Critical Social Work

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Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information can be found at: <http://uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork>

Link to article:

<http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/MoralEconomyWater>

Critical Social Work, 2016 Vol. 17, No. 2

Social Work and the Moral Economy of Water: Community-Based Water Activism and its Implications for Eco-Social Work

Critical Social Work 17(2)

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Author Note

This research was supported in part by a Doctoral Fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Canada, and by the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program of the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities.

Abstract

This paper presents highlights from research on community-based water activism in Guelph, Ontario, Canada – one of the most water-rich regions of the world. Social network analysis in conjunction with qualitative methods was used to explore the influence of water activists' normative motivations on the mobilization of collective action on water issues. The findings revealed that even where scarcity is only a remote, long-term threat, decision-making and economic activity involving water have the potential to trigger local citizen action based on a fundamental conflict between the drive of commodification and a countervailing, popularly-held normative consensus concerning water. The findings suggest that a popular consensus that holds water as a commons – and as such, places universal access to water, environmental sustainability, and local community self-reliance ahead of profit making – is an important trigger for collective action when violated by decisions or actions taken in the local community. Understood as such, I draw on scholarship on the moral economy to argue that collective action on water issues in Guelph exposes a unifying theme that connects Guelph's water activists to each other and to a growing worldwide movement to defend the water commons. Moreover, with Canadian social work striving to incorporate matters of environmental justice into its scholarship and practice, in this paper I outline a rationale and identify priorities for social work involvement in this area.

Keywords: water activism, community organization, moral economy, the commons, eco-social work

Social work has made considerable progress over the past decade in bringing matters of the natural environment into its scholarship and in engaging with grassroots environmental initiatives as part of its practice. That social work was initially slow to engage with matters of the natural environment has been thoroughly documented (see for example Besthorn, 2012; Germain, 1981; Molyneux, 2011; Ungar, 2002; Weick, 1981; Zapf, 2010). With the burgeoning of popular discourse and academic literature on climate change and other ecological concerns in a broad range of disciplines, however, social work scholars, practitioners, and activists have begun to raise critical questions about the absence of our profession from engagement with environmental issues. Consequently, despite the slow start, social work is beginning to respond to the call of early eco-social work pioneers for a new paradigm (Coates, 2003) that brings the connections between humans, their communities, and the natural environment, into the centre of the profession.

Attention is growing in the social work literature, for instance, about the role of climate change, and other forms of environmental degradation in the entrenchment and deepening of social inequality and marginalization (e.g., Boetto & McKinnon, 2013; Dominelli, 2012; Kemp, 2011). Climate change and environmental hazards, such as floods, drought, toxic waste dumping, and water contamination have their greatest impact on poor, racialized, and otherwise marginalized communities (Fletcher, 2003; Mascarenhas, 2007), thereby indicating the need to bring environmental justice considerations directly into the purview of social work's ethical mandate (Hetherington & Boddy, 2013). In this emerging perspective, issues such as economic exploitation and poverty, colonialism and cultural degradation, human rights abuses, and the breakdown of community, for example, are understood as part and parcel of the neoliberal capitalist project now unfolding at an accelerating pace around the globe (e.g., Gray & Coates, 2012; Miller, Hayward & Shaw, 2012). So intertwined are environmental and social issues, in fact, that some authors have taken to referring to deepening social inequality and accelerating environmental degradation together as the "social-ecological crisis" (Peeters, 2012, p. 289).

Environmental initiatives also appear to be gaining recognition in the social work literature for the psychosocial benefits derived from participating in them (e.g., Norton, Holguin & Manos, 2013), for the power they have in convening and mobilizing community (e.g., Shepard, 2013), and as sites around which resistance to neoliberal capitalism is expressed and alternatives are asserted (Peeters, 2012). Dominelli (2012) identifies the failings of neoliberal capitalism as the source of both human oppression and environmental degradation. In her vision of green social work, practitioners work with community groups, non-governmental organizations, and social justice coalitions to demand corporate responsibility and the creation of policy that promotes sustainable community. Community praxis is thus emerging as an important avenue through which social work can bring environmentalism into its practice and scholarship.

From this perspective, grassroots environmental initiatives offer opportunities not only for direct eco-social work praxis, but also opportunities for learning about the dynamics of community organization, mobilization, and engagement in collective action at the community level. In this article, I look to the collective action on water issues emerging recently in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, for insights about the relationship between social work and environmental justice, and for lessons about the mobilization of community-based social action.

Guelph might seem an unlikely context for grassroots concern about water. Canada is a wealthy nation (International Monetary Fund, 2016) with a high standard of living (Jahan, 2015) and with "mostly first-class infrastructure" (at least in the cities and most of the densely populated south) (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2012, p. 18). The more than 120,000 people who live in Guelph can turn on their taps every day and access a seemingly endless supply of safe, clean, potable water at minimal cost. Nestled amongst North America's Great Lakes, Guelph is only a pipeline away from the largest freshwater reserves on the planet if local supplies become depleted or contaminated. Yet, even with this degree of water security, concern over water issues in this south-western Ontario city finds expression in a growing array of community-based initiatives, lifestyle choices and social trends, municipal government programs, entrepreneurial ventures, technological and design innovations, academic explorations, and social actions in the community.

Water is emerging as an increasingly potent focal point of collective action and social conflict in communities in all corners of the world (Barlow, 2009). Extreme scarcity or outright denial of access to water is an important factor contributing to conflict in places as diverse as El Alto, Bolivia (Spronk & Webber, 2007), Darfur, Sudan (Eckstein, 2009), and Detroit, Michigan (Lucaks, 2014). What the case example of Guelph demonstrates, however, is that scarcity and immediate need are insufficient on their own for explaining the diversity of actions taking place and the complexity of the claims and values being expressed. In Guelph, as elsewhere, the politics of water involve "tense, interesting confrontations about private interests, legacies and opportunities, profit and meaning" (Kaplan, 2007, p. 685). In Guelph, the risk to groundwater posed by business activities, such as quarrying and water bottling butt awkwardly against the meanings and expectations people in the community ascribe to water and other environmental resources. In this context, concerns about water tend to be future looking and analytically driven – oriented to underlying norms and values associated with a long-term notion of social justice and environmental sustainability, rather than to source water depletion and scarcity in the short-term per se.

Community groups and individuals in Guelph have been actively concerned with water issues for over a decade. However, it was not until early 2007 when Nestlé Waters Canada applied to renew its permit to take water from aquifers near Guelph that residents took action in large numbers. Amid growing community concern, a group of local residents formed the *Wellington Water Watchers*, and by May 2007 mobilized over 6,000 Guelphites to send letters to the Ontario Ministry of the Environment contesting the Nestlé application (Environmental Registry, Ministry of the Environment, Government of Ontario, 2008). While the permit was ultimately granted despite the opposition to it, the public action surrounding the application nevertheless led the government to limit the term of the permit to two years, rather than the five-year term requested, and to impose "additional and more comprehensive monitoring conditions" on the permit (Environmental Registry, Ministry of the Environment, Government of Ontario, 2008, Surface Water Comments section, comment 2). The success of the campaign raised the profile of water issues in the Guelph area, and consolidated a growing concern into collective action.

Yet, Nestlé Waters is not the most significant threat to Guelph's water source. Nestlé Waters is not the largest industrial water user in the area, and the City of Guelph's take of 44

million litres per day (City of Guelph, 2014) makes Nestlé's take of 3.6 million litres per day look like a drop in a bucket. Nonetheless, Nestlé's water pumping activities have become a focal point in discussions and organizing around local water issues.

Below, I draw on data gathered from Guelph's water activists to articulate an explanation for engagement in water activism that transcends parochial concerns about a future scarcity of water for local consumption, and which sets water activism in Guelph within the context of political and economic trends that impact the access people have to water everywhere in the world. In scholarship on the concept of moral economy (Arnold, 2001; Booth, 1994; Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971), the penetration of capitalist economic logic into pre- or non-capitalist contexts – or into new domains of capitalist accumulation, such as water – is often the trigger of social action at the community level. When emerging economic practices confront, ignore, and violate community-held notions of what is just and acceptable behaviour in the local economy, the community reacts to assert the norms of moral economic practice they expect. While people in Guelph take part in collective action on water issues for a wide variety of reasons, the evidence gathered suggests that an important driving force underlying at least some central elements of local activism can be understood as a moral economy of water.

In the next two sections, I describe the methodology used and summarize the data from which I draw this assertion. Elaborating on the moral economy thesis, I show how it ties water activism in Guelph to a history of struggle to defend community-held notions of social and environmental justice, and to myriad other emerging sites of contestation. Following this discussion, I consider the implications of this proposition for community organizing and community-based social work practice.

Methods

The data were derived from a broader, mixed-methods case study of Guelph's social networks of water activism that aimed to gather observations and perspective from those involved in collective action on water issues. The study employed two principle methods combined to, first, generate an overview of the social network structure underlying the local water movement, and secondly, to elicit normative articulations about participation in social action on water issues from a cross-section of those involved. Using a field research approach consisting of an open-ended question in a survey circulated amongst Guelph's water activists ("*What are the main ideas, challenges or issues, related to water, that motivate or concern you?*"; $n=51$), a series of interviews with activists ($n=17$), and participant-observation during three water-related public events, the normative articulations were gathered between January and June 2011.

The first step in the research process inventoried Guelph actors involved in water activism and charted their positions within the local community of water activism. The survey included a social network analysis tool known as free recall, single-name generator (Knoke & Sang, 2008, p. 21). Using this survey item, respondents were asked to list up to 10 individuals they knew personally and were associated with involvement in collective action on water issues. To reach as broad a base of actors as possible, the survey was promoted and distributed through presentations at two local public events about water issues, newsletters and electronic bulletins of

four water-related community-based organizations active in Guelph, and the personal and professional networks of visible leaders in divergent areas of collective action on water issues in Guelph.

Fifty-one individuals involved in collective action on water issues completed the survey, generating 137 additional names of others identified as similarly involved. When aggregated, responses to the name generator provided the data needed to generate a map of the individuals involved in water activism in Guelph and the social ties among them (Figure 1). While also used for structural network analysis, which is not the subject of the current paper, the social network map served as a sampling frame for the selection of key informants.

Key informant interviews were the primary source of data regarding the normative factors underlying involvement in social action on water issues. Commonly used in social research to elicit in-depth information about a specific phenomenon (Patton, 2002), here key informant interviews explored the values, norms, and priorities underlying involvement in social action on water issues. A balance of men and women were selected, as well as actors who were enmeshed in the central core of the overall network (labelled with an A in Figure 1), actors at the margins of the network (labelled with a C in Figure 1), and actors who appeared as key connectors between the various segments of the overall network (labelled with a B in Figure 1). The sample of 14 key informants included leading figures in local water and environmental activist groups (4), an environmental entrepreneur (1), academics connected to water-related technology (2) and environmental politics (1), representatives of organized labour and municipal water services (2), an organizer of student-based environmental activism (1), and people involved in faith-based groups involved in water issues (3). Figure 1 depicts the location of the key informants within Guelph's overall social network of water activism.

Figure 1

Location of key informants in Guelph's social network of water activism

Interviews were also conducted with six activists during a 13-kilometre protest march to the Nestlé Waters Canada national headquarters. In contrast to the structured, in-depth data of the strategically sampled key informant interviews, these "actor interviews" gathered perspective from a convenience sample of people involved directly in social action. Collectively, participants represented a balance of three men and three women, and people ranging in age from their early 20s to late 60s. Though less structured and more conversational than key informant interviews, actor interviews were nonetheless designed to elicit responses to questions on consistent, central themes. For both key informants and these actors, the standard interview protocol used focused on three main questions about involvement in water issues and the values that drive it. The open-ended interview questions included few probes, in order to minimize the interviewer's influence on the responses. Key informant and actor interviews used these questions and sub-questions:

1. What kinds of community issues are you most interested in/concerned about right now?
2. Where does water fit in relation to the community issues you are most interested in/concerned about or involved in?
 - a. What would you define as the most fundamental problems or challenges related to water in Guelph?

3. Are these water issues – or your interest in them – in any way related to the other community issues we were talking about a minute ago?
 - a. Are there similar values or conflicts in values involved in water issues or your interest/involvement in water issues?

As an additional means of contextualizing and triangulating the research findings, qualitative data were also gathered through participant observation at three water-related public events. DeWalt and DeWalt (1998) promote the use of participant observation in conjunction with other methods, such as interviewing, to increase the validity of a study by providing the researcher with a better, more holistic understanding of the phenomenon being explored. Participant observation not only affords the researcher the opportunity to observe expressions of water activism as they unfold (in the context of my study), but also the opportunity, as Bernard (1994) has pointed out, to collect different types of data. Taking a participant observer stance – participating alongside others, but making others aware of the research activity (Kawulich, 2005) – field notes were used to record observations and the public expressions of people involved in the water events.

Qualitative data from all methods were combined and analyzed together. Aiming to understand the norms, values, and priorities underlying water activism in Guelph, an inductive thematic approach to data analysis was employed, drawing important and patterned meanings from the data, rather than imposing theoretical constraints on themes being considered (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative analysis proceeded in four steps: open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008); exploration of the coded data for emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002); analysis and integration of the themes found toward drawing broader meaning from overall data ("interpretation"; Creswell, 2009, p. 154); and finally, articulation of key findings and their implications for theory and practice, as presented below.

Key Findings: What Motivates Guelph's Water Activists?

A wide range of specific values, concerns, priorities, and interests motivated Guelph water activists. Guelph's water activists expressed concern about contamination and pollution of fresh water sources locally and globally, about melting polar ice caps and the diminishing stock of fresh water reserves on the planet, and about inequities in access to clean water both within Canada and globally. Guelph's water activists also raised broad questions about global supplies of fresh water, as well as specific concerns about local water use practices. Some of Guelph's water activists were most concerned with local river corridors, others with water efficient technology and industrial design. Some cited religious or spiritual values as a source of their motivation to join others in action on water issues while others cited occupational connections or personal experiences with water shortage.

Guelph's water activists were conscious of growing water scarcity in other part of the world, and perceive the possibility of local scarcity in the future; however, an imminent threat of water scarcity does not appear to be what propels them into action. Water bottling was a central issue driving water activism in Guelph, and given its operations in the area, Nestlé Waters was an important target of protest. Part of that opposition is general distrust of big corporations as well as some distrust of the Nestlé brand itself. A slightly more prominent source of opposition

Case

had to do with the environmental impacts of water bottling, including the plastics involved, the environmental costs of shipping bottles of water to market, and the amount of water being extracted from the local ground water supply. Even then, however, the statements of research participants make clear that for most, the amount being extracted was not the primary concern:

If it were the water itself we'd have to be going after the gravel companies, the golf courses, all that, right? And it is the water, but it's more the attitude, the values. (Actor Interview 2)

More consequential for water activism in Guelph than the amount of water being taken or the large carbon footprint associated with water bottling, my research found, were the meanings attached to water and to the values and norms embedded within those meanings, as illustrated in the following quotation:

Water is a human right, not a commodity. I think it is morally and ethically wrong that Nestlé (among many others) are gaining a profit from a natural resource which should be protected and conserved endlessly...not sold to make them money. (Survey Respondent)

Guelph's water activists, in short, expressed diverse interests, concerns, and priorities. Systematic analysis of survey responses, interviews, and public statements of activists, however, reveal three central normative themes underlying collective action on water issues in Guelph: (a) the priority of social justice and universal access to water, (b) a conflict between commodity and the commons, and (c) a call for increased localization in terms of the stewardship, use, and governance of life resources, such as water.

Social Justice and Universal Access to Water

“Water is a human right... Everyone should have access to water.”
– Survey Respondent

The broadest and most widely evoked theme across the data was a social justice oriented concern for ensuring a safe, clean supply of water, accessible – now and in the future – to everyone who needs it. The priority of securing “a source of clear, safe drinking water readily available and free to all” (Survey Respondent) and ensuring “the future availability to all beings (not only humans) of clean untainted water” (Survey Respondent) was explicit in many of the survey responses, in the comments of key informants, and in the actor interview data.

In addition to bald assertions that water should be available for all who need it, the data revealed a number of dimensions and nuances within the theme of social justice and universal access. Often using the language of human rights, some focussed specifically on the marginalized and the poor, and on overcoming social inequities in access to water based on geopolitics, class, gender, race, and economics:

Water is a human right and not an option, and any decision regarding water needs to be made in light of its impact on the poorest members of our society. (Key Informant A13)

While many of Guelph's water activists did raise questions about the environmental impact of over-exploitation or depletion of fresh water sources, more dominant in the data were questions about who will have access to water when it becomes scarce (or where it already is) and on what basis this increasingly scarce resource will be distributed. Many of the individuals within Guelph's social network of water activism expressed a general distrust of large corporations, and opposition to the idea of the profit motive playing a role in determining how increasingly rarefied life good such as water are distributed. The data revealed that considerable concern exists in the community about this trend and what this means for future access to water for those without money. Statements like the following recur frequently throughout the data:

... the hands of these massive corporations are reaching in and trying to secure access to things that will give them significant power if our world is in dire need... (Key Informant C3)

What Nestlé Waters' local bottling operations represented for many of Guelph's water activists, these data suggest, is a dangerous step towards establishing the acceptance of commodity and profit as a legitimate basis for the distribution of water.

Not all of the research participants were opposed to large water bottlers and other commercial interests tapping into the local aquifer. Some pointed to the profit motive as the key to driving technological innovation and other water-saving systems or practices on a large scale. Even these actors, though, see some degree of regulation as necessary for creating the incentives required to achieve conservation goals. All local actors thus appear to be motivated in one way or another to participate in or advocate for the governance and/or constraint of the profit motive when it involves fresh water supply.

What will happen when there is too little water left to sustain human life is a question that Guelph's water activists asked. In terms of explaining the emergence of collective action, however, the more important question appeared to be about who will have control over water and by what logic it will be distributed as local and global supplies shrink. On this point, the priorities of Guelph's water activists are clear. As a sign held by a protester on the protest march to the Nestlé Canada headquarters in March 2011, put it: "People before profit."

Commons against Commodity

Closely related to the imperative of ensuring universal access to water was a strong theme in the data that reflects a fundamental conflict between the forces of commodification and a popularly held conceptualization of water as a commons.

"Commodity" and "commodification" are words that recur frequently across the data, with consistently negative connotations in relation to water. In some interview data, "commodification" appears without any accompanying definition, in statements such as "I don't believe water should be a commodity for sale" (Survey Respondent). In other data, commodification is quite clearly defined as contrary to the meeting of human need and irreconcilable with the social justice priority of ensuring universal access:

If we put a price on water it makes water a commodity, which is what [we are] against, because then it means it's only accessible to people who can afford to pay for it. (Key Informant B5)

Overall, what commodification means to those who do oppose it is best clarified by its juxtaposition against the idea of water as a commons. Many of Guelph's water activists described water as something that should not be subjected to private, exclusionary ownership, and not something to be exploited for profit. One key informant explained it this way:

Commodification – the idea that it's okay and good and worthwhile to make the earth and all of us creatures into commodities... that it's okay to take some of the commons and privatize it for profit... exploit it for gain. (Key Informant A2)

Against commodity, many of the research participants asserted the concept of water as a commons. Not all research participants specifically mentioned the "commons," and even among those who did there were differences in how they described it. Nevertheless, where mentioned in the data, participants ascribed several shared threads to what they call the commons.

First, a commons implies universal access for all who need it. "If you're thinking about that particular body as a commons," one key informant explained, "then everyone has access to it." In this sense, "preserving water as a commons and a human right" (Key Informant A1) belong together as an important motive underlying water activism in Guelph. A second, closely related characteristic of the commons pertains to the form of property and ownership that a commons implies. Representing a collective form of ownership that ensures access to all based on need, the notion of the commons directly defies the private, exclusionary ownership upon which the notion of commodity is based (Linebaugh, 2008; Ricoveri, 2013). As one key informant declared, using the concept of "public trust" to describe the state's role as custodian of the commons, water cannot be owned any more than air can be:

Who owns groundwater? ...There is no ownership of groundwater. ... It's not that the state owns groundwater. Nobody owns groundwater. It's a public trust. (Key Informant interview A3)

The commons stands in direct contradiction to commodity and it is from this contradiction my research suggests, that water activism in Guelph derives much of its momentum. As already noted, various other factors also played a role in mobilizing activism among the research participants, but defending water as a commons against ideas or actions that challenge or contradict the concept of a commons emerged in the data as a key mobilizing factor. As one key informant explained, referring to the community's reaction to local water bottling operations, "no, the quantities involved aren't enormous. It's the modification of water...", to paraphrase, from something that cannot be owned and is protected as "a public trust" (commons), into something that is bought or sold for profit in the market (commodity) (Key Informant A3).

From this perspective, activists who oppose water bottling described it as part of something bigger than the specific water-taking actions of one company in one location. "It's symbolic," one participant said during a protest march to the Nestlé Waters Canada headquarters.

"It's the vision of taking water for financial gain" (Actor Interview 3). "I think it's a precedent," another protester said, "Like a wedge..." (Actor Interview 4). Or as a key informant put it:

[A] foot in the door, slippery slope that I'm afraid will take us in the direction of more and more profit making being based on water taking and moving it around the globe and bottling... (Key Informant B3)

"Commodity" and "commodification" were words that many research participants used frequently to describe what they saw as troubling trends affecting water in Guelph and around the world. While not always well defined by those who use these terms, many of Guelph's water activists associated commodity with corporatization and profit-making, and thus with the removal of something from the public domain and from the living systems in which it is embedded (the commons) in order to sell it for private profit (enclosure). This tension between commodity and commons and the consequent struggle to protect the commons against enclosure, my study found, is a central factor underlying the emergence of collective action on water issues in Guelph.

Localization: Sustainability, Community Resilience and Local Control

A third major theme aligns water issues with a need for greater local control over resource use, the policies governing public goods, and the building of a healthy, resilient community.

Sustainability. The data reveal quite clearly that issues related to the quality and sustainability of the local water supply were an important part of what drives water activism in Guelph. Most of the research participants expressed concern, in one way or another, about "the long-term carrying capacity of the Guelph groundwater supply" (Survey Respondent), particularly in the context of population growth and suburban sprawl. More telling, however, are data suggesting that this concern was not motivated primarily by a fear of eventually not having access to water, but rather by the importance of increasing and securing local self-sufficiency in terms of water supply and delivery. A case in point, shared by one of the key informants, was Guelph's 2006 "Stop the Pipe!" campaign, which mobilized opposition to a proposed plan to address Guelph's water worries by piping water in from Lake Erie:

It was a pretty significant that it arose... You'd think on the other side that people would be like "Oh great, we've found a new source of water." (Key Informant C3)

Similarly, some data included criticisms of the decision, in nearby Milton, Ontario, to build a pipeline to transport water from Lake Ontario, instead of orienting population growth and industrial development to a level sustainable within the natural limits of local water resources. These data indicate that achieving and sustaining local self-sufficiency in water, and not simply securing a source of water for the future, were important objectives for many of Guelph's water activists.

Community resilience. The theme of local self-sufficiency and sustainability, moreover, goes beyond the particular focus on water, and connects directly to traditional domains of

community-based social work. Research participants all expressed concerns about water specifically, but the data suggest that underlying this concern, in many cases, was a broader objective of building stronger, more resilient community. In various ways, whether focused on technological innovation and industry like the key informant quoted below, or on political questions of environmental sustainability, activists across Guelph's social network of water activism expressed a belief in strong community relationships as a basis for achieving sustainable water use and sustainable community in general:

I believe that at the end of the day... I don't care what great technologies we may have and what type of regulations in place and so on. If we do not have good communities, none of those will work. So ultimately, my primary purpose is to build a strong community – to help build strong community. (Key Informant B2)

For some of Guelph's water activists, stronger community relationships were seen as necessary for breaking through individualistic consumption habits, facilitating cooperative approaches to water stewardship, and building and sustaining water practices oriented toward a future-looking common good. Conversely, for others, water was an important focus of a broader program of building a community that is more self-sufficient, more sustainable, and less vulnerable to the vagaries of the global economy, natural disaster, or climate change. "I want to see resilient communities," one key informant said, echoing a sentiment shared by several other research participants. "I'm deeply interested in the water component, but water is part of our greater resilience" (Key Informant A2).

Local control. Although this emphasis on the building of community relationships was expressed as an objective in its own right for some of Guelph's water activists, in much of the data, community building was also tied to a broader appeal for increased direct, local control over resources, and the policies governing their use. In many places in the data are statements like the following:

I don't think it should be under the government, well not in the sense that it's [removed from the local context]; but it should be regulated by the people by the resource itself, looking at the capacity of the watershed. (Actor Interview 5)

Together these data suggest that an important objective underlying collective action on water issues in Guelph is to find ways to work together at the community level to ensure sustainable water stewardship and to build more self-sufficient, sustainable community. Within the discourse of Guelph's water activists was a strong call for increased community resilience and sustainability through localization:

...when as a community we feel there's a mess being done by our government, we should be working in our neighbourhoods to protect water. (Key Informant C1)

In the long term we each need to be responsible for our water, and we need to get to know our neighbour who's going to get the water after you use it; I think that's the way to go – completely decentralize it. (Key Informant A1)

Discussion

Guelph's water activists cited a variety of motivations for engaging with others in social action. What my research revealed is that while concern about things, such as source water contamination, water bottling, and the rate of groundwater extraction are part of the equation, the values, concerns, and priorities driving water activism in Guelph go far beyond narrow environmental concerns or a fear of running out of water. Against individualist consumerism, in reaction to alienation from collective decision-making, and in response to the reach of for-profit corporations into local water supply, Guelph's water activists sought community through which to assert quite different values and priorities. Underlying much of this activism, my research suggests, were values that put local sustainability and long-term, universal access to water for all life needs ahead of profit making; values which inspire community building and action to defend the water commons against commodification and enclosure.

Not all of Guelph's water activists shared these values and priorities and not all of the collective action happening around water issues in Guelph can be explained this way. Some of the activists involved in the study, for instance, supported policy and technology initiatives that harness for-profit markets and market logic. What my research suggests, nonetheless, is that for a solid core of those involved, water activism in Guelph was bolstered by an underlying sense of conflict between people's values regarding community wellbeing, social justice, and sustainability, and the creep of capitalist economic logic into new territory.

Scholarship on the concept of moral economy identifies this kind of clash as a common trigger for social action. When new economic practices emerge that confront, ignore, and violate community-held notions of what is just and acceptable behaviour in the local economy, the community reacts to assert the norms of moral economic practice they expect. My research suggests that, as much as the amount of water taken or the plastic waste generated, Nestlé's water bottling operations draw the ire of local water activists as a visible and symbolic embodiment of this underlying conflict.

The Concept of Moral Economy

English historian E. P. Thompson proposed the moral economy conflict as a source of activism following his examination of historical evidence concerning the bread riots that swept across England during the industrial revolution. Breaking with traditional historical accounts, Thompson found that outright food scarcity and a "spasmodic" (Thompson, 1971, p. 77), "instinctive reaction of the virility of hunger" (Ashton & Sykes, 1929, p. 131, as cited in Thompson, 1971, p. 77) were insufficient in explaining why the English crowds of the 18th century took to the streets. Rather, Thompson found that the actions of the people involved were "grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community" – a popular consensus of values and norms which he coined "the moral economy of the poor" (1971, p. 79).

Food riots were commonplace in 18th century England and took place within the context of a changing political economy (Thompson, 1971). As capitalist logic began to displace traditional village economies, new business practices crept into the village market that put the

profit motive ahead of social need. Responding to such departures from accepted practice, the village crowd took mass action to re-assert the moral economy. Most often, when people attacked mills and granaries in the late 1700s their actions were not to pilfer food, but rather to send a clear message to the proprietors about price and to punish them for breaking with accepted practice (Thompson, 1971). English commoners reacted in protest not because they were starving, but when, against customary practice, profiteers inflated food prices during dearth or exported food to other markets when local need for food supply was high (Thompson, 1971). For centuries the prospect that anyone should profit from the necessity of others – for example by raising food prices in times of scarcity – was discouraged by the social norms and cultural context in which the market was embedded. By the eighteenth century, however, a new political economy had begun to separate economic activity from the context of social and cultural relations (Polanyi, 1957). Driven not just by a compulsive, instinctive reaction to hunger, 18th century English food riots were a response to the undermining of traditional rights and customs of an economy of provision by the emergence of capitalist economic logic.

The Moral Economy of Water

Though intended originally to describe the "particular social and political conjuncture" of the 18th century English market (Hudson, 1993, as cited in Wells, 1993, p. 272), scholars have since cited the concept of moral economy as a factor in diverse accounts of peasant rebellions in the context of colonization (O'Brian & Li, 2006; Polachek, 1983; Scott, 1976), in food riots occurring in parts of Africa and the Caribbean in 2007/08 and 2009/10 (Fraser, 2010; Sneyd, Legwegoh, & Fraser, 2013), and in battles over water rights in California in the 1970s (Arnold, 2001). Examining the emergence of conflict over water rights in parts of California, Arnold (2001) argues that water there reveals a "popular consensus, rooted in the past" (p. 92) that distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable economic behaviour. Though less overt than in 18th century England, Arnold argues that a moral economy nonetheless persists in modern market-based societies within the "nested meanings of specific constitutive and/or communal social goods" (p. 93) – such as water. As Arnold shows, in relations to water rights in California, "a significant threat to or a sustained deliberate deviation from accepted practices and relations prompts organized response, which can range from public criticism, legal challenges, and policy initiatives to more unconventional and violent forms of protest, including rebellion" (p. 93).

With Arnold, I contend that water exemplifies the notion of a social good to which nested meanings are attached that, even in advanced capitalist societies, submerges expectations concerning economic relations within broader social and ecological norms, values and obligations. The line in the sand has shifted considerably since English food riots of the 18th century. Nevertheless, my research revealed that much of the collective action on water issues in Guelph, Ontario was based in a moral outrage to communal values, norms, and assumptions regarding water by the business practices that accompany the advances of capitalist economic logic and its incursions into a new domain and area of life.

The consequent activism has not reached the scale or vigour of the English crowds of Thompson's writing (nor that experienced in other sites of contestation around water). Like the English crowd reacting to emerging business practices that contravened local norms and priorities, however, Guelphites reacted to news of Nestlé Waters Canada's plans to bottle and

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sell water from the local aquifer with concern, confusion, and the organization of collective opposition. While the quantity of water being taken and the environmental impacts of water bottling are certainly a part of the explanation, at the heart of the opposition is the embodiment, in Nestlé Waters Canada's local bottling operations, of a fundamental contradiction of commodification and enclosure with an underlying popular consensus that holds water as a commons.

"Indefinite as such a notion as 'moral consensus' may be," Thompson tells us, "this question of the limits beyond which the Englishman [sic] was not prepared to be 'pushed around' is crucial to understanding the period" (1966, p. 87). My research suggests that in Guelph, as in many communities around the world, water, infused with constitutive and intrinsically meaningful properties, represents a threshold in our current period beyond which commodification and enclosure cannot proceed without resistance. The data suggest quite strongly that the intersection of ecological and social values in resistance to neoliberal social and economic trends represents an important element driving activism in this context.

Limitations of the Study

Some caution should be taken against too boldly extrapolating the findings of this study to other sites of community-based activism without further research. The findings are drawn from a small sample of participants within a single, localized instance of collective action. Likewise, given the combination of purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling techniques used to develop the sampling pool and to select interview participants (Knoke & Sang, 2008; Rubin & Babbie, 2008), there is some risk that less visible, isolated hubs of water activism were overlooked. To mitigate this risk, outreach and recruitment were conducted very broadly through diverse contacts in the community, and individual and community consultations were conducted to verify the representativeness of the social network map from which Key Informants were drawn. While the risk cannot be completely ruled out, the process appears to have generated a diverse enough cross-section of Guelph's water activists to support the findings reported here.

Ultimately, as an exploratory study, the findings of this single case study should be taken as useful in generating theoretical propositions from an in-depth analysis of community-based water activism, rather than as a definitive conclusion about the nature of contestation (Yin, 2009). Admittedly, the notion of moral economy cannot explain the motivations of all actors or all manifestations of social action in this context. Further research is required to test the applicability of this concept to other sites of water and environmental contestation. Still, underlying social action on water issues in Guelph, the research suggests, is a moral economy of water based on social justice, localization, and community resilience, and the protection of water as a commons.

Implications for Social Work

Moral economy aside, the findings of this study support the assertion made by eco-social work scholars (e.g., Coates, 2004; Norton, 2012; Peeters, 2012) that social workers should be encouraged to support locally rooted initiatives that promote environmental sustainability. Relatedly, these findings suggest that reinvigorating social work scholarship, praxis, and

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education related to community organization and community development will be an important part of making the transition to an eco-social practice paradigm. While beneficial for their contributions to mitigating environmental degradation, the findings from my study reinforce the idea that local 'environmental' issues, such as water are also a potent focus around which community convenes, relationships can be strengthened, community engagement encouraged, and through which the broader project of building socially just and environmentally sustainable alternatives can vigorously be pursued. Schools of social work can help to move the profession toward greater integration of environmental justice by reaching out to community-based environmental initiatives through practicum placements and research collaboration, by bringing scholarship and case studies of environmental initiatives into the classroom, and by developing new courses designed to explore theory and highlight practice approaches that bridge the eco-social divide.

At a general level, the findings affirm and amplify the call of eco-social work advocates for more direct engagement of social workers in environmental justice initiatives on the basis of a concurrence of values (Schmitz, Matyók, Sloan & James, 2012). At the centre of the social network of water activism I studied were values, norms, and priorities that not only situate water issues in the social context, but which also lie at the core of the social work profession: social justice, including the implicit critique of neoliberal capitalism and a particular concern for the most marginalized communities; community building; and the establishment of social relations that support self-reliant, sustainable, and resilient local community. In this context, the priorities emerging from this study of water activism highlight what eco-social work pioneers, such as Coates (2003) observe about the growing importance of the "connectedness and relationship," which consequently "makes the re-establishment of a sense of community – of place and belonging – a primary concern for social work" (pp. 113-114). Considerable opportunity exists in community-based socio-environmental action contexts like water activism in Guelph, my study suggests, for social work to pursue the social priorities around which the profession has evolved.

What water activism in Guelph reveals, moreover, is that beneath the local focus and the environmental rhetoric associated with it, a deeper conflict between the values, norms, and priorities of people in the community, and the advances of neoliberal capitalist logic and its consequences, remains capable of moving communities to action. The moral economy of water found in Guelph suggests that considerable latent potential exists at the grassroots level, even in advanced capitalist contexts, for the building of community engagement in resisting, mitigating, and creating alternatives to the social relations and global forces at the root of marginalization and social injustice. Additional research will be needed to better understand and assess the relevance of a moral economy to activism in diverse sites of contestation. Further theoretical development will be needed, similarly, to test and flesh out the implications and opportunities of the moral economy concept for social work theory and practice. Nevertheless, for community based social work practice operating in the space between the operations of capitalist economic logic and the satisfaction of human need and social justice, the moral economy offers a conceptual frame through which to recognize and support agency expressed through collective action at the community level, to stimulate and strengthen community mobilization, and to build linkages to social networks of activists in other communities. For this potential to be realized, and for social work to more effectively respond to grassroots movements like that emerging

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around water issues in Guelph, social work will need to continue refining its critiques of capitalism and orient practice to the building of resistance to it.

In this regard, one important role that social work is well-suited to involves the development of techniques for working with organizations and communities to dig beneath the specific focus of action and identify the fundamental norms, priorities, and values that drive it. The case study of water activism in Guelph, for instance, suggests that beneath the surface of locally rooted environmental action are values and priorities that reveal considerable normative concurrence with traditional social work preoccupations. Social work should continue to develop its expertise in assisting communities to organize themselves to address specific, emerging concerns. The moral economy proposition, however, is that identifying and articulating the values underlying local activism could be an important strategy for building broad-based, long-term opposition to the systemic factors that create poverty, inequality, marginalization, *and* environmental exploitation. Here too, as a "field not only of direct practitioners but also of leaders, change agents, activists and community builders" (Schmitz, Matyók, Sloan, and James, 2012, p. 278), social work, by extending itself into the domain of environmental justice, is ideally suited for building networks and convening coalitions across diverse communities and diverse sectors of activity.

"We are called as a profession," Holland (2005) declared, "to contribute to the re-invigoration of cultural-spiritual structures in the 'creative communion of life' within political-governmental structures in 'local-global networks'" (p. 8). The global economic and social trends in which water issues in Guelph are embedded, and the values and priorities expressed by many of Guelph's water activists, reinforce this call and point to a growing relevance of the community-based scholarship and practice traditions of social work to the reconciliation of environmental concern with the pursuit of social justice.

Conclusion

Underlying the collective actions taking place on water issues in Guelph, Ontario, is a basic conflict between the logic of capitalist expansion and the social and ecological values, norms, and expectations that people in the community hold with regard to water. Though not always explicit in the discourse or tactics of action-takers, water in Guelph represents an emerging front in a confrontation between capitalism's drive to accumulate through privatization and commodification, and the resistance of local people based in the values of a moral economy of water as a commons. This basic conflict, while more evident in some manifestations of collective action in Guelph than in others, ties actions targeting water in Guelph with actions targeting water issues in communities all around the world. It grounds social action on water in Guelph, as elsewhere, in a continuity of struggle that has existed since the dawn of capitalism to resist the enclosure of the commons and the triumph of capitalist economic logic over human need and social values.

Further research will be needed to examine the applicability of the concept of moral economy to the mobilization of collective action in the contexts where community-based social workers traditionally practice, as well as to the building of movement momentum across specific sites and issues of social conflict. For social movement scholars and practitioners more

generally, identifying the normative foundations upon which a moral economy dynamic is constructed or expressed around one focus of social action, offers the promise of finding common cause with a variety of other sites and foci of contestation and the possibility of situating local manifestations of resistance within a continuity of struggle over time and space. Ultimately, my findings are that a moral economy that holds water as a commons, placing universal access to water, environmental sustainability, and local community self-reliance ahead of profit making when it comes to water, is an important trigger for collective action when violated by decisions or actions taken in the local community. Understood as such, I contend that collective action on water issues in Guelph not only reveals where eco-social work connects with community-based environmental issues such as water, but also a unifying theme that connects Guelph's water activists to each other, to water activists in other parts of the world and to growing worldwide movements to resist unfettered neoliberal capitalist expansion.

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