

BOUNDARIES BETWEEN INEQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE IN WATER GOVERNANCE¹

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Introduction

The international debate on environmental governance has retained strong ties with political assumptions in studies on democracy. Studies about political arrangements dedicated to expanding participation and the construction of different spheres of deliberative democracy have strongly influenced the debate about legitimacy and effectiveness in the arenas of environmental governance (BABER; BARTLETT, 2005).

In the case of water resources, attention fusing on the reform of national and regional management mechanisms dates back to the mid-1980s. In this period of almost three decades, academic institutions dedicated to quantitative and qualitative water resource management studies, professional associations, national and multilateral environmental institutions and social movements have contributed decisively to extending the boundaries of the debate on what would be classified as modern water governance. Among the main issues involved in these new governance arrangements are the creation of management tools (particularly of economic instruments for pricing of the resource, the reduction of subsidies and the opening of markets), and above all administrative decentralization, allied to increased citizen participation (INGRAM et al., 2008).

In Brazil, the so-called water governance movement is currently undergoing a process of administrative decentralization and of participation in management practices by different social sectors. In this type of governance, the River Basin Committees play a key role. Regulated by federal law (in the case of rivers under Federal jurisdiction) or by state laws, the Committees vary in their designation of the participating segments and the percentage of representation of these segments. However, regardless of classification formulas, they all include government representatives (federal, state and municipal), the so-called major users of the resource and of organized civil society (NGOs, social movements, research institutions, professional associations and labor unions, among others).

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Numerous studies about the operation of River Basin Committees in Brazil have been published in recent years. Based on different objects and theoretical frameworks, these studies have highlighted major impasses not only in the effective decentralization of water management in the country but also in the participation of different sectors and social groups in the arenas of governance. Issues such as governance, subsidiarity, empowerment, social capital and accountability, among others, have underlain the academic debate on the progress and limits of the national experience in the creation of Brazil's "regional water parliaments."

This article seeks to contribute to this debate by proposing a perspective that focuses on the plurality of knowledge in governance practices. In other words, beyond the impasses involved in the guarantee of multiple uses of the resource, we intend to discuss here the impasses to the inclusion of multiple knowledge sources in the quotidian construction of the River Basin Committees. The article therefore aims to propose some elements of reflection about innovations in water governance that touch upon the topics of participation and diversity in management experience. To this end, we will take as reference significant findings of studies about River Basin Committees in different regions of the country.

From the start, it should be noted that the intention here is not to present a systematic rationale of the various studies that have been conducted on the theme. Moreover, even considering the specificities of each Committee and its respective region of action (which also implies regulatory specificities), the strategy of detailed discussion of cases will not be adopted here. Instead, relatively recurrent processes in the functioning of this governance entity will be highlighted, which can be interpreted in the light of the themes of participation and diversity.

To develop this discussion, the article is divided into seven topics. After this brief introduction, topic two will outline the general formal characteristics of water governance in Brazil. Topic three will present findings of recent studies on political participation in committees and management bodies in different regions of the country. Topic four will address the implications of the hierarchization of discourse and knowledge in these spheres of management, which in turn will lead to a discussion, in topic five, of the dilemmas of participation from the perspective of the socially constructed authority of the agents that embody the new principles of management. Topic six aims to contribute to the classification of this first cycle of experience in water governance in the country based on the notion of scientification of politics, as already developed by Martins (2013a). Lastly, topic seven will present a summary of the main implications of the discussions undertaken throughout the text, highlighting the diagnosis of the necessary search for diversity in the creation of a new narrative of environmental governance.

Water governance

Social participation in environmental policy making in Brazil was strengthened in the 1990s through the creation of several advisory and deliberative councils at all levels of government, with the regulated participation of organized civil society. The Environmental

Councils, River Basin Committees and managing councils of Environmentally Protected Areas provide for the participation of various segments of society, such as professional associations, neighborhood associations, trade unions, NGOs and social movements. As so aptly indicated in the literature, this form of organization of these forums represents the politicization of environmental management as a participatory mode of solving problems and conflicts between the groups and sectors involved (JACOBI, 2003; SORRENTINO, 2002).

In the case of water management, the model adopted in Brazil in the 1990s was directly influenced by the international debate on the subject. The various conferences on the environment held since the 70s recognized the problems of availability of natural resources and drew up general guidelines to be applied by national States to minimize the impacts of human activities on nature. The core concern since this period revolved around the projections of levels of relative water scarcity. Since the United Nations Water Conference in Mar Del Plata (1977), followed by the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1990), the International Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin (1992), and the creation of the World Water Council (1996), the theme has been incorporated in the international political agenda, and new modes of regulation of the forms of use and access to water resources began to be discussed by governments and different sectors of organized civil society.

In implementing the reform of its own management structure, the Brazilian State was strongly influenced by these debates and by the experiences of other countries. Among the most significant results of this reform is the adoption of the river basin, or drainage basin, as a water resource management unit. Moreover, the new management structure also made progress in the political and administrative decentralization of the system. Benefited by the context of the 1988 Constitution – paradigmatically supported by the expansion of civil society participation in the public sphere (DAGNINO, 2002) –, the new model would seek to ensure the participation of different social groups in the river basin decision-making forum. Thus, the River Basin Committees, in addition to administrative spheres, would also become political arenas responsible for water governance at the local level, bringing together in their composition the participation of users, of organized civil society, and of all the domains of government involved. The operation of each committee would regionally constitute an effective *water parliament*.

Established in the country in the last two decades, this model is in the phase of institutional consolidation. The river management structure, which is under the domain of the Federal Union, is governed by the terms of Law 9433 of 1997. This federal law established the National Water Resources Policy and created the National Water Resources Management System. This system assigned the central role in the management structure to the Committees, defining them as the main decision-making forums for each river basin. Their composition would necessarily bring together representatives of the users of water resources, organized civil society and the three levels of government (federal, state and municipal).

At the state level, São Paulo was the pioneer federal entity in structuring an effectively decentralized and participatory water resource management system, which

even influenced the subsequent federal legislation. State law no. 7633 of 1991, which environmental experts and activists considered a milestone in the history of water governance in the country, defined the terms of the new management of the resource, dividing the state into hydrographic management units and determining the creation of a River Basin Committee for each unit. The Committees would be composed of equal and tripartite representation of the state government, municipal governments and civil society.

Since the mid-1990s, other states have invested in the creation of their own legislation to structure the management of water resources in their respective territories. Following the general principles of the federal law, the states have made advances in the promotion of legal frameworks to ensure the decentralized and participatory management of water resources. Despite the different modes of classification of what would be the representation of the civil society segment (in some cases divided into *civil society* and *users*) and the variation in the percentage of representation of each segment, it is clear that the principle of participation has characterized the experience of the creation of the River Basin Committees in the country.

Notably, these legal frameworks give civil society a central role in driving the policy and management of water resources. As Jacobi and Fracalanza (2005) pointed out, social groups, and particularly the major users, will have to organize politically to participate in the Committees, in order to defend their specific interests in water pricing, the application of raised funds, and the modes of conferment of use rights. In other words, the expression of these sectoral interests and of organized social groups will necessarily imply the contraposition of political strategies and worldviews, which might strengthen the River Basin Committees as an important arena of environmental debate.

However, notwithstanding the undoubted advance represented by this new governance model with respect to society's access to environmental decision-making, recent studies about different work experiences of these Committees in the country have revealed impasses that fall outside the scope of the institutional order advocated by the legal frameworks. Some significant results of these studies are presented below, which emphasize recurrent processes pertaining to the functioning of governance and identify major impasses in the construction of a real "water parliament."

Disputes in environmental governance

Based on a survey conducted in 2004 among members of eighteen river basin organizations (fourteen River Basin Committees and four intermunicipal consortiums) in different regions of Brazil, Abers (2010) identified the perception of the participants of these arenas of governance about the inequalities in their deliberative process. According to the author, 67% of these participants stated that the main factor of inequality was differences in technical knowledge; 51% stated it was inequality in political power, and 31% claimed that inequality was the result of economic power. These participants consider that these forms of inequality undoubtedly affect the representative logic of the sectors and social groups that make up the governance forums.

Lemos et al. (2010) processed the data of this survey by river basin and pointed out that the diagnosis of inequalities within these boards does not reveal state or regional concentrations. The strategic use of technical information is recognized as the main source of inequality by most of the members of the Committees of Santa Maria and Gravataí (state of Rio Grande do Sul), Itajaí (state of Santa Catarina) the Upper Tietê and the Litoral Norte (state of São Paulo), Pirapama (state of Pernambuco), the Lower Jaguaribe (state of Ceará) and Rio das Velhas, Araçuaí and Pará (state of Minas Gerais). In these committee boards, the perception of this form of inequality is higher among representatives of civil society.

The survey reveals that the grasp of technical information also plays a role in the ordering of gender relations in participatory water governance. In an analysis of this information, Empinotti (2010) demonstrates that the female participants of these river basin organizations come from the middle and upper-middle classes, had access to higher education, and are mostly civil servants with ties to the environmental bureaucracy – and therefore presumably have the expertise necessary for management. However, the author points out that women in these arenas usually work in subordinate positions of support for the internal decision-making structures – a situation that would strengthen the androcentric condition of the exercise of power.

When they are the target of in-depth case studies, the inequalities identified in the organization and operation of river basin agencies in the country appear more flagrant. In a study on the Intermunicipal Consortium of the Piracicaba, Capivari and Jundiá River Basins (PCJ Consortium), Castellano (2007) identifies impasses in the levels of synergy of the interactions between public authorities and civil society. According to the author, despite the evident advances involving the decentralization of water management in the region, major difficulties still limit the scope of greater heterogeneity in the social participation of the groups and entities represented in the Consortium. In particular, the overvaluation of technical knowledge appears in the study as a central barrier to the identification of the diversity of interests involved in the regional water issueⁱ.

Inequalities relating to differences in technical knowledge are also one of the important conclusions of the study by Jacobi and Monteiro (2009) in the case of the Upper Tietê River Basin Committee, which encompasses the metropolitan region of the state of São Paulo. Resorting to the notion of social capital in their study of institutional performance, the authors point out that the asymmetries of capital between the participants of the Committee significantly influence the negotiating capacity of the agents and the individual potential of establishing pacts. The strong prevalence of the technical element as a reference for control of the decision-making process – through knowledge about hydrology, climatology, ecology and hydraulics, among others – end up by keeping negotiations on a strictly socio-technical level, thus marginalizing (or even masking) any possible diverging policies. Solely for this reason, the authors stress that, in the case of the Upper Tietê Committee, the improvement of the domain of governance toward practices of participatory management is also undergoing a change in dialogic paradigm.

This power of the technoscientific paradigm in the disputes established within the River Basin Committees was also observed in the study by Martins (2012) about the

conception of rational water management in Brazil. The author explains that the belief in the scientific rationale for the planning of water governance practices in the state of São Paulo is also rooted in the profile of the team of experts involved in the studies for the proposition of the new decentralized and participatory management system. Based on an analysis of the history of experts influential in the design and implementation of water governance in the state, the study reveals the formation of a discursive field that consecrates the principles of scientific management, with the notable influence of professional associations linked to areas of engineering – such as the Brazilian Water Resource Association (ABRH), the Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering (ABES), and the Brazilian Groundwater Association (ABAS). This arrangement of actors and institutions resulted in a sort of moral economy around the technologically rational management of water, which exerted strong pressure on the composition and operation of the River Basin Committees.

Particularly in the case of ABRH, Ravenna (2012) underscores the crucial role of its members in structuring corporate interests disparate from the historical hegemony of the electricity sector in the centralized management of water in the country. In a study of the political construction of the new legal frameworks for decentralized and participatory water governance at the federal level, the author reveals that in different regions of the country, members of ABRH provided the officials of local government agencies with technical expertise to outline the policy that was being drawn up. Profoundly knowledgeable about many of the tools for measuring the quantity and quality of water resources, these agents succeeded in turning their professional association into a key institution for the new pathways of regulation on the use and access to water in the country, contributing to render technical information a powerful tool in the new arenas of governance.

The concreteness of this moral economy around the technorationalist approach and its hegemony in the arenas of environmental governance can also be identified in the case study conducted by Martins (2013a) about the Tietê-Jacaré Committee, located in the central region of the state of São Paulo. The study recalls the history of preference for the recruitment of technicians from professional associations and research institutes to represent civil society in the governance forum. Among the areas of specialization were geology, hydrology and hydraulics, always identified with the supposed neutrality of science in decisions involving a community with varied interests. According to the study, this “professionalized civil society” successfully imposed its categories of classification of the environment and of social relations pertaining to it on the agenda and discussions at meetings of the Committee, decisively influencing the regional environmental policy agenda.

The discursive hierarchies

The findings of these studies on inequalities relating to differences in technical knowledge in water governance forums do, in fact, have an impact on the principles of participation usually associated with the River Basin Committees. The widespread prevalence of technical knowledge and terminology in the plenary sessions of the Committees has a

significant side effect on participatory management, because it creates social inequality and is reproduced not only materially. Social class, as a classificatory phenomenon, also extends to taste and discourse. In other words, an individual's class status is revealed not only through economic aspects but also through symbolic dimensions that differentiate him in terms of language, information and even elective affinities (BOURDIEU, 1979). This means that language also inevitably constitutes an exercise of dominance, regardless of the will of the user of technical discourse, since dominance, as Weber (1999) so aptly points out, is legitimated precisely by the person who submits to the discourse, and not by the user himself.

It is, therefore, a relationship in which legitimate or "official" forms of envisioning and dividing the social world are assimilated and naturalized by those who have few resources to challenge them. And, in this context, this assimilation also has to do with the establishment of inequalities in the agencies. This is perceptible in the environmental governance practiced by the River Basin Committees, by the willingness to talk, by the body language, by the physical arrangement of the agents in the plenary sessions, and even by the gender classification that positions men and women in this decision-making spaceⁱⁱ.

Inasmuch as discursive order is a key target of disputes in the parliamentary space, the use of this technical instrument has become a tool of dominance and hierarchization. Water resource management agencies use technical language that limits the participation of local groups who have not mastered certain symbolic codes. The agents who engage in technical discourse in this space make use of a linguistic *habitus* acquired according to their various educational backgrounds, which is not accessible everyone. Thus, there is a symbolic relationship of dominance whereby only those who possess a specific symbolic capital can make use of a discourse that everyone accepts as valid and authorized.

What should be emphasized here is that the cultural capital required to master the technical and discursive codes used in the daily affairs of the Committees gives those who have it a prominent position in the management process. The truth and diagnosis of the watershed's environmental situation and the planning of its management (both written using the technical jargon of the so-called Basin Plans) is that, paradoxically, they have become expressions of a management that is little participative, to the extent that, even among the Committee's participants, few are able to make a proper reading of these documents for the management practice. Thus, within the sphere of environmental governance, technical and scientific language does not refer solely to the method, to systematization and to some degree of universality, but is also used in the rhetorical sense: the production of a discourse and its rhetorical and grammatical system, mastered by specific circles.

At this point, it is pertinent to note what may be called *environmental truth of the river basin*. Notably, the widely accepted rationale about the mastery of specialized knowledge within this space refers to the presumed neutrality of science and technology in decisions that involve a community with varied interests. In this discursive order, technoscience is employed as an impartial instrument that can be imposed for particular political and economic interests, which would not contribute to the general interests (or the common good) of society as a whole. This rationale cannot but negate the principle

that the governance of water resources necessarily involves varied interests; hence, the extensive use of encoded discourse presumably affects the democratic and parliamentary space which the River Basin Committees presumably are. This implies considering that the order of the disciplinary discourse cannot be depoliticized, at the risk of naturalizing the inequalities it entails and/or that it helps to reproduce.

The dilemmas of participation

Participation is undeniably one of the key elements of democratic water governance. But this is not a given that can be identified statically, based on the number of seats or segments represented on a River Basin Committee. Participation is built on a daily basis and therefore involves a process, which is not necessarily linear. Advances and setbacks can be identified from the profiles of the participating sectors, from attendance at plenary sessions, and from practical involvement in the various tasks required of a Committee.

Upon emancipating participation from static information and discussing it as a process, some of the obstacles to its greater development also take on new meanings. This is because its realization – or achievement – is no longer observed pointwise, allowing it to be interpreted as a permanent negotiation resulting from social disputes, sometimes declared and sometimes veiled, and which to some extent express conflicting worldviews.

An example of this is the phenomenon of non-participation. Little studied in the recent literature on the Committees, and largely because of the difficulty in demarcating the theme (after all, who should attend?), this phenomenon can be seen as more than a lack of knowledge of the management agency and/or disinterest. Non-participation in the River Basin Committee may refer to what some social science authors call the *hidden discourse* of resistance (SCOTT, 2003). In other words, there is no explicit critical discursive formulation about a given state of things, but the avoidance of interaction and/or participation may be related directly to the rules of recruitment of participants, the form of participation, the institutional design, or the lack of belief in the effectiveness of the institutional space.

In one of the rare studies about the phenomenon in Brazil, Empinotti (2011) suggests that non-participation may also result from pragmatic choices of sectors of civil society, which rationalize the political onslaughts, anticipating the possibilities of one-shot successes or of direct gains in influence on public management. Based on the case of the São Francisco River Basin Committee, the author describes how the refusal of organized civil society to participate in the Committee is the result not only of the strategies promoted by the state that weaken the management agency (using it, in situations of conflict, as a consultative rather than a deliberative forum) but also of impasses in the representation of civil society itself. These impasses include the distance of those elected by civil society to their headquarter institutions; the absence of dialogue between the participating organizations, especially between members and proxies; and the centralization of the demands of civil society by their principal representatives. As the author points out, these exclusionary political practices illustrate the fact that the difficulties of decentralization and participation are not exclusive to

the State sector, but extend to the very sectors that require new openings for public management.

With regard specifically to the members of the Committees, some specificities of this participation should be emphasized. As mentioned earlier, several studies have pointed out that the language used in the management practices of the Committees has significant implications for access to information about topics on the management agendas. In general, the people who make use of technoscientific discourse are the representatives of state bureaucracy (from the areas of environment, sanitation, energy and, in Committees in rural areas, agriculture) and of research institutions and professional associations, who, in turn, are backed by the supporting documents of management activities (such as Water Resource Situation Reports and River Basin Plans). Despite their unquestionable importance in the planning of management activities, the Committees do not contribute to the environmental debate, which makes them essentially technical agencies. They undoubtedly contribute when their goal is to become true “water parliaments.” For basic technical management, they can resort (as they already do) to technical chambers. But for their parliamentary objectives – that is, of political assembly – the technical terminology may compromise the intended expansion of participation.

Scientification of the Politics

In this movement of scientification of management, representatives seeking to support their discourse on expert instruments consistently resort to a mode of legitimization of their discourse when facing those who do not master the codes of this expertise. However, this does not mean that those who do not master this knowledge are excluded from the management practice. On the contrary, the participation of these non-experts, and especially their acceptance of the descriptions and requirements of this expertise, are fundamental to the legitimacy of the position of the experts in the governance forum. Nevertheless, technical reasoning applied to social issues does not forgo its political content. As science and technology are repeatedly put forward by the agents participating in governance as major instruments of regulation of management practices, one sees here a recurring need for justification based on the magnitudes of rationality and efficiency in the political battle. It is precisely this imperative that legitimizes the monopoly of knowledge of certain agents in detriment to others, in order to justify that the policy makes use of technology and science to guide and judge social conductⁱⁱⁱ.

Taking as premise the need for justification imperatives about the regime of truth of the management experience, one can demystify the apparent opposition between political management and technical management of water resources. On many occasions, this opposition emerges in the speech of committee participants as though it represented the overcoming of the politics in favor of technique, purportedly stripped and devoid of social contradictions. It must be emphasized that this myth only hampers the necessary delimitation of the social side of the Committees. Based on their intended role as legitimate water parliaments, the Committees should be discussed as a stage for dialogue and the composition of interests. Moreover, underestimating the political dimension of decisions

favors the construction of versions that captivate certain management experiences. In this field, the most emblematic case seems to be the myth of the river basin as an eminently technical management unit in the French system of water governance – a notable international reference of a decentralized and participatory form of environmental management.

As already discussed elsewhere (MARTINS, 2008), the well-known French law of 1964, upon which that country's current management model is designed, articulated what could be classified as territorial dominance of the polytechnic knowledge of the period, based on the physiographic delimitation of drainage basins. Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, the division of France's territory into six drainage basins at that time was not the result of an eminently technical decision, based on the perfect demarcation of basins or groups of basins determined based on strictly physiographic criteria. Strictly speaking, the specialists originally intended to divide the country's territory based on the courses of the major national rivers and the portion of partially French rivers. This division would correspond to the creation of eight drainage basins. However, disputes among the three polytechnic organizations on the committees involved in formulating the new legislation – namely, the Corps of Mines, Corps of Bridges, and Corps of Rural Engineers – shifted the decision about the division of the territory into drainage basins toward the field of relative balance of the professional forces involved. As a result, the territory that initially would have been divided into eight river basins was divided into six basins, distributed equally among the three polytechnic organizations – each assuming the helm of two River Basin Agencies. The Corps of Mines took over the River Basin Agencies of the north and east, which are more industrialized regions with a greater diversity of mineral resources, the Corps of Bridges took over the Seine and Rhône agencies due to the importance of these rivers for navigation and the location of major cities, and the Corps of Rural Engineers took over the agencies of the agricultural areas of the Loire and Garonne rivers.

In its condition of international reference, mainly due to the adoption of the drainage basin as a planning and management unit, the French model has been the object of abstraction about its real significance in terms of environmental policy. The meaning of this abstraction lies precisely in the interpretation of its development based exclusively on its most obvious technical characteristics, ignoring that its structure also resulted from a political solution aimed at meeting the vested interests of different professional groups.

By abstracting the power relations involved in the demarcation of the river basins of this international reference, this type of scientification of the political process contributes conspicuously to the authentication of certain monopolies of competence. In the case of the Brazilian River Basin Committees, the relationship between experts and non-experts generally fails to express differences in points of view – a fact that would be very beneficial for environmental governance – thus rendering it unequal in terms of politics practices. This shift from difference to inequality results precisely from the practices of justification that naturalize the sovereignty of expert competence, devaluing the shared sense (even through practices of stigmatization) that could compete with it. However, difference does not necessarily lead to inequality: this shift is contingent, as Brah (2006, p.374) so aptly suggests:

(...) difference is not always a mark of hierarchy and oppression. Therefore, it is a contextually contingent matter to determine whether difference results in inequality, exploitation and oppression or in egalitarianism, diversity and democratic forms of political agency.

By proposing to apply this issue to the case of democratic participation in the country's River Basin Committees, the intention here is to emphasize that when the technical-instrumental rationale assumes the authority of sole valid and legitimate instrument for governance, the other is built contingently not as different but as unequal. In other words, he is not taken as a different interlocutor but as an unequal subordinate who must be qualified in order to participate in management. In the light of modern rationalism, this other is classified as unfit for dialogue because he can understand the water resource only on the simple plane of the senses – a far cry therefore, from the Cartesian individual, who is autonomous, methodical and strictly supported by scientific reasoning^{iv}. Qualifying this other through the traditional water resources management training courses could give him a rational understanding of management tools, empowering him in this unequal permanent arrangement of environmental governance.

This scientification of the politics may reinforce what Acselrad, Mello and Bezerra (2009) identify as a salient feature of environmental injustice, namely, the concentration of information. In the case of the River Basin Committees, this concentration has the important peculiarity of electing legitimate categories based not only on the description of environmental problems but also on the establishment of tools to cope with them. It is therefore up to representatives that lack the wherewithal to mobilize these abstract categories to tacitly recognize that type of knowledge as the only legitimate criterion of power and of construction of information for the exercise of such power. The practical efficacy of this recognition, in turn, will be greater the more unlikely the possibility appears to be of integrating knowledge outside of science to describe the environmental reality of the river basin.

By way of illustration, an important expression of the impact of the concentration of information allied to the discursive authority of technoscience refers to the charging for water use by different River Basin Committees in the country. The debate about the implementation of this strategy of environmental valuation usually focuses solely on its putative mechanism of economic stimulus for change in the patterns of use of this resource. That is, its political implications are subsumed to its instrumental and disciplinary character. Undoubtedly, this emphasis is related (albeit not exclusively) with the absence – also in these governance forums – of members of social groups and classes historically excluded from the decision-making arenas in Brazilian society, who might even question the principle of pricing of the resource from other epistemic bases and even other social interests. After all, as Fracalanza, Jacob and Eça (2013) point out, water management also interferes with the cycle of social and environmental vulnerability to which certain populations are exposed^v.

However, charging for the use of water is a management tool and also a precept produced by the legitimate and authorized view about environmental resources or “goods.”

This view, an offshoot of the logic of classification of economic marginality (MARTINS, 2013b), implies the assumption of a universal rationality, the product of each agent's unequivocal search to maximize his gains and minimize his costs. Its strength lies both in the political arrangement that benefits it and in the belief that this would not be a discourse about reality. Once crystallized, the discourse is presented as reality itself, as a universal fact described and prescribed by the instruments of science.

By way of conclusion: for diversity in the management narrative

According to Castro (2007), social conflicts and confrontations between political projects are at the core of what is internationally called water governance in the 21st century. The boundaries of these conflicts are defined by a complex arrangement of variables, which range from water availability and projections of commitment of the resource to political confrontations about the forms of use and access to socioterritorial resources. Evidently, these conflicts have different impacts on different social classes, and manifest materialities that are also very specific. In this article, we sought to discuss the production of these hierarchies and inequalities, putting forward the argument that, in the Brazilian context, one of the key dimensions of the conflicts over water governance pertains to how the legitimate and authorized views are built about what the management of this natural resource should be, and how it should be achieved.

The first cycle of experiences in decentralized and participatory water governance in Brazil was characterized by the consolidation of a narrative strongly focused on the technical instrumentation of management, with major initiatives dedicated to structuring information systems and managing information about water resources at the river-basin level. Far from suggesting that this cycle has ended, not only but also in view of the distinct levels of progress this new institutional management experience is undergoing in different regions and states of the country, this article has attempted to underscore the challenges involved in participation and policy in the context of structuring the River basin Committees.

In any democratic arena, political action tends to become more complex and inventive the broader the social spectrum of its composition. Therefore, the quality of the debates in the River Basin Committees should be higher the greater the diversity in the construction of the management narrative. It is therefore reasonable to propose the hypothesis that, albeit still maintaining the technical view but breaking its absolutism, the history of this inequality can be transformed by placing emphasis on the richness of difference. In other words, more complex and comprehensive levels of real understanding of the different meanings of water in a given locality can be achieved that encompass its economic, political and cultural dimensions.

For a new cycle of governance, it should also be considered that decentralized water management represents more than governance solely at the local level, which is understood on a vertical scale of organization and distribution of institutions and power. To date, this has been the prevailing interpretation of governance. However, it still needs to be extended horizontally and its boundaries expanded to include many

different groups and the most diverse rationales that operate in the construction of the social significations of water. This is also done through transformations in the repertoire of terms used in the management apparatus. Technical hegemonic jargon, accepted as legitimate and authorized in these governance spaces, is also a power resource employed as an instrument of authority in the deliberations of the Committee. In other words, the management narrative needs to be transformed so that the committee can gradually let go of the naive and abstract discourse of “technical management” of water resources and come progressively closer to the real concept of water parliament, focusing on the uses and multiple knowledge pools.

This time, the transformation of the current management narrative requires that the participants be trained for diversity, i.e., that they be qualified for dialogue with the various social sectors. Despite the relevance of the disciplinary education of most of the representatives, the members of the Committees must develop skills to think in terms of diversity, which means to relate expert and disciplinary knowledge with what is commonly classified as lay knowledge. And in this process, diversity has to do not only with respect for the different matrices of conception of the relationship between society and nature but also, and above all, with reciprocity between these different matrices. Diversity has to do not with the preservation of knowledge niches but with the mutual influence between those who produce and reproduce this knowledge. And, in a space such as the River Basin Committee, this seems essential.

Notes

- i It should be noted that the emergence of the PCJ Consortium is closely linked to the local society's resistance to the reversal of the waters of its river basins to supply the metropolitan region of São Paulo through the Cantareira System. For a history of this conflict, see Castellano (2007).
- ii In the case of gender inequalities, even when lessened in the River Basin Committees through vocational training, women's entry into the arenas of governance remains hierarchical among the participating segments. On this subject, see Moraes and Perkins (2007).
- iii About the modes and magnitudes of justification involved in the legitimization of regimes of action, see Boltanski and Thévenot (1991). For a discussion about the construction of an “ecological” magnitude as a current form of justification, see Lafaye and Thévenot (1993).
- iv For a radical critique of the so-called “Cartesian moment” in the construction of knowledge, see Foucault (2001).
- v From an analytical standpoint, the link between different levels of social inequality and dimensions of environmental vulnerability can be discussed based on the notion of hyperperiphery, as coined by Torres and Marques (2001).

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BOUNDARIES BETWEEN INEQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE IN WATER GOVERNANCE

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Resumo: O objetivo do artigo é discutir os temas da desigualdade e da diferença na governança das águas no Brasil. O trabalho problematiza a produção de hierarquias nas arenas de governança, sustentando a hipótese de que a passagem da diferença à desigualdade resulta das práticas de justificação que naturalizam a soberania da competência técnica na gestão ambiental. Para tanto, serão tomados como referência resultados significativos de estudos feitos sobre a estruturação e o funcionamento dos Comitês de Bacia em diferentes regiões do país. Com base nestes resultados, discute-se a produção discursiva nos Comitês, a autoridade dos agentes que corporificam os novos princípios de gestão e as implicações do processo de cientificação da política. O texto conclui indicando a importância da diversidade na construção de uma nova narrativa da governança ambiental.

Palavras-chave: Governança da água; Comitês de Bacia Hidrográfica; Participação; Justiça ambiental.

Abstract: This article addresses the themes of inequality and difference in water governance in Brazil. The production of hierarchies in the arenas of governance is discussed, defending the hypothesis that the shift from difference to inequality is the result of practices of justification that consolidate the sovereignty of technical competence in environmental management. Some of the more significant findings of studies about the structure and functioning of River Basin Committees in different regions of the country are taken as reference for this discussion. Based on these findings, we discuss the discursive production of the Committees, the authority of the agents that embody the new principles of management, and the implications of the process of scientification of the politics. The article concludes by pointing out the importance of diversity in the construction of a new narrative of environmental governance.

Keywords: Water Governance; River basin Committees; Participation; Environmental Justice

Resumen: El objetivo del texto es discutir los temas de la desigualdad y la diferencia en la gobernabilidad del agua en Brasil. El trabajo problematiza la producción de jerarquías en las arenas de la gobernanza, sosteniendo la hipótesis de que el paso de la diferencia a la desigualdad resulta de las prácticas de la justificación que naturalizan la soberanía de la competencia técnica en la gestión ambiental. Para ello, se tomarán como referencia los hallazgos significativos de estudios realizados sobre la estructuración y el funcionamiento de los Comités de Cuentas de diferentes regiones del país. Basándose en estos resultados, discutimos la producción discursiva en los Comités, la autoridad de los agentes que encarnan los nuevos principios de gestión y las implicaciones del proceso de cientifización de la política. El texto concluye planteando la importancia de la diversidad en la construcción de una nueva narrativa de gobernanza ambiental.

Palabras-clave: Gobernanza del agua; Comités de Cuencas; Participación; Justicia ambiental.
