

William Heegaard

Professor Gary Wren

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A Marxist Analysis of the California Peripheral Canal Proposal

While the global movement to privatize water has recently received much attention, Californians are now feeling the ideological pressure to commodify their water resources much closer to home (Promoting Privatization 2003). In a recent article published on AlterNet, Yasha Levine examines how a small conglomeration of powerfully wealthy Central Valley farm owners and Southern California real estate developers have come together to back the construction of the Peripheral Canal, a 40 billion dollar aqueduct that would redirect water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River near Clarksburg around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to the Clinton Court Forebay. The Canal would allow “corporate farmers and Southern California's real estate tycoons to cut to the front of the Delta water line and have direct access to Northern California's water” (Levine 2010). However, Levine also argues that the Canal is part of a bigger plan constructed “by a handful of farmers and urban water districts to lay down infrastructure that would enable the creation of a full-fledged ‘water market’ that would allow them to acquire and sell Northern California's water to the highest bidder, like any other commodity” (Levine 2010).

In this essay I will attempt to use Marx’s theoretical tools to analyze the interests and ideologies surrounding the Peripheral Canal proposal. I will start by examining how the State directly supports the interests of those that own the means of production. I will then discuss how the State acts as an ideological tool that presents the interests of the bourgeoisie as the interests of

everyone. Finally, I will analyze how water privatization may be the catalyst for the class revolution that Marx predicted.

Marx's theories on the relationship between the State and the dominant class are especially applicable to the ongoing process of privatizing the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta's water. In his Manifesto of the Communist Party, Marx claims "the bourgeoisie has at last, since the establishment of Modern Industry and of the world-market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway" (Marx 475). He argues that modern politics is simply a mechanism for distributing material spoils. While some may consider the political process a method of ensuring equitable resource distribution, Marx theorizes that the State makes the "law of the ruling class its general will" (Marx 606). Since only those who own the means of production hold the capital necessary to run a campaign and secure political office, most political decisions will represent the material interests of that class.

In the case of Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta water distribution, the State has blatantly served the interests of a small group of millionaires who own all the farms in California's Central Valley. The Woolf family operates "the biggest farming operation in Fresno County," and receives "\$4.2 million annually in subsidized water" (Levine 2010). In the Westlands Water District, "every dollar of revenue from the Westlands' farms is funded by 75 cents' worth of water subsidies alone" (Levine 2010). One Westlands farmer, Eric Hanson, has received over \$13 million in government crop and water subsidies over the past decade (Levine 2010). In comparison, the small family farms that dot the Delta have received only "1/10th of the money that Westlands [have] received in water subsidies alone" (Levine 2010). From a Marxist perspective, the massive amounts of money that the State dumps on the already extremely wealthy farm owners in the Central Valley illustrates how State decisions routinely align with the interests of the ruling class.

The Central Valley farmers and the Southern California realtors also use the State as an ideological tool to present their interests as the interests of everyone. Marx argues that since the bourgeoisie controls the State and since the State is believed to democratically represent the ideas of everyone, the ideas of the bourgeoisie become labeled as the ideas of everyone (Marx 172, 187). Governor Schwarzenegger nicely demonstrated this process when he formed the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force in 2006 to come up with a solution to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta's levee problems. In reality, the Task Force "was a thinly veiled PR job tasked with finding a way to sell the Peripheral Canal to an unsuspecting public" (Levine 2010). If the Delta's current system of levees were to crumble, the Peripheral Canal would become the only viable option for supplying water to over two-thirds of California. Considering the interest groups placed on the Task Force – wealthy corporate farmers from the Central Valley, Southern California real estate developers, and construction companies – it makes sense that the Task Force's conclusion described the Delta's current levee system as a "dangerous, polluted stink-hole not worth saving," and instead recommended building the Peripheral Canal (Levine 2010). However, when the Task Force presented its justifications for the recommendation, it described the aqueduct as the solution to "water safety," an idea that appears to represent the interests of all stakeholders. The Task Force's recommendation exemplifies how the State acts as a mechanism that presents the ideology of the bourgeoisie as the ideology of everyone.

While some may believe that the coercive relationship between the Central Valley farm owners, the Southern California real estate developers and the State would prevent any systemic change, Marx would see the movement to privatize California's water as a key catalyst of proletariat revolution. He argues that class revolt occurs when the bourgeoisie becomes "unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery" (Marx

483). In other words, once the ruling class can no longer keep the masses alive, the masses will take action to secure their own survival. When applied to California, Marx's theory predicts that the construction of the Peripheral Canal would put water prices into the profiteering hands of a concentrated elite, leaving many proletariat Delta farmers and low-income urban workers unable to afford the water needed for survival. The immediate inability to live would push the masses to revolt against the bourgeoisie and reform society under a new, non-capitalist system. In this way, Marx would see water privatization as a critical spark for the proletariat revolution.

In conclusion, Marx's theories on the political and ideological relationship between the State and the ruling class, along with his predictions for proletariat revolution, provide a unique analytical lens to examine the Peripheral Canal proposal and California water privatization as a whole. His arguments are well supported by the recent dealings between the California government and the small conglomeration of wealthy Central Valley farm owners and Southern California real estate tycoons. In addition, his prediction of a proletariat revolution becomes much more understandable in terms of water control and its direct impact on the survival of millions of Californians.

Works Cited

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The Looming Water Disaster That Could Destroy California, and Enrich Its Billionaire Farmers

By Yasha Levine, AlterNet Posted on March 23, 2010, Printed on March 28, 2010 <http://www.alternet.org/story/146130/>

Excerpts

Imagine the devastating flooding of Hurricane Katrina multiplied by epic sandstorms, drought and economic collapse of the Dust Bowl. Now picture it happening an hour east of Apple's headquarters in Silicon Valley and spreading all the way down to the Mexican border. It's not as far-fetched as you think. A routine 6.7-magnitude earthquake would be enough to set it off, liquefying the decrepit levee system that walls off California's main source of drinking water from the Pacific Ocean and triggering a deadly flood that would submerge roads, destroy homes, wipe out thousands of acres of farmland, snuff out countless lives and possibly cut over 20 million Californians off from their water supply for a year or more.

California's politicians have known about this looming catastrophe for decades. They also have had the power to neutralize the threat. But no one has done anything to prevent it. Just like the oligarchs who used the shock of Hurricane Katrina's destruction to tear down public housing, privatize public schools and pillage the city's poorest, California's most powerful business interests have positioned themselves to profit from this disaster. A handful of billionaire farmers and real estate developers are in line to pull off the most brazen water heist in American history, seizing control over much of Northern California's water supplies to do what they have always wanted: turn water, a shared public resource, into a private asset that can be traded on the open market.

The Peripheral Canal

It's all about the Peripheral Canal, a massive, multi-billion dollar aqueduct that would bypass the Delta region altogether and tap into the Sacramento-San Joaquin River further upstream, essentially allowing corporate farmers and Southern California's real estate tycoons to cut to the front of the Delta water line and have direct access to Northern California's water. Any major levee repairs would squelch one of the main reasons -- water safety -- being used to justify the construction of the aqueduct, which would cost up to \$40 billion and require the use of eminent domain to clear the path for its 50-mile run up north from pumping stations at the southern end of the Delta to the southern border of Sacramento.

The Peripheral Canal is more than just about cutting Delta farmers out of the game and taking their water. It is part of a bigger, more long-term strategy by a handful of farmers and urban water districts to lay down infrastructure that would enable the creation of a full-fledged "water market" that would allow them to acquire and sell Northern California's water to the highest bidder, like any other commodity.

Westlands and their billionaire farmer buddies will team up with Southern California real estate developers if all water transfers from the Delta first go through them. That way, the farmers would become the de facto middlemen in California's water market, harvesting subsidized water from the Delta at below-market cost, storing it in their vast underground water reservoirs and then flipping it to Southern California cities and suburbs for a massive profit. This has been a dream of California's water interests, and exactly the future that Enron was working towards when it set up its own water trading company in California at the height of the dot-com bubble.

You could see plenty of shady, conspiratorial forces at work after Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger convened the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force in 2006. On paper, the task force was created to come up with a solution to the Delta's levee problems. In reality, it was a thinly veiled PR job tasked with finding a way to sell the Peripheral Canal to an unsuspecting public. Its members represented the real estate industry, Southern California's urban interests, wealthy corporate farmers from the Central Valley, real estate developers, construction companies and just anyone else who stood to profit from a massive diversion of Northern California water. The only group not represented were the people who actually lived, worked and farmed in the Delta. Not surprisingly, the prevailing attitude of the committee was that the Delta was a dangerous, polluted stink-hole not worth saving.