

# “Pueblos originarios,” citizenship transgressive practices and water conflicts in the Mexico city-region: some paradoxes

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This paper explores the restructuring of the modern state faced with an increasingly evident urban failure. It develops micro-histories in order to highlight the state's weakening and adaptive processes. How can governments adapt to a variety of conflicts over water?

The aim is to initiate a reflection based on the premise that urban water management, and its political uses, reveal how 'modern' state forms are always intertwined with 'differently' modern practices. In other words, water conflicts in Mexico City are a problem of 'water power relations' that take on multiple forms across the region (from shortage to abundance). It is in this context that the influence of intermediaries becomes central.

Water intermediaries do not simply connect residents with water institutions. They connect needs with the institutions that satisfy them. Intermediaries facilitate access and by doing so, the user 'feels' the intermediary is doing him/her a favor. This is of course a relation of unequal power. As we will see in this article, the formal or informal character of intermediary work matters. When intermediaries come from formal institutions, political uses are frequent and respond to corporate interests, ideologies or government programs. When intermediaries work informally, use and favors are not exclusive; they are often shared. They do not respond to ideology, institutions, or programs

With the 1997 arrival of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in the Mexico City government, new opportunities arose for the political use of natural resources and public services. Many authors have discussed 'left clientelism', which differs from the traditional forms of clientelism during the authoritarian system dominated by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) (Durand, 2007; Tosoni, 2007; Vizcarra, 2014). The idea of clientelism can nevertheless prevent us from seeing the complexity of these new relationships. Buying or exchanging favors has always depended on a collecting agent, that is, a 'giving' institution (political parties, unions, and the government). After 1997, however, the use of water to obtain political benefits did not depend as strongly on the 'management of favors' by the political parties or the unions. This was because the PRD is a party that originated from the fusion of former urban movement leaders whose main accomplishments were the negotiation of services with the government.

As they became elected officials and party workers under a new party banner, the PRD continued building on their history of negotiation on behalf of citizens. This in turn, forced these former movement leaders-cum-party-workers to change their clientelistic practices because of their 'leftist' beliefs. Instead of participating in clientelism as a means to negotiate gains for citizens against a government ideologically opposed to them, now that they had formed the government the exchange of favors with government intermediaries and former social movement comrades operated through the discursive ritual of 'favoring the poor'.

The adaptive practices of “tandeo” and “pipeo” devised by the government were gradually converted into ‘replacement’ or ‘alleviating’ policies that could accommodate various types of water scarcity in the city-region, meaning that the pipeo and the tandeo gradually became ‘informal’ policies. The tandeo, through successive cuts on a fixed schedule, and the pipeo, through the development of an extensive network of water-truck routes, now function as ‘policies’ – in that they are organized directly by the state; but they are also ‘informal’ in that the government does not publicly recognize them, because they rely on a range of informal intermediaries.

These are more than administrative measures intended to ‘compensate’ for governmental incapacity. In fact, these measures progressively gained a political character through tacit governmental approval of their existence. That is, the state allowed and even encouraged these informal water provision measures once it was no longer the sole and exclusive interlocutor of citizens. The state became only one of many other agents. And because of this, it required new legitimization tactics. It is in this sense that pipeo and tandeo can be seen as an informal means of adapting to a crisis of legitimacy.

The examination of these legitimizing mechanisms through the micro-histories of water conflicts demonstrates the importance of intermediaries in re-signifying social stratification and state power. The use of water scarcity and adaptive governmental mechanisms can be understood as symptoms of the larger problem of a profound inequality between the central city and urban peripheries. Governments have long favored central city areas over their peripheries in the process of modern state formalization. Through their decisions, governments define priorities, hierarchies, and modalities of responsiveness, and, when resources are short or public action remains insufficient, they resort to informal provision.

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