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CITIZENSHIP AND WATER ACCESS AND DISTRIBUTION IN RIO CLARO/SP

CIDADANIA, DISTRIBUIÇÃO E ACESSO À ÁGUA EM RIO CLARO/SP

CIUDADANÍA, DISTRIBUCIÓN Y ACCESO AL AGUA EN RIO CLARO/SP

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ABSTRACT: The article discusses the relationship between the management of public water and basic sanitation services and the contradictions of the capitalist system in Rio Claro/SP (Brazil). The discussion reveals the historical trajectory of local water management, marked by the public sector's difficulty in ensuring universal access and by the concentration of infrastructure in areas with greater purchasing power. It addresses the recent process of transforming the Departamento Autônomo de Água e Esgoto (DAAE), which, despite being an autonomous agency, is undergoing changes to become a public company with private participation, introducing market logic into an essential service. Popular resistance to privatization is highlighted, evidenced by public hearings and opinion surveys, which point to problems related to quality, access, risks of tariff increases, and layoffs. Finally, it is emphasized that these processes reflect the contradictions of contemporary capitalism, as access to basic services is conditioned by the ability to pay, thereby expanding social and territorial inequalities.

KEYWORDS: Water. Access. Citizenship. Rio Claro/SP.

***RESUMO**: O artigo discute a relação entre a gestão dos serviços públicos de água e saneamento básico e as contradições do sistema capitalista em Rio Claro/SP. A discussão revela a trajetória histórica da administração hídrica local, marcada pela dificuldade do poder público em garantir seu acesso universal e pela concentração da infraestrutura em áreas de maior poder aquisitivo. Aborda-se o processo recente de transformação do Departamento Autônomo de Água e Esgoto (DAAE), que, embora seja uma autarquia, passa por mudanças para se tornar uma empresa pública com participação privada, implicando a lógica de mercado para um serviço essencial. Destaca-se resistências populares às privatizações, evidenciadas em audiências públicas e pesquisas de opinião, que apontam problemas de qualidade, acesso, riscos de aumento tarifário e demissões. Por fim, ressalta-se que esses processos refletem as contradições do capitalismo contemporâneo, ao condicionar o acesso a serviços básicos à capacidade de pagamento, ampliando desigualdades sociais e territoriais.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Água. Acesso. Cidadania. Rio Claro/SP.*

***RESUMEN**: El artículo discute la relación entre la gestión de los servicios públicos de agua y saneamiento básico y las contradicciones del sistema capitalista, en Rio Claro/SP (Brasil). La discusión revela la trayectoria histórica de la administración hídrica local, marcada por la dificultad del poder público para garantizar el acceso universal y por la concentración de la infraestructura en áreas de mayor poder adquisitivo. Se aborda el proceso reciente de transformación del Departamento Autônomo de Água e Esgoto (DAAE), que, aunque sea una autarquía, pasa por cambios para convertirse en una empresa pública con participación privada, lo que introduce la lógica de mercado para un servicio esencial. Se destacan las resistencias populares a las privatizaciones, evidenciadas en audiencias públicas y encuestas de opinión, que señalan problemas de calidad, acceso, riesgos de aumento tarifario y despidos. Finalmente, se resalta cómo estos procesos reflejan las contradicciones del capitalismo contemporáneo, al condicionar el acceso a servicios básicos a la capacidad de pago, ampliando las desigualdades sociales y territoriales.*

***PALABRAS CLAVE**: Agua. Acceso. Ciudadanía. Rio Claro/SP.*

Introduction

The capitalist city is shaped to serve the economic interests of large corporations and capital holders, making urbanization a multiplier of inequalities in access to basic goods such as water (Corrêa, 1999). This article aims to understand how the distribution of collective consumption means— a concept proposed by urban theorists like Lojkine (1981) and Topalov (1972)—expressed here as water and sanitation infrastructure, reflects inequalities in access.

The right to water—essential to citizenship—is not fully guaranteed in Rio Claro/SP. The city experiences frequent water outages, high tariffs, poor water quality, and inefficient management, all of which hinder population access. The general objective of this article is to analyze the urban spatial organization, identifying areas with greater or lesser water access, considering the impacts of the privatization process of DAAE (Departamento Autônomo de Água e Esgoto). Specifically, the study seeks to: 1) discuss the management of the city's water resources through related infrastructures; 2) analyze the impacts of unequal water access on the lives of Rio Claro's citizens; and 3) understand how the privatization of DAAE may affect access to water resources and sanitation services for the population.

To achieve these objectives, the methodology included: 1) bibliographic research on relevant concepts, terminology, and cases; 2) data collection from the city's public archives to understand urban organization and access to collective consumption means in Rio Claro; 3) analysis of municipal government decisions to gather information on the management and organization of collective consumption means, especially water supply networks; 4) development of tables, graphs, and maps to organize and illustrate the spatial distribution of the data; 5) fieldwork comprising interviews with three citizens regarding the privatization of DAAE infrastructure, conducted between May 2 and July 27, 2025; and 6) an online questionnaire completed by 80 respondents between August 16 and November 2, 2024.

In compliance with Resolutions No. 466 of December 12, 2012, and No. 510 of April 7, 2016 (Brazil, 2016), which regulate research involving human subjects in the country, participants' names have been anonymized as Roberto, 47, professor; Andréia, 21, student; and Éder, 38, professor. It is important to highlight that the research underpinning this article was duly approved by the Ethics and Research Committee (CEP) under Process No. 84338624.9.0000.5402.

Water from a Political and Economic Perspective

Water is indispensable to human life; therefore, it is impossible to build a just and healthy society without full access to it. Nonetheless, many people in our society still lack adequate access to water and basic sanitation. According to Brazil (2022), 15.1% of Brazilians are not served by the water supply system despite the country holding 12% of the planet's potable water.

Furthermore, data from the National Water and Basic Sanitation Agency (ANA) (Brazil, [202-?]) indicate that water consumption varies across economic sectors. In Brazil, urban human consumption accounts for approximately 22.5% of total usage, while irrigation and livestock sectors together consume about 64.1%. This disparity highlights that water is not only vital for life but also a strategic resource for multiple productive activities, increasing its political and economic significance.

Ribeiro (2008) discusses the political and economic distribution of water, asserting that it is both a source of wealth and conflict. Currently, water has become a commercial resource and commodity subjected to economic logic, which is itself influenced by global dynamics affecting all scales, including local realities. As Milton Santos (2023) emphasizes, geographic events are interconnected; the global economy is worldwide, and decisions made by international committees, assemblies, and organizations have direct impacts on citizens' daily lives.

This is illustrated by debates initiated by several international organizations seeking to promote privatization of water and sanitation systems globally through financial and geopolitical influence. These efforts often deploy the neoliberal narrative of the "inefficiency of the State" to justify privatization. A pivotal moment in this process was the 1992 Dublin Conference, which declared water to be an economic good and linked current preservation inefficiencies to the failure to recognize water as a commodity (Ribeiro, 2008).

Another example is the creation of the Global Water Partnership in 1996, orchestrated by the World Bank. Many environmentalists view this initiative as advancing the financialization of water resources worldwide, given the World Bank's global reach (Ribeiro, 2008).

In Brazil, a recent example of this neoliberal advance is Law 14,026/2020 (Brazil, 2020), which updated the legal framework for sanitation with the goal of universalizing access by ensuring potable water for 99% of the population and sewage treatment for 90% by 2033. Although this appears positive, the new regulations aimed to undermine public water and

sewage providers, especially state companies, reinforcing the narrative of state inefficiency, as highlighted by a report from the portal Brasil de Fato (National Observatory on the Right to Water and Sanitation [ONDAS], 2024). These developments illustrate how water distribution is contested across multiple scales of analysis.

At a more detailed level, such disputes reach the municipal sphere, since, as Corrêa (1999) points out, urban space is not neutral; fragmentation is an intrinsically produced and planned characteristic that reinforces urban inequalities. Within the scope of this article, the unequal distribution of water and sanitation infrastructure reflects how urban space is produced.

Disordered urbanization—typical in Global South countries like Brazil—complicates this scenario further, as areas surrounding water sources are often irregularly occupied (Ribeiro, 2008). Territorial occupation is the primary factor affecting water quality because contamination is one of the main threats to surface and groundwater bodies (Cardoso, 2022).

The city of São Paulo and its water crisis exemplify this. Uncontrolled urban growth, uneven occupation, and water resource management profiles exacerbate inequalities in water access[4], causing poorer populations to face frequent water cuts during periods of water stress (Jacobi; Buckeridge; Ribeiro, 2021).

During the 2014–2015 water crisis, government disregard for public opinion was evident. Large consumers—such as shopping malls and clubs—were favored with uninterrupted supply and reduced tariffs (Jacobi; Buckeridge; Ribeiro, 2021). The government's denial of the crisis severity contributed to worsening water stress[5].

These cases demonstrate that water scarcity involves both physical and political factors. While the drought in Southeast Brazil was real, economic interests of wealthier groups pressured infrastructure managers, deepening the crisis's impact on poorer populations. Castro (2013) emphasizes that inequality in access to basic sanitation services cannot be explained solely by natural factors but also by social and structural conditions historically overlooked in analyses. Evidently, the commodification of water and sanitation has amplified socio-spatial inequalities. This model, prioritizing investment recovery and market logic, excludes the poorest populations and intensifies the negative impacts of water scarcity (Castro, 2013).

[4] Regarding the São Paulo water crisis of 2014–2015, Vargas (2019, p. 106) shows that the nighttime reduction of hydraulic pressure, implemented as a measure to contain water scarcity, while yielding satisfactory results, disproportionately penalized low-income families, many of whom lived in more remote and elevated areas relative to the city's main centers.

[5] Ribeiro (2008, p. 62, our translation) defines Water Stress as "the result of the relationship between the total annual water usage and the difference between precipitation and evaporation (renewed water) occurring within a territorial unit."

Given this context, the following discussion addresses the relationship among access to collective consumption goods—including water and sanitation infrastructure—urban spatial organization, and citizenship, as well as their connections with geographic space.

Urbanization and Transformations in the City

Before proceeding, it is essential to briefly address geographic space, as all actions both affect and are influenced by it. We adopt Milton Santos's perspective that "space consists of an inseparable, interdependent, and also contradictory set of systems of objects and systems of actions, not considered in isolation but as the unique framework in which history unfolds" (Santos, 2003a, p. 63, our translation). This means recognizing geographic space not as a mere stage but as a social occurrence in constant motion, historicized through human action, which directly shapes the landscape (Santos, 2021, 2023).

Moreover, contemporary space is characterized by what Santos (2023) terms the Technical-Scientific-Informational milieu. This characterization reflects the intimate relationship between science and technology in a fluid, globalized world, where global actors centralize power and impose cultural and technological standards.

Consequently, spatial forms are intrinsically influenced by a logic disseminated by higher levels of the global economy linked to capital globalization. This dynamic directly impacts a country's administrative institutions, which in turn influence how space is constructed. The World Bank–led Global Water Partnership exemplifies this phenomenon[6].

In this context, urban space and its planning are subject to economic forces promoting market logic worldwide. This influence is reflected in the spatial organization of urban centers at various levels, affecting how citizens are perceived socially. Cities—today's primary population hubs—are increasingly built to serve market demands and real estate speculation, making citizens' access to fundamental rights such as water dependent on their ability to acquire it as a commodity[7].

[6]According to its official website, the Global Water Partnership is an independent international network composed of over 2,800 partners across 182 countries, responsible for "providing a neutral platform that connects stakeholders at all levels to develop and implement solutions for water security and climate resilience" (translation ours). The site also clarifies that since 2002, the World Bank, together with governments and other institutions, has been responsible for the strategic planning of the Global Water Partnership. See more at: https://gwpo-gwp.org/about/who-we-are. Accessed December 18, 2025.

[7]In his work *Space of Citizenship and Other Reflections* (2011), Milton Santos discusses how the integration of market logic into society has transformed the rights-bearing citizen into a Consumer-Citizen, or an Over-Perfect Consumer, living in a society where access to rights is contingent upon one's purchasing power.

Moreira (1993) offers a critical analysis of capitalist spatial organization, stating that "the content of space is the content of society: the process of labor in its concrete manifestation" (Moreira, 1993, p. 92, our translation). Thus, a dialectical and inseparable relationship between society and space is evident.

Within the context of the Technical-Scientific-Informational milieu, organization is increasingly characterized by precarious labor processes aimed at generating surplus value. Space is understood as both a means of production and reproduction of capital (Moreira, 1993). Control over cities is central to this discussion; therefore, the imposition of hegemonic global forces on resource management seeks to ensure a standardized mode of production and consumption of urban space. This directly impacts access not only to urban services but also to the right to the city—a collective right that extends beyond individual access to urban resources to the ability to transform ourselves through transforming the city. This right demands collective power to shape the urbanization process and represents a class phenomenon historically tied to control over social surplus, concentrated in the hands of a few, thereby maintaining persistent structural inequalities of capitalism (Lefebvre, 2011).

Access problems related to urban formation align with a well-documented chronic issue present in cities since the Renaissance, when they began to concentrate and centralize commercial and financial activities, adapting to the needs of industrialization (Sposito, 2022). Thus, under capitalism, cities have been conceived and shaped according to market interests and a profit-driven culture.

Corrêa (1999) elucidates this by discussing historical trends and models in the formation of modern and contemporary cities, based on spatial segregation dynamics reinforced by the state through urban planning actions (Oliveira, 2011). Corrêa (1999) also examines how dominant social classes—due to greater purchasing power—historically occupy the best urban areas through practices of self-segregation. This perspective is echoed by Sposito and Sposito (2020), who analyze mechanisms of socio-spatial fragmentation, identifying self-segregation as a fundamental structural element.

However, this process is not solely driven by dominant classes. Corrêa (1999) highlights the state's role, which, directly or indirectly, exacerbates spatial segregation. This occurs through housing policies that favor private interests of dominant classes, real estate companies, and construction firms. Such state action reinforces real estate speculation at the expense of precarious housing conditions and the permanence of the urban poor.

Citizenship and Access to Collective Consumption Goods

As demonstrated above, decisions regarding water and the organization of water and sanitation distribution systems in urban space are not neutral. Their implementation, maintenance, and effective functioning carry political and economic biases with zonal and financial distribution, preferentially benefiting some groups over others.

Nevertheless, according to Brazil's National Water Resources Policy (Law No. 9,433/97), water is a public domain resource and must prioritize human consumption and animal hydration in situations of scarcity (Brazil, 1997). Yet, as seen in São Paulo's 2014 drought, distribution within the municipality was aggravated by preferential supply to high-consumption regions.

In urban contexts, access to resources is preferentially directed toward those with greater purchasing power, while lower-income populations suffer scarcity and lack of infrastructure for basic rights such as water. This raises Santos's (2011, p. 82, our translation) provocative question: "Are there citizens in this country?"

But what is a citizen? The most recognized definition is Marshall's (2021), who identifies citizenship as comprising three elements: Civil Rights, Political Rights, and Social Rights.

According to Marshall:

> The civil element consists of rights necessary for individual freedom—personal liberty, freedom of expression, thought, and faith, the right to own property and conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice […] The political element I designate as the right to participate in the exercise of political power, either as a member of a politically authorized body or as an elector of its members […] By the social element, I refer to the entire range from the right to a minimum of economic welfare and security to the right to participate in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the prevailing standards of society (Marshall, 2021, p. 23-24, our translation).

It is important to note that Marshall (2021) argues for the full realization of citizenship, all three elements must function effectively and in unity, as separated, they risk disappearing or failing. The struggle for citizenship is situated within a long-standing historical debate dating back to the end of the feudal regime (Santos, 2011). Since then, much has been debated and proposed concerning citizens' rights. Among the main achievements of this struggle for modern citizenship are the U.S. Bill of Rights of 1776, the French Revolution's declaration of 1798, and more recently, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (Couvre, 2013).

The Brazilian Constitution, promulgated in 1988 after twenty years of authoritarian rule, is often called the "Citizen Constitution" due to its strong guarantees of citizens' rights (Brazil, 1988). However, a significant gap exists between the legal framework and daily reality. Civil equality guaranteed by law dissolves when the rights of the poor confront the interests of the wealthy. Political rights rarely move beyond abstraction, as political participation is limited in a society where the poor lack basic needs[8]; social rights are not always accessible to them. How can rights be exercised when the equality and voice of these populations are disregarded?

From access to high-value consumer goods—such as real estate or transportation—to basic infrastructure like water and sanitation—in a consumer society where the citizen becomes a consumer—rights become commodities accessible only to those who can pay. Precisely for this reason, "the consumer is not a citizen" (Santos, 2011, p. 118, our translation). What citizenship remains for inhabitants of this country when guaranteed rights are inaccessible?

Regarding access to water and basic sanitation, it is essential to understand collective consumption means and their relationship to rights. According to Lojkine (1981), collective consumption means are urban infrastructures, facilities, and services constructed within cities for public use. Although these structures are essential to the economy and citizens' well-being, they are built according to a capitalist market logic that reinforces socio-spatial inequalities and contradictions, as their primary goal is the socialization of productive forces.

Topalov (1979) explains that companies appropriate existing urban structures through the state, treating them as historical inheritances of economically significant zones. Consequently, capital invests only in areas with profit potential, concentrating public and private resources there at the expense of less profitable areas. However, both Topalov (1979) and Lojkine (1981) emphasize that these infrastructures—while essential for surplus value—are costly, yield little or no profit, and are fixed and indivisible. This complicates assigning exchange value to their use value, creating challenges for private initiatives that typically do not build these infrastructures alone; the state must do so, sometimes independently, sometimes in partnership with private firms.

When the state transfers control of these infrastructures to private enterprises, it also provides its full apparatus to ensure their operation, granting a monopoly to a private agent who

[8]According to the 2022 census conducted by IBGE, the sewage network reaches only 62.5% of the country's population. The same census reports that 32.2% of the rural population lacks access to water supply, compared to 93.4% coverage in urban areas. Given these alarming statistics, how can there be full political participation from the poorest segments of society? For further information, see: https://agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/agencia-noticias/2012-agencia-de-noticias/noticias/39237-censo-2022-rede-de-esgoto-alcanca-62-5-da-populacao-mas-desigualdades-regionais-e-por-cor-e-raca-persistem. Accessed December 18, 2025.

will seek profit from managing the infrastructure. This inevitably impacts costs across other economic sectors.

Similar cases exist in Latin America. Ribeiro (2008) recalls Bolivia's 1999 privatization of its water supply to the U.S. company Bechtel, which triggered protests following abusive price increases. Buenos Aires, Argentina, experienced a similar situation, reversing privatization after water bills rose by 20% (Ribeiro, 2008).

Such experiences—characterized by price hikes, poor quality, and unequal distribution—have given rise to the "remunicipalization" movement. By 2014, over 180 remunicipalization processes of water services had been recorded worldwide, 136 of them in Global South countries (Lobina *et al.*, 2014).

Water in Rio Claro: A Historical Problem

In Rio Claro, the logic of profit prioritization persists in the management of collective consumption means. This reflects the municipality's political orientation, historically aligned with the neoliberal agenda dominant in the State of São Paulo.

This debate gained renewed relevance in 2024 when, in May, the São Paulo City Council approved the privatization of the São Paulo State Basic Sanitation Company (Sabesp), finalized in June with a ceremony at the São Paulo Stock Exchange (B3) and international recognition for the governor, according to Machado, Patriarca, and Bitar (2024). That same year, Rio Claro initiated, under urgent conditions, the privatization proposal for the Autonomous Department of Water and Sewage (DAAE), approved by the local council despite strong popular resistance.

It is important to note that since its establishment by Rio Claro's city hall in the late 1960s, DAAE has been the autonomous agency responsible for managing the city's water supply and sewage treatment. Currently, the agency operates two water treatment plants, with plans to build a third, and eight sewage treatment stations, serving a population of just over 200,000 people.

Figure 1 – Infrastructure and Hydrography Map of Rio Claro Municipality

Source: Prepared by the authors.

According to Calores (2024), the current municipal management of Rio Claro seeks to adopt a privatization model similar to that implemented by the state government, wherein the autonomous agency will become a public company with private initiative assuming most of its administration, thereby diluting municipal management's participation.

However, this is not the first time the city's water resources have been contested. Prior to the current privatization attempt and another in the 2000s—rejected by the city council—Rio Claro's water supply has long been the subject of debate.

As noted in works such as Sampaio and Pires (1992), at the early stages of Rio Claro's existence as a city, water supply was primarily provided through domestic wells, the Servidão stream, and public fountains distributed throughout the city (Souza *et al*., 2004). With urban growth, the need arose for adequate infrastructure to distribute water to residents, who, according to reports from citizens of that period, suffered from poor water quality from sources such as the Servidão stream, where "fecal matter" was reportedly found in its course (Souza *et al.*, 2004, p. 9-10).

Sampaio and Pires (1992) report that by 1885, some affluent households, clubs, and hospitals already had water access, but it was only in 1901 that Rio Claro approved the creation

of a company to manage municipal water and sewage systems through private loans (Souza *et al.*, 2004).

This did not fully resolve the city's problems. The Servidão stream—a small urban watercourse crossing part of the city and flowing into the Corumbataí River, as shown in Figure 2's map—was notorious for foul odors, debris, and waste pollution for many years. In the 1970s, it was channeled and covered by an avenue (Souza *et al*., 2004), initially seen as a solution but later revealed to cause frequent flooding during heavy rains.

Around this period, the Autonomous Department of Water and Sewage (DAAE), as it is known today, was created as an autonomous agency in 1969, "under the leadership of Oswaldo de Oliveira Brossi, the primary figure in modernizing Rio Claro's sanitation" (Souza *et al*., 2004, p. 14).

The agency inherited the previous administration's structure with only one water treatment plant (ETA-1). In the 1990s, it expanded by constructing a second plant (ETA-2), and in 1999, the city inaugurated its first sewage treatment station.

It is also important to note that, during this period—following a nationwide trend of privatizing public enterprises—the city administration began debating DAAE's privatization. However, unlike today, the city council rejected the sale, responding to public opposition, supported by intervention from the National Association of Municipal Sanitation Services (ASSEMAE) (Sanchez, 2001).

This anti-privatization stance is evident in materials reviewed during this study. Both Souza *et al*. (2004) and an institutional booklet published for DAAE's 30th anniversary emphasize the agency's importance and efficiency. Souza et al. (2004) dedicate a section titled "Impracticality of DAAE Privatization."

As will be discussed further, in 2024, the city once again resumed debates on privatizing the agency, this time with a different outcome.

DAAE and Privatization in the Third Decade of the 21st Century

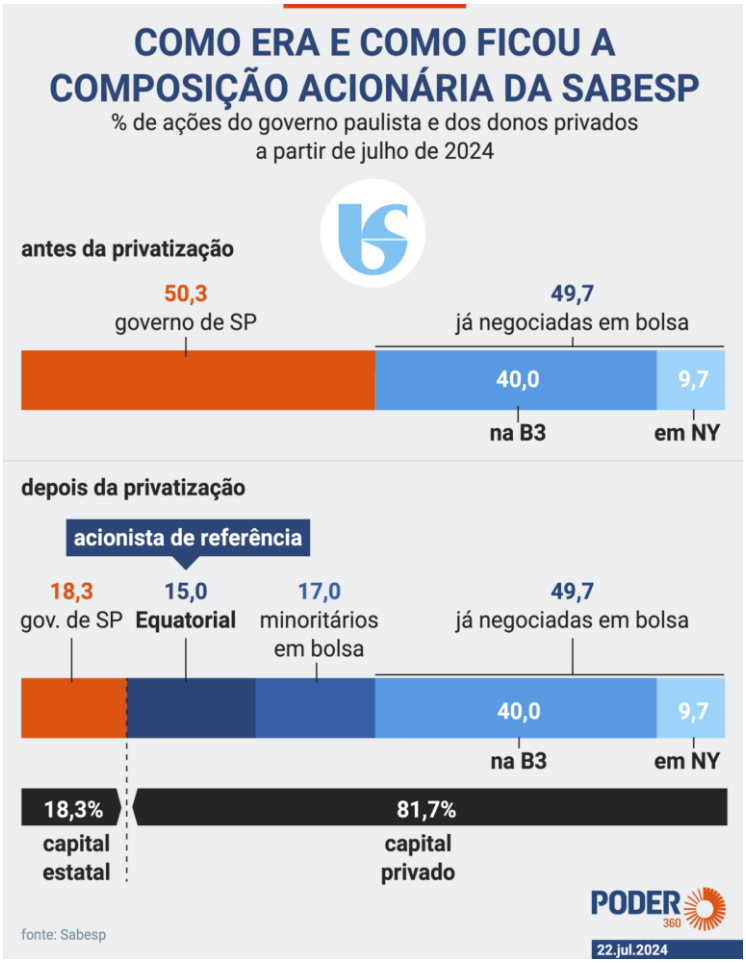
After the impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, Brazil deepened its embrace of neoliberal demands that had been prominent since the 1990s, characterized by a new wave of privatizations, economic liberalization, and widespread ideological dissemination through traditional and digital media.

As Milton Santos points out in *The Nature of Space* (2023), these ideological vehicles form a "psicoesphere" that gradually convinces the population of the dominant discourse.

Consequently, politicians and administrators advocating neoliberal programs—focused on transferring collective consumption assets to private initiative—gain media prominence and growing societal support, reflected in electoral outcomes across various São Paulo cities.

In this context, São Paulo's governor, Tarcísio de Freitas, exemplifies how policymakers implement neoliberal policies that transfer collective goods to the private sector. In 2023, Tarcísio oversaw the auction of the northern section of the Rodoanel, won by Via Appia, turning symbolic gestures like hammering into political spectacle (Via Appia [...], 2023). In 2024, during the ceremony formalizing Sabesp's privatization, he repeated this symbolism by ringing a bell (Tarcísio [...], 2024), reinforcing the dominant narrative and legitimizing neoliberal measures before the public.

Figure 2 – Shareholding History of SABESP



Source: Poder360 (2023). Note: Tarcísio concludes Sabesp's privatization and rings the bell at B3.

With the significant decline of the Brazilian left from 2016 onward, there has been a large-scale resurgence of the liberalization process initiated globally in the 1970s and diffused

in Brazil since the 1990s, as Harvey (2008) notes. Lapida (2023) links this shift to the financialization of the economy, the abandonment of "Fordism-Keynesianism," and the rise of neoliberalism, driven by leaders such as Reagan and Thatcher.

This movement established a new "common sense" (Lapida, 2023, p. 9, our translation), reinforced by strategies within the psicoesphere (Santos, 2023), which expanded in Brazil during the 1980s amid redemocratization and the heavy external debt inherited from the dictatorship. These changes led Brazil to quickly adopt measures imposed by economic powers (Paulani, 2012), strengthening the discourse on privatization and accelerating the financialization of the economy and collective consumption assets.

In this context, as Costa and Gallo (2020, p. 335) remind us, understanding the financialization process is critical since it is closely linked to the current accumulation model. Rufino *et al*. (2021) argue that after the 2008 U.S. subprime crisis, global investors began viewing state infrastructures as secure and profitable assets. Control over these structures thus acts as a wealth drain for core countries (Costa; Gallo, 2020, p. 327). An example is Sabesp's privatization, where Equatorial Energia—the company granted the concession to operate the service—acquired shares below market value and counts foreign groups among its shareholders, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Major Shareholders of Equatorial Energia

Shareholder	**Ownership (%)**
Opportunity Asset Administradora de Recursos de Terceiros LTDA.	10,08%
Capital World Investors	5,0%
Squadra Investimentos	4,6%
Canada Pension Plan Investment Board	4,59%
BLACKROCK, INC.	4,57%

Source: Prepared by the authors. Adapted from Fundamentus (2025).

As observed, more than half of Equatorial Energia's capital is held by foreign companies: Capital World Investors is a U.S.-based investment group; the Canada Pension Plan is a pension fund linked to the Canadian government; and BlackRock, possibly the world's largest investment firm, is headquartered in the U.S.

In the case of Sabesp—Brazil's largest basic sanitation company, originally tasked with ensuring access to potable water, sewage treatment, and collection for the population of São

Paulo—it is now controlled by a private company that remunerates its shareholders through a service vital to the population. The consequences became apparent within months of the new management: the concessionaire announced the end of subsidies for key sectors in São Paulo and potential increases in water bills for residents[9].

In the case of Rio Claro, at the time of writing, the city hall published in the Official Gazette on March 6, 2025, the transformation of DAAE into a public company, with plans to open a bidding process for the sale of shares "to select a private legal entity to become a minority shareholder of the company, following the subscription of new shares" (Rio Claro, 2025, p. 3, our translation).

DAAE ceased to be an autonomous public agency and became a public company, losing its status as a public legal entity and adopting the status of a private company, now operating under a market-driven logic rather than prioritizing social service to Rio Claro's population. Although it is still early to measure the effects, despite strong opposition during public hearings, the municipal government approved the change by a wide majority, arguing that this was not privatization but merely an administrative change and the sale of "only" 49% of shares. However, experiences like Sabesp's show that transferring shares to private initiative tends to prioritize shareholder profit over the public interest—also directing taxpayer-funded resources to companies, including foreign ones.

On the Population and Privatization Debates

Rio Claro's city hall held several public hearings on DAAE's privatization, with significant popular participation—mainly unions, public servants, and charitable organizations—most of whom opposed the proposal. To better understand public perception, we conducted interviews with stakeholders and a preliminary survey via Google Forms about water and sewage service quality. A total of 80 people completed the online questionnaire.

Regardless of income or residential area, respondents reported structural problems: 43% rated water quality as poor or very poor; 54% experienced supply interruptions; 32% reported frequent water cuts; and 35% faced difficulties paying their bills. According to Calores (2024), DAAE loses about 40% of water due to network failures and illegal connections. Although this

[9]See more at: SABESP vai cortar descontos na tarifa para clientes comerciais a partir de 2025, diz jornal. **ICL Notícias**, 2024. Available at: https://iclnoticias.com.br/economia/sabesp-descontos-tarifa-clientes-comerciais/. Accessed on: Mar. 15, 2025.

loss is roughly in line with the national average, it signals a management weakness (Hummel, 2024).

Additionally, the study *"Desestatização dos serviços de saneamento no estado do Rio de Janeiro: avaliação dos primeiros meses de operação das novas concessionárias"* or *"We Miss Cedae"* (Quintslr; Arouca, 2024), analyzed complaint volumes against water and sewage concessionaires in Rio de Janeiro post-privatization. It showed a significant increase in user complaints recorded on Consumidor.gov.br after privatization. Before the concession, complaint levels were stable, but they surged after private companies began operations, particularly concerning billing and service quality. This demonstrates that private management brought greater user dissatisfaction (Quintslr; Arouca, 2024). Problems extend beyond increased bills caused by meter replacement and sewage fees in some areas—they also include high fines for employee access denial, service cuts, reconnection fees, and other charges. These costs raise concerns about economic impacts on households in poverty and extreme poverty (Quintslr; Arouca, 2024).

Following the surveys, we interviewed three residents involved in the issue. Their testimonies reinforce these criticisms, citing strong chlorine odor, whitish water discoloration, and general dissatisfaction. While privatization advocates argue these problems would be resolved, the interviewees expressed skepticism, citing Sabesp's case, where services remained poor and tariffs high after privatization. One interviewee, Andréia, a 21-year-old female student, recounted suffering from a viral outbreak on the São Paulo coast in early 2025, during which Sabesp was notified by the Guarujá city hall for poor water quality—despite the company denying responsibility.

The other two interviewees, Éder (38, male, teacher) and Roberto (43, male, teacher), considered tariff increases and their impacts on low- and middle-income families, as well as mass layoffs at the company, inevitable, given their frequency in public service privatizations.

There are numerous examples in recent national history, especially during the 1990s "economic modernization" process, as cited by Silva and Abdalla (2020), which led to the privatization of Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional, causing significant unemployment and weakening labor movements in Volta Redonda. More recently, Eletropaulo experienced a 36% reduction in staff between 2019 and 2023 (Alencar, 2023). Similarly, Sabesp, according to the workers' union, had already dismissed approximately 2,000 employees within one year of privatization (Jeronymo, 2025).

Final Considerations

The discussion surrounding the privatization of the water and basic sanitation agency in Rio Claro, São Paulo, reveals that this process is part of a broader economic, social, and ideological movement that extends beyond municipal politics, with global implications.

The privatization of DAAE is merely one outcome of the neoliberalization of the economy, rooted in the 1970s in central countries and spreading worldwide since then, targeting peripheral countries like Brazil as key areas for expansion.

This process has been supported from the outset by global institutions and organizations that act as major promoters of an ideological framework, creating what Santos (2023) calls a "psicosphere," gradually convincing different societies to adopt market logic and relinquish their public goods. An example of this is seen in international forums and summits on water consumption, whose final reports often advocate treating water as a commodity.

Among these influential actors are the World Bank and the IMF, which historically use their financial power by granting loans to Global South countries, pressuring them to adopt market-friendly standards that benefit central economies.

Analyzing these dynamics clarifies why privatizations like those of DAAE or Sabesp occur despite significant public opposition or limited broad debate about equitable access to water. Since water is treated as a commodity, access becomes guaranteed only to those who can afford it.

This does not mean that public enterprises or state-controlled entities under capitalism are exempt from criticism. They have a record of providing inadequate services to low-income populations, show little interest in expanding access, and rarely adopt affordable pricing or lenient payment policies. Our research found no evidence that Rio Claro's public companies or DAAE fully ensure universal access to water and sanitation or operate without shortcomings.

Throughout this study, numerous issues reported by Rio Claro's population became evident. Dissatisfaction with DAAE's services is widespread and is often used by privatization advocates as justification for transfer. However, historical analysis and examination of economic impacts from prior privatizations lead us to conclude that privatization is not an ideal solution; on the contrary, it may exacerbate existing problems.

The expectation is that private companies, upon obtaining concessions, will seek profitability, further reinforcing water's status as a commodity. This typically results in tariff increases since private firms prioritize financial returns and are unwilling to absorb losses. Sabesp's recent experience exemplifies this scenario.

Moreover, water is a strategic resource intrinsically linked to the governance and functionality of the municipality. Transferring control of such a vital resource to private interests places a critical element of the city's wellbeing in the hands of actors whose priorities may not align with public welfare—especially given that privatization grants them a monopoly over resource management.

Finally, and most importantly, access to water is a fundamental right—not only of Brazilian citizens but of all human beings. Therefore, any initiative aiming to remove this essential resource from public control and transfer it to private entities must be considered highly risky. This transfer reflects the state's alignment with private interests, which will likely contribute to increasingly restricted and unequal production, consumption, and access—directly impacting the daily lives of the population.

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