Servicing Customers in Revolutionary Times: The Experience of the Collectivized Barcelona Water Company during the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract: Debates on the total or partial privatization of water usually follow the rationale that efficient and rational management is best left to the private sphere. In this paper and using a historical example, we attempt to assess critically this assumption arguing that efficiency and rationality in resource management are and have been an asset of collective management as well. We present the case of the Barcelona Water Company, run by its workers during the Spanish Civil War, to illustrate how in certain cases, gains in economic efficiency and rational management that had been impossible to accomplish under standard private management, were achieved by collective action. Workers management during this period not only improved efficiency and rationality but to a large extent did so also procuring equity and fairness in the provision of water to the citizens of Barcelona despite the harsh conditions brought about by the war.

Keywords: urban water management, collective action, anarchism, Spanish Civil War, Barcelona

Introduction

In November 2010, while addressing a group of farmers in Lleida (Western Catalonia), one of the leaders of the conservative coalition Convèrgencia i Unió protested against those that considered “birds more important than humans”. This admonishment was directed towards the Catalan Department of the Environment, then in the hands of a coalition of former communists and greens, for having pursued the compliance of several European Directives on the protection of habitats and species. The crux of the matter was the “Segarra-Garrigues” project which had to transform more than 200,000 ha of dryland farming into irrigated land. Besides the highly dubious economic and social profitability of this project, much of the cereal fields and olive orchards to be transformed had become an important habitat for threatened species included in European Directives. Hence, the amount of land that could be changed to irrigated land was curtailed by the Department of the Environment, raising the anger of farmers and landowners. Generous compensation packages and the fact that irrigation would not be prohibited but simply regulated and subject to maximum efficiencies did not deter protesters of their vociferous opposition to the “red–green” coalition in power.
This long paragraph encapsulates the main argument we wish to develop here, namely that, in certain cases, modest reformist policies can only be implemented when forces with presumably much more radical agendas take over management responsibilities. As we will attempt to show with the case of the Barcelona Water Company (SGAB) during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), it may take “radical” management (by anarchist unions in this case) to pursue and implement standard reformist policies such as the economic rationalization of water provision or the increase in the amount of water delivered to flats and houses in order to improve sanitary conditions. A related topic explored in the paper is the assessment of a private water supply system that, in the hands of a worker-controlled company, attempted to become more efficient, introducing at the same time equity concerns. Finally, the paper may also offer an interesting example of the performance of essential public services during wartime in a city not only affected by the scarcity of essential inputs for the delivery of water but also subject to frequent and damaging air raids.

One central point of this paper is that, as in other spheres of social life, ideas of (economic) rationality and efficiency in the management of natural resources have been successfully sequestered by neoliberal discourses with devastating consequences for the Left. Thus efficiency has been especially associated with the private realm while equity has been more a matter of public action. This distinction needs a deep rethinking since neoliberal approaches are penetrating more and more into the equity dimension while from the Left rationality and efficiency are sometimes viewed suspiciously as something irrelevant or, worse still, as pennants of neoliberalism. Both concepts are powerful weapons to undermine public property and management of natural resources under common and uncontested axiom that, by definition, everything that comes from the private sphere is rational and efficient and everything that comes from the public sphere is the opposite. To take a recent example, the current proliferation of public–private partnerships in the management of key resources such as water finds an ideological justification in that the contribution of the private partner would ensure the rationality and economic efficiency of management decisions while the public partner would cover for the equity and distributional issues.

All these arguments need to be seriously questioned using the many examples existing both in the present and in the past. In what concerns the present and in the urban water field, for instance, there are numerous examples of successful public water companies able to deliver supply and sanitation services in efficient and equitable manners (Castro and Heller 2009; Delclòs 2009). However, in this paper we want to look at a little known example from the past in which rationality and efficiency management measures were rather successfully implemented not by a public company but by a private company taken over by its workers and collectivized in the years of the Spanish Civil War. In July 1936 and after the Franco putsch, the revolutionary forces seized power in Barcelona and the anarchist union Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) came to control a number of private companies including the Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona (SGAB). The company was subsequently collectivized and workers were in charge of management from 1936 until 1939 when the war finished with the victory of Franco and the company was returned
to its original owners. The collectivized SGAB undertook a number of initiatives leading to the improvement of the access to water by the citizens such as the rationalization of water pricing or the increase of the amount of water available for flats after the application of hygienist principles. These management initiatives (that would probably fit well today under the “ecological modernization” framework) found growing difficulties as Barcelona was heavily bombed by Italian planes and the dams of the Pyrenees producing electricity for the city fell under Franco’s hands. However, in 1939, the original owners silently acknowledged an important number of the management policies taken during the war. Despite mounting difficulties, the SGAB never ceased to provide water to the city and in 1939, when reappropriated, could soon operate again under normal conditions. After a number of takeovers and changes in ownership, the SGAB came to be the leading company in the corporate conglomerate known as AGBAR (Grupo Corporativo Aguas de Barcelona) including more than 120 subsidiary companies in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia, many of them in the water business. In Spain alone, AGBAR controls more than 50% of the private market with a special presence in the Mediterranean areas (Del Romero 2006). In October 2009, 70% of AGBAR shares were purchased by French giant utility company Suez Environnement.

This case study is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it provides an example of a relatively rare property regime for urban water supply not yet explored in the literature. Second, and by examining the performance of an essential public service during wartime, it may also contribute to the still relatively small literature on urban resource management under very stressful conditions. But perhaps more importantly, this case may question taken for granted axioms in the water and elsewhere in the environmental sectors such as the achievement of rationality and efficiency conditions is only possible under specific forms of corporate private management. Finally, it may reconnect current interests in Critical Geography for alternative resource management regimes with academic contributions of the past on the same topics. For instance, our interest in the collectivization of the Barcelona water company during the Spanish Civil War echoes the interest in exploring the geographical dimensions of agricultural or industrial collectivizations during the same period (see Breitbart 1978a).

To our knowledge, this article constitutes the first historical study on the Barcelona water company during the Spanish Civil War which uses primary sources as basic data. Although the collectivization process has been extensively studied (see, for instance, Adín et al 1989; Bernecker 1982; Bricall 1970; Castells 1993; Leval 1977; Mintz 2006; Peirats 1971; Pérez Baró 1974), most of this work has focused on either the agricultural sector or in certain industrial activities while utility companies have not received a comparable level of attention. Gas and electricity were examined in Castells (1993) but we only find brief references to the SGAB collectivization in Amsden (1978), Bernecker (1982) and Leval (1977). A classic contemporary report on the work of the collectivizations (Souchy and Folgare 2007 [1937]), often reprinted ever since the end of the war, included a valuable interview with workers of the collectivized SGAB extracted from Solidaridad Obrera, but a cross-checking exercise with the original source has revealed significant gaps (Solidaridad Obrera 1937). In broader contributions on the history of water in
Catalonia, the collectivization period is only mentioned in a few sentences (Aldomà 2007; Latorre 1995). Only the work of Voltes Bou (1967), published by the SGAB, pays a little more attention to the reforms. Voltes Bou, however, described the workers’ management of the company as naive and contradictory, while obviating the difficult circumstances in which it developed. Considering all these facts, it comes as no surprise that in a recent exhibition of the Barcelona historical museum, under the title “Water Revolution in Barcelona: Running water and the modern city (1867–1967)”, the collectivization years of SGAB were totally ignored (MUHBA and Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2011).

Our research has been based on a partial access to SGAB archives, which permitted us to examine the company’s correspondence between 1936 and 1940 (12 boxes, some 8000 documents). The SGAB annual reports, public administration official diaries and press clips from La Vanguardia, Solidaridad Obrera and Luz y Fuerza have been used as ancillary sources. Moreover, two interviews were conducted with workers in key positions of SGAB in order to clarify certain problematic issues.

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section we review the concepts of rationality and efficiency in the water management sector, especially in the light of the debate on the merits and pitfalls of several property regimes. Second we present our case study as an example of a rare and previously unreported property regime that introduced important rationalization and efficient actions in the water supply of Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. Third we discuss some of the most important management actions taken by the workers in order to improve water supply in the city and that included, among others, the creation of a single water tariff for the entire city; the creation of a “social” price for water, and the compromise of maintaining the service even under heavy bombing or massive electricity cut-offs. Finally, we offer some conclusions regarding the potential implications of this case study for improving the technical and economic performance of urban water supply systems for the benefit of all users under conditions of efficiency and fairness.

Rationality and Efficiency in the Debate About Urban Property Regimes

The privatization of water services in the UK at the end of the 1980s (Bakker 2003, 2005, 2007a; Finger and Allouche 2002; Fraser and Wilson 1988; Gómez-Ibáñez 2003; Hassan 1998) or Chile (Bauer 1997, 1998, 2004; Budds 2004) and other events such as the drought that threatened parts of Europe in the 1990s (see for instance Bakker 2000) stimulated research about the pros and cons of private versus public approaches to water management especially in urban areas (Chong et al 2006; Davis 2005; Hall and Lobina 2006; Johnstone and Wood 2001; Renzetti and Dupont 2004; Saal and Parker 2000, 2001; Shaoul 1997). These contributions coalesced with work in critical Human Geography about neoliberalism and its impact on the environment to produce a lively debate on how water could express nature–society relations under the current phase of capitalism (for summaries on the most important points of this debate, see Bakker 2007b; Budds and McGranahan 2003; Castro 2007, 2009; Swyngedouw 2004; Wilder and Romero Lankao 2006). The most promising and at the same time challenging result of this debate is that

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the dichotomy public–private no longer serves to encapsulate the many different situations found regarding this matter (Bakker 2010). On the one hand, assumptions on the relative merits of the private sphere in “producing” resources efficiently versus the inefficiency of the public sphere in doing the same, fare poorly in front of well managed public systems around the world, from Scandinavia to the USA. On the other hand, the privatization wave supported among others by the World Bank that swept many cities in the 1990s has receded amidst situations of social conflict and even violence, especially in Latin America (Marvin and Laurie 1999; Morgan 2004). Private companies (and the World Bank, 1997) prefer now “public private partnerships” (PPPs) at a moment when privatization of water services has been firmly refused in Italy by popular decision and some capitals such as Paris have remunicipalized (i.e. deprivatized) their water supply.

One of the possible shortcomings on the debate between public and private forms of managing urban water utilities has been perhaps the acknowledgement that these (or different combinations of the two) are the only possible options available. Likewise, and despite the rhetoric of privatization proponents, efficiency and social equity continue to be presented in antagonistic ways only to be reconciled through the joint action of the market (which would ensure efficiency) and the various levels of the State (which would ensure social equity) as in PPPs. As said before, however, one important question is whether efficiency is limited to the neoliberal logic or, on the contrary, can be mobilized by other political and economic paradigms. As Wilder and Romero Lankao argue (2006:1991): “privatization appears not so much an instrument aimed at improving efficiency as it does a channel for preferred treatment for capital accumulation by private entities as well as a legitimized way for the state to transfer the financial and politically charged burden of water management to non-state institutions”.

Currently the issue of efficiency is especially deployed in justifications for the corporatization of public companies (as a first step towards some form of privatization). Under corporatization, or what is the same “new public management”, the market is introduced into the State (Gamble 2006) so that the latter emulates private practices and private ethos (Smith 2004). Nevertheless, if efficiency is decoupled from its strict neoliberal interpretation (i.e. more monetary revenue per worker or per cubic meter of water to be seized by company owners and not by society at large) it may not only overcome the supposed contradiction with social equity but may help to improve the latter as well. This discussion may be framed also in the light of new proposals regarding water management in the developing world that attempt to transcend the public–private schism and ensure more efficient and just management systems. For instance, communal forms of management have been explored by authors such as Karen Bakker (2007b). Bakker argues that water users are increasingly pictured as individual customers with individual responsibilities following an economic logic rather than a collective of citizens receiving a public service.

The study of historical examples attempting to promote both efficiency and social justice criteria with the overall objective of supplying water at affordable prices for all urban households could be useful in helping to develop management strategies able to correct some of the more pressing problems that cities in the developing world
may have regarding water supply and sanitation. However, it remains to be seen whether the pursuit of such objectives of conjuring up efficiency and equity matters is only possible in periods of radical reforms such as those of Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. In the following sections we will develop our narrative of a private company under the collectivized management of its workers that attempted (and partially succeeded even after the defeat) to reconcile efficient water supply management with equity principles of water in enough quantities to satisfy basic needs, and this under the formidable constraint posed by war.

Water Supply in Barcelona During the First Decades of the Twentieth Century

Barcelona constitutes one of the earliest European examples of water supplied by a private company (Masjuan et al 2008). Urban and industrial growth from the mid nineteenth century onwards proved the inability of municipal authorities to provide water in sufficient amounts and opened the door to private interests eager to capture the benefits derived from the urban plan (Eixample) of 1859. By then a myriad of small water companies joined the city council in supplying water to the expanding neighborhoods and towns near Barcelona. Until 1878, two-thirds of the supply came from a nearby spring through a municipal aqueduct. The rest was obtained from groundwater or from the ephemeral streams that circulated in the Barcelona plain. Conflicts with industrialists, closely allied to real estate businesses, prompted in 1888 the concession to the private water company Compañía de Aguas de Barcelona to excavate more wells in the Besòs River. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona, which had survived successfully the financial turmoil liquidating many of the private companies, consolidated its power and in 1905 began to pump water from the aquifer of the Llobregat Valley (Martín Pascual 2009). In 1913 the company resisted an attempt of municipalization, and at the beginning of the 1930s, after the acquisition of a number of smaller companies, controlled about 80% of the water supplied to Barcelona as well as that of neighboring municipalities (Claramunt 1933; Masjuan et al 2008).

During the 1920s, under the dictatorship of general Primo de Rivera, the city of Barcelona experienced another era of intense urban development. Attracted by the public works planned for the 1929 International Expo, thousands of workers from the rest of Catalonia and from Spain settled in the city and worked on several large public projects such as the paving of the main streets or the digging of the first underground line. The Expo was inaugurated in May 1929, featuring what was to become its symbol and is still today an important tourist attraction: the so-called Font Màgica of Montjuïc. This luxurious fountain was designed as a water garden, flanked by vast waterfalls. During the shows, water jets mingle with different shades of light, both fascinating and refreshing tourists in warm summer evenings. Eighty years ago, the Font Màgica showed the splendor and wealth of Barcelona to the world. The success of the Expo inauguration was also meant to be the success of the SGAB, which offered a public image of water abundance (Voltes Bou 1967).

Nevertheless the overly lavish fountains of Montjuïc could not hide for long the inequalities in access to water that existed in the city. Between 1914 and 1936,
the population of Barcelona doubled from 600,000 to 1,200,000 inhabitants (Oyón 2008). During this period, lack of affordable housing led to an intense process of densification in the old downtown districts, and also to an increase of slums in several parts of the city (Oyón 2008; Tatjer 1998). In fact, in the early 1930s, some 20,000 homes (13% of the city buildings) had no running water, which meant that about 100,000 people did not have access to this basic service (Claramunt 1933; Martín Pascual 2009). In the old districts, population density could be 10 times the average figure of the rest of Barcelona, and the number of people per building twice the city average. Several families were forced to share a single toilet and sanitary conditions were very poor. Furthermore, the extreme subdivision of flats into smaller apartments was accompanied by increase of rents, which only in the 1920s grew between 50% and 150% (Ealham 2010). Despite the benefits reaped, landlords made few improvements in the houses (Tatjer 1998).

Protest by working class tenants had started in 1918, when the anarchist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) established the Tenants Union, and demanded improvements in housing and a 50% discount in rents. Four years later, the CNT Tenants Union called a strike on the payment of rents which was quickly supported by the Builders Union (Ealham 2010). When in 1923 Primo de Rivera seized power and established a military dictatorship, the CNT was banned and the protests silenced for the rest of the decade. On 15 January 1930 the International Expo closed its doors with an impressive economic deficit, creating a burden that would condition the municipal management of the following years. Barely one year later and amidst the international turbulences of the 1929 crash, the Spanish monarchy fell and the Second Republic was proclaimed.

The birth of the Second Republic marked the approach of progressive policies in several areas. Health policies would be slowly transferred to regional authorities, which began a hectic legislative effort (Serrallonga 2006). The recovered civil and political rights made resurface some of the urban conflicts repressed during the dictatorship of general Primo de Rivera. The so-called rent strike, supported by anarchist unions, reappeared in the spring and summer of 1931. Strikers asked again for a 50% reduction in rents as well as improvements in flats. At the end of the summer there were some 100,000 strikers in the city (Ealham 2010). Water supply occupied a central role in this since, contrary to electricity and gas (arranged by tenants with the respective companies), it was contracted by landlords and included in the rent of thousands of houses of the city (Claramunt 1933).

As said before, in the 1930s, the SGAB supplied about 80% of the water of Barcelona and other cities in the vicinity. Water was obtained from the aquifers of the Besòs and Llobregat river valleys as well as from springs and fountains. The second supplier was the Barcelona city council itself who took charge of the Montcada wells, also in the Besòs valley. The rest was supplied by smaller companies and individuals who held rights to certain local water sources (Claramunt 1933). Price varied according to use and elevation (Conillera 1991). In neighborhoods on higher terrain, it could go up to 2.5 pesetas/m³ whereas in those on the plain it oscillated between 35 cents and 1 peseta/m³ (Luz y Fuerza 1937a; La Vanguardia 1933). The installation of water meters progressed rapidly in the city, although in the denser working class neighborhoods water was still mostly delivered from cisterns located
in the roof of the buildings. These cisterns were filled with a constant flow of water that ensured a volume of 100 liters per day (Claramunt 1933; Oyón 2008).

In flats with 10 or even 15 occupants, water provision per capita could be as low as 7 or 8 liters per day, perhaps barely for very limited personal hygiene and cooking, but not for washing clothes and other household uses (Claramunt 1933; Oyón 2008). Moreover, water arrived many times in poor sanitary conditions which forced tenants to obtain the resource from public fountains and to use public baths for personal hygiene. For landlords, though, this system worked very well since water had a fixed and relatively small cost. However, during the 1930s some voices from public health services began to argue that more water was needed for households and that the main obstacles for this were the greed of landlords and the passivity of municipal authorities. For example, Doctor Lluís Claramunt, Director of the Municipal Institute for Hygiene, argued that the cistern system and the fact that water was included in rents were the main obstacles towards a needed increase in the use of water for which he saw meters as essential tools. In addition, Claramunt observed that the lack of maintenance of cisterns (usually made of lead) turned them into infection foci. Hence, low supplies per capita and poor sanitary conditions contributed to the frequent episodes of typhoid fevers and other diseases, still present in the Barcelona of the 1930s (Claramunt 1933, 1934).

In 1930 and therefore still under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, a new Municipal Public Health decree had been approved in Barcelona (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona 1930; Martín Pascual 2009; Tatjer 2001). According to this regulation, if water was included in the rent, landlords had to guarantee a minimum of 250 liters per day, plus 100 liters more for each room larger than 9 m$^2$ and 50 for each additional room smaller than 9 m$^2$. Moreover, if the flat had a bath, supply had to be increased by 100 liters, and if it had a facility for washing clothes, it had to allow 200 liters more. New buildings had to be supplied through meters exclusively and costs would be paid directly by tenants.

These and other measures addressed to modernize the water delivery system looked good on paper but proved difficult to apply. Under the Republic, the new democratically elected municipal government pushed the Health Decree to come into effect under the conflictive context of the rent strike. In 1932 new articles were added to the regulations, including a provision by which landlords had to renovate the water supply facilities of rented flats (Martín Pascual 2009). Landlords rapidly objected to this mandate, arguing economic difficulties caused by low rents, and by defaults in payments by tenants many of whom were accused of illegally re-renting their flats (Claramunt 1934; Tatjer 2001). Landlords explicitly resisted to the installation of individual meters per flat and supported instead the cistern system with a general meter per building, which implied that water was still included in the rent (La Vanguardia 1932). The new municipal order could not stop the existence of rents with low water provision. Tenants had to claim their rights to minimum supply during the first six months of the lease; otherwise the existing fixed quantity was maintained. Poorer households, in particular, could easily accept low water supplies if, at least, rents were not increased (Martín Pascual 2009). Hence, the municipal order of 1930 failed to fulfill many of its expectations. Besides, the municipality did not invest enough in supply mains and in sewer systems and left many of
those in the hands of private companies which, in turn, tended to concentrate investments in the more affluent neighborhoods able to pay for the services provided (Tatjer 2001).

**Revolutionary Times: The SGAB Under the Control of its Workers**

On 18 July 1936, the military coup led by Francisco Franco marked the beginning of reactionary or revolutionary periods in Spain depending on whether the coup had succeeded or failed. In Catalonia, one of the strongholds of the Spanish left, anarchist and socialist trade unions and political parties came to control the regional government and engaged in a deep transformation of the economic and social life including the collectivization of agricultural, and industrial activities (Amsden 1978; Breitbart 1978b; Garcia-Ramon 1978). Spain was the only country in the world, in the twentieth century, where “anarcho-communism and anarcho-syndicalism were adopted extensively as revolutionary theories and practices in urban and rural areas” (Breitbart 1978a:60).

On 24 July 1936, the SGAB became seized by its workers and soon thereafter new management actions addressed to improve the efficiency of the system were announced. First, the water price was unified into a single tariff for the entire city (40 cents of a peseta per m$^3$). As said before, up until then, prices varied according to location, customs, historical reasons, etc and oscillated between 35 cents and 1.5 pesetas. Second, the fixed payment per meter was abolished and owners of flats and houses would be forced to buy and install their own meters. This installation of meters can be seen as an example of increasing the efficiency of the system and had been insistently proposed by hygienists in the previous years. Third, the water bill was split between the landlord who would pay a fixed fee based on the minimum consumption set by the municipal health service, and the tenant who would pay consumption in excess of that minimum amount. All minimums were to be revised according to the number of rooms and water points. In those cases where the 1930 law was not complied with, the amount of water delivered to the flat was automatically increased. The economic logic behind this decision was that the increase in the amount of water sold would compensate for the lower prices both for housing depending on cisterns and housing already metered. The problem was that, with the revolution and the flight of many landowners, tenants stopped paying the rents altogether, and subsequently, company revenues declined sharply. Hence the renewed interest in collecting water fees separated from rents.

Another important reform was the termination of all water contracts enjoyed by some households in perpetuity. These contracts had been established in the late nineteenth century after one-time payments that granted a fixed amount of water forever (Martín Pascual 2007). They represented not only an old privilege, a symbol of previous times, but also an obstacle to hygienic modernization, because the fixed provision of water impeded further sanitation improvements. Some of these contracts were reestablished after the war but the company always insisted in cancelling them, which it finally achieved in the 1980s. This represents a perfect
example of how the company tended to suppress (efficient) reforms made in the revolutionary period only if explicitly asked by customers.

The new SGAB also undertook some actions to increase its control of all water supplies in Barcelona. For example, in the working class neighborhood of the Trinitat (north-east of the city), a private water vendor sold water from a nearby spring. After the breakup of the war the anarchist neighborhood association took over the spring and transferred its ownership to the SGAB. In return, the company installed piped water in many houses, thus increasing the number of customers.4

Perhaps the most important objective of the collectivized company was to improve access to water in sufficient quantities and qualities. Hygienist discourses had been very influential in the urban expansion plan of 1859 or in the sanitary projects of Garcia Faria (1893) but they were also central to many anarchist thinkers (Masjuan 1998, 2000; Tatjer 2001). The collectivized SGAB reunited this tradition together with the aspirations in the improvement of living conditions that fueled the rent strike. It is interesting to contrast this interest in hygiene, one of many aspirations of the anarchist working class, with opinions on the Francoist side. Talking to the foreign press, Captain Aguilera, an aristocrat and big landowner from Salamanca, expressed very peculiar ideas about water sanitation and its influence in the origins of the Spanish Civil War (Preston 2006:219):

Sewers caused all our troubles. The masses in this country are not like your Americans, nor even like the British. They are slave stock. They are good for nothing but slaves and only when they are used as slaves are they happy. But we, the decent people, made the mistake of giving them modern housing in the cities where we have our factories. We put sewers in these cities, sewers which extend right down to the workers’ quarters. Not content with the work of God, we thus interfere with His will. The result is that the slave stock increases. Had we no sewers in Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao, all these Red leaders would have died in their infancy instead of exciting the rabble and causing good Spanish blood to flow. When the war is over, we should destroy the sewers. The perfect birth control for Spain is the birth control God intended us to have. Sewers are a luxury to be reserved for those who deserve them, the leaders of Spain, not the slave stock.

The workers committee of the SGAB openly pursued the unilateral implementation of the 1930 local ordinance mentioned before. In early 1937, they calculated that water consumption in Barcelona had already increased by some 10,000 m³ since the beginning of the war, and estimated that reserves were sufficient to double that figure (Solidaridad Obrera 1937). One particular objective was to improve water supply in certain working class neighborhoods that consumed as little as 30 liters per person per day. Nevertheless and despite the increase in water supplied, non-payments rose by 50% in the early months of the war. When the regional government ruled the temporal suspension of rent payments, unpaid bills rose to more than 80% of the total.5 In addition, company workers were increasingly drafted for the Republican army and those staying had to work longer hours. Still, later in 1937 works on the wells and pumps of the Llobregat aquifer were finished, implying an important increase in the water extracted (Ferret 1985). Other important tasks such as the salinity control of the Llobregat were also pursued at the same time that the company made donations to sustain the war effort, constructed air raid shelters and opened up a school for the children of its 800 workers (La Vanguardia 1936a,
1936b, 1937a, 1937b, 1937c, 1937d, 1937e, 1937f, 1938a, 1938b; Rivas 1997; Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona 1939). Many years before it was finally achieved, the workers committee also attempted to bring the city of Barcelona and neighboring industrial towns such as Sabadell and Terrassa into a single supply system. This way they explicitly aimed to intervene in the local conflicts that water provisions controlled by industrialists and landlords provoked in the region (Masjuan 2007; Solidaridad Obrera 1937; see also Otero et al 2011 for the historical analysis of an example of such conflicts in the town of Matadepera).

The workers committee of the SGAB appealed for public support to their reform policies, which also included the construction of public fountains and swimming pools. Again, hygienist discourses were central to Committee policy and served also to criticize religious attitudes towards water (Solidaridad Obrera 1937):

During the last 20 centuries, the most terrible enemy of water has been Catholicism. Those admirable stubborn people from the Rome catacombs, conspiring against a world of pools and public baths, were the precursors of a sad civilization ruled by the pious and the prudish, who inoculated into people the hate towards physical contact of the human flesh with water, air and light, as the highest moral idea (our translation).

In fact, in many of the churches reconverted into warehouses and parking places a water meter was installed. Also many of the newly collectivized companies devoted themselves to the improvement of the working conditions. Among other actions, this included the installation of showers and other water-using facilities which in turn meant an increase in water consumption (Serra and Serra 2003).

Very Difficult Years: 1938 and Early 1939

I do not at all underrate the severity of the ordeal which lies before us; but I believe our countrymen will show themselves capable of standing up to it, like the brave men of Barcelona (Winston Churchill, speech to the House of Commons, 18 June 1940).

Between March and April 1938, Francoist troops entered Catalonia from the West and captured the Pyrenean reservoirs that supplied electricity to Barcelona. The effects of this interruption in supply were devastating for the Catalan industry (Bricall 1970). The old power plants generating electricity from coal had to reopen again under very precarious conditions. First electricity, and then water, became more and more scarce. The city council even had to put armed guards near the public fountains in order to avoid excessive withdrawals addressed to irrigate private orchards growing around the city. The workers committee of the SGAB had warned the city council about the necessity of supplying electricity to several neighborhoods located in higher terrains in order to facilitate the pumping of water and thus the continuity of supply. But the council proved unable to obtain the engines needed. Another important problem was the lack of chlorine needed to purify the water supply which could only be obtained through numerous appeals to the Republican Ministry of Defense and never in the appropriate quantities.

The worst problem during these months, however, was the intensification of air raids over the city, which in January 1938 alone caused more deaths and destruction than in all the year 1937 (Memorial Democràtic 2008). Such harassment...
in a rearguard city was unprecedented, and spread demoralization, causing the flight of part of the population (Solé and Villarroya 1986). As far as water supply was concerned, bombing implied a string of malfunctioning cases, water leaks, drops in water pressure, etc. that complicated enormously the continuity of supply and contributed to the deterioration of the network. The correspondence of the company also shows numerous petitions for cutting the supply in buildings that had been destroyed or evacuated; and a hectic activity related to the petitions of citizens committees asking for pipe diversions and installation of electrical equipment for many of the hundreds of underground shelters that were made. Some SGAB workers were injured while performing their duties under the air raids of 17–19 March 1938 that caused nearly a thousand dead in the city. The company also had to fight hard to void electricity cutoffs at night and to obtain the necessary replacements for materials lost. Moreover, as mentioned before, it had to reopen the old steam engines in the Cornellà aquifer which used expensive coal and were extremely inefficient. Finally, illegal tapping of the network had become such a problem that the authorities had to intervene. Towards the end of April 1938 a ban was imposed on superfluous uses and water had to be reserved for personal hygiene and food preparation (Generalitat de Catalunya 1938a). Arguing the large increase in costs, the company was authorized in June to raise the price of water to 70 cents per m$^3$ or almost twice the price set in September 1936 (Generalitat de Catalunya 1938b). Unlike energy companies, the SGAB was not nationalized by the Republican authorities and remained under workers’ management until the end of the war. It is true, however, that after the progressive loss of political influence by the CNT, workers meetings to decide management issues gave way to a permanent direction responsible for technical and administrative issues (Gorostiza 2009; Luz y Fuerza 1937b, 1938).

The company faced other problems such as the mandatory draft of many of their employees for the Republican Army, resulting in fewer staff available to perform repairs and maintenance of the old steam engines, which only a few experts had the skills to command. Moreover, more than 300,000 refugees roamed in the city suffering worsening living conditions as war progressed (Serrallonga 2004). As a result of all these circumstances, in 1939 deaths by typhoid fever would reach the highest numbers since the deadly epidemic of 1914 (Conillera 1991).

**Defeat**

On 26 January 1939, Francoist troops occupied Barcelona. The company was rapidly returned to its original owners who in turn thanked the Army by providing land and paying for a luxurious residence for single army officers (La Vanguardia 1939; Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona 1939). Its high cost was charged to the SGAB corporate accounts. The poor state of the machinery and the network was attributed to the incompetence and greed of the so-called “reds” (Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona 1939) with no mention of the heavy damage inflicted to the network by bombing.

Despite all the problems, the company reassumed its activities and achieved very significant benefits in its first year of operation after the war (Sociedad General de
Aguas de Barcelona 1940). Soler Nolla, General Manager of SGAB between 1934 and 1960, privately claimed years later that “we were lucky that, overall, the red period only cost us a few million pesetas”. For obvious political reasons, Soler Nolla could not admit that the company had pursued sound policies during the collectivization years that would prove adequate for the future. When retiring in 1960, Soler Nolla, also in a private letter, conceded that the unification of tariffs free of conflicts and protests implied an increase in revenue for the company of several million pesetas.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most important change, also quietly accepted after the war, was the general increase of minimum quantities of water per flat. Despite the dramatic circumstances of the period, by 1939 water supplied to the city increased by a significant 15% and the extractions from Cornellà wells by 30% (Ferret 1985). The unilateral increase in supply decided by the workers committee complied with the inability by landlords and the local administration to ensure healthy conditions in working class households. After 1939, management complained about the disorder found, including many minimum provisions that had been increased by the “reds”; and landlords also complained that these minima were used as a basis to calculate water bills. Despite the radical rhetoric of the company’s managers—for whom the revolutionary period “had not existed” and thus rejected to charge for bills previous to January 1939—the minimum compulsory thresholds of water supply set during the war were not changed after the conflict (unless being explicitly told to do so). Something similar can be argued about the perpetuity contracts. Their almost complete disappearance was not reached until the 1980s. However, after the war, not all the contracts were to be claimed by its beneficiaries. And the SGAB, of course, had no interest in reestablishing contracts that granted no income. Finally, in 1939 the SGAB could also benefit from the takeover of smaller companies that still supplied water to certain city neighborhoods and that were not returned to their original owners. That the company was generally satisfied with the management of the revolutionary years is also proven by the rehabilitation (including retirement pensions) of some workers purged by fascist authorities (Rivas 1997).

Conclusion

Water running through your pipes is like blood running through our veins: Life Advert by Aguas de Barcelona, Empresa Colectivizada (Luz y Fuerza 1937a).

Reformist policies, be these the implementation of European Directives or the rationalization of water supply in cities, may be sometimes difficult to implement because of the resistance of vested interests opposed to proposals that only attempt to improve the performance of socially and environmentally unsustainable systems. In this paper we have presented the case of the Barcelona Water Company (SGAB) and its collectivization during the Spanish Civil War. Our aim has been to show how favorable political and social conditions allowed for the adoption of certain policies that did not have any revolutionary content but that, in some cases, such as the Municipal Order on Public Health by the Barcelona City Council, had been
approved in times of social and political conservatism. Thus water management in Barcelona during the war was primarily oriented to increase water consumption in the working class neighborhoods of Barcelona after the hygienist ideals so appreciated by Anarchism in the first third of the twentieth century. The workers committee also sought to establish a unified tariff in order to increase efficiency in revenues, although it had to withdraw this decision because of many defaults in payments. Most remarkably, under workers’ management, the company could satisfy the supply of water without major problems until April 1938 when the hydropower plants of the Pyrenees were taken by the Franco troops. The following months, however, saw a rapid deterioration of supply given the difficulties in finding basic inputs, the precariousness of alternative power sources, and the heavy damage inflicted by air raids over Barcelona. In January 1939 the revolutionary experiment came to an abrupt halt when Francoist troops entered Barcelona. The SGAB was rapidly returned to the original owners who saw how many of their management objectives that could not be reached before the war had been accomplished by the workers committee.

The control of the SGAB by its workers was a brief experience carried out initially in a context of weak state power. Despite these exceptional circumstances, it is significant that management reforms implemented during wartime were acknowledged by the former owners of the company and partly maintained after the war. Before becoming overshadowed by the proximity of the war fronts in 1938, these changes in management were more related to the previous 50 years of debates on water access than with wartime constraints, and many of the issues that had to be dealt with in 1936 reappear today under other circumstances. Thus problems such as the high salt content of the Llobregat River, the consideration of standards of minimum consumption at affordable prices, the penalties for excessive use or the definition of water as a “basic” good still remain at the core of current debates surrounding this resource in the Barcelona area.

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Endnotes
1 Regional Government to SGAB workers committee, 24 September 1936, box 7373, Arxiu General Aigües de Barcelona (AGAB).
2 Workers committee to Regional Government, 31 May 1937, box 7374, AGAB.
3 Interview B: 20 July 2011, Barcelona.
4 Subcomité de Defensa Barriada “19 de Julio” to SGAB workers committee, 8 February 1937, and Dionisio Delso to SGAB workers committee, 2 November 1937, box 7375 AGAB.
5 Workers committee to Regional Government, 31 May 1937, box 7374, AGAB.
6 See Anglo-Española de Electricidad E.C. to Aguas de Barcelona E.C., 5 August 1937, box 7375, AGAB; regional government to Aguas de Barcelona E.C., 2 February 1938, box 7377, AGAB; Almacenes El Barato E.C. to SGAB workers committee, 3 June 1938, box 7377, AGAB.
7 Hansard (1940).
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Aguas de Barcelona E.C. to Mutua General de Seguros, 23 July 1938, box 7378, AGAB.


Soler Nolla to Gari Gimeno, 31 December 1960. When he retired, Soler Nolla’s son brought a copy of this letter to the Associació de Treballadors d’Aigües de Barcelona, which kindly granted us a copy.

Aguas de Barcelona E.C. to the City Council, 31 March 1938, box 7378, AGAB.

Interview B: 20 July 2011, Barcelona.


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