Water reform governmentality in Ecuador: Neoliberalism, centralization, and the restraining of polycentric authority and community rule-making

Rutgerd Boelens a,b,*, Jaime Hoogesteger a, Michiel Baud c

a Water Resource Management Group, Wageningen University, Droevendaalsesteeg 3a, 6708 PB Wageningen, The Netherlands
b Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Av. Universitaria 1801, San Miguel, Lima, Peru
c Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation, Keizersgracht 395-397, 1016 EK Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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In most Latin American countries, issues concerning water governance and control also reflect broader conflicts over authority and legitimacy between the state and civil society. What lies behind the diverse water policy reforms is not simply a question of governing water affairs but also a drive to control or co-opt water user groups. This paper examines the efforts by the present Ecuadorian government to ‘control water users’ through new forms of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1991). We use the ‘cathedral and bazaar’ metaphor (Lankford and Hepworth, 2010) to illustrate government rational and practices in water governance shifts in the last decades. We analyze how Rafael Correa’s government sets out to reshape the relations between state, market and society. In its ‘Twenty-first Century Socialism’ project, based on a proclaimed ‘Citizen Revolution’, actual policy reform does not reverse but rather transforms the process of neoliberalizing water governance – creating a hybrid bazaar-cathedral model. We argue that the current water governmentality project implements reforms that do not challenge established market-based water governance foundations. Rather it aims to contain and undermine communities’ autonomy and ‘unruly’ polycentric rule-making, which are the result of both historical and present-day processes of change. Interestingly, water user federations that emerged during the neoliberal wave of the last two decades now claim water control space and search for new forms of democratizing water governance. They act as agents who fiercely – yet selectively and strategically – oppose both elements of the State-centered (cathedral) and market-based (bazaar) water governance models.

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1. Introduction

Ecuador has gone through a radical process of transformation since in 2007 the government of Rafael Correa started its ambitious plan of making ‘Twenty-first Century Socialism’ a reality. The new political course included far-reaching reforms in the country’s legal and institutional framework. During the election campaign of 2006 the Patria Altiva I Soberana (PAIS) Movement promised to ‘build a new Fatherland (patria)’ through renewed, stronger State involvement in the country’s development (Larrea, 2009; Ospina-Peralta, 2009; Ayala Mora, 2011).1 This was well received by many civil society organizations, including peasant and indigenous ones, because the previous neoliberal policies had greatly reduced State support to these groups.

Also within water management sectors the new government was received with enthusiasm. Public spending to administer, develop and provide water-related services had been drastically cut, relegating many responsibilities to water users, lower-level government institutions and the private sector (Cremer et al., 2005). The fragmentation of water management functions led to the emergence of many new actors and centers of authority, creating a polycentric ‘water governance bazaar’ (Lankford and Hepworth, 2010). This led to overlap of functions and responsibilities both within and among State institutions, water users, NGOs and private companies. In this confusion, new actors sought to establish their own space and fill the vacuum left by the shrinking State. This resulted both in water rights injustices and new polycentric forms of social organization and mobilization.

This article presents the different policy models for water management that Ecuador has gone through in recent years concentrating on rural water control, in particular irrigation, which uses nearly 80% of the country’s fresh water resources. It analyses the current, complex forms of governmentality as well as the reactions of water user organizations that struggle against the State’s aim to ‘conduct their conduct’ (Foucault, 1991). The material presented,
for which groundwork was laid during two decades of active involvement in the study of Ecuadorian water societies, was gathered during fieldwork done from 2006 to 2012. The paper is based on academic and action research with the research programs ‘Water Law and Indigenous Rights’ (2001–2007; this paper’s fieldwork in 2006–2007), ‘Struggling for Water Security: Social Mobilization for the Defense of Water Rights in Peru and Ecuador’ (2008–2013; fieldwork in 2008–2012) and through the international Justicia Hídrica research alliance (since 2009). Literature and archival investigation for this paper was combined with semi-structured interviews, workshops, policy meetings, and long-term (many-years) action research with and within Interrutjas-Chimborazo (Section 5) and other Ecuadorian institutes.3 Interviews were done in Spanish (the authors are fluent and native speakers). During the construction of the ‘insider’s story’, reflection about and triangulation of findings was carried out with all actors mentioned in this paper, including State officials, politicians, indigenous and peasant leaders, female and male water users, NGO and private company employees, as well as national and international water politics scholars.

The article analyses how State-based and neoliberal water governance take shape in actual governance models and practices and how they are being adapted, appropriated and contested by water user groups and federations. Section 2 explains and conceptualizes complexity and polycentricity in Ecuadorian water control, the region’s water governmentality projects and, in particular State’s efforts to control water and its users. Section 3 explores recent Ecuadorian governance shifts, and Section 4 deepens this contextual analysis by examining ingredients of the specific nature of president Correa’s ‘Citizen Revolution’ project, which claims to lead the country to anti-neoliberal ‘Twenty-first Century Socialism’. Section 5 explores the strategies of water user federations that paradoxically emerged during the neoliberal baazaar epoch and which now actively question the hegemony and governance techniques of Correa’s governmentality project that combine State-centric and neoliberal features. The outcomes of the neoliberal governmentality era in Ecuador, therefore, were deeply polyvalent, leading to market-oriented reforms but also to peasant indigenous water users’ capacity to resist against both State-centered and neoliberal forms of domination that the Correa government tried to install (Swyngedouw, 1997; Cremers et al., 2005; Boelens, 2009; Buitrón, 2008; Hoogesteger, 2012, 2013). In the conclusion, we reflect on the contrasting nature and ambiguous outcomes of the water policy reforms and the ways in which they are contested and creatively mediated by water user organizations.

2. Polycentricity, governmentality and shifting water governance models

In Ecuador, as in other countries in the Andean region, norms and practices of peasant organizations and indigenous communities play a key role in local water management. They combine elements of pre-Conquest, colonial (since early 16th century) and republican (since early 19th century) water traditions as well as ‘modern’ (20th and 21st century) norms and technologies. In everyday water control, forms of local law are intertwined with the norms and procedures of official (formal, national) law. In 1998, the Ecuadorian Constitution recognized the use of local law, alongside national law. The new Constitution of 2008 confirmed the system of legal pluralism in the country (Simon Thomas, 2009). Thus, water users often appeal to rules and practices originating in diverse normative and legal traditions. In water user communities, water rights tend to derive from different socio-legal frameworks: official law, peasant or indigenous law, religion-based water control norms (from Catholic, Protestant or Andean religious beliefs), international treaties, the rules and rights promoted by NGO water development projects (‘development law’), or other local and supralocal norms (see Roth et al., 2005; Boelens, 2009).

Water rights express the legitimacy of claims to water and to decision making power over water management. Rights need certification by an authority that has legitimacy in the eyes of users and non-users and that is capable of enforcing these rights. State officials commonly equate ‘legal’ and ‘legitimate’ water rights, but local user groups usually differentiate the two and challenge this notion (Boelens and Doornbos, 2001). The reason is that Ecuadorian communities and water user organizations consider that they have several authorities simultaneously – both State and non-State authorities, each representing different socio-legal systems and often taking divergent positions on the legitimacy of water use claims (Boelens, 2009). These different water rights regimes co-exist, complement or even contradict each other (Roth et al., 2005). In this way, users actively produce inter-legality and pluralism (Moore, 1978; Sousa Santos, 1995). In doing so they often challenge government authority while engaging in struggles for legitimacy as they (simultaneously) seek legal recognition by State law of their normative context as well as legitimacy for everyday water use practices outside the official legal domain. Everyday water control in the Andes is a product of this pluralism and water rights, rather than consisting solely of a set of ancestral customs and indigenous traditions, continually undergo reformation and transformation. Indigenous and other local water users take advantage of decentralization and legal plurality to defend their interests and manage conflicts (e.g., Sousa Santos, 1995; Baud, 2003).

At the same time, and in confrontation with the above-described reality,4 irrigation modernization programs in Andean countries are commonly implemented as governmentality projects. These programs imply socio-technical engineering of ‘hydro-political dream schemes’ to which all human and nonhuman components are expected to productively align. Water designs and governance techniques present ‘functional water rights’, ‘efficient schedules’, ‘rational land and water use’, and manageable unit organizations in order to simultaneously optimize production and economic development and externalize control from local communities (Boelens, 2009; Boelens and Vos, 2012). More recent debates and policies on participatory water governance (through, for example, Irrigation Management Transfer, Decentralization, Privatization and Public–Private Partnerships) are also directly linked to this process. In neoliberal water governance, rather than the State pulling all the strings, water controlling tasks and techniques are delegated to private micro-power structures. At the same time, the process of “neoliberalizing nature”5 fosters the incorporation of water users as individual

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2 For two decades the authors have worked in a diversity of Ecuadorian research and training institutes, NGOs and peasant and indigenous federations and water user organizations, such as Interrutjas-Chimborazo (water users federation), CESAD (Ecuadorian Agricultural Services Center), CAMAREN (Capacity-building Network on Natural Resources Management), CODOCAL (Licto Peasant-Indigenous Organization), and currently join with Ecuadorian, other Latin American, and world-wide partners in the research alliance Justicia Hídrica/Water Justice (see www.justiciahidrica.org).

3 Non-users’ recognition of authority is necessary to avoid water theft, interference with management and infrastructure damage from this group. Next, certain non-user groups may have important influence on local water rights, such as politicians, elites, or development agencies.

4 We do not argue that (hugely diverse) local water rights and management rationalities are by definition more ‘equitable’ or ‘better’ than State or market led water management. While often more adapted to local socio-natural context and organizational capacity, they also may harbor many class, gender and ethnic injustices. The issue we raise is the profound divergence among rationalities, objectives, as well as governance interests, in everyday practice.

5 For a wider discussion on neoliberalizing nature, see e.g., Peck and Tickell (2002), Heynen et al. (2007), Mansfield (2007), Castree (2008), Bakker (2010), Brenner et al. (2010) and Springer (2010).

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agents and private rights-holders – similar to commercial water entities – into the water market (Boelens and Zwarteveen, 2005).

Modern nation-States, in a more general sense, have thus developed a range of government tactics and techniques which are not so much based on legal force and outright and open (State-sanctioned) violence (as in former State regimes based founded on sovereign power) but on the need to design, manage and direct society (for example, its water users and resource management).6 Governmentality, the art of government, is deployed as “the conduct of conduct”, based on efforts that – though contested and mediated in practice – envision to arrange and align citizens, institutions, infrastructure and practices in strategic ways: in order to steer and control societal development (Foucault, 1991. Cf. Gordon, 1991; Dean, 1999). It is useful here to distinguish among two modernist modes of governmentality (apart from the direct rule of law through sovereign power) – that in practice often overlap. First, there is disciplinary governmentality that works through establishing the norms for ‘proper, normal behavior’ and invokes morality, guilt, and self-correction. Through normalizing power (Foucault, 1975) deviant-thinking and acting is oppressed and changed. This happens through both objectivation (how the subject’s behavior is considered as an object for governmental intervention) and through subjectivation (how governed subjects self-correct in order not to be considered immoral or deviant) (Foucault, 1975. Cf. Cadman, 2010; Springer, 2010). Second, we see neoliberal governmentality that seeks to steer the thinking and acting of people by approaching them as rational actors who strategically calculate costs and benefits and only pursue their personal interest (Fletcher, 2010). Neoliberal water reform recipes have basic ingredients such as decentralized decision-making, private property rights and markets, that are meant to create political and economic behavioral incentives for water actors. They follow the assumption that whenever the incentives are right, private motives of profit maximization and accumulation will automatically organize the use of water, funds and other water development related resources as efficiently as possible.

Authors as Harvey (2005) demonstrate how neoliberalism is a global project that aims to expand capital accumulation mechanisms and to include local societies and resources in elites’ endeavor to increase their economic and political power. Yet, it is crucial to also see how disciplinary and neoliberal projects rework micro-practice, such as water use norms and practices, and in this way, water user identities and notions of citizenship (Boelens and Zwarteveen, 2005). With neoliberalism at the background as, at once, an ideological, often utopian project (Achterhuis et al., 2010), as a free market policy program, as a concrete (but contested) state of the State, and as a rationality of governing subject populations and their resources (see England and Ward, 2007), this finds expression in a variety of (often contradictory) local “neoliberalizations” (see also Heynen et al., 2007; Brenner et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2010; Springer, 2010; Harris and Roa, forthcoming). For instance, alongside the neoliberal project of a market-based political economy, the Ecuadorian case testifies the complex workings of the schemes by which dominant groups (local elites and national rulers) categorize ‘the others’, converting Andean water users into ‘objectified subjects’. Thereby, part of the ‘recognition policies’ to support local and indigenous water user groups implicitly aims to foster the normalization of water management (Boelens, 2009). The definition and political recognition of local territories, identities and water laws has often been instrumental not just to freezing them as folklore otherness, but also to distinguishing ‘proper rights’ and ‘convenient Indians’ (i.e., obedient water users who follow State rules) from ‘irrational rights’ and ‘subversive identities’, and to containing their ‘unruliness’ (Hale, 2002; Assies, 2012; Baud, 2010).

Modernist water policies and training programs often have the implicit objective of protecting local water user communities from their own autonomous being, backward identities and limited water cultures, ‘freeing’ them from their inefficient water rights systems. Legal training, schooling in expert-based frames of water rights and techniques, development of their water markets and correction of their informalities, is commonly diagnosed as the path to include those supposedly excluded from modernity. Water reforms, presented as sets of neutral programs and techniques to foster progress, have deep social and political consequences for water user collectives. These consequences are deeply paradoxical. On the one hand, they reinforce political control by the water bureaucracies through rule-imposition and incorporation in State hierarchies, and help powerful capitalist agents to incorporate local water users’ rights into the market system. On the other, they allow for the fragmentation of the State and the decentralization of decision making. In this way, water reforms created discursive and practical spaces in which new water user organizations emerge and consolidate.

3. Centralized cathedrals vs. polycentric bazaars: the neoliberalization of water governance in Ecuador

Water governance based on ideas of centralized command and regulatory State control – termed a cathedral model by Lankford and Hepworth – formed the core of strong State institutions for water management in Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century. ‘Cathedral’ institutions hinge on the idea that the State and its agencies are centralized, ‘solid’, ‘longstanding’ entities (Lankford and Hepworth, 2010). Their solidity is attested through nation-wide regulatory frameworks, norms, regulations, and legal sanctions that are made, implemented and controlled by State institutions. They are usually expressed physically in large-scale hydraulic structures such as dams and irrigation systems, and formally in standardized procedures that claim to be a-political (Hendriks, 2010). A central element of this model is that the State is seen as the only center of rule-making and enforcing power which maintains a direct relationship with individual citizens through its network of government institutions (Zapatta, 2007; Hoogesteger, 2013). Therefore, other centers of authority and their rule-making systems and practices – such as those of NGOs, private companies, peasant communities and water user organizations – are deemed superfluous and problematic.

Starting around the turn of the 20th century and having its apex in the 1960s and 1970s, many Latin American countries embarked on large nation-building projects based on the cathedral model and the idea of ‘the Developmental State’. In Ecuador the first post-colonial water law of 1832 that recognized public and private ownership of water and required water users’ registration, was, for example, replaced by a new law in 1936 that gave the State a more prominent role in water management. Nevertheless, water resource development and management mainly remained a local, mostly private landlord or collective community activity. The first national regulations concerning irrigation management were established in 1942 (Zapatta, 2007). In 1944, two new laws further entrenched the position of the central State. Water administration was organized within the Ministry for Public Works and a National Institute for Irrigation (Caja Nacional del Riego) which took care of large State-managed irrigation systems. The most prominent cathedral institution for water management, the Ecuadorian Water Resources Institute (Instituto Ecuatoriano de Recursos Hidráulicos, INERHI), was created in 1966. It became the first State institution in Ecuadorian history “in charge of establishing and implementing

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6 As Springer (2010) elaborates, in modernist (e.g., neoliberal, disciplinary) governmentalties violence and inequality have not at all disappeared but are masked and become ‘accepted’, through symbolic forces and discursive politics.

a nation-wide irrigation and drainage policy. (…) Its most important function was the administration of all national waters in all its technical and legal dimensions” (Carrera de la Torre, 1972: 63). INERHI became a powerful, technocratic and top-down institution, coordinating nationwide allocation of water and the construction and management of national irrigation systems (Cremers et al., 2005). It had numerous regional offices and shared development and administration of national water resources with two other State institutes, the Ecuadorian Institute for Electrification (Instituto Ecuatoriano de Electrificación, INECEL) and the Ecuadorian Institute for Sanitation Works (Instituto Ecuatoriano de Obras Sanitarias, IEOS). In 1972, a new water law nationalized all Ecuadorian water resources. Private entitlements were replaced by temporary water use permits. This law established INERHI as representative of the State, and as the central regulator of water use and allocation. Buying and selling water volumes and rights was prohibited and INERHI became the sole mediator between parties in all water-related issues (Cremers et al., 2005; Zapatta, 2007).

By the early 1990s, in Ecuador as in neighboring countries, the economic crisis and the recognition that several State bureaucracies presented problems of corruption and inefficiency led to new, neoliberal models for water management (Hey and Klak, 1999). These were promoted by international policy advisory and finance institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Inter-American Development Bank. The World Bank even made new loans to Ecuador conditional upon accepting a new privatization-based water law that would copy the 1981 Water Code that was forcefully installed in Pinochet’s Chile, and Chilean legal experts

The main pillars of these water reform proposals in Latin America were (see Bauer, 1998; Boelens and Zwarteveen, 2005; Achterhuis et al., 2010; Budds, 2010;): (a) privatization of water resources, rights and services so as to create tenure security, stimulate investments and generate efficient water use; (b) commodification of water resources, rights and services so as to create opportunities for trading them; (c) opening of markets and creation of market rules and mechanisms for selling and purchasing water rights and services; (d) reduction of the State apparatus and subsidies, drastic cuts on public spending, and withdrawal of direct State intervention from market transactions; and (e) deregulation and reorganization of the water governance structure, for example, decentralization and transfer of water management and administration to local government authorities and non-State actors. These pillars exemplify the newly created institutional polycentric bazaar-model.

In Ecuador, State institutions in the mid–1990s strongly concentrated on ‘making the market function’ in order to manage the country’s water affairs (Cremers et al., 2005). In the irrigation and domestic water use sector, direct State involvement was greatly reduced. It was based on the idea that market forces had to govern water affairs and that the private sector through enhanced economic rationality would make water management more efficient (cf. Buitrón, 2008; Gaybor, 2008; Hendriks, 2010). Through structural adjustment programs, water budgets were drastically cut and space was made for water user organizations, mixed public–private partnerships or private companies (Cremers et al., 2005). In the irrigation sector, INERHI was replaced by the weak National Water Resources Council (Consejo Nacional de los Recursos Hídricos, CNRH) in 1994. It coordinated twelve regional Water Agencies charged with administrative tasks to handle water use permits, to mediate in water conflicts and to control the application of legal norms. The responsibility for State managed irrigation systems and investments in new irrigation infrastructure was delegated to Regional Development Corporations (Corporaciones Regionales de Desarrollo, RDC) and provincial governments. To reduce State spending in irrigation, an Irrigation Management Transfer program was implemented with World Bank support in 1995. By 2003, 35 of the 76 State irrigation systems had been transferred to the newly created water users organizations. In some cases water user organizations had proven their effectiveness, in others it was rather a matter of the State ‘dumping’ (sometimes economically non-viable) systems on (unprepared) users (Cremers et al., 2005).

In the urban water supply sector, amendments were made to the legal framework in order to facilitate the entrance of private capital into the services sector nationwide (Buitrón, 2008). Several municipalities delegated water service provision to private companies. In the country’s largest city, Guayaquil, for instance, an international consortium (Interagua) came to manage domestic water supply (see Swyngedouw, 1997). This gave rise to social and political protest as private companies showed a poor performance record compared to municipal water delivery companies, while charging the highest service fees in the country (Buitrón, 2008).

The 1998 Constitution further decentralized State authority and provided sub-national governments with many tasks that overlapped with those of the RDCs and other agencies. This created both confusion and autonomy as a clear delineation of responsibilities was lacking (Cremers et al., 2005). Many institutions, such as decentralized government agencies, water user organizations, communitarian water supply associations and companies went ‘shopping around’ at different international and State institutions – as well as the increasing number of NGOs and foreign donor agencies – in their search for funds, recognition and legitimacy. Other actors started their own projects in the water governance arena, often without coordination. The day-to-day development of polycentrism thus became quite different and far more complex than the market governmentality perspective that neoliberal policy designers had foreseen.


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2 In this respect, Peck and Tickell (2002) elaborate their concepts of the State’s ‘roll-back’ and ‘roll-out’ functions; considering the neoliberal processes of State’s deregulation and dismantlement, and active intervention and ‘convenient’ State-building, respectively.
Water users in formerly State-managed systems started to manage their own irrigation and water supply systems through the creation of water user organizations. At the same time, local governments, NGOs and private initiatives assumed new roles. According to neoliberal theory, alliances would emerge among user organizations, layers of government and private stakeholders active at different scales. Nonetheless, the fragmentation led to a constant contestation of the State’s authority, as the different and divergent actors who intervened in the water management domain questioned the State's functioning and governance rationality (Hoogesteger, 2012). This struggle allowed more powerful actors to strengthen their stakes. The threats of privatization and subsequent market-based water rights accumulation lingered; since these would forcefully break up local water rights systems, replacing collective arrangements by outside, market-controlled rules (Boelens, 2009; Hendriks, 2010). However, the creation of autonomous water user organizations in the midst of weak State control and a plurality of funding sources for water development projects also provided local water users with new opportunities to consolidate autonomy and local control over their water use systems.

Most peasant and indigenous communities and federations felt that the neoliberal policies that had swept through the country were no solution to the problems encountered in irrigation and water management. State support for irrigation and agriculture was severely reduced leading to a lack of maintenance of State irrigation system and a halt to many planned projects. The Water Agencies, installed during the neoliberal reform, were understaffed and poorly equipped, unable to handle the growing number of conflicts regarding water use and permits. These piled up and, in 2007, totaled almost 40,000 unresolved cases. As a result, most water users and the public in general felt abandoned by the State, which reflected both in their everyday water problems and in terms of long-term frictions over legitimate power and authority. In this context, throughout the late 1990s and the early 2000s, large sections of civil society, including water users federations, environmentalists and indigenous federations consistently advocated for a model that – without returning to the classic top-down State bureaucracy – would replace the country’s neoliberal policies.

4. Current water governance in Ecuador: rebuilding cathedrals in the bazaar?

Rafael Correa won the presidential elections in late 2006 with the promise to replace the neoliberal model (de la Torre and Conaghan, 2009). As part of the policy package of his revolución ciudadana, which rests heavily on Keynesian economic ideas, he introduced a number of changes: (a) re-nationalization of natural resources, giving the State back its central role in managing resources, including water; (b) re-enforcing national control over several strategic services sectors such as telecommunications, electrification, domestic water supply, health care and transport; and (c) increasing State expenditures in strategic development sectors, including oil exploration, public road construction, the public health sector, water administration, hydropower and irrigation projects.

The new water policies discursively follow the anti-neoliberal claims of civil society groups. In practice, however, the ‘citizen revolution’ does not advocate simply restoring former State centralism. It applies new discourses and tactics which keeps market mechanisms and the capitalist economic rationality of the bazaar model in place but now with the aim of gaining greater control over it (Andrade, 2012). Furthermore, State action is particularly oriented toward resolving the diversity and plurality that are intrinsic to Andean community rights systems and were deepened by the bazaar’s polycentrism. The State in Ecuador, throughout both the cathedral and the bazaar eras, sought (and continues seeking) a uniform legal and administrative-organizational playing field. It therefore consistently denied, yet could not erase, local complexity and historically created hybrid norms and organizational forms within the peasant economy. This led to a merging of the centralized command and control regime of the cathedral model with the bazaar model.

To strengthen the position of the State, the National Water Secretariat (Secretaría Nacional del Agua, SENAGUA) replaced CNRH in May 2008 and took over the responsibility of coordinating national water management. Its framework was an ambitious watershed-based, integrated water management approach (Republic of Ecuador, 2008). To materially consolidate its water government, the government financed several major maintenance works and new investments in State, private and community irrigation systems in all regions of the country. In the Central Highlands region (including the Bolívar and Chimborazo provinces), for instance, budgets for investments in irrigation skyrocketed from US$1,000,000 to US$7,404,000 per year in Chimborazo and US$6,896,000 per year in Bolívar (MAGAP, 2009).

Along with these new investments, the State tried to get more control over users and their water use practices so as to establish ‘order’. To do so, it tried to align diverse governance tools into a uniform policy. One such governance technique encouraged all water users to register each individual plot and corresponding surface area. This would provide the foundation for centralized fee payment and administrative-organizational control through local water users organizations. Also, to ‘help efficient management of irrigation systems’, the State is financing technical staff to participate in heretofore autonomously managed water user organizations. These government-appointed staff members are slowly introducing new discourses, rationalities and authority in these organizations, often transforming local water management capacities and reducing autonomy. In the same process, collectives of water users need to conform to State rules in order to be officially ‘recognized’.

Through strategically intertwining legal procedures and administrative structures with hydraulic and agro-productive designs and training efforts, the government stimulates the acceptance of the nation-State’s normative framework, policy objectives and system responsibilities by water users. In this way, Correa’s government aims to subject water users to a system of control and self-control, whereby the latter would accept the rules on efficient water use and modern governance. Rather than being forced to do so by sovereign power, water users need to fit themselves into water-power relationships in which they perform both the responsibilities of well-trained, compliant water users and their own scrutinizing ‘controllers’ (Boelens, 2009). The institutional shifts and efforts to support local organization-strengthening by the Correa-government show that, on the one hand, there is a strong push toward centralizing water management responsibilities in the hands of State institutions while, on the other, there is a gesture towards including water users in decision-making (for example, based on the new 2008 Constitution). Fundamentally, however, collectives only are allowed to use their rule-enforcing autonomy and share in decision-making as long as it is in the interest of the State and in line with the State’s agenda.

A fundamental feature of Correa’s so-called citizen revolution contains the notion of an all-inclusive State that will break down the structures of elite oppression and neoliberal domination.
on behalf of its citizens – and certainly not by its citizens and civil society groups. As the president remarks:

“I have often referred to the use of force as an exclusive attribute of the State, as the representative of common well-being. Please, let’s not fall into the right-wing trap that ‘the State is the enemy’: we are all the State […] The State is a fundamental instrument for coexistence, because, through that institutionalized representation, we undertake collective actions”. (Rafael Correa, 27 April 2010; authors’ translation)

The Correa government certainly knows that the era of top-down water policies has ended, and that the globalizing concepts of equality, inclusion, participation and democracy are key to all modern water policies. Compared to the plans and actions of former, neoliberal governments, which fundamentally aimed to defend the status quo and increased the huge gap between the rich and the poor – the Correa regime has made major advances. The new Constitution (República del Ecuador, 2008), everyday concrete public investment in marginal areas and social priority issues, and a new feeling of dignity and valorization among the country’s grassroots and peasant society, are clear examples. Nevertheless, this message implies that the need for non-State institutions (many of which helped the government to power) is over, and that existing grassroots organizations and movements no longer represent the will of the people. Their interests are now ‘guaranteed by the State’: we all are the State.

Alongside this, national legislation and international water policies call for the establishment of ‘rational, efficient and accountable water uses’; and the standards for rationality, efficiency, accountability and participation are set by those who govern and not by peasant water users (cf. Boelens, 2009; Springer, 2010).

In water governance issues as much as in other social fields, Correa’s governance concept produces a new social order, which re-builds a new cathedral on particular foundations of the bazaar.

The techniques of governance deployed in the citizen revolution are – paraphrasing Foucault (1975) – at once totalizing and individualizing. Correa’s governance project is crucially concerned with discourses and practices that not only aim to (re)structure public institutions based on the idea of national homogeneity, but also intend to shape a national identity in which individual citizens proudly contribute to the development of the new 21st century patria (Alfaro, 2010; Ayala Mora, 2011; Andrade, 2012). A fundamental message that the government-steered revolution has for its citizens is that politics are in safe hands. Citizens do not have to bother about societal problems and contradictions as collective groups as long as the people, as individuals, follow the nation’s revolutionary leadership. The government provides spaces for participation by citizens through, for instance, the Council of Citizen Participation and Social Control. As the SENAGUA leaflet Plan Nacional deAgua, un Plan para Todos y Todas states: “[In the past] any procedure in water agencies meant abuse and humiliation… From now on, SENAGUA offices will be places for citizen engagement, where everyone will be treated and listened to with warmth, quality, quickness and respect” (SENAGUA, 2008: 7). It is, however, not just this new promise of heeding individuals’ demands but, most of all, the above mentioned technical–administrative water governance tools that are deployed to fortify the State. These techniques aim for inducing individualistic State – water user relationships, guardianship and obedient citizenship (Boelens, 2009; Ospina-Peralta, 2011; Hoogesteger, 2013).10 Thereto, Correa’s governmentality project imposes a one-way rationality and homogeneity in terms of rules and authority.

Directly related to this process is the project of discursive, legal and political undermining of ‘unruly’ non-State collectives, federations and movements. To break critical unions and NGOs, the president’s revolution has re-interpreted Article 13b of the 2008 Constitution, to mean that organizations that do not follow State regulations and control can be dissolved. As Correa stated: “Any NGO that gets involved in politics will have to leave the country, because it is prohibited to engage in politics” (national newspaper Diario Hoy, 11 July 2010). The process in which the government declared illegal the critical NGO Acción Ecológica for protesting against mining and oil extraction in indigenous territories is but one example. Correa has argued that “the worst enemy of the citizen revolution was leftist, ecologism and indigenism – ‘fundamentalist, childish extremists’” (presidential speech, 4 February 2009; in Ospina-Peralta, 2009: 12; translation ours). Alfaro (2010: 27) affirms that “it is a government with a discourse that calls upon the people to arise, but not to mobilize. Not because it would not be able to do so, but because it knows that the Ecuadorian people have a tradition of struggle and mobilization” (translation ours). The government-led revolution is well aware of the fact that people’s mobilization would endanger State control. The largest federation of indigenous people in Ecuador, CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador), argues that the State increasingly co-opts movement leaders and penetrates in those federations that traditionally have been directed by peasant and indigenous leaders. As a benevolent care-taker the State controls positions that secure the everyday management of, for example, irrigation systems and other local resource management organizations. These become dependent on the State for their financial and managerial resources and, most of all, for political decision-making.

Correa’s governmentality project is afraid of both pluralism and non-aligned organized civil society. Some government intellectuals behind the citizen revolution have fiercely opposed the idea of involving civil society organizations in the process of public planning and management. For example, ex-Minister of Government, Fernando Bustamante, explains that such involvement just leads to “pluralist, polycentric anarchy and materialization of groups’ self-interests beyond the public interest” (in Ospina-Peralta, 2011: 124). Other intellectuals, in a similar way, argued that it can only result in “privileging private interests above public or collective interests, which would mean neglecting the historical possibility of a general people’s democracy” (Quintero and Sylva 2010, in Ospina-Peralta, 2011: 125).

A key feature of the citizen revolution is the attempt to re-build a strong State, re-gaining its regulatory and enforcement capacities and becoming the sole authority for managing society and its economy. Discursively, the citizen revolution strongly attacks the neoliberal economic model but its practices support many elements of

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10 For a long time, this notion of a citizen revolution, where a paternalistic State takes care of individuals, has been accepted by most Ecuadorians. First of all, because most people were desperately looking for an alternative to neoliberal practices by which dominant elites had abused the country, its resources and its people. Second, because Ecuador, as many other Latin American countries, has a tradition in which labor unions and peasant and indigenous movements tend to see their struggle for transformation largely as a struggle for getting recognition and control over (and getting inside) the ‘State’. Initially, the governors of the revolución ciudadana – after absorbing these movements during the initial stages of Correa’s government and by organizing constitutional assemblies or co-opting movement leaders – largely succeeded in convincing the people of Correa’s ‘finally-now-we-are-all-the-State’ motto (see Larrea, 2009; Ospina-Peralta, 2009, 2011).
the same model. For example, these days, Chinese companies are rapidly taking over most of the country’s large-scale, mega-hydraulic development. Thereby, huge transnational investment is replacing internal institutional capacity – actively supported by Ecuador’s ‘hybrid’ cathedral-bazaar State (cf. Peck and Tickell, 2002; England and Ward, 2007; Springer, 2010). So, clearly, not all but only certain elements of the bazaar are under fire. While the position of national and transnational business entrepreneurs within the government constellation has been strengthened (Ospina-Peralta, 2009: 12), the space of unions, grassroots organizations and peasant and indigenous federations has been curtailed. Rather than questioning the bazaar’s neoliberal foundations and market governmentality, Correa’s government-led citizen revolution has engaged in a strategic attack on these ‘deeply annoying’ societal actors (i.e., organized civil society and grassroots), many of whom have arisen during the neoliberal era. It is telling, that during the process of constructing the Constitution, Correa (cited in Ospina-Peralta, 2009) warned against “too much democracy”. In its authoritarian regime of practices – which strongly departs from the spirit of the Constitution that was set in place – the citizen revolution builds institutions and programs that systematically undermine peasant, indigenous and other local forms of water rules and water rights.

5. Challenging the citizen revolution’s water governmentality project

As Partha Chatterjee (2004: 77) observes, “alongside the abstract promise of popular sovereignty, people in most of the world are devising new ways in which they can choose how they should be governed”. This is also true in Ecuador, where despite initial support, peasant and indigenous federations and other social movements gradually started to protest and mobilize against the citizen revolution. The strong contradictions between the government’s promises and non-State collective interests led to, among other things, confrontations over the Mining Law, the Law on Food Sovereignty and the Water Law. In January 2009, CONAIE organized a national mobilization against the new Mining Law and in defense of a human right to water, as a public and common property source. In September 2010, conflicts among military forces that defended multinational mining companies and inhabitants of Zamora Chinchipe province attracted national attention. One of the injured inhabitants framed his anger towards the president as follows: “When did you forget that we were the ones who elected you, not the foreign mining companies…who do you want to turn the mining zones of Zamora Chinchipe over to?” Another inhabitant, victim of the police repression, argued: “Rafael Correa sends thousands of police and military to attack us. The country and the world should know what is going on in Zamora Chinchipe, all this to deliver on a platter for foreign companies we once defended with our lives”.12

5.1. An illustration: the Interjuntas-Chimborazo water user federation

In July 2005, during the aftermath of the neoliberal era, thousands of water users took to the streets of Riobamba – capital of the ‘indigenous peasant province’ Chimborazo located in the central highlands of Ecuador. Users demanded removal of the Water Agency’s director and some officials because of their corrupt, profoundly racist treatment of indigenous and peasant users. “No more oppression, no more aggression!”14 shouted the water users after having been discriminated against by the Chimborazo Water Agency, provincial office of the CNRH, for many years.

A farmer from Alausí tells how the indigenous peasants are always the last served while private companies with economic and political clout receive preferential treatment in the office and in water allocation. “Poor people… folks from Alausí and Tixán, they have to spend one or more nights at the Water Agency. And the bosses, I have seen this with my own eyes… instead of seeing people, they stroll out to have a fine chicken dinner down the street. Then they wander back to the office and say ‘come back some other day’… what is fair about that?!”.15

Tired of long years of abuse, discrimination, corruption and arbitrary action by the director and legal secretary of the Chimborazo Water Agency, the water users – organized in the Provincial Federation of Water Use Collectives, Interjuntas-Chimborazo, created in 1998 and uniting some 320 irrigation and drinking water organizations – decided to take action. Interjuntas carefully documented a lengthy series of cases of corruption and discrimination against the province’s indigenous-peasant population. With this documentation Interjuntas demanded that CNRH change the director of the Water Agency of Riobamba. The outcome was that the director and other Water Agency officials were put on administrative trial. However, national, post-election political changeovers shelved this process and the director returned to office.

In response, Interjuntas summoned its members for a massive demonstration that gathered more than 5000 water users in the city of Riobamba. The demonstrators took over the agency offices. The president of Interjuntas, Carlos Oleas, expressed the communities’ rage and resentment: “If we don’t peacefully take over the Water Agency today, they will come back tomorrow, and all this movement will have been in vain. We are staying here, until the bosses come from Quito. They harassed us and this is the outcome. The people, the users, are tired of being mocked, and have risen up!”16

Different governance rationalities clash at such encounters; during a visit to Riobamba and Interjuntas, the reaction by the Secretary General of CNRH was telling: “Why, good heaven, must the power of numbers prevail over the power of the Law?!”. The president of Interjuntas responded: “Because it is the only way we ever will be listened to. How often have we demonstrated that the situation here is fundamentally appalling and entirely unjust? Mobilization is the only way to change things here!”.

The Water Agency was taken for 18 consecutive days until, finally, CNRH transferred the Water Agency director. In response to the demands of Interjuntas, a transparent selection process was established for the appointment of the new director. Interjuntas ‘monitored’ the process through a veeduría social (social oversight) procedure, as an autonomous, collective people’s pressure from below. After many months and a constant supervision of Interjuntas, a new director – a committed professional that had been put forward by the water users – was appointed. Soon several

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13 Own recordings, July 2005.
14 Own recordings, July 2005.
15 Own recordings, July 2005.
16 Own recordings, July 2005.
17 Both recordings: August 2005.

staff members were renewed and the Agency’s practices became fairer and more transparent. Discrimination disappeared and an indigenous kitchwa-speaking lawyer was hired to attend to those indigenous families who are less fluent or non-Spanish speaking. These achievements result from the constant surveillance and societal pressure exercised by Interjuntas and its user organizations.

The stories of injustice and conflict offer a glimpse of the impacts of the neoliberal water policy wave that shocked Ecuadorian water user communities during the 1990s. Day-to-day practice in the Ecuadorian water bazaar was full of conflicts. Unfair water allocation and ownership frameworks went hand-in-hand with policies biased toward economically powerful stakeholders. In the Ecuadorian highlands, a decrease in available water of sufficient quality due to pollution and climate change, combined with neoliberalization that triggered greater competition for water between local communities and private companies, led to more conflicts as well as to more applications to register water rights. However, while the Water Agencies were short-handed financially and staff-wise because of nationwide modernization, new concessions were granted without determining whether there was enough water. Over-allocation of water rights caused new conflicts that were supposed to be resolved by the same under-staffed Water Agency. The Agency was unable to resolve such conflicts, and the vicious cycle continued.

In Ecuador, the privatization and decentralization policies and practices of the 1990s dismantled not just national State bureaucracy but also its capacity as a framework to help local governments and water user organizations to creatively manage their own water affairs (Cremers et al., 2005; Hoogesteger, 2012). The Interjuntas experiences show the great importance of continuing grassroots groups’ monitoring of governmental authorities and their control mentalities – by overseeing their practices, taking collective action and, when necessary, organizing resistance. Their aim is to generate the capacity among users, on multiple scales, to defend water rights and provide bottom-up political and legal advocacy. They also strive to build a capacity for action among water user organizations and foster forums for discussion, consensus-building, training and debate. Furthermore Interjuntas has established a nodal point for the defense of water rights and mediation of conflicts. There, peasant and indigenous water user groups find a way to materialize their demands.

New water users’ network organizations have responded to both bazaar and cathedral policies and practices (Hoogesteger, 2012, 2013). As the president of Interjuntas put it: “We are always meeting and talking with national organizations that deal with water resources, and through these conversations, through political agency, seek ways to improve the water users’ conditions. Yet… if at any time, in order to defend users’ rights, Interjuntas must raise its voice in protest against any authority, we will do so… but… at the same time, we will support those actions [of State agencies] that benefit the water users, regardless of the political position it comes from”.

In the era of the Correa’s citizen’s revolution, they have also taken position against its tolerance of privatized water service delivery across three Ecuadorian cities and water accumulation by the few, as well as against its cathedral dimensions that impose uniformity and State-based mono-legality and mono-centrivity. Contested issues are, for example, the extension of the Guayaquil water services contract to the multinational Interagua for another forty years, the top-down management model of the State, and controversial articles in drafts of the new Water Law. Another fact that generated resistance from water user federations was the presidential decree that placed communal irrigation and domestic water supply under the command of provincial governments, with possible transfer to municipalities. This could, according to the users, undermine the autonomy of the water users organizations and delegate management of these systems to private or mixed companies (INREDH, 2010). This interpretation of government tactics clearly illustrates the great concern among water user collectives to lose rule-making and management authority to either the State or the market.

The government’s ‘citizen revolution’ has tried to co-opt several critical water user leaders into political and bureaucratic structures. For instance, the president of Interjuntas was successfully invited by Alianza PAIS to run for councilor in the Municipality of Riobamba; the ex-president of the Water Users Federation of Cotopaxi Province (FEDURICC) was appointed governor in that same province, and several leaders of water users organizations and NGOs have been invited to become staff of the State’s bureaucracy. Nonetheless these organizations and these very same leaders have remained critical of the citizen revolution. At the meeting of the government-steered Council of Citizen Participation and Social Control, Juan Rodriguez, president of FEDURICC, criticized the council’s individualistic and non-representative structure: “If this council will be dependent and will only fulfill official dispositions, it will only create ruptures with the bases of our organizations… because everything has to come from the grassroots up and not from the top to the bottom”. His Interjuntas colleague adds: “what kind of participation do we water users want in each of our provinces? Shared power in decision-making, that our decisions become binding… [we disagree] with the Council the way it is proposed at this moment, we would become a citizens space that would contribute but to outside decision-making…”.

Water user communities and their federations argue that official policies and legal measures alone will not ensure materialization of more just and democratic water governance structures. For this to happen, water users would have to build their own organizational force and rely on their own capacity to use the new institutional and legal frameworks to claim these promises. Their actions, as responses to collective demands and felt threats, are the key to monitor transparency and water justice.

5.2. From neoliberal to transformative multiculturalism; from managed to alternative polycentricity

What has become clear for peasant and indigenous water users and their organizations is that ‘taking over the government’ and collectively building a ‘people’s Constitution’ is not a sufficient guarantee of replacing neoliberal water governance. Several constitutional principles – such as the decisions “to promote redistributive policies that allow the peasantry to have access to land, water and other productive resources” (Article 281.4), “to prohibit land concentration, water accumulation, and privatization of water sources” (Article 282), let alone the principles of promoting greater authority and rule-making autonomy to water user communities – are electoral lip-service but not in the interest of the government-led revolution. It would trigger too much unrest in the eyes of the country’s governors, and ‘destabilize order’. The government, therefore, neglects these principles. It foresees building a strong cathedral in a controlled bazaar in which the different autonomous actors follow and contribute to the government’s project – not by a heterogeneous ‘unruly’ plurality and polycentric governance practices.

The diverse ways in which sovereign State power and disciplinary and neoliberal water governmentality have been enforced over

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18 Interview, March, 2011.
19 Own recording, January, 2011.
20 Own recording, January, 2011.
the last decades – through cathedral and/or bazaar approaches – relate to both economic, political and cultural programs. These programs aim to shape particular, aligned water user identities. In this respect, although diverse, there is also continuity. As Baud (2010) argues, Andean countries’ policies over the last two centuries illustrate a contrast between legal and discursive equality for indigenous populations and the actual persistence of economic and political injustice. Governments and national elites have tried to balance a political system responsive to the discourses of equality and modernity. The result is a system that incorporates (‘equalizes’) and at the same time marginalizes indigenous peoples and peasant communities.21

Identity politics have been and continue to be crucial. Both neoliberal governmentality and Correa’s citizen revolution base themselves on strategies of ‘managed multiculturalism’, celebrating local autonomous water users organizations and cultural diversity as long as it supports the official governance project, but failing to materialize this in lasting redistributive effects for oppressed ethnic groups (see also Hale, 2002; Assies, 2012). Contrary to this top-down multiculturalism that reinforces essentialism and ignores locally generated norms, self-management strategies and political self-representation, the water users appear to claim ‘transformative multiculturalism’. Transformative multiculturalism aims to redistribute power and resources (Mijeski and Beck, 2011) and the governors and dominant groups, in both the bazaar and cathedral eras, were not willing to allow this to happen. By claiming transformative multiculturalism, water users realize that the water governmentality project requires a response in terms of strategic counter-conducts (Foucault, 2008).

In these counter-conducts, water user organizations both struggle against and cooperate with the State. At different scales, they both critique, co-construct and seek to enforce materialization of particular claims regarding the Constitution and the Water Law. They are often constrained by State law but at the same time they can approach it as a powerful resource for claiming or defending their rights and authority (Randeria, 2003; Roth et al., 2005; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2007). As Bourdieu (1998: 34) stated, “the State in every country is the track-record of social conquests . . . ”, an ambiguous reality, “it is not accurate to say that it is an instrument in the hands of the ruling class. The State is certainly not completely neutral, completely independent of dominant forces in society . . . It is a battleground”.

At the same time, beyond the legal and State-administrative battlefield, water users continue to build their own polycentric rules and strategies to defend their interests and authority. Beyond simple obedience according to official ‘normative modernization’ of Andean communities, their actual practices often manifest a bottom-up, grassroots-driven, subtle and strategic resistance. Indigenous and peasant communities creatively blend water rules, rights and practices of various legal systems, generating new socio-legal repertoires to regulate their resources, while dynamizing their long-standing cultural patterns and identities (de Vos et al., 2006). Here, the water user federations are among the many tools they construct to defend their water and confront the new challenges of a globalizing world. Through scalar politics they build and mobilize varied networks to pursue their claims (see also Swyngedouw, 2004), strategically connecting local claims to broader political, economic and ecological issues.

It would be erroneous to see ‘resistance’ as just a reactive strategy against the ways in which governors try to govern and conduct the conduct of water users. In most cases, rather than deliberate counter strategies, water users consciously or unconsciously practice the right to question government and water governance (see also Foucault, 2002. cf. Cadman, 2010). In everyday practice, their multi-layered, collective spaces harbor a huge diversity of context-based water rights systems. The active development, use and proliferation of these local rights systems constantly question the exclusiveness and self-evidence of formal State- and market-based water rules. In these relatively autonomous spaces and covert water territories the rationality and local styles of materially and culturally arranging water rights and authorities vitally diverge from official frameworks. Their resistance to surveillance and repression is not just reactive but mostly pro-active, dovetailing local non-conformity with creative advocacy to generate alternative orders of nature-society.

6. Conclusions

Water governance takes place as a complex and pluralist phenomenon. It extends beyond official policies and formal institutions. It involves everyday water control practices and hybrid norms developed by local families, communities and other water users. It is sanctioned and regulated by a myriad of polycentric authorities. In this paper we have shown how, in the recent history of Ecuador, government authorities have aimed to govern this water complexity through conducting people’s conduct and the normalization of uniform modes of water governance.

Water governmentality is about the (re)distribution and (re)configuration of power by disciplining individuals and society at large. As we have shown, different governmentaliies produce nature-society relations involving particular categories and definitions of norms, cultural identities, economic incentive structures and social practices. Governmentalities, therefore, are constitutive of reality in that they produce nature, society, citizens, and the modes to manage them simultaneously.

In Ecuador, in the 1990s, reforms were driven by neoliberal governmentality – hailing polycentricity and multiculturalism but only in order to meet the market needs of international and national investors, in alliance with national politicians and policy makers. They approached water users not as collectives but as individual profit-maximizers and market clients. Therefore, State policies recognizing indigenous and peasant rights acquired a disciplining and standardizing direction, subservient to neoliberal requirements but largely incompatible with the demands of indigenous and peasant movements for policies assuring both cultural recognition and water resources redistribution. At the same time, neoliberal policies and structural readjustment programs greatly eroded the State-centered cathedral model and led to an institutional polycentric bazaar. In this context many existing and newly formed water user organizations and federations claimed space and extended their role as important centers of autonomy.

Since 2006, president Correa’s promised a radical break with the past through his ‘Citizen Revolution’ and ‘Socialism of the 21st Century’. However, in water control, just as in most other aspects of society, policy practices have continued to embrace the project of ‘conducting the conduct’ of its citizens, albeit in another way. Just as his predecessors, although far more subtly, Correa strategizes the normalization of its subjects through particular, individualizing and State-aligning governance techniques. The citizen revolution aims to re-establish a cathedral State in a refurbished, yet persistent governmentality project. Through a mono-centric authority, creation of several new offices, expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus, strategic intrusion in local irrigation management posts, and co-opting of water user federations and user collectives, as well as through ‘State-convenient market actors and forces’, the government aims to productively (and economically) manage and direct water management. It aims to externalize control from local communities, to subject and subjectify water users. Therefore, de-

spite changes, the trust of governing and controlling water users through governance over water and nature is a constant factor in Ecuadorian water governmentality.

In direct relation to this, as we have shown, both the neoliberal era governments and Correa’s administration celebrate identity politics that aim to foster ‘managed multiculturalism’ – celebrating political and cultural diversity of water rules, water user identities and water organizational forms but only as long as these align to official government programs and objectives. Thereby, in different ways, both governmentality regimes undercut all efforts towards ‘transformative multiculturalism’, which would challenge the hugely unequal distribution of water access, water rights, and water decision-making powers. As integral part of the citizen revolution’s model, to counteract threats and counter-forces, efforts are made to co-opt or sideline the plurality of social organizations and dissident voices that might challenge government’s discourses, practices and rationality.

The private sector and economically promising corporations that contribute to the economic project of the citizen revolution have not been seriously challenged – another pillar of continuity throughout bazaar and cathedral eras. In the water sector this is clearly expressed by the fact that water allocations – which are highly skewed toward agri-businesses and large landowners – have not been revised, even though it was an explicit Constitutional mandate. Similarly, private water service providers have been maintained despite civil society protests. This paper shows that, notwithstanding the advances the citizen revolution has made in improving the conditions of the poor, and in spite of the new discourses and techniques, it has fundamentally reproduced existing practices. The point of difference is that, rather than relying on a bazaar-model it seeks to build a particular authoritarian (and hybrid) State-centered cathedral model to conduct water user collectives and society at large.

Water user collectives and federations now form pockets of resistance that challenge the new regime, in particular in relation to privatization and individualization of water control, or replacement of pluralism and polycentric water user authorities by State centric. Many of these water user collectives and federations resist externally imposed change and seek creative reproduction of their own cultural and political spaces as well as different forms of democracy and political representation. By asserting water rights pluralism and water identity-based distinctiveness, they challenge commensuration and governmentality. Through non-conformist plurality and scalar strategies, they reject the categories in which the dominating groups want to ‘other’ and enclose them, while at the same time they pursue ways in which formal categories can be used for their own purposes. By going their own directions, they go beyond de-politicized notions of multiculturalism and its assimilation aspirations to claim alternative forms of resource management and polycentric governance – governance forms that also fundamentally aim to re-dress water-based distributive injustice.

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