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Session: Ethnographic explorations of urban policy-making and implementation processes

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Creole water governance in urban areas: ethnographic explorations of water policy-making and implementation in a West African secondary city

Political economy and political ecology perspectives and debates on the pros and cons of private sector participation have largely dominated discussions on water provision in critical urban studies. This body of work has contributed with fundamental insights to understandings of how political, economic, cultural and social configurations shape urban water supply. However, it is the argument of this paper that these approaches, as conventionally applied, have significant limitations when it comes to understanding water provision in small secondary African cities. I thus refer to the case study of Bafatá, a small secondary West African city located in Guinea-Bissau, to illustrate the limitations of these political economy and political ecology approaches and to explore alternative lines of interpretation, by drawing on ethnographic work as a way to expand analytical devices.

Whilst focusing on smaller cities in poorer contexts, this research builds on recent important openings in academic debates, as scholars in urban studies have started to realise the prevalence of ‘fast interpretations’ based on neoliberal analytical frameworks, and to look for more nuanced interpretations of urban processes. This is apparent, for example, in the lively discussions centred on assemblage urbanism, critiques of critiques of neoliberalism and calls for post-neoliberal analytical optics in urban studies (Baptista, 2013; McFarlane, 2011; McGuirk & Dowling, 2009; Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Rankin, 2011). It is also noticeable in a range of work by African urbanists seeking new theoretical constructs that can encapsulate the multiplicity and vitality of processes shaping African cities. Here, for example, Edgar Pieterse has called for a focus on everyday practices as a way to theorise neglected spaces. Crucially, such a focus on everyday practices entails conceptualisations of power as diffused, opening possibilities for agency at different levels (Lawhon, Ernstson, & Silver, 2014; Pieterse, 2008; Pieterse & Parnell, 2014; Simone, 2004). In addition, theorisations of neoliberalism have too expanded and opened up to account for the multiple directions and trajectories of neoliberal policies, as well as the different ways these policies, ideals and models are transformed, contested and adapted as they are appropriated in a diversity of urban contexts (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010).

In this paper, I use the case study of water provision in Bafatá and adopt an ethnographic approach to explore the extent to which national and international policies have been adapted, contested, transformed, but also ignored, in the production of a situated governance model for water supply. I argue that the governance system in place in Bafatá is better understood as an assemblage of actors, agendas, rationalities, ways of doing and infrastructure, which together produce a specific and situated outcome that cannot be equated with a specific modality.

First, this paper discusses national water policies adopted in 1992 in Guinea-Bissau which, resembling broader trends in the continent, entailed the devolution of responsibilities for water provision to the community and private sectors, alongside the adoption of cost-recovery principles. Nevertheless, in a context such as that of Guinea-Bissau, marked by an extreme scarcity of financial resources and the weakness of state institutions, it is argued that multiple meanings, which largely surpass the conventionally analysed neoliberal ideals, have come together in the adoption and implementation of these policies. Rather than merely equating the creation of markets, they also entail the possibility of strengthening the role of the state in supporting non-state organisations working in multiple modes of water provision.

The recent evolution of water provision in Bafatá cannot be separated from the presence of international NGOs and the related influx of international funds and, naturally, of global policies, ideas, models and forms of governance. In these circumstances, the long-term sustainability of the city's water system has been framed around well-travelled notions of devolution, the regulatory role of the state and cost-recovery principles. Tracing two specific efforts towards cost recovery – the introduction of the rule of the meter, and the definition of a financially viable tariff – this paper explores the ways in which these efforts have been translated and re-interpreted as they were implemented in Bafatá. Cost-recovery is at the core of the governance model currently in place in Bafatá and it is certainly enabling the creation and expansion of a new water market. However, this paper also explores the ways in which this principle has been consistently and successfully contested. Furthermore, it looks at the ways in which it has gone through successive mutations to adapt to local social relations, norms and institutions. Moreover, it is argued whereas cost-recovery can be linked to the creation of a new water market in the city, it can also be associated with a necessary requirement for a piped water supply in a context where resources are extremely scarce.

This case study demonstrates that understandings of power and agency as diffuse can help us to make sense of the multiplicity of forces and processes engendered by, and accompanying, global policies and ideas. Related to this, it shows that links between capital and the production of urban space are not ubiquitous. Finally, this research highlights the importance of seeking alternative voices in a context dominated by those of international organisations, which produce most written documentation. Whereas the governance model adopted in Bafatá resembles international models, an ethnographic approach unveils the multiple ways in which this model constitutes a situated

assemblage that seeks to extend possibilities in a prescribed social, political and economic configuration.