

The Biopolitics of Water

Technology, Subjectivity and Lifestyle in eThekweni Municipality, South Africa

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Abstract

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Water issues have for a long time been of central political concern in South Africa due to the scarcity of the resource. During the apartheid era, the distribution of water was deeply intertwined with a nationalist and racist agenda. In the transition to democracy in 1994, water became an important issue, both symbolically and materially, for a redistribution of resources within the country. This thesis explores the effects of this shift in water politics in the local context of eThekweni municipality. The municipality has been argued to be an exemplary case in relation to global norms of water management. It has, however, also been the target of severe critique.

Based on narrative interviews with water users in the municipality the thesis inquires into how the arrangement of water service delivery matters in terms of people's lives. On the basis of these narratives, the thesis shows how water governance can be understood as biopolitically performative in the way that notions of Self and Other and distinctions between different lifestyles are shaped. Ultimately, such a biopolitical reading of the water users' narratives illustrates how an implementation of the right to basic water can work so as to (re)produce, or further entrench, distinctions between different forms of life.

Keywords: Water, South Africa, Sustainable Development, Biopolitics, (Green) Governmentality, Hydropolitics, Technology, Narrative method, Life(style), Subjectivity