The political ecology of water memory: Contending narratives of past hydraulic infrastructures in Barcelona (2015–2021)

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ABSTRACT

In the context of ecological emergency and crisis of representation of the capitalist democracy, the battles over water management have become ever more politicised: who is to administer water resources, how, and with what legitimacy? This article examines a disregarded dimension of the recent water conflict in Barcelona by looking into the politics of memory as part of a struggle for legitimacy between the private water company Agbar, and Barcelona en Comú (BeC), the political platform governing the city since 2015, and defending the 'remunicipalisation' of water. By combining memory studies and critical discourse analysis we pay attention to the dynamic resignification of the hydraulic infrastructure as spaces or "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*; Nora, 1998). Barcelona en Comú narrative retrieves a forgotten past of local sites and experiences in public management of water. In contrast, Agbar defends its legitimacy by advancing a narrative of linear progress and social inclusion that re-signifies its 150-year long history and co-opts key "empty signifiers" (Laclau, 2005) from the discourse of the *Indignados* and BeC. Theoretically, we advance that a temporal turn in political ecology and geography, complementing the concern with spatiality, could usefully draw on memory studies to analyse the growing memorialization of water discourses and sites, as well as their political significance. The article thus investigates a question that has not been systematically explored by political ecologists: how the entanglement of space and historical memory is mobilized in the conflict over the use and management of the environment.

"So, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."
F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

1. Introduction

In the context of the environmental emergency and the crisis of representation of capitalist democracy, water management has become ever more politicised: who is to administer water resources, how, and with what legitimacy? In recent years, various anti-privatisation movements emerged around the world, some of them in alliance with larger 'municipalist' programmes which profoundly politicised the urban space (Bakker, 2010, 2013; Beveridge, 2012). The literature focused on this topic has also flourished, looking at how these movements imagine and enact alternative 'water futures' that break with the

neoliberal 'common sense' (Bakker, 2010; Bagué, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2011, 2018, Gandy, 2010). However, significant gaps remain: first, whereas scholars of political ecology have predominantly focused on the spatialisation of water politics as well as its history (Gandy, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2015; Menga & Swyngedouw, 2020; Moss, 2021; Gorostiza et al., 2012, March & Saurí, 2020), there has been less concern with the analysis of the politics of hydraulic memory in the context of struggles for power and legitimacy. We thus advance that a 'temporal turn' in political ecology, complementing the concern with spatiality, could usefully draw on memory studies to analyse the growing memorialization of water[1] discourses, sites, as well as their political significance. Second, existing studies in political and critical geography, with an interest in 'new municipalism' (for an overview see Thomson, 2020; also, Russel, 2019; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017), tend to focus predominantly on the 'insurgent' movements, overlooking the reaction of the water

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companies and the ensuing dialectic between public and private actors (McDonald, 2019).[2]

This article examines a disregarded dimension of the anti-privatisation movement in Barcelona (see Popartan et al., 2020) by looking into the politics of hydraulic memory as part of a conflict between the the private water company Agbar, and Barcelona en Comú (BeC), the political platform governing the city since 2015, and defending the 'remunicipalisation' of water.[3] The article thus looks into a question that has not been systematically explored by political ecologists: how the entanglement of space and historical memory is mobilized in the conflict over the use and management of the environment (Gezon, 1999). By combining memory studies and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Howarth & Torfing, 2005; Laclau, 2005; Nora, 1998), we analyse the clash of memory narratives and the dynamic resignification of hydraulic infrastructures as spaces or sites of memory (Nora, 1998) through discourse and "acts of citizenship" (Isin and Saward, 2013).

The creation of the Barcelona en Comú citizen platform in 2014, rooted in the Indignados movement, and its victory in the 2015 municipal elections in Barcelona, led by Ada Colau, was followed by the politicisation of issues such as water, energy, housing, gender or environment. In relation to the question of water, this political change entailed an effort to publicly delegitimize Agbar, which was framed as private capitalist actor undermining "real democracy" (Popartan et al., 2020). In this conflict, the memory of the urban water infrastructure became a crucial battleground.

By drawing on its concern with the memorialization of water and in response to the recent challenge of 'remunicipalisation', Agbar has developed its own politics of memory by re-signifying its 150-yearlong history of water management in Barcelona (Pascual & Agbar Foundation, 2017).[4] Agbar has symbolically unearthed the sunken infrastructures of the city as "icons" of water engineering (Kaika & Swyngedou, 2000), which have thus become enmeshed in the struggle for the urban imagination and power. It is noteworthy that it was Agbar who first mobilized the water memory in the conflict, building on the company's traditional involvement with the preservation of historical hydraulic infrastructures in Catalunya (see later). In this process, it managed to co-opt and reinterpret key "empty signifiers" (Laclau, 2005, p. 68) of the discourse of the Indignados and BeC ('people', 'proximity', 'neighbourhood') (Subirats, 2016) and thus developed a grand narrative of linear progress and social inclusion. In turn, BeC engaged in the "public use of history" (Habermas & Leamen, 1988) and articulated a politics of hydraulic memory best embodied in the Water Memorial (2018–2019) premised on a discontinuous temporality and decentralized geography of water.

In the following, we proceed by analysing this conflict over the urban hydraulic memory in three steps. First, we combine insights from critical discourse analysis and memory studies so as to provide a framework of analysis sensitive to the weaving of the spatial and the temporal dimensions of politicisation. In this context, by drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1981), we distinguish between two ideal-types of politics of memory: a monoglossic one, which puts across a unitary and totalizing account of history, versus a heteroglossic politics of memory,

which is open and develops through the participation of the "plurality" (Arendt, 1998) of citizens (I).

On this theoretical basis, we examine the opposite memorialization strategies of Agbar (II) and BeC (III). The analysis of the empirical case is based on research that took place between 2017 and 2021 and considers electoral programs, communication outlets (e.g., official webs, Twitter) as well as the in-depth analysis of two campaigns: Water Memorial (BeC) and the District Memorial booklets (Agbar). Our research also relies on 20 semi-structured interviews with actors on both sides, including experts on communication, historians and public servants.

2. The political ecology of water memory: a framework of analysis

Water has been the focus of constant tension between processes of politicisation and depoliticisation whereby hydraulic infrastructures and their underlying power relations appear and disappear from the public eye. This historical dialectic of (de)politicisation generates new geographies and "natures" (Gandy, 2014; Moss, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2015). In this sense, the process of urbanisation has been oftentimes accompanied by the depoliticisation of the water resources, which become "self-evident, an apparent triviality, located simply at the mouth of the tap" (Kaika & Swyngedou, 2000, p. 135). Thereby, the hydraulic infrastructure, this "underbelly of the city" (Kaika & Swyngedou, 2000, p. 135), is banished from everyday collective consciousness. Popular movements have been struggling to politicise water infrastructures by bringing them back into the "domain of the sensible" (Rancière, 2004), making visible the inherent social relations of power inscribed therein.

When exploring this dialectic, political ecologists and geographers have underscored the spatialisation of the water politics as well as its history (Gandy, 1999, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2015). Yet, they have been less concerned with the role of memorialization discourses and the sites of memory mobilized in political conflicts (but see Harmanşah, 2014). By systematically arguing for a social ontology that gives a crucial place to the performativity of language and its role in struggles for power and legitimation, CDA provides a fruitful background for the uses of memory narratives and their embeddedness in power relations. Conversely, the field of memory studies provides an interest in the materialization of memory that can escape the focus of discourse analysis. Memory studies draw attention to the co-dependence of the spatial and temporal dimensions of social practices by focusing on the "*lieux de mémoire*" ("sites of memory", Nora, 1998) and the relevance of memorialization for the construction of political practices. Let us briefly review the contribution of CDA and memory studies to our case study.

a. Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA undertakes a systematic reflection on social ontology, which gives an important role to how we "do things with words" (Austin, 1975), namely to the performativity of linguistic exchanges and narratives in the construction of socio-natural reality (Butler, 1997; Howarth & Torfing, 2005; Laclau, 2005). Further, CDA is convincing in arguing that the linguistic exchanges and narratives are embedded in relations of power that are constitutive to social practices. Narratives, as structured discourses, are part of the game of (de)legitimation of power relations. These legitimation narratives are historical constructions, which can be challenged by alternative powers and discourses as well as by dislocating events - a war, a pandemic, or a disruptive social movement such as *Indignados*. Especially in moments of crisis, new collective subjects emerge, and alternative narratives challenge the status quo (Laclau, 2005); the new subjects articulating counter-narratives can reconfigure the existing field of power and discourse.

For this paper, we rely particularly on the CDA scholarship commonly known as the Essex School of discourse analysis, founded on the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as it provides not only useful reflections on social ontology but also interrelated conceptual

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[2] According to Thomson (2020, p. 317), new municipalism "is a nascent global social movement aiming to democratically transform the local state and economy".

[3] The term remunicipalisation generically refers to the process by which a municipality recovers the direct management of water services. In the case of Barcelona, the term is a matter of debate in the sense that water is, legally speaking, public and only its management can be outsourced. To account for this, we use quotation marks when referring to the Barcelona case.

[4] We use interchangeably "water memory" and "hydraulic memory". "Hydraulic memory" is, however, more suggestive, as it captures better the materiality of the conflict (Kaika & Swyngedou, 2000).

tools: "empty signifier", "floating signifiers" and "chain of equivalence" (Laclau, 2005; Howarth & Torfing, 2015). These concepts help us analyse the role of narratives in the emergence of new geographies and political configurations. As Laclau argues, especially in moments of crisis, fragmented social and political demands, which are not met by the establishment, tend to build alliances. In Laclau's terms, this means that they become gradually articulated, despite their heterogeneity, into "chains of equivalence", eventually creating new collective subjects (Laclau, 2005, pp. 74–75; Howarth, Glynos & Grigs, 2016). These subjects are not constructed in abstract but in antagonism with the existing hegemonic power, framed as 'the establishment', 'the elite', and the like. This gradual process of politicisation is centred on the discursive production of "empty signifiers": these signifiers can be general concepts such as 'democracy', 'people', or 'nation', which gain particular meaning in the framework of a narrative (Howarth & Torfing, 2015). In other words, the signifiers are empty to the extent that they are open to interpretative struggles. To exemplify, in the communist ideology, pre-existing available signifiers (democracy, freedom, state) acquire a new meaning by being articulated around the signifier "communism". Likewise, to anticipate, "people", "participation", *veí (local resident)*[5] and "proximity" are empty signifiers in the discourses of the two actors analysed here. In this sense, these signifiers become "floating signifiers" if, in the conflict for hegemony, they circulate (float) between the contending parts.

b. Space-time and politics of memory

Memory studies have been sensitive to the double space-time dimension captured by Pierre Nora's famous phrase "lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory) (Nora, 1998).[6] Taking our cue from Nora but also from philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, we argue for the relevance of examining how space and time, i.e. spatialisation and memorialization, are mobilized in the battle for specific, politicised visions of "urbanisation of nature" (Heynen, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2018). As Derrida points out in Margins of Philosophy, "one cannot treat space and time as two concepts or as two themes" (Derrida, 1982, p. 55). Instead, the constitution of social-natural space or the "spacing", in Derrida's and Nancy's terminology (Derrida, 1982; Nancy, 2018, p. 20), occurs in co-dependence with the historical dynamic of meaningful practices. According to Nancy "(s)pacing itself is not an inert interval. It is exposition" (Nancy, 2018, p. 23) – that is a meaningful disclosure (Erschlossenheit)[7] which is constitutive to and at once

constituted by temporality. From this standpoint, 'objects' or material resources such as water are not neutral instances that fill the space-time but are socially signified through discourse and experience.

The field of memory studies throws light on the spatial materialization of memory and thus contributes to the discursive (re)signification of water infrastructures into "sites of memory". They are set up and preserved through performative acts such as public celebrations, textbooks, documents, mass media and education policies. As Sturken notes, "(w)hat memories tell us, more than anything, is the stakes held by individuals and institutions in attributing meaning to the past" (Sturken, 1997, p. 9). Memory constructions are characterized by plasticity; they are performatively crafted and recrafted so as to answer cultural, social, religious and political imperatives of the present conveyed by different forces and groups in society. As Schwartz argues, "(t)o remember is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present" (1982, p. 374) and the interests of constructing the future. The "sites of memory" may thus become "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012); in this process, the past provides legitimacy for the political battles of the present.

In particular, here we are concerned with the constitution of hydraulic memory sites and narratives in the struggle for power and legitimacy in public spaces. By drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), we distinguish between "monoglossic" and "heteroglossic" types of politics of memory: the former articulates the space-time of memory through one voice or language (glossa, γλῶσσα); in turn, a heteroglossic politics articulates memory through a plurality of voices and discourses.[8] To illustrate, the modern process of memorialization has been predominantly pursued in the context of the nation-state building. Driven by a top-down interest in building a state-community bound in space-time, such politics of memory have been overwhelmingly monoglossic. As Nora argues, as nation-states have set up and institutionalized sites of memory, they have tended to homogenize the plurality of local memories (Nora, 1998) into one grand narrative. Thus, the monoglossic politics of memory often erases divergent trends, moral failures, ambivalences, and singular histories; thereby, it tends to dissolve difference and ambiguity into a reconciling unity with mythical undertones. Such a strategy involves the creation of memory laws, archives, textbooks, museums, memorials, etc. In this process, as Sturken argues, "(q)uestions of who is sanctioned to speak of particular memories are often raised, and issues of difference and exclusion from the 'imagined community' of the nation come to the fore" (Maurantonio, 2017; Sturken, 1997, p. 13).

Yet, even if any politics of (ecological) memory involves a degree of narrative coherence (thus privileging specific stories), they can be heteroglossic in that they reflect a plurality of discourses, voices and resistant forces in society (Mihai, 2022). Retrieving the historical heteroglossia can be part of an alternative political agenda (consider feminist and postcolonial struggles), which aims to criticize the erasures of the hegemonic narrative and excavate marginalized narratives, ambivalent voices and forgotten sites of memory (Mihai, 2022). To anticipate, in terms of strategy and content, BeC claims not to "impose" a totalizing and closed memory narrative, but to performatively engage the plurality of citizens' voices in a decentralized struggle for the "distribution of the sensible" against the perceived monopoly of Agbar. It is, however, important to note that our definitions are ideal-typical. Concrete phenomena do not necessarily fall neatly into one category: BeC's politics of memory has heteroglossic features, yet it also aims to build a new hegemonic narrative through the active intervention of public authorities (see later).

In sum, CDA and memory studies provide, we argue, a fruitful analytical framework for the political uses of ecological memory

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[5] There is no ideal translation for the Catalan (*veí*) and Spanish (*vecino*) in the context of remunicipalization struggles. In contrast to the English "neighbor", *veí/vecino* can refer to all the residents of a neighbourhood. It is important to keep in mind that for BeC and Agbar "*veí/vecino*" is a proxy of "people", aiming to convey a relation of affective proximity, on the one hand, as well as the bottom-up participation of common people in the construction of legitimacy, on the other. Due to this complex meaning, in the text we use the original *veí* (local resident).

[6] In this paper we use Nora's classic broad definition of sites of memory, which we apply as well to new phenomena (e.g. social media). In Nora's words, "If the expression *lieu de memoire* must have an official definition, it should be this: *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case, the French community)" (Nora, 1988, xvii). Site of memory refers then to any place, object or concept vested with historical significance in the popular collective memory, such as a museum, monument, an event (e.g. a public celebration), an object (national flag; a coin). Moreover, sites of memory can be virtual and digital, and they can refer to a tweet or a Facebook posting.

[7] The concept of disclosure is Heidegger's in *Being and Time*, and it refers to how things become intelligible and meaningful to human beings, by virtue of being part of the *world*. This concept is at the basis of Derrida's and Nancy's views; however, the later developed a more systematic and less metaphysical reflection on space.

[8] In Bakhtin's view, any language is marked by heteroglossia as it is stratified into a plurality of social and cultural "dialects" and voices. Here we adapt Bakhtin's terminology to the context of the politics of memory.

narratives and to answer questions such as: what water infrastructures and site are made visible, by whom and to serve which legitimation narrative?

We move now to the analysis of the conflict of memory narratives in the struggles between Agbar and BeC.

3. Background: the politicisation of water in Barcelona

Barcelona's water service has been managed privately under different forms since the nineteenth century with a brief interlude during the Spanish Civil War (Gorostiza et al., 2012). In particular, Aigües de Barcelona, a public-private company in which Agbar[9] holds the majority of shares, has been in charge of the water management in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, successfully adapting to changing political regimes (Gaya, 2014). The decisive shift towards the politicisation of water was the effect of the *Indignados* mobilizations starting in May 2011. The Indignados overtook public squares and streets in many Spanish cities to protest austerity policies and demand "Real Democracy Now!". A key moment in this process was November 2011, when different anti-privatisation platforms and movements formed the activist platform Aigua és vida (Water is life, AeV) (Bagué & Varo, 2018). *Indignados*, AeV and, starting with 2014, BeC signalled private companies managing water as the "enemy of real democracy", and championed a new narrative and management of water as a 'right' and a 'common good' (Interview #7).

BeC's critical discourse can, generally speaking, be labelled as democratic-populist, as it was articulated around the opposition of "those from below" against "those from above" (Rodriguez, 2016, p. 60, Popartan et al., 2020; Ungureanu & Popartan, 2020; Ungureanu & Serrano, 2019), i.e. between two key empty signifiers - 'the people' (the 99%) and 'the elite' (the 1%). This dichotomist narrative has been expressed through grassroots "acts of citizenship" (Isin and Saward, 2013) involving occupying public spaces and direct-communicative strategies: 'the square', 'the street' and 'the neighbourhood' were the main discursive and material sites of the assembly politics of grassroots movements. A similar dichotomist framing of water was based on a "moral story" (Lakoff, 2016) or narrative, built around signifiers such as 'real democracy', 'elite', 'people', 'participation', 'common goods', and 'decentralization'.

Accordingly, water is to be publicly administered, and controlled by public participation (Interview #7). This Manichean vision applied to the question of water has been pursued by AeV and BeC under the slogan-metaphors "Water is life" and "Water is democracy". These cognitive metaphors (Lakoff, 2016) are not neutral, but they are fighting words which aim to mobilize citizens and negatively frame the adversary as enemy by an appeal to "absolutes" (life, democracy) so as to bring home a moral-political idea: the public governance of water is meant to protect and enhance life and democracy, while private capitalist corporations undermine them.

Importantly, the 150 years of Agbar's presence in the water management of the city was discursively portrayed an elite's 'theft' of what naturally pertains to the citizens or the people (Interview #8). However, beyond the condemnation of the large history of private water management, BeC did not develop a systematic politics of hydraulic memory until 2018 (see section IV). Up to this point, the producer of the official hydraulic history was Agbar, who would traditionally collaborate with the previous municipal authorities in this endeavour. In the next section we reflect on how this discourse changed in the context of the 'remunicipalisation' discursive challenge.

4. "The word 'veí' is not yours": Agbar's politics of memory

The memorialization of the water in Barcelona and its Metropolitan Area has been inextricably linked to Agbar. The company traditionally collaborated with the public authorities and summoned relevant experts and public intellectuals to organize cultural undertakings dedicated to the hydraulic patrimony of the city. In 2004, Agbar, in syntony with the public authorities of that time, founded the "Museu Agbar de les Aigües" (The Agbar Water Museum)[10], the largest cultural infrastructure of its kind in the area. In 2011, four years before the electoral victory of municipalist forces, Agbar and the municipality organized a major exhibition at the Museu d'Història de Barcelona (History Museum of Barcelona - MUHBA) titled "The Revolution of Water in Barcelona. Running water and modern city 1867–1967" (see Guàrdia, 2011). The tone and intention of these enterprises were didactic and told a story of urban progress, intimately connected with the modernization of the water infrastructure. This consensualist discourse was also completely devoid of any political undertones. The visibilisation of the water history in Barcelona was thus premised on its invisibilisation as a political-contentious issue.

With the coming into power of the municipalist forces, the traditional collaboration between Agbar and the local authorities in the cultural domain broke down. One of the interviewed company employees lamented this distancing: "we have invested in the water patrimony for many years [...] we could have continued to help them, promote la Casa de l'Aigua for instance … they didn't want us to [...]" (Interview #10). In turn, the company's deployed its own battery of communicational devices to defend its legitimacy (see Popartan et al., 2020 for the analysis of other campaigns); water memory became a key tool. Agbar maintained the linear-progressive narrative, but it now put more accent on its democratic dimension: it provided a vision of modernization and reconciliation between capitalism and democracy, private companies and common people. Importantly, this vision was now underpinned by an agonistic mimetism, i.e. a process whereby the contenders in a socio-political struggle co-opt (Holdo, 2019) – often implicitly - key discourses and practices of their opponents in order to neutralize them. As the documents analyzed here illustrate, the company laid claim to several key signifiers of the opponent's discourse – 'proximity', 'people', 'veïns' and 'democracy' - which become, in Laclauian terms, "floating signifiers" (see Laclau, 2005).

Different types of discourses - from the issue of a new 'official' water history to Agbar's public campaigning (see Popartan et al., 2020) - have contributed to this renewed democratic politics of memory. A paradigmatic example in this sense is the publication of "*Aigües de Barcelona, 150 anys als servei de la ciutat*" (*Aigües* de Barcelona: 150 years in the service of the city), celebrating the 150th anniversary of Agbar as an agent of modernization in Barcelona and Catalunya. In the fashion of the monograph authored by Voltes Bou in 1967 (Voltes Bou, 1967) with the occasion of Agbar's 100th anniversary, this work broadly maintains a 'neutral', academic tone. In this sense, the book does not shy away from explaining in detail the more 'delicate' moments in the history of the company. One such example is the acknowledgement of the excellent

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[9] "Agbar" stands for "Societat General d'Aigües de Barcelona", also known as SGAB. It is to be distinguished from "Aigües de Barcelona", which is the public-private company with an almost identical name, in which Agbar/SGAB holds the majority of shares. For purposes of discourse analysis, Agbar is used generically for both cases.

[10] Cornellà de Llobregat is a municipality that is part of the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona. It is key to the history of the company since it is home to important landmarks, including the Water Museum. The Museum itself is a former piece of infrastructure, namely a water pumping station built in 1909 to bring water from the Llobregat aquifer to the Barcelona urban supply system. According to Agbar's official history, "the museification of the equipment from Cornellá answers (…) to the will of the company to preserve and disseminate its industrial patrimony, being aware of its importance for the development of the metropolitan area during the last two centuries" (Martín Pascual & Agbar Foundation, 2017, p. 234). For more details on Agbar's role in the patrimonial water memorialization, see Martín Pascual and Agbar Foundation (2017), pp. 240–243.

relationship between the company and Franco's regime (Martín Pascual & Fundació Agbar, 2017, p. 162). Another example is the tone of description of the Civil War period, when Agbar was collectivized and placed under an anarcho-syndicalist management: the book lauds the good results of the workers self-management which, in spite of the war, did not interrupt the water supply a single day (Martín Pascual & Fundació Agbar, p. 97; Interview #18). The monograph is silent over the politicisation of water during the *Indignados* movement as well as the water conflict triggered by Ada Colau's becoming mayor in 2015. In turn, the monograph updates the traditional narrative of modernization and progress with elements of democratisation (see for instance chapters 4 "Democratisation and internationalisation") which describes the Agbar's capacity of social inclusion and defense of workers' rights. Moreover, the monograph aims to 'naturalize' the past, present and future role of Agbar in water management (see chapter 5. "A sustainable Future"). Accordingly, Agbar is a "company born with a service vocation", which has accompanied the development of this city for 150 years and is committed to carry on doing it during many more years" (Martín Pascual & Fundació Agbar, 2017, p. 257).

Agbar's renewed democratic politics of memory is even more explicitly conveyed in "District Memories" *(Memòries del districte, MD)*. In 2017–2018, Agbar commissioned and supervised a series of 14 booklets titled "District Memories" *(Memòries del districte, MD)*, one for each of the ten districts of Barcelona, plus other four covering the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona. This series of publications moves away from the academic style, where the story is told by authoritative historians such as Martín Pascual or Voltes Bou, and inaugurates a choral narrative, where the protagonists are the 'common people'.

The booklets have a similar structure: a short corporate prologue, a historical introduction followed by interviews with ten personalities from each district. Each of these accounts is enriched by several quotes from different *veïns*. The prologue is always signed by the Director General of Agbar, and it combines a standard description of the collection with a reflection on the specific history in each district, connecting it to the historical or the present work of the company in the area. The purpose of the MD is stated as follows:

"The history of the municipalities that make up the metropolitan area of Barcelona is well documented. But the history of these municipalities is written every day by the *veïns*. With the collection of books Memòries of the metropolitan area of Barcelona we wanted to discover these municipalities through the people's own eyes, citizens who, with their experiences and personal stories, build their own city." (Aigües de Barcelona, 2017a).[11]

Overall, MD constructs a reconciling memory narrative where the traditional signifiers of 'water' and urban 'modernization' are weld together with 'people' and 'democracy'; thereby it draws on the usual progressive relation between past, present, and future, but it also claims to harmonize the voices of the company and the 'common people'. The video presenting the collection on its website informs that 1500 *veïns* from these districts and cities have been invited to tell their story and that of their neighbourhood. Three main types of *veïns* stand out in this story: the activist (presidents of neighbours' associations, leaders of local social movements); the owner of a local business (bars, restaurants, small commerce); and public sector workers or intellectuals (professors, artists, historians). All these people are "committed to their cities and … are the living memory of these cities" (Aigües de Barcelona, 2017).

Another defining trait of these personal stories is that most of them are linked to the neighbourhood for generations. The relation to the people is organic and historical: "In the stationery shop of Joan Lloberas, we have lifelong customers, who have passed from generation to generation" (Memòries del districte, 2017d). Elsewhere, a veí is proud to say

that he owns "the Puigdevall florist shop for more than 45 years. The relation with the clients is familiar, a lifelong relation". This "lifelong" expression is frequently repeated across the books. Its Catalan original "de tota la vida" ("for a lifetime") evokes not only a long time but also something which is familiar. This way, the past is connected to the future, to progress and the possibility of improvement, which is another key message of the collection. Barcelona is a "city in constant evolution" and those who have built it can be relied upon to keep building it. Many veïns speak about this connection between past, present and future against a background of appreciation of the progress the city has made: "The jewellery Orfi, belonged to my parents, it's a family business." says one of the veïns of Sant Adrià, "In recent years, I have seen the neighbourhood evolve very positively thanks to the reforms that have been made there over the years" (Aigües de Barcelona, 2017d).

Since the signifiers 'the people' and 'proximity' are at the basis of this memory narrative, the accent is put on the residents, whose portraits are close-ups, smiling (Fig. 1). This patchwork of testimonies, evoking the famous *trencadís*, the mix of broken pieces created by Gaudí, the emblematic architect of Barcelona, is meant to put forward a "whole new look at the great metropolis … living and constantly evolving" (Aigües de Barcelona, 2017d).

Importantly, Agbar presents itself as a key piece of this mix, which is invisibly held together by its waters. Through this vital flow, the company inextricably connects its own history to that of the city, because "for 150 years we have been taking care of the water" (Aigües de Barcelona, 2017a). Agbar is "committed to" and "has built" the city, just like the *veïns*. Water, as an empty signifier, acquires another meaning: that of a carrier of incessant urban progress:

"… at Aigües de Barcelona we know very well that the stories of the cities are written through the memories of their people [because] for many years we have been taking care of their water and, ultimately, we have been building the city as they do. Because water has flown through these cities […] and has been part of our past, our present and will continue to be part of our future" (Aigües de Barcelona, 2017a).

Agbar's politics of water memory builds a chain of equivalence between the people (*veïns*), its water management, democracy, and progress or modernization. In the words of an interviewed manager "the aim was to incarnate the company in these persons" (Interview #14) and thus make it visible:

"… here and everywhere else, the water infrastructures are invisible to the citizen: they are outside the city, underground. A nuclear plant is an inevitable sight in a town, see the example of the chemical complex in Tarragona: it's impossible not to generate an opinion, either good or bad. But water infrastructure is underground … this is an opportunity for visibility" (Interview #11; our transl.).

In another strategic move, Agbar's narrative includes its very opposition or negation. Concerning the district Sants, well-known for its anarchist, rebellious and cooperativist legacy, MD specifies that "Aigües de Barcelona takes part in the Business Board of Sants-Montjuïc, together with other entities, companies and organizations from the district, to provide opinions and proposals […] which will be used to promote entrepreneurship, focused on the commercial fabric, but also to support the cooperative, social and collaborative economy" (Aigües de Barcelona, 2017c, p. 7).

The reference to the cooperative economy – key to BeC's commoning agenda (see II) - indicates the company's monoglossic memorialization, which discursively absorbs and anesthetizes difference and conflict. Analogously, one leitmotif of the collection is represented by the struggles for rights of the residents. The booklets tell stories of resistance against the Francoist dictatorship, claiming social rights or the improvement of living conditions. This decision of the company to approach the leaders of social movements was perceived by one of the

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[11] All the translations are ours.

Fig. 1. Example of mix of images of *veïns* as represented in District Memories (Source: Aigües de Barcelona, Ciutat Vella 2017).

managers as a "new, unknown and risky terrain", but it was positively assessed: "this risky transparency is good". Thus, we find here representatives of well-known activist movements, civic centres, and anarchist 'athenaeums' such as La Leialtat Santsenca, Can Batlló, Ateneu de Nou Barris, some of them with a long history of protest, civil disobedience or squatting. In the words of a company manager, the goal is the following:

"Well, now we also talk more about the neighborhood than about city, we talk more about *veïns* than about citizens (…) The goal is to say 'the word '*veï*' is *not yours*, the word 'neighborhood' is not yours': I take it, I redefine it […] it is no longer your property" (Interview #12).

Indeed, many of the stories in the MD are about the struggle for public and collective infrastructures and after the 2008 crisis, against evictions (precisely the political turf of Ada Colau). In the Sants neighbourhood, one of the interviewees describes the creation of Can Batlló - a well-known landmark of the grassroots fabric of the city - its relation to the *Indignados* movement, and the Popular Municipalist Encounters (*Trobades Populars Municipalistes*); all of these are important reference points for the BeC's own emergence. The Can Batlló staff is described as "neighbourhood movements, some of the *libertarian* movements, unions. The common denominator is social consciousness". Elsewhere an activist confesses: "I have always fought for the working class and my struggle has always been peaceful" (Aigües de Barcelona, 2017c, p. 86). Interestingly, references to these local struggles are also present in the corporative Introduction of the books. For instance, in Sants, the Bonet i Ruixi square is described as "[…] revolutionary, traditional, anarchist […] and most of all, popular".

"In that neighborhood … there was neither light nor running water; the streets were not asphalted […]. Sewer system and any public service were simply non-existent: schools, health centers, transport […] In spite of everything […] everyone helped out and the *veïns*

learned to join forces to claim the relevant services to the public administration" (Aigües de Barcelona, 2017b, p. 35).

The Memories can be thus interpreted as a successful operation of the company 'entering the terrain of the *other*' not only in terms of language but also in practice, by engaging with the supporters of the 'remunicipalisation' campaign. In this sense, according to an article published in 2018 (La Directa, 2018), several activists interviewed for the booklets said it was "incoherent" of them to collaborate with the project and felt they had been "misled". However, most of these activists acknowledge that they knew from the beginning that Aigües de Barcelona was sponsoring the campaign.

This politics of memory has been also conducted via social media through the regular publication of historical photos of hydraulic sites and infrastructures. The old photos Gaudi's La Pedrera or Sagrada Familia (Fig. 2), two of the most representative buildings in the city, are a visual synecdoche of the whole of city of Barcelona. The photos strategically unveil the hydraulic 'guts' of the city as they capture the rare moment when the infrastructure is under construction.

This operation runs in the opposite direction to what Kaika and Swyngedouw consider as emblematic for the construction of modernity: "… urban networks in the contemporary city are largely hidden, opaque, invisible, disappearing underground, locked into pipes, conduits, tubes, passages and electronic waves." (Kaika & Swyngedou, 2000, p. 120). Instead, Agbar displays the underground waterworks to claim its role in the construction of modern and democratic Barcelona. This visual artefact is not new: the Martín Pascual book also makes use of historical photos, where city landmarks under construction are associated with the instalment of water pipes (see Pascual p. 24 and p. 60). However, in the case of the social media campaign, this motif is blended with constant references to 'the people': for instance: "thousands of persons have passed by the eyes of the casa Pedrera. Likewise, they have also seen our colleagues working to improve the water service" or "Working for this city and its people" (Fig. 2).

A subtler effect of Agbar's discourse is that of depoliticisation. This is achieved in two ways: first, through a logic of assimilation of difference

Fig. 2. Images of water works being built in front La Pedrera and Sagrada Familia buildings respectively (Source: Official Twitter of Aigües de Barcelona).

and resistance (see supra). Second, through a logic of "naturalization" and a sense of common historical destiny that unites Barcelona, its people, and the water company. If the politicisation is associated with drawing lines that separate the social sphere in different antagonising camps (Menga, 2017), then to depoliticise means to dissolve these lines in an apolitical unity and consensus.

5. BeC's politics of water memory as disruption: forgotten past, alternative future

In its 2015 political program, BeC's asserts the importance of collective memory and how stories about the past shape future urban imaginaries. Its reference to "democratic memory" is predicated upon a heteroglossic approach, well captured in this quote:

> "it is still pending to assert the intangible heritage that accounts for the collective historical memory and the *multiple popular narratives* that shape the identity of our city. From Barcelona en Comú we propose … (to) … (w)ork for the restitution of a *plural and collective memory* of Barcelona, which vindicates both the historical legacy of the popular associationist and cooperative culture, in response to the current hegemonic vision of an apolitical and conservative catalanism, like the new imaginaries of today's city (BeC, 2015, p.252, our emphasis).

The 2018 Water Memorial, which remains the most representative act of its kind to this date, is an attempt to materialise these principles in the water sector: as this section intimates, the aim was to mobilizes a series of disruptive sites and acts of memory in order to dislocate the continuity narrative of modernization at the core of Agbar's politics of memory. The Memorial was structured along the following types of activities: 1) Expert talks; 2) Itineraries including in-situ open debates meant to visibilise the sewer system or water-related landmarks such as the Rec Comtal - the medieval waterway built on the relics of the Roman water infrastructure; the Magic Fountain of Montjuïc, the high Montcada aqueduct, part of the extinct municipals water company, Aigües de Montcada; 3) AiguaArt, artistic events related to water, from cinema to music, to educational workshops or contests.

The set-up of the Memorial aimed to be heteroglossic in several ways: first of all, the organisation included a wide variety of local historical knowledges, from MUHBA to associations specialised in the historical memory of the neighbourhoods (for instance the Associació per la Memòria Històrica de la Trinitat Vella, the Historical Archives in Roquetes-Nou Barris or Poble Nou, Taller d'Història de Gràcia), research centres (Centre d'Estudis Ignasi Iglésias), teachers associations, etc.

Secondly, the Water Memorial was not designed as a traditional, static exibition, meant to neutrally inform citizens about history; instead, it was organised as a set of open memory spaces. Through them, the past is effectively politicised by being brought into the "domain of the sensible" once again. The sites of memory acquire their significance through people's acts of memory, i.e. through walking, debating, tweeting, assembling in relation to these sites. Moreover, the official presentation videos of the Memorial symbolically include testimonies of 'common people'. In one such video, Nuria Julivilla, presented as veïna (local resident, feminine), emphasizes the importance the water management as part "popular culture … that is accessible to everyone …" and "that things are done so that people can participate" (Water Memorial official website). Concomitantly, the activists involved in the Water Memorial convey in similar videos key traits of this politics of memory aimed to unveil an alternative past through the active engagement of citizenry (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018a).

Thirdly, the Water Memorial heteroglossic aim is reflected in the effort to make visible a multitude of peripheralized sites of memory, i.e., decentralized infrastructures of water management. In this sense, a pillar of the Memorial is the permanent exhibition "Water Km Zero" or "Proximity water" (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018b). The exhibition maps a whole range of management experiences which have often fallen into disuse such as wells, torrents, streams, water towers or rain-harvest reservoirs. In line with the BeC's politics of proximity, the coordinator of the exhibition and the ensuing guide (Fig. 3), Manel Guàrdia, advocates for the importance of putting back on the city map the myriad ruins of extinct urban waters, as reminders of alternative hydrosocial experiences of local people:

> "We call 'Km 0 water' the proximity waters, those that fall on the territory with the rain and those arriving from other places with the runoff. In the area of Barcelona delimited by Collserola, the Besós river and Montjuïc, this water has determined throughout history the development of the city itself and that of the surrounding towns and villages. Until recently, this water shaped the relations between society and the territory. With this exhibition we want to bring out the essential and nowadays underrated links of water with the territory, as a step in the recovery of the memory of a long tradition of management of local water resources" (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018b).

Thus, the signifiers "proximity" or "kilometre 0" in relation to water are anchored in the concrete scale of the derelict and abandoned remains of decentralized water practices. In the politicised context of the Memorial, this politics of historical reappropriation becomes a symbolic
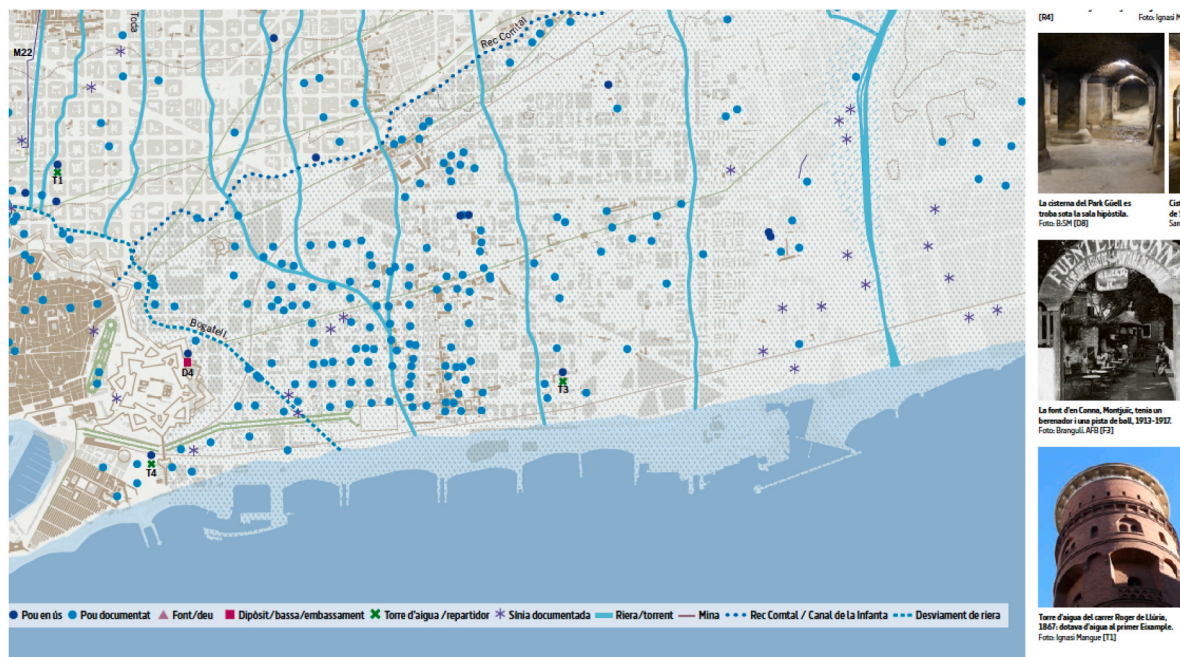
Fig. 3. Visualizing the hydraulic memory of peripheralized experiences in public water management, and involving local people (Source: Official webpage of the Water Memorial).

act of shedding light on the alternatives to the 'official' history of water management in Barcelona, which tends to privilege major, centralised waterworks (Interview #2). By giving renewed value to these traditional and often modest water practices, the Memorial builds a metaphor of radical decentralization of power in favor of direct, participatory forms of management.

An important trait of the Memorial is that its intention is unmistakably politicising. For Eloi Badia, the BeC's city councilman for water, and one of the key voices of the 'remunicipalization' campaign, the Water Memorial is part of a historical movement whereby "the citizenry has taken a step forward" (presentation video, Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018a). The underlying message is that BeC's position emanates directly from the people:

> "In addition to discovering the city's historical water heritage, the Memorial will also reflect on the importance of water as a common good […] where the experiences of municipalizing water will be addressed, and which have been carried out in other cities. The Water Memorial advocates for water as a common good, through debating, assemblies and seminars. The campaign proposed excursions to selected water heritage sites of the city such as the Casa de l'Aigua which belonged to the public company Aigües de Montcada." (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018a)

The Aigües de Montcada, the last public water company of the city, is assigned an exemplary and quasi-mythical place in the 'remunicipalisation' discourse: this infrastructure is related to the "renewal of the commitment of the Barcelona municipality with public water management" (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018a). In the context of the battle between memory narratives of BeC and Agbar, the two actors propose different historical reference points: if Agbar had recently celebrated 150 years of history of private management in Barcelona, BeC officials talk about the 100 years from the foundation the Water House (*Casa de l'Aigua*) of Montcada, as privileged site of public municipalist memory (Fig. 4).

In the official presentation video of the Memorial, Joan Gaya, its curator, explains its political goal: to make a "conceptual update for the preparation of water government for the future". The Memorial is thus part of an explicit and programmatic democratic battle: retrieving the

hydraulic memory contributes to "recovering *the will to govern* the water service" (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018a; our it.). Moreover, in the video presenting the Memorial, Badia places the current 'remunicipalisation' in a historical continuum of similar elements such as the extinct public company, Aigües de Montcada. In this strategic retrieval of the water memory of Barcelona, the current agenda of BeC is also connected with the subterranean, peripheralized history of citizens' or people's struggles:

> "We recover the relationship between Barcelona and water, between citizenship and water because throughout history we have witnessed moments of great significance and surely now we are living one of the most decisive ones: the citizens have decided to take a step forward and choose the relationship between the service provider, the city council and the citizens" (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018a, our it.).

All in all, BeC's strategy manages to politicise water memory in a way that is both antagonistic and heteroglossic, giving voice to a plurality of knowledges and water management experiences. However, the Water Memorial is not free of tensions and dilemmas, since the construction of any (counter)hegemonic discourse is by definition exclusionary. Particularly telling is the absence from the Memorial of substantial references to the Civil War period, when the company was collectivized. During this period, water services in Barcelona were provided under a regime that was neither public, nor private but self-managed by the anarcho-syndicalist workers (see Gorostiza et al., 2012). Thus, while the exhibitions aimed to render visible the alternatives to the private management and democratize, in fact, the Memorial seems to privilege one option over the others: the public, State-led one. At the same time, by positing an equivalence between 'democratic', 'public' and 'popular', BeC's historical narrative entails a democratization of the past: the historical experiences of the public management of water (in Catalunya) are in fact neither necessarily democratic nor do they involve the active participation of citizens.

6. Conclusion: water memories and urban futures

Political ecology and geography have predominantly emphasized the

Fig. 4. Images of the 100-year celebration of the Aigües de Montcada, in the tweet of Eloi Badia which states "100 later we renew the commitment of the city council of Barcelona with the public management of the water, we open the Casa de l'Aigua built 100 years ago by the municipal company Aigües de Montcada in order to supply the city, it's the start of # MemorialAigua #WorldWaterDay (Source: Eloi Badia's official Twitter, March 22, 2018).

spatialisation of water politics but there has been less concern with the politics of hydraulic memory in the context of conflicts for power. Thereby we aim to advance an embryonic sub-field of political ecology which strives to understand how the entanglement of space and memory constitutes a discursive framework in the struggles for political legitimacy and the control of the environment. Thus, a temporal turn in political ecology, complementing the concern with spatiality, could usefully draw on memory studies to analyse the growing memorialization of water discourses and sites, as well as their political significance. Moreover, we have maintained that existing studies tend to focus predominantly on the 'insurgent' movements, overlooking the reaction of the water companies and the ensuing dialectic between public and private actors. Critical and political geography would benefit from more case- and comparative studies centred on the production of space-time over conflict-ridden resources such as water.

By building on the existing theoretical and empirical work on remunicipalisation conflicts, in this paper we have analysed the clash between hydraulic memories as a dimension of the ongoing struggles for legitimacy and power in the city of Barcelona. In Agbar's vision of modernization and linear progress, the future is built in perfect continuity with the past: the private company is to preserve the management of key resources such as water because it has proven its capacity to "take care of them" (see section III). Agbar's strategy of mimetic antagonism is the implicit recognition of what is explicitly denied: the force of the

challenge disrupting the field of power and demanding a substantive transformation of socio-natural relations through citizens' empowerment. In Agbar's monoglossic politics of memory, different elements are united in a tale of reconciliation: the private agent managing water, the plurality of people's voices, and the sites of memory in Barcelona and its metropolitan area.

In contrast, BeC's memory narrative is discontinuist and non-linear, aiming to bring to light alterative time-spaces obscured or ignored by the 'official history'. By going back to the decentralised, heteroglossic experiences of water management, BeC projects a radically different image of progress as answer to the current socio-natural challenges: re-signifying water as 'life' and 'common good', advocating for 'people's' direct involvement in caring for and managing it. Yet its "moral tale" is also riddled with tension: top-down initiatives (the Water Memorial itself) and the construction of an alternative grand narrative inevitably excludes historical episodes that do not fit the intention of the storyline.

Pierre Nora claims that, starting with the 1990s, we have entered the "age of commemoration", whereby the traditional remembrance of history via oral stories and legends has disappeared in favor of artificially crafted collective memories (Nora, 1998, pp. 609–610). Yet the clash between BeC and Agbar concerning the time-space of urban hydraulic memory is not simply about two engineered narratives: it is, we believe, about the fundamental political question of the type of society and environment in which we aspire to live in. As Scott Fitzgerald

beautifully expressed it, navigating the currents of the future brings us inevitably and "ceaselessly into the past".

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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