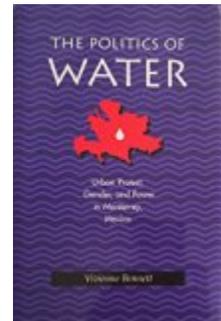


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Vivienne Bennett. *The Politics of Water: Urban Protest, Gender, and Power in Monterrey, Mexico*. Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996. xvii + 232 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-3908-5.

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Vivienne Bennett has crafted an insightful study of the politics of water system management and development that offers insights into urban popular movements and protest, especially by women, and the politics of public policymaking in Mexico. Students of urban politics will appreciate this work's contribution to the literature on community power. Others will find Bennett's unraveling of the respective roles of the federal, state, and municipal governments in Mexico to be a significant addition to our understanding of the changing Mexican political regime. Yet others will find this book a solid, empirically based analysis of the emergence and development of urban popular movements and the ways in which such movements can have consequences for public policy.

Bennett chose to set her study in Monterrey, Mexico's second most important industrial city, the home of the Grupo Monterrey, the industrial and financial group that has strongly opposed state intervention in the Mexican economy. Monterrey is situated in a semi-arid zone in northern Mexico and has been subject to multiyear droughts. Its heavy industry and rapidly growing population have taken a heavy toll on the water resources available to Monterrey, but Bennett shows how political conflict between the federal government and the Grupo Monterrey exacerbated the city's water shortages by inhibiting investment in the water system during the years of rapid industrial and population growth, especially from the 1950s through the 1970s.

Bennett delineates the means by which Monterrey received major new investments in its hydraulic infrastructure in the 1980s. Major factors she identifies as bringing these investments are an upsurge of popular protest in the 1970s and 1980s, a rapprochement between the Mex-

ican presidency and the Grupo Monterrey, and a convergence of administrative terms of office during the presidencies of Jose Lopez Portillo (1976-1982) and Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) and the governorship of Alfonso Martinez Dominguez (1979-1985) in Nuevo Leon.

Bennett explicitly defines her goals and summarizes her findings at the outset of *The Politics of Water*:

The objective of this book is to use Monterrey's water crisis as a lens through which to explore the political process of public service provision in Mexico. Among public services, water is of particular interest because it is both an essential component of the production process and vital for human survival. My research on the evolution of Monterrey's water system during the twentieth century reveals that three political actors were key to the process of planning water services to the city: the executive branches of the federal and state governments, the regional private sector elite known as the Grupo Monterrey, and women living in low-income neighborhoods in Monterrey (p. 3).

Bennett begins her theoretical chapter (chapter 2) by describing both residential and industrial usage of water in Latin American cities. She makes it obvious that these two demands for water are in potential conflict, especially so because the state usually provides, distributes, and regulates water supplies and because most Latin American cities have inadequate supplies of water. Hence she believes that understanding public policymaking regarding the provision of water must take an approach that avoids state-centrism, even in the context of the highly centralized Mexican state. Making her own approach to urban planning in Latin America clear, Bennett argues: "An understanding of the dynamics of public

service provision for a given city is achieved by exploring the voices and relations of power of actors in government and civil society. Planning occurs from above and from below” (p. 32).

Bennett’s third chapter describes the development of the water crisis that led to urban protests in the 1970s. Monterrey’s original water system was built in the first decade of this century by MacKenzie, Mann and Company and operated by that Canadian firm until 1945. The state government failed in its regulatory role from the beginning, so that both industry and residential consumers suffered shortages by 1940. In 1945, the state government of Nuevo Leon bought the water company; population growth and a severe drought in the late 1940s and early 1950s led to a severe water crisis by 1954, when the president of Mexico created the Water Planning Commission of Monterrey to plan further development of the water system. Little was accomplished by the commission, though, and the industrial sector responded by developing its own sources of water. Subsequently, the Grupo Monterrey came to control the Water Planning Commission and it also resisted all efforts to regulate its usage of water from its private sources (indeed, since industry was tapping the same aquifers as the city, it contributed to the city’s water crisis). At the same time, during the 1960s the government spent very little on water system development in Monterrey at a time when the city’s population and industrial production were exploding. Hence, by the 1970s the water shortage in Monterrey was acute. Yet, little was accomplished until the end of the decade.

However, during the term of Governor Martinez Dominguez, the federal and state governments engaged in major policy initiatives to create new sources of water for the city and new means of distributing it to citizens through two major infrastructure projects, the Plan Hidraulico and Agua Para Todos. Bennett’s challenge is to explain how these programs could come about when decades of inaction had characterized the approach of the state toward Monterrey’s water problems.

Bennett devotes two chapters (4 and 5) to describing the buildup of popular protest about the chronic water shortages. She situates the protests that plagued the Monterrey and Nuevo Leon governments in the 1973 to 1985 period into the Latin America phenomenon of urban popular movements. These have been particularly strong in Mexico, as scholars have shown. Monterrey itself had one of the strongest urban popular movements, the Frente Popular Tierra y Libertad, created to support those engaging in land invasions. Bennett shows that

protests over water were concentrated in the 1978-1985 period, excepting a short outburst in 1973. The maldistribution of water services meant that protests were concentrated in poor neighborhoods (and to the extent that upper-middle-class and upper-class residents suffered water shortages, they could address their concerns to policy makers on an individual basis). Public protests emerged in 1978, after more private attempts to achieve change had failed. They typically originated from affected neighborhoods and involved blockading streets and kidnapping water service vehicles and personnel.

Bennett mined the archives of the Monterrey dailies, *El Norte* and *El Porvenir*, to create a database of incidents of protest about water, the neighborhoods from which those protests surged, and the strategies used by the protesters. Bennett argues that these protests about water both “call[ed] attention to the problem” and “threaten[ed] the stability of the city” (p. 98). Although they were never coordinated from a single organizational head, Bennett concludes that these protests indicated that “civil society had made itself an important social actor in Monterrey” (p. 98). She further notes, “The protests in Monterrey were problem oriented and took the form of defensive collective actions.” They did not lead to a social movement with wider goals. Yet, “[w]hile the protest in Monterrey did not coalesce into a social movement with an overarching goal of transforming society, the multiplicity of protests across the city had a larger effect than individual defensive collective actions would have had” (p. 104).

The most notable aspect of these protests about water in Monterrey was the central role played by women. Because women’s role in Mexico “makes women the managers of the process of social reproduction” (p. 110), they are especially burdened by water shortages. Bennett suggests that we must consider the streets of the neighborhoods as public spaces within the women’s workplaces which they could effectively use as places to stage their protests: the blocking of streets and the seizure of water service vehicles. As she notes, this posed a dilemma for Monterrey authorities: taking violent action against protesting women proved difficult for the police. She states: “The political culture of Mexico in the late 1970s and early 1980s constrained physical repression against groups of protesting women” (p. 174). Bennett is careful to avoid insupportable conclusions about women’s participation in these protests; she concludes that rather than seeking to promote “strategic gender interests” (transforming gender relations), women in Monterrey were pursuing “practical gender interests” (the

practical issue at hand—lack of water—that happens to affect women unequally). Yet she also concludes that “[b]y constituting themselves as the active subjects of social change, women in Monterrey asserted their right as citizens to have a voice, and at the same time they identified decent water service as the right of all citizens” (p. 126).

The federal government’s response to the water crisis and the protests about it included both organizational reform of the water service in Monterrey and significant building. In the best chapter of this book (chapter 6), Bennett illuminates the interactions between federal, state, and local governments and government agencies, showing how the federal government seized control of the water agencies at the end of the presidency of Luis Echeverría (1970-76), at a time when relations between the state and the Grupo Monterrey were extremely tense. Echeverría’s successor, Lopez Portillo, sought to mend fences with the Monterrey industrialists and had the unusually abundant resources associated with Mexico’s oil boom with which to do that. But Lopez Portillo waited until after he had installed Martínez Domínguez in the gubernatorial seat in Nuevo León to take action. This Bennett attributes to the Mexican sexennial policy cycle (real policy initiatives do not emerge until the third year of a presidency; the first two years are devoted to consolidation and planning) and the disinclination of presidents to cooperate with governors they have not personally picked or worked closely with in the past. Lopez Portillo’s government promoted the Plan Hidráulico, a major dam- and aqueduct-building project. Lopez Portillo’s successor, De la Madrid, even though hampered by the financial crisis he inherited, nevertheless introduced the Agua Para Todos program which built a water distribution system to extend to all Monterrey neighborhoods, an unprecedented program for Mexico.

Here Bennett makes good use of the literature on policymaking and policy cycles in Mexican politics and does a service for Mexicanists by showing how the Mexican state is not a centralized monolith and how the Mexican

presidency is not all-powerful. For these major initiatives of infrastructural building to go forward, it was essential that the federal government have control of the local water agencies, which it did not prior to 1976, and it was important to have a powerful and decisive governor in Nuevo León who was willing to cooperate with the federal authorities. Further, the timing was key too; the sequencing of presidential and gubernatorial terms worked in Monterrey’s favor from 1979 to 1985.

Vivienne Bennett has written a fine study of the interaction of the formal policymaking apparatus and urban protest in Mexico. Although sympathetic to urban popular movements and sympathetic to movements that would advance women’s strategic gender interests, she does not draw unwarranted conclusions about either in this carefully crafted empirical study. Protests about water shortages were primarily expressions of women’s practical gender interests and they did not coalesce into a social movement with explicit transformative intentions. Yet, she convincingly demonstrates that these protests had very real results and helped to move the federal government to take the actions necessary to overcome the obstructionist tactics of the Grupo Monterrey and bring water to the residents of Monterrey’s neighborhoods.

Further, Mexicanists can place this book alongside Richard Fagen and William Tuohy’s *Politics and Privilege in a Mexican City* (Stanford University Press, 1972) as a fine example of a study of community power and inter-governmental relations. Empirically minded readers will appreciate the ample tables and figures that display Bennett’s analysis of her data; all readers will enjoy the political cartoons she has interspersed in the text to illustrate how those who live in Monterrey saw the water crisis and the government’s response to it.

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