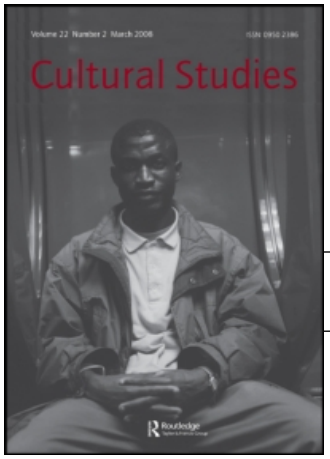

Cultural Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713684873

FROM WATER CRISIS TO WATER CULTURE

Vandana Shiva an interview by Andy Opel

Online Publication Date: 01 May 2008

To cite this Article: Shiva an interview by Andy Opel, Vandana (2008) 'FROM WATER CRISIS TO WATER CULTURE', Cultural Studies, 22:3, 498 — 509

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09502380802012591
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502380802012591

Interview

Dr Vandana Shiva, an interview by Andy Opel

FROM WATER CRISIS TO WATER CULTURE

Fresh water has gone through some significant changes over the past twenty years. What once had been sold by the gallon as an emergency storm supply in grocery stores in the U.S. is now marketed by the pint by global corporations. Public water supplies are increasingly pressured to privatize their services as local fresh water sources are bought by these same companies, and global trade agreements and international development organizations increasingly promote the privatization of fresh water supplies. Dr. Vandana Shiva has been a leading voice in the efforts to defend local water rights and promote new forms of "public-public" partnerships to protect fresh water supplies. For this issue of Cultural Studies*, Dr. Andy Opel interviewed Dr. Shiva about the connections between culture and water, how our cultural attitudes shape our water use and how we might change those cultural habits to ensure clean water for the future.*

Keywords water; globalization; water culture; earth democracy; privatization

Fresh water has gone through some significant changes over the past 20 years. What once had been sold by the gallon as an emergency storm supply in grocery stores in the US is now marketed by the pint by global corporations; Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Co and Nestle. Public water supplies are increasingly pressured to privatize their services as local fresh water sources are bought by these same companies. Global trade agreements and international development organizations [International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank] increasingly promote the privatization of fresh water supplies. Although water resource issues have received relatively little attention from the mainstream media,[1] these corporate moves have been coupled with increased attention from journalists, activists and scholars.[2] Dr Vandana Shiva has been a leading voice in the efforts to defend local water rights and promote new forms of 'public–public' partnerships to protect fresh water supplies. Dr Andy Opel has written about the bottled water industry (Opel 1999) as well as the intersection of

Cultural Studies Vol. 22, Nos. 3–4 May–July 2008, pp. 498–509
ISSN 0950-2386 print/ISSN 1466-4348 online
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals DOI: 10.1080/09502380802012591

environmentalism and popular culture. For purposes of this issue of *Cultural Studies*, they spoke across continents in December 2005 to exchange ideas about the connections between culture and water, how our cultural attitudes shape our water use and how we might change those cultural habits to ensure clean water for the future.

Opel: You have written the book *Water Wars* (Shiva 2002) as well as many articles, given numerous interviews and spoken publicly about global water resource issues.[3] Can you give us an update about where we are as a planet with regard to fresh water supplies?

Shiva: We are at a very precarious time with regard to global fresh water supplies because water is being treated like a non-renewable resource. Even though water can be available forever in adequate quantities according to the ecosystems and their water endowment, all of the technology of the last 50 years has been breaking out of the water cycle and breaking out of the culture of conservation and awareness of the water cycle. The entire system of industrial agriculture is based on obstructing rejuvenation of rivers, rejuvenation of aquifers. Basically, the 'so-called' additional food that is being produced is really additional water sucked out of the earth and sent off to the marketplace. I think industrial agriculture has done the maximum harm to fresh water and everywhere in the tropics, wherever industrial agriculture has spread, in countries like India, wherever green revolution technology has spread, that is where we have a water crisis.

Opel: So industrial agriculture is *the* leading cause of fresh water scarcity?

Shiva: Industrial agriculture and rampant industrialization, which could only be viable if it treated pollution as zero cost and treated the river as the place to carry the pollution. Just look at what's happened in China in the last few weeks, where river after river has had an accident, with the release of chemicals from industrial plants. From the Bhopal industrial disaster of 1984, the ground water is still contaminated there. The Yamuna the river on which Delhi has been built and has lived for millennia, in the last 20 years of industrialization, the Yamuna has become an industrial sewer, it is just carrying the waste of industry. This externalization of polluting industries is the second big burden on our fresh water. In my lifetime, really just 20 years ago, I could go travel anywhere in my country, go on treks, go in villages, just bend down and drink from any stream and any river and not get sick.

Opel: You have also used the term 'water cultures.' What do you mean by this term and how does a cultural perspective shed light on what many view as an economic commodity?

Shiva: When the awareness and consciousness of our living in the water cycle dies, that is when water culture dies. To me, water culture is the consciousness of water, the consciousness of being immersed in a water cycle, the consciousness of knowing that we are 70 percent water, and that the planet is 70 percent water, and to tread extremely lightly to ensure that water balance is not destroyed. Heightened water awareness creates water culture and water cultures build into them cultures like the sacredness of India's rivers. If Indian's could have such a long-term evolution of civilization in the Ganges basin, it is because the Ganges was related to as a sacred mother nourishing the entire basin. The culture that that creates is extremely different from the culture which sees water running into the sea as wasted and sees rivers as wild women to be tamed and creates the most violent technologies for rerouting rivers, imprisoning rivers and drying out rivers. That idea of control that develops technologies that disrupt the water cycle and impair the water culture goes hand-in-hand and are leading to the current thinking that water is just another commodity on the planet, you don't have to give it any special respect. And every right wing think tank that is promoting and supporting water privatization repeatedly states that water is just another commodity.

Opel: Could you describe what you mean when you say water cycle?

Shiva: The water cycle is the process through which water recycles itself. Water can never run out as long as it is allowed to recycle itself. As long as the forests evaporate the water, moves up into the clouds, forms precipitation, falls as snow, falls as rain, comes back to the ground, the ground welcomes those raindrops, welcomes the snow and in that welcoming, recharges the aquifers, realizes the rivers. That perennial reach out of water is the water cycle, the most efficient way of renewing water resources on the planet.

We are disrupting that water cycle by first destroying the places where water is held, catchments of our beautiful rivers. My first involvement with an environmental movement was working with the women of the high Himalayas who launched the 'chipko' movement.[4] Chipko means to embrace and they embraced trees to prevent logging. When they were hugging the trees to stop them from being logged, they were also embracing water because they recognized that forests are the protectors of water and it was their struggle over 10 years that led to a ban on logging in the catchment and changed water policy and changed water thinking. It did not come out of the scientists, it came out of peasant women who recognized the water cycle and that the cradle of recharging of our water sources on the planet are our catchment forests, that their stands are the biggest dams. Here we think of

dams as concrete, but they prevent water from recharging the ground, they prevent water from recharging along the entire basin. That is another disruption of the water cycle. And the third disruption of the water cycle is our mad romance with concrete. Look how we are paving over the world, blocking every drop from going back into the earth where it belongs. And it is no accident that we have. Combined with climate change, and climate change destabilizing the amount of water we receive in periods so we get too much rain when we shouldn't and too little when we should, combined with the blocking of drainage, the blocking of leaching of the ground water, we have increasing flood disasters. Bombay was drowned in floods this last June, Chennai (Madras) is under flood water now. We have become experts at disrupting the water cycle. We treat that as technological progress. Every step of destroying the water cycle is treated and defined as a step in progress.

Opel: You have written about a concept you call ecological democracy. Can you describe what you mean by ecological democracy? How do you think our cultural attitudes about natural resources such as water are connected to our larger political cultures? Does one need to be changed before the other? Can they be changed independent of one another?

Shiva: Ecological democracy or earth democracy means three things. It means, firstly, a democracy of all life, not just human life – all life, plant life, animal life, microbial life because all life has a right to have a share in the planet's water. All beings need water and ecological democracy recognizes our duty to other beings, not just to provide the human community with water. But earth democracy and ecological democracy for me is also democracy from the ground up. It's the democracy of the earth that has the highest decision-making powers in the places closest to where people live, use natural resources, have to handle ecosystems and have to handle the consequences of their actions. The third meaning for me of ecological democracy is a democracy that recognizes our ecological nature, our ecological identity and therefore recognizes that we are a biological species that needs water, that needs food and that these essentials are the most fundamental human rights, that they are everyday rights, everyday responsibilities that have to be looked after.

How do we connect it to the larger issue of political culture, political democracy? Well, we've just had the World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings in Hong Kong and these WTO meetings have increasingly grasped more and more spheres of life, so the trade relations in intellectual property rights agreement took over control of biodiversity by introducing patents on life forms, piracy of traditional knowledge. The new general agreements on

trade in services (GATS) and the whole services text that has been adopted in Hong Kong includes among other things the privatization and commodification of water. Earth democracy basically addresses this worldview of the world as a supermarket, the world as a place where things are bought and sold, the recognition that where there is no ecosystem, there is no culture. Earth democracy addresses this narrowing of our political culture both by reclaiming democracy for people and reclaiming democracy for all of life so that we are able to re-embed our actions – our economic actions, our ecological actions – within the earth family, within the diversity of species on this planet.

Opel: I appreciate what you are saying. We need to democratize the trade agreement process because we know that they have been anti-democratic from the beginning.

Shiva: And there are certain things that you cannot democratize at that distant level. You cannot have, as we have seen again and again, 150 countries trying to represent their millions of citizens. They can not then make appropriate decisions about how water should be used, how water should be managed at a global level, driven by the trade and commodification paradigm. They will eventually sign on to an inappropriate decision driven largely by those who would commodify our fundamental needs.

Opel: 'Globalization' and 'the marketplace' are the new meta-narratives of our time. You have made a distinction between the market paradigm and an ecological paradigm. Can you describe this distinction and give us any examples of movement toward an ecological paradigm?

Shiva: All the work I have done over the past two decades is really to not just talk and think about alternatives to the market paradigm and an ecological paradigm but to actually shape it, shape it on action. If you think about water, the places where we are making a difference and where we are building a water democracy and building an ecological paradigm, is in cases for example of creating alternatives to the privatization being pushed by the World Bank. In Delhi, we have managed to stop that privatization, first by mobilizing communities all along the Ganges from where the water was to be brought to then be commodified and sold by Suez, the world's biggest water corporation. We've also continued to work with the Delhi communities on conservation. We have enough water in Delhi as long as it is conserved and as long as it is shared.

Scarcity is a product of the market paradigm. Scarcity is a product of the market thinking, 'Oh, the river Yamuna is there as a sink, let's throw all our

waste into it.' It creates scarcity by polluting our rivers. It creates scarcity by allowing some people to get their water and others to have none. Ecological paradigm recognizes that everyone has an equal access to water, an equal right to water, and those equal rights allow us to make sure we can share and conserve what is there. Our work in Delhi and the water democracy movement we have built there, shows that if communities engage in conservation and recycling, there is no scarcity, there is no need for corporations to enter our water economy.

The other place where the ecological paradigm in water is really built beautifully is in agriculture. I mentioned the largest waste of water is in industrial farming. We don't need a lot of water for growing good food. Chemicals need a lot of water. It is chemical farming that needs intensive water and intensive irrigation. We have reduced water use, through organic farming, by 60–70 percent and still maintaining crop yields and sometimes even increasing crop yields because it means a deeper agriculture of care. And one of the most beautiful movements that has evolved over the past few years in India is the movement to threat the ecological paradigm as a paradigm of living democracy. The villages declare themselves as earth republics. Republics in which the family is the trees, the plants, the animals, the goats, the buffalo, everything together, one family. And within that earth family, is a clear recognition that you have to protect all life and you have to use your resources in ways that all life has a share. Which means that you have to change your farming systems from chemical farming that destroys the earthworms, that pollutes the water, to organic farming. You have to shift your ways of doing forestry from monocultures for the pulp industry to ecological forestry for the needs of all. The living democracy movement focuses on the conservation of biodiversity, the production of ecological foods and the conservation and sharing of water. And it is able from the ground to address the passing laws of WTO and say, 'We are sorry, we have higher laws. We cannot think of biodiversity as the property of some corporation so we are compelled to not obey the WTO laws. We have higher laws with respect to water and our water culture says we must share and we cannot commodify. We will continue to hold our water as sacred, a sacred resource to be shared for all life.' I feel extremely empowered and extremely hopeful with the emergence of these new movements shaping a new ecological paradigm and a new earth democracy.

Opel: Last summer, Indian photographer Sharad Haksar created a billboard from a photo of water jugs lined up at a pump in front of a Coca-Cola billboard.[5] This pictured served as a commentary on the water shortages in India, drawing attention to the 500,000–1.5 million liters of water a day used by Coke to manufacture soft drinks in the bottling plant in the Palakkad district

of Kerala. This sign also drew attention to the fact that it takes seven times the amount of fresh water to manufacture one bottle of Coke. You have been a vocal critic of Coke as well and I wanted to ask what you thought of this form of 'culture jamming' and how this type of activism might play into broader efforts to change the 'water cultures?'

Shiva: For me, it was culture jamming when I went in 2002 to join the women of Pallakad who were fighting the Coca-Cola plant which was destroying 1.5 million liters of water a day. And here they were, the women who were having to walk extra miles because Coke had polluted and destroyed their water. Their culture of water verses the Coke commodification of water, in a way that movement itself was cultural jamming. And now, Sarad Haksar's photograph as you describe it, in a way reflects an imagery that of the real life political culture jamming these women have done. They have shut down that plant and I say three cheers to them and three cheers to Sarad Haksar.

Opel: In many ways, cultural habits around water use are driven by infrastructure – our toilets in the West use 1.5–2 gallons with every flush and faucets and showerheads rarely restrict water flow. In your book *Water Wars* you write about the community construction of Johads, water retention pods that capture monsoon rains. Can you talk about the connection between material infrastructure and the habits of water use? How much of our 'water culture' is determined by the tools we surround ourselves with? Do you think we need to change the way people think or rather change the material conditions that shape their actions?

Shiva: I think we need to change both and both feed each other. I think if we think of water as a very precious gift that we have to nurture, conserve and recycle, then we will not use it in a wasteful, careless way. Then we will build the caring through conserving it with the Johads, we will take that extra walk in order to not have millions of gallons flushing down toilets. We will make news designs that do not assume abundant water in order to be able to recycle our own waste – to turn it into a replenishment for the soil. We have an ancient bit of wisdom that says everything is food, everything is something else's food. We need to recognize that we too need to recycle ourselves in order to be able to recycle water. The way we think decides the material conditions we make, what technologies we shape. If we think of water as a gift we must care for, we will have a decentralized system of low water use technologies. If we think of water as a non-renewable resource whose access is determined by how much you can pay for it and you don't have to care about how far it came from, how much it's exploitation led to crisis for someone else, we will then support large dam building, we will support building canals and mad projects like the one in India that is being supported now by the World Bank called the river linking project

that is basically a river rerouting project. Corporations that get into water privatization are actually civil engineering companies. They've made their money building; the Suez Canal, Bechtel making giant sized dams. They will continue to shape the material infrastructure that creates a carelessness with respect to water because they thrive on that carelessness. That carelessness in fact takes away our sovereignty. If we have to care for water, we have to take responsibility for water, we have to reclaim democracy.

Opel: Keeping with the idea of changing 'water cultures' – I want to ask about the pathways to change. In the US, we don't hear about the case studies you are talking about and we are increasingly saturated with commercial, corporate media who derive significant advertising revenue from the companies working the hardest to privatize water supplies (Pepsi-Co, Nestle and the Perrier Group, Suez/Vivendi). What role will the global media play in changing 'water cultures?' Is there a media strategy you would recommend to local activists?

Shiva: The corporate media is designed to create consumers. It is designed to silence the narrative of what is happening to real people in their lives. Corporate media presents the image that water comes from these corporations rather than that it comes from the earth and is cared for by us. The role of the corporate media is increasingly to create water illiteracy and to create and support a water dictatorship. How do we have a media strategy? By pluralizing our communication system, recognizing that what corporate media says is not the only way to talk to each other. We don't have to talk via the corporate media, there are lots of other ways of talking and other ways of knowing about reality. The fact that you are talking to me today is part of the alternative beyond corporate media. This is communication beyond the communication of corporate control.

Opel: The public resistance to Bechtel's attempt to privatize the water supply in Cochabamba Bolivia resulted in canceling Bechtel's contract and renewed support for maintaining a public water utility. This was fueled in part by news that Bechtel would raise water prices by 35 percent. While the outcome of this story is encouraging for local communities attempting to defend their natural resources from multinational corporations, the impetus to action could be argued to be the result of financial self-interest. Do you think financial pressures are the primary forces that will mobilize local communities? If so, how do you reconcile this with the economists who claim the only way to safeguard water is to attach a monetary value to it? Are these two sides of the same coin?

Shiva: Wasters of water are those who can pay lots of money to buy it. Conservers of water are those who have no money. The most important water conservers are those who walk miles to collect a pot of water. They cannot

afford to waste that water. Those who can build swimming pools in desert areas and irrigate golf courses and manage to pay that high price will never ever conserve a drop of water. High prices and high value are not the same thing. You can have very high prices for water and value it very low by treating it as just another commodity, not as the basis of life itself. And in that context, I would say it is not true that the people of Cochabamba only responded in financial terms when the price of water was going up. The slogan of the movement was 'water is life.' Water is Life – it was a cultural statement and of course the high prices was the ground for resistance but was not the basis for thinking about water.

Opel: Economist, engineer and ranking World Bank's ranking water advisor John Briscoe argues for a mix of public and private supervision of water supplies. In the US, most of us pay for metered water from a public utility that acts as a monopoly in most cases. Briscoe (2005a) argues that one alternative is 'to assign property rights to users and then allow them to trade those rights. This is not a "free market." Indeed, it requires a great deal of regulation. Informal markets have long existed wherever there has been water scarcity. But in recent decades, there has been enormous progress in establishing formal markets in places like California in the United States, Chile, Australia and Mexico' [online]. What do you see as the tensions or balance between public and private management of water supplies?

Shiva: We know John Briscoe because he keeps recommending privatization. The real tension in what is called public–private partnerships is that these arrangements are all about the public bearing the cost and the private walking away with profit from water treaties. I am among those who believe that the only way you can really sustain the water on this planet and sustain human life on the basis of converting water is to recognize that water by its very nature is a public good. And it must be managed as a public good and of course, each of as a part of the community, are also individuals and so society has public and private built right into it. But the idea that giant, private corporations and small, tiny municipal authorities can have an equal partnership, particularly under the pressure of the World Bank financing policies, is totally false. And is made so clear in the case of Delhi, where every step of the way since 1998, the World Bank twisted the arms of the local public utility and forced the utility to farm out contracts, increasing the costs 10–20 times more, increasing the financial burden of the public utility. That sort of public–private partnership is leading to socialism for capital, socialism for corporations. They are supported by the public utilities, they are supported by public finance, and they are supported by public resources and common resources. The public has been marginalized in making these decisions. Briscoe's statement that 'the greatest benefit of getting the private sector involved is precisely that it brings greater public scrutiny,

openness and accountability' is also a total lie, because all of these contracts are secret contracts. Never are they made public. The World Bank's own loans are not public knowledge. The contracts they force our governments to sign with companies are not public knowledge. The cases that were brought against us when we fought these companies to leave our countries were conducted in secret courts in London, and Bechtel dragged Bolivia to a court in Amsterdam, these are not public.

These are systems based on secrecy. These are systems based on exclusion and these are systems based on corruption and lack of accountability. Private players have always fixed our tap and laid the pipeline. That is a whole different contractual arrangement than giant corporations being brought in by the World Bank clout and that being called a public–private partnership. The alternative to that is what I call public–public partnership. The citizens as public, working with the public utilities, to manage water as a public good and conserve water as a common property resource for all people and for the good of all. In the report that John Briscoe (2005b) released for India about two to three months ago, they have very clearly attacked the concept of water as a commons and communities having rights to water. For us, that is the pillar of a water culture – that water is a commons and communities have rights. It will be interesting to watch over the next decade which paradigm wins, the water privatization paradigm or the water democracy paradigm that we fight for.

Opel: Briscoe (2005a) has also argued that 'the greatest benefit of getting the private sector involved is precisely that it brings greater public scrutiny, openness and accountability' [online]. Clearly, efforts to privatize water are eliciting greater public scrutiny and more often outrage. In many ways privatization attempts are serving to mobilize local communities. In a globalized world where national sovereignty is often trumped by global trade agreements, what advice do you have for local communities working to defend their public water supplies?

Shiva: My first suggestion is to just look at the record. Privatization is failing. Even though the propaganda machinery is so intense, on the ground more privatization projects have failed than succeeded. Second, we don't just have a right to water; we have a duty to water. We have a duty to conserve water. That duty I believe is one of our highest duties as human beings on this planet. Other species do not have the capacity to destroy water as much as we do. And therefore, as a species, we have to be part of shaping movements for ecological democracy, for ecological renewal of our resources. From the work I have done over 30 years, and the fact that I have been a physicist and I am scientifically literate, I can tell you one thing. The more we conserve water, the better quality of life we create for ourselves. The idea of progress based on

the destruction of water as a measure of progress is obsolete. It does not belong to this century. This century has to be based on recognizing that the more we protect our water, the more evolved we are as a species.

Opel: Thank you Dr Shiva for taking the time to speak with me.

Acknowledgements

Andy Opel would like to thank Dr Michelle Laurents, Eric Welch and WVFS 89.7FM for their production assistance with this interview.

Notes

1 Water privatization was the number one most censored story in 2000, according to Project Censored [online].
2 Glennon (2004), Barlow and Clark (2003), and Ward (2002).
3 See Vandana Shiva's ZNet Homepage [online] and the Navdanya Homepage [online].
4 For a brief description of the movement, see Chipko Movement, India [online].
5 For more information on Haksar and this billboard, see Sharad Haksar [online] and India Resource Center [online].

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