector is not necessarily more efficient than the public sector², water or such common properties are increasingly going through privatization and commodification in the developing world. Why then do states still follow the neoliberal rationale? Harvey explains the insistence on neoliberal policies as follows; “neoliberalism creates conditions for class formation, and as that class power strengthens so the tendency arises for that class to seek to liberate itself from reliance upon state power and to reorient state power along neoliberal lines” (Harvey 2005: 72) In other words, there are certain powerful groups who benefits from neoliberal restructuring of the state and they are the same actors who are creating and promoting the neoliberal rhetoric. Such rhetoric persuades people that there is no other alternative and that neoliberalism is necessary, even natural way to restore the social order. The Edirne case in Turkey can be a good example of how certain groups can gain from privatization processes. In 2008 there were claims of corruption in Edirne where mayor initiated the private sector involvement in the Edirne’s water services for a period of 30 years. It is revealed that municipal officials and the company owners have close relations in order to prepare the kind conditions that are in the favor of the companies with Ahmet Ozal’s mediation. (Global Water Intelligence 2008) One can easily see that with the neoliberal turn in water governance, personal relations within and between powerful groups gain importance and profit making has become the priority rather than the common good is looming large.

Government to Governance: Public Participation and Integrated Water Resource Management

In this part of the paper, I want to interrogate the new methods or discourses of water governance of Turkey that has introduced by the European Union (EU). According to that in Turkey, the EU serves as the institution that on one hand challenges the traditional forms of governance that are state-centered, hierarchical and bureaucratic, on the other hand promotes the new forms of governance-beyond-the-state. (Swyngedouw 2005) The EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) that was adopted in 2000 is very significant since it introduced new approaches to the Turkish water governance. Some main principles of WFD are assorted to be; river basin planning, river basin districts, integrated water resource management

²For more information, see The World Development movement (2006) “ Pipe Dreams: the failure of private sector to invets in water services in developing countries”

Principles like public participation or IWRM are parts of a new form of governance which Swyngedouw (2005) calls the governance-beyond-the-state. It is the “governance as an arrangement of governing beyond the state” and is characterized by the socially innovative institutional arrangements of governance that are organized as horizontal associational networks of private, civil society and state actors. (Ibid: 1992) Although European Union is neither a private actor, civil society nor a state, it fits to the concept of meta-governance which refers to the institutions or arrangements of governance where the grand principles of governmentality are defined. (Ibid: 2001)

The idea of governance departed from the Foucault’s notion of governmentality which studies the technologies of power by analyzing the political rationalities underpinning them (Lemke 2000). However, the concept of governmentality looks beyond the political understanding of power, so the ‘government’ is not only understood as the management by the state but also signifies the problems of self-regulation, guidance for the family and for children, management of the household etc. It includes a range of techniques that state uses for controlling the people or the population. (Ibid) Moreover, governmentality in 20th century includes “the hierarchical and top-down (command-and-control) forms of setting rules and exercising power (but recognized as legitimate via socially agreed conventions of representation, delegation, accountability and control) and mobilizing technologies of government involving policing, bio-political knowledge and bureaucratic rule” (Swyngedouw 2005: 1995).

In contrast, today’s governance are in the shape of the governance-beyond-the-state which is horizontal, networked and based on interactive relations between independent and interdependent actors and influencing among other things the water governance. In the context of governance-beyond-the-state, the term of ‘stakeholder’ forced its associated politics of stakeholder governance to the political realm. Such a change in governance from state-based to more participatory one is seen as the new technique for the government. As Lemke argues that the reshaping of ‘governing’ under neoliberalism with the withdrawal of the state can be seen as the technique for the government. He further explains; “Foucault’s discussion of neo-liberal governmentality shows that the so-called “retreat of the state” is in
fact a prolongation of government, neo-liberalism is not the end but a transformation of politics, that restructures the power relations in society. What we observe today is not a diminishment or a reduction of state sovereignty and planning capacities but a displacement from formal to informal techniques of government and the appearance of new actors on the scene of government (e.g. NGOs), that indicate fundamental transformations in statehood and a new relation between state and civil society actors. This encompasses on the one hand the displacement of forms of practices that were formerly defined in terms of nation state to supranational levels, and on the other hand the development of forms of sub-politics “beneath” politics in its traditional meaning” (Lemke 2000: 11)

Some trends like public private cooperation in the Turkish water governance that are introduced by Water Framework Directive are best understood in the context of reorganization or restructuring of the neoliberal governmentality. According to Swyngedouw (2005: 1998), there are three parts in this reorganization. First is the externalization of state functions by privatization and deregulation through the involvement of non-state, civil society and market-based actors. Second is the up-scaling of governance meaning that nation states increasingly delegates the regulatory tasks to higher levels of governance such as EU, IMF etc. Third is the down scaling of governance to local practices with an aim to incorporate new actors in the arena of governing.

The involvement of different actors in the decision making process is one of the central principle to the recent understanding of water governance. However, the participatory approach ignores the power relations between actors; “while the concept of stake (holder) is inclusive and presumably exhaustive, the actual concrete forms of governance are necessarily constrained and limited in terms of who can, is, or will be allowed to participate” (Ibid: 1999). Also, the opponents of EU water governance argue that participatory approach (stakeholder management) doesn’t function in many parts of Turkey such as Southeast Anatolia where tribal culture is influential. As Kibaroglu, Baskan and Alp (2009) state, tribal chiefs who maintain their power through land ownership dominate the irrigation associates (IA). Moreover, different ethnic groups can cause divisions in the board and assemblies of IAs or other water-related entities.

*Craving for the technology*
Here in this part, I want to address the significance of technology in the current water discourses in Turkey. Together with the privatization wave, the Turkish government wants to invest or allow private firms to build big dams in order to overcome water and energy shortages. However, dam building is a controversial issue since it only provides a short term solution to water shortages while it can lead to serious implications like displacement of people and environmental degradation. However, despite these drawbacks, dam building in Turkey is seen as the best solution to the water scarcities as well as a necessary condition to the socio-economic development.

For instance, the Ilısu dam building project is controversial since if completed will drown the ancient town of Hasankeyf, 1 town and 30 villages, thereby displacing 70,000 people with different ethnic backgrounds. NGO groups who protest against this dam project are often labeled as terrorists or traitors which limit their ability to mobilize local people of the region. According to the head of the Nature Association, Guven Eken, there is a strong lobby for dam construction by certain companies so they support discourses claiming that dams will solve the water shortages and problems like terrorism in the Southeast Anatolia Region, will bring prosperity and economic growth. Therefore anyone against dams is against the prosperity of the region and the nation. (Milliyet 2009)

According to Harvey (2005), the neoliberal system encourages the competition to drive the search for new technologies or methods. This drive is embedded in the entrepreneurial common sense. Therefore, “it becomes a fetish belief: that there is a technological fix for each and every problem”. (Ibid: 68) According to that, dam-construction for a solution to water problems is an outcome of this fetish belief of technology. The Turkish Minister of Environment, Veysel Eroglu who is a constructor himself, has just announced that 1600 dams are about to be completed with the help of the private enterprises in couple of years. He is now known by the popular media as the ‘King of Dams’ because of his special interest in building various dams in the different parts of Turkey. (Eko cerceve 2008) On the other hand, some like Ulrike Dufner (Bianet 2009) who is a member of Istanbul Water Tribunal³ argues that there is a dam fetishism in Turkey since “building one dam after another is a meaningless policy from economic, social and ecological perspective and cannot be rationalized”.

³ The Istanbul Water Tribunal is an association that demands that government fulfill its obligations under national and international legislations. All projects have to be evaluated in terms of environmental effects and evaluations should go beyond the economic parameters.
Concluding Remarks

The neoliberal turn that has started in 1980s in Turkey lead to many changes both in discourse formation and water management strategies. The rearrangement of water institutions and private involvement in water projects have been parts of the structural adjustments projects of World Bank and IMF. Moreover, changes in legislation and introduction of BOT (Build-Operate and Transfer) model allowed private sector to construct, operate and manage water infrastructures under a public supervision. However, water sector has been opened up to the profit-seeking entities which are not in line with the valuation of water as a human right.

On the other hand, European Union’s Water Framework Directive which states water as a human right, requires significant investments for capacity building and promotes the public-private partnership as a resource. Therefore, I found it necessary to analyze the role of European Union as the meta-governance which facilitates the rules and discourses of the neoliberal water governance in Turkey. Moreover, the implementation of the integrated water resource management has emerged in Turkey with the EU and contributed to the new understanding of water governance.

Moreover, in the last part I have try to show how technology-related solutions are always promoted although they may not the best answers to the problems. There are many cases that show that big-scale dam building lead to the displacement of people and destruction of the environment as well as the biodiversity. The case of Ilisu Dam clearly shows that there are certain private interests in dam building business that are prioritized over public interests. Although dam-building is still promoted in the dominant water discourses, anti-dam building discourses start to take part in the discussions. Further studies can look at the anti-neoliberal discourses in water governance and analyze the scope of the environmental activism in Turkey.
References


News Links

Bianet (2009) “Su Mahmekesi Istanbul’da Toplanıyor.” Water Court is in Istanbul
http://old.boell-tr.org/faalivet.aspx?id=112

EkoCerceve(2009)
http://www.ekocerceve.com/haberDetay.asp?kategori=1&HaberID=17703

Global Water Intelligence (2008) “Turkish water sector hit by corruption scandal” and “Turkey’s water future in Europe”