

BANANA REPUBLICANS

How the Right Wing is Turning America into a One-Party State

About

EnviroHealth is concerned with issues that affect the lives of ordinary people and their communities; from air and water pollution, food safety and climate change to toxics, transportation and sustainable energy. Our goal is to inform and inspire by providing up-to-date reporting, opinion and analysis, and tips and tools for creating change.

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BACKGROUND

SoyJoy

Thinking of becoming a vegetarian? This witty blog on all things vegetarian (and many things meat) provides lots of food-supply and nutrition information with links to articles spanning

The New Blue Gold

By [Silja J.A. Talvi](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted **June 23, 2004**.

The rush to privatize water is underway across the world. In the new documentary 'Thirst,' filmmakers Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow set out to explore the consequences.



Bay Area-based filmmaking duo [Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow](#).

life."

In their third collaborative documentary film after the successes of *Blacks and Jews* (1997) and *Secrets of Silicon Valley* (2001), Bay Area-based filmmaking duo [Deborah Kaufman and Snitow](#) take an unflinching and multifaceted look at water privatization in Bolivia, India, Japan and the U.S.

What Kaufman and Snitow find is that the "water rush" is likely to turn into one of the most volatile and potentially galvanizing issues of the 21st century.

"This is an incredible struggle, and yet it's still so far below the radar that we're trying to give it a voice," Kaufman says. "People are already willing to die for

There are untold profits to be made from controlling the simplest and most vital ingredient of our survival: water.

The only question, from a profit standpoint, is why it has taken this long.

"You can't do anything without water," says Alan Snitow, co-producer and co-director of *Thirst*, a groundbreaking and provocative new film about the rush to privatize what the filmmakers rightly define as the very "essence of

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George W. Buy?

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What Would Jesus Drive?

It's difficult to know for certain, but this network of eco-evangelicals brings a fact-filled and meaningful perspective to the SUV debate.

RECOMMENDED SITES

Grist Magazine

An online environmental magazine that tackles the issues of the day with intelligence, humor, and a fresh perspective.

Natural Resources Defense Council

Featuring two of the most dynamic Roberts in the world of Environmentalism, Redford and Kennedy Jr., the NRDC has been one of the most successful groups at bringing the fight both to the attention of the public and the congress as well.

Center For a New American Dream

Learn nine actions to save the planet, get your name off junk mail lists, and read tips for responsible consumerism.

Bluewater Network

Bluewater Network promotes policy changes in government and industry to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and eradicate other root causes of air and water pollution, global warming and habitat destruction.

Pesticide Action

The grab for corporate control of water is indeed already here in our own backyards. But the conflict over water supplies perhaps most familiar to news-savvy audiences is the place where *Thirst* goes first: to Cochabamba, Bolivia. After the country auctions off the water system of its third-largest city to U.S.-based Bechtel Corporation in 1999, residents experience water price hikes of 30-300%, and the situation eventually erupts in a cross-class protest that makes headline news worldwide.

By April 2000, the government responds to civil unrest by declaring martial law. Shortly thereafter, Victor Hugo Daza, a 17-year-old peaceful protester, is shot dead in the streets by a government sniper.

Daza's death doesn't quell dissent the way it was intended to. In fact, protests heat up to the point that water consortium execs beat a hasty retreat, and Cochabamba's water system gets handed over to a community-run utility. In an unlikely turn of events, the citizens actually get what they want; water gets treated like a human right, not as the last frontier of the commercialization and privatization of earth's natural resources.

"They're on the defensive in the global South," Kaufman explains. "In many ways, they're ahead of us responding to what's in the near future for all of us."

In point of fact, American cities and towns are the new staging ground for rapid and strategic power plays over who controls water supply. In 2004, 85% of U.S. municipal water systems are publicly owned, with a shocking 15% already in the hands of corporations. Unbeknownst to most residents, municipal governments are being heavily courted in the here and now to turn over control of their water supply to multinational companies like Suez Water, whose U.S. subsidiary took control of Atlanta's water in 1999.

The incentive for local governments is hard to miss; with an estimated cost of a trillion dollars, the prospect of replacing aging pipes and improving the condition of public water plants is increasingly seen by city leaders as a budgetary drain best dealt with through privatization.

To exemplify the point, Kaufman and Snitow turn their camera to Stockton, California, where a well-run locally controlled water purification and distribution system is about to be offered to the highest bidder. (Notably, the public utility itself isn't allowed to be one of the bidders.)

The transfer of power over the water supply is intended to take the form of a "public-private partnership," and Stockton Mayor Gary Podesto is a firm supporter.

"This can be done for less dollars," as Mayor Podesto says.

A subsequent, well-orchestrated grassroots mobilization by city residents -- baristas, orthodontists, environmentalists, utility employees and union members among other unlikely allies -- fails to capture any attention from the national media. But Kaufman and Snitow have the instinct to jump into the heart of the conflict, meeting and talking with all sides of the privatization debate.

But there is no storybook ending in *Thirst* where Stockton's citizenry are concerned. By February 2003, in fact, the Mayor and a severely divided City Council hand over the \$600 million, 20-year contract to a two-company consortium of corporate water giants: OMI and Thames.

All along, Stockton residents who did their research were emphatic that

The Pesticide Action Network takes on everything from corporate power to sustainable living and environmental justice. Visit their site and join the fight!

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corporate claims of cost effectiveness, quality and safety had not been realized elsewhere.

In Atlanta's case, for instance, the city's \$428 million, 20-year contract with Suez-sub subsidiary United Water Services was cancelled after a series of citywide EPA alerts advising residents to boil their tap water because of toxic contaminants. Finally, after five such "boil-alerts," staff cutbacks, leaking water mains, and rising sewer bill costs, city administrators yanked back control of the utility.

Little victories aside, corporate water grab is still fully underway, working in collusion with governments and international financial agencies, wreaking environmental havoc and inflating water prices all the while. In the final analysis, the battle over water, says Kaufman, has more to do with democracy than what's coming out of your tap. And it's toward this end, say the filmmakers, that they fully intend their documentary to spur further activism and to educate audiences about the extent to which water has already been commodified.

As captured in *Thirst*, John Briscoe, the Senior Water Advisor to The World Bank, puts it this way to an assembly at the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan.

"What does it mean to say that water is a human right?" he asks. "Those who proclaim it so would say that it is the obligation of [governments] to provide free water to everybody. Well, that's a fantasy."

In touring the U.S. with their film, Kaufman and Snitow have already become cautiously optimistic that the tide of privatization can be turned. A model ordinance to safeguard water as a public trust has already been drafted in concert with Madison, Wisconsin Mayor David Cieslewicz, and will be presented at the upcoming 72nd U.S. Conference of Mayors in Boston, which runs from June 25-29th. (Perhaps not so coincidentally, the conference's website is being sponsored by Veolia Water, which has become North America's leading private "service provider" for local government water and wastewater supplies.)

"It's a festival of privatization," as Snitow says. "But what they don't yet fully realize is that for many people, water is the final boundary that can't be crossed."

Check local listings for screenings of 'Thirst.' To coincide with the U.S. Conference of Mayors, 'Thirst' will show at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts on June 26th. It will have its national P.O.V. broadcast premiere on PBS stations on Tuesday, July 13th at 10 p.m.

To learn more about related issues -- and a growing campaign to boycott bottled water -- visit http://www.sierraclub.org/cac/water/bottled_water/.

Silja J.A. Talvi writes for In These Times, the Christian Science Monitor, The Nation and other publications. Her work appears in the anthology, "Prison Nation" (Routledge, 2003).

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