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Contemporary stories of water

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Abstract

Water conflict is not a new phenomenon; rather the status of water generates conflicts. Water research has generally focused on developing countries, but this study is situated in a developed, Western context, where water is just as necessary to human survival. In this paper I examine how water is perceived in a contemporary European water conflict. Considering narratives of water in a political debate from Ireland in 2014, I look into the constructed relation between humans and water. The narrative approach, based on Jörn Rüsen's historical methodology, provides insights into the way historical orientation plays into the narration of water. Inspired by the research of Karen Bakker, I identify three main narratives; a market environmentalist, a social-equity and an anti-commercialization narrative. I find that the three narratives provide different stories of what water is and the value it has to humanity. The perceptions vary from economic asset to social good and entitlement. However, these stories are all narrated over the assumption that water – and nature – is instrumental to human survival.

Water – water management – narrative – conflict – commercialization – Republic of Ireland – water charges

Vattenkonflikter är inget nytt fenomen, det är snarare så att vattnets status genererar konflikter. Forskningen kring vatten har generellt sätt fokuserat på utvecklingsländerna, men i den här uppsatsen ligger fokus på den utvecklade, västliga kontexten, där vatten är en lika stor nödvändighet för människors överlevnad. I den här uppsatsen undersöker jag hur vatten förstås i ett nutida europeiskt sammanhang. Utifrån olika narrativ under en politisk debatt i Irland från 2014, undersöker jag hur relationen mellan människor och vatten konstrueras. Angripandet av narrativet är baserat på Jörn Rüsens historiska metod, som ger en inblick i vilken roll historisk orientering har för narrativ om vatten. Med inspiration från Karen Bakkers forskning, identifierar jag tre huvudsakliga narrativ; ett miljömarknadsnarrativ, ett socialt rättvisenarrativ och ett anti-kommersiellt narrativ. Jag drar slutsatsen att de tre narrativen ger olika beskrivningar av vad vatten är och vilket värde det har för mänskligheten. Förståelserna varierar från ekonomiskt värde till

social nytta samt rättigheter. Alla narrativen är dock överens om att vatten - och naturen – har instrumentellt värde för människans överlevnad.

Vatten – hantering av vatten – narrativ – konflikt – kommersialisering – Irland – vattenavgifter

Contents

1	Introduction	5
1.1	Purpose and problem statement	6
1.2	Material	7
1.2.1	Primary material	7
1.2.2	Secondary material	8
2	Background	10
3	Preceding research	13
3.1	The private-public binary	13
3.2	The human-nature relation	15
3.3	Solutions and approaches	17
4	Method	19
4.1	Typology of historical narration	20
5	Theory	24
5.1	Beyond the private-public binary	25
5.2	The status of water	26
5.3	Water as an emblem of citizenship	27
5.4	Market environmentalism	28
6	Analysis	30
6.1	The Dáil Éireann debate	30
6.2	The private-public binary	30
6.3	Market environmentalism	34
6.4	Water as an emblem of citizenship	36
6.5	Status of water	40
7	Conclusion	43
8	Discussion	46
	Bibliography	49

1 Introduction

When we think of water, we may think of drinking water, bathing water, oceans, lakes, rivers and rain. Water represents many things to us and we come in contact with it on a daily basis. It is integral to our lives through drinking and hygiene, but also as a key part of food and energy production. Water is a point of conflict and has been for many years. Disputes about ownership of and access to rivers cause wars between countries, water pollution cause health issues, and high water tariffs causes water poverty. As this paper is concerned with access to water it is important to note that less than 3 % of the water on Earth is freshwater.

The many roles water plays in our lives make it important to us on so many levels, that the prioritization of these is a heated political issue and a question of power. We may see water as neutral, as it follows its own cycle and has no regard for borders, but despite or maybe because of water's constant presence, one of the primary issues with access to water is its management and distribution. While water is forever present, the amount of water on Earth is fixed – it cannot de- or increase. The global demographic development demands solutions for the allocation of water to an ever-growing population. The need to rethink and deconstruct current forms of water governance is pressing, both from a social and an environmental point of view. Inadequate access to drinking water and sanitation in developing countries has been a focus both in academic research and in the work of charities. However, water and water governance is also causing debates and conflict in the developed countries. After all, we all need it to survive.

On October 11th 2014, 50.000 people marched the streets of Dublin to protest against the introduction of water charges in the Republic of Ireland. The year before *The Water Services Act 2013* established the firm Irish Water as a semi-state company, initiating a nationwide commercialization of the water services. The changes in water management was motivated by the challenge of aging water supply infrastructure and financial troubles of the Irish state. The 2014 resistance against the water charges meant that the government had to promise fixed water charges until 2018. As of May 2017 public opposition to the change in water management persists, and the charges have been abolished.

This paper examines how the water conflict in Ireland expresses understandings of water, and in turn what it reveals about the relation between humans and water.

1.1 Purpose and problem statement

Water is a basic need for human survival, yet it is commercialized or privatized in most of the European Union. The Republic of Ireland is the last member state to commercialize water supplies, and this transition has been met with public resistance. As mentioned academic focus on water, management and conflicts has primarily been in the context of developing countries. However, the need for freshwater is inescapable, even where technology is advanced and the form of government stable. With the purpose of examining a water conflict in a developed, Western country, I have chosen the current conflict in Ireland.

I examine the tensions of water commercialization in the context of Ireland in order to consider water narratives and understandings of the human-water relation in a specific context. I consider different narratives of the transition of the Irish water supply in an attempt to comprehend, how water is understood today, and how commercialization is justified.

- How is water understood in the Irish water conflict, and what does it reveal about the human-water relation?

Additionally, I have a set of working questions.

- How and why was the transition of the Irish water management initiated?
- What are the arguments for and against the commercialization?
- What understandings of water management are present in the Irish context, and to which extent are they distinct?

By focusing on commercialization through a narrative angle I am able to consider perceptions of water and water management. A narrative method will help fulfil the purpose of this paper, through the uncovering of general stories about water in a con-

temporary context. Moreover, narratives clearly position author and subject and enable discussion of the human-water relation using the examination as the point of departure. The choice of a historical narrative methodology is premised on the assumption that people make sense of their existence and understand and give meaning to the world through history.

The water supply conflict is on-going and developing at the time of writing. To this end I have chosen to limit the scope of this paper to October 2014, when water charges were introduced and the debate sparked. However, I situate the events and understandings of 2014 within the broader context, both internationally and in terms of subsequent development.

1.2 Material

In order to trace the different narratives of the Irish water supply debate and conflict in 2014, I apply material from different agents. While the politicians, the government and Irish citizens are represented in the primary material, the secondary material encompasses national and international perspectives to contextualize the Irish conflict, as well as academic approaches and interpretations of water issues.

1.2.1 Primary material

My primary material consists of an Irish parliamentary debate from October 2014, in which elected politicians debate the issue of Irish water management. I have chosen a parliamentary debate as the primary material in order to consider the political motivations, considerations and understandings of the politicians involved in the transition of Irish water supplies.

The debate is from the Dáil Éireann (the Dáil), the lower house or House of Representatives, which is a part of the Oireachtas, Ireland's legislature. I have chosen a Dáil debate because its members are directly elected and represent the Irish citizens. The debate was held, when the opposition party Fianna Fáil put forward a motion to review the Irish Water model in terms of funding and service delivery. Government representa-

tives as well as opposition politicians participated in the debate.

- Parliamentary debate held in Dáil Éireann on October 21st 2014: *Irish Water: Motion*.

In the Dáil Éireann there are specific rules and formalities in terms of how the debate is held. There is an Acting Chairman, who distributes time amongst the speakers. However, it is somewhat common that the Teachta Dálas (TD's), which are members of the Dáil, interrupt or comment on each other's speeches. Overall the parliamentary debate is subjected to a specific structure, and the speaker time is distributed accurately. This sort of material involves a process, where the speakers to some extent react to one another. There is a development in the debate and they refer to previous speaker.

The material limits the examination to water understandings of Irish politicians. It is impossible to encompass all understandings of water present in Ireland. However, the narratives include and play on common stories. I use the parliamentary debate to compare the different stories in the debate, and to examine how water is comprehended in a contemporary European context.

1.2.2 Secondary material

The secondary material applied in this paper consists of sources that help contextualize the chosen primary material. Therefore it ranges from newspaper articles to legal documents and academic articles. In this section I present form and genre of the secondary material. The contents will be described in the subsequent sections.

The EU established *The Water Framework Directive* in 2000. The directive has had major impact on the water management and governance of European member states ever since.¹ A directive is a legal rule issued by the EU. A directive has a specific form. In addition to preamble and a description of purpose and definitions, the directive consists of articles. Reading a directive can be done in different ways; with focus on the content, the form, the language, or what has been left out. In this paper I use the WFD as a source with focus on the content. The Directive sets out goals and frames future

¹ Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council, 23 October 2000.

water management, but it is for the member state itself to adopt legislation and live up to the Directive. The content of the WFD will be elaborated in the *Background* section.

I apply a number of newspaper articles from Irish media. I use them to capture the context and provide background information for the analysis. This genre is focused on facts and events, as well as comments from the people involved. Newspaper articles can be read with focus on language and content, but it is important to remember that they are not completely objective. For the most part I use the articles to confirm and add detail to elements of the Irish water conflict, which I have read about in academic articles.

Academic articles are used as sources throughout the paper; as context, as preceding research, in the method section and in the discussion. The academic article follows a specific form, in which research result, argument or examination is framed by an introduction and conclusion in each end. The purpose of an academic article is to contribute to the discussion in a given field. Within this genre there is a spectrum of variations of academic articles dependent on the field of research and the purpose; some have an empirical focus, others a theoretical.

The books I use resemble the academic articles in the structure, but are more comprehensive. They take part in the same academic and public discussions. The books are more elaborate and often give more space to examples and case studies. In this paper I use books primarily to build my theoretical and methodological standpoint, but also to situate this study in relation to preceding research. The contents of the sources used in this paper will be described in the relevant sections below.

2 Background

In the 20th century the Irish water supplies were primarily municipally organized, and water services were financed through general taxation.² In 1983 it became possible for local authorities to charge households for water. Before this point it had only been possible to charge businesses, and not households. This led to public discussion and protests, and after a non-payment campaign in the 1990's the water charges were abolished in 1996.³ The Irish water infrastructure has suffered from lack of investment, and despite some investment between 2000-2010 the amount of water wasted or lost before it reaches the consumer was at 41 % in 2008. Furthermore, the quality of the water is compromised and some areas have been subjected to boil water notices for several years.⁴

The European Union (EU), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), often referred to as the Troika, bailed out the Irish economy in 2010, following the financial crisis in 2008. One condition was the introduction of water charges.⁵ This was in line with the *Water Framework Directive* (the Directive) of 2000.

The Directive represented a new economic approach to water management in the European Union. Amongst others, it introduces two economic elements into the water management of member states. First, it requires water users to pay the full costs of water services, and second, it calls on member states to use economic analysis in the management of water. However, the Directive conceptualizes water not as "a commercial

² Bresnihan, Patrick. "The bio-financialization of Irish Water: New advances in the neoliberalization of vital services", *Utilities Policy* 40, June 1, 2016. p. 123.

³ Higgins, Joe, "How the Water Charges were beaten in 1996", *We Won't Pay*, <http://wontpay.ie/from-joe-higgins-td-how-the-water-charges-were-beaten-in-1996/> (Accessed 18.05.2017), and; Caroll, Steven "A brief history of water charges in Ireland", *The Irish Times*, Nov 19 2014, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/a-brief-history-of-water-charges-in-ireland-1.2007574> (Accessed 18.05.2017)

⁴ Quinn, Martin, Theodore Lynn, Stephen Jollands, and Binesh Nair. 2016. "Domestic Water Charges in Ireland - Issues and Challenges Conveyed through Social Media." *Water Resources Management* 30, no. 10, p. 3579.

⁵ Ibid. p. 3577.

product like any other but, rather, a heritage which must be protected, defended and treated as such.”⁶

To meet the condition of the Troika, a new national water delivery company, Irish Water, was established. Irish Water is a *quango* – a semi-public administrative body receiving financial support from the government, but outside civil service. Irish Water is technically public, as it is state-owned. Irish Water took over responsibility of water management from 34 local authorities. Through Irish Water, water metering, in which the use of water is measured at the residential or commercial building, was chosen as the course of action. The transition in water management was initiated in 2010 and expected to last 12 years.⁷

After the bailout agreement opposition parties called for a general election, which was held in February 2011. In this election Fianna Fáil lost its government position to a coalition between Fine Gael and The Labour Party. These two parties are in government at the time of the debate chosen for analysis. When the water charges were introduced in October 2014, protests began. The Right2Water campaign opposes commercialization with reference to the human rights doctrine, and the Irish conflict is one case in a larger international campaign.⁸ The We Won't Pay campaign is directed at the water charges and involved non-payment and return of water bills.⁹

A month after the Debate, the government presented a package to fix some of the problems with the water charges and Irish Water. A new charging system was initiated in January 2015, where households pay maximum €160 a year.¹⁰ At the time of writing (May 2017) the domestic water charges have been abolished with the exception of 8 % of the consumers, who are regarded as water wasters. This categorization is based on

⁶ European Commission, “Water Note 5, Economics in Water Policy: The value of Europe's waters”, March 2008, http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/participation/notes_en.htm (Accessed 03.04.2017).

⁷ Bresnihan, Patrick, 2016, pp. 115; 119.

⁸ Right2Water, “About the Campaign”, <http://www.right2water.ie/about> (Accessed 21.05.2017)

⁹ O'Brien, Tim, “Anti-water charges protest due for Dublin on October 11th”, *The Irish Times*, 02.10.2014, (<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/anti-water-charges-protest-due-for-dublin-on-october-11th-1.1949285>)(Accessed 21.05.2017)

¹⁰ Murphy, Sue, “Can't pay or won't pay? Irish Water will decide what category you're in”, *Newstalk*, 19.11.2014. (<http://www.newstalk.com/LIVE:-Government-announcement-on-water-charges>) (Accessed 21.05.2017)

metering of water use. A process of refunding consumers, who have paid the domestic water charges, has been initiated.¹¹

¹¹ O'Halloran, Marie, "Dáil votes to abolish current water charges regime", *The Irish Times*, 13.04.2017, (<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/water-charges/dáil-votes-to-abolish-current-water-charges-regime-1.3047742>)(Accessed 11.05.2017)

3 Preceding research

Water as a research subject has been approached from different perspectives as well as disciplines. In this paper I focus primarily on the status of water and water management. Much research on water management and the access to water has been done in the context of the developing world with focus on post-colonial structures, marginalized groups and water conflicts within and between states. While there are many interesting aspects in such contexts, I have chosen to examine the subject of water in a Western context.

My contribution to the research field is an analysis of a water conflict in a Western and developed country, and a discussion of contemporary conceptualizations of water. Additionally, by applying a narrative method the paper brings attention to how human beings position themselves within the chosen water context. Narratives or stories exist in every context and help us form and give meaning. I incorporate a narrative perspective on the Irish water conflict debate to see how water is assigned meaning and in turn understood.

3.1 The private-public binary

One of the key discussions within the field of water management is how to characterize water. Definitions vary from a basic human necessity, over common property and resource, to financial asset and commodity. Editor Robin Clarke¹² emphasizes three important aspects of water that are inescapable when dealing with water management. First, water moves, and has no concern for national borders. Second, the amount of water on earth is constant, and cannot be de- or increased. And third, human survival requires water.¹³ Clarke is primarily concerned with the significance of water in development projects, and given his profession as editor of UN environment publications, he focuses on international political action and his writing is less academic. Nonetheless, he points to some of the mayor difficulties and warns of a global water crisis.

¹² Robin Clarke has worked as editor of the World Meteorological Organization's World Climate News, and of the United Nations Environment Program's publications.

¹³ Clarke, Robin, *Water: The International Crisis*, Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1991, p. 19.

The understanding of water is often linked to the private-public binary. First, it is a discussion about whether water is a public commons or a private good. Second, the binary is present in different water governance strategies and management approaches.

Privatization and commercialization of water has been central in debates about water management especially since the 1990's, when international development policies became increasingly pro-private sector participation. Privatization of water management has been used as a strategy to overcome the global water crisis, which is the lack of basic services and the degradation of water resources, both in developing and developed nations.¹⁴

Another strategy has been the introduction of New Public Management in water management. Here principles and rationales from the private sector are applied in the public sector to decrease the size of it and make it more efficient. Furthermore, marketization and liberalization of economies are considered effective, and are executed through outsourcing and privatization.¹⁵

Many countries have small private wells or municipal, local water systems. There are many variations of water management, and the private-public binary, while being a useful introduction to the conceptualizations of management and governance, is often too simple to comprehend actual water systems.

Research that is critical towards privatization and commercialization of water often explains the development by referring to capitalist and neoliberal rationality infiltrating the public sphere and the conduct of the state. Professor in Geography Patrick Bresnahan points out that the Irish case differs from common understandings of neoliberalism, where focus is on retreat of the state, and advance of the market. In the Irish case the status of Irish Water is somewhere between public and private. In the article *The bio-financialization of Irish Water: New advances in the neoliberalization of vital services* he examines, how ecological modernization and financialization changes the way water supplies are valued and measured in the context of Ireland. The nexus of ecological modernization and financialization, he argues, is evident in the view of nature as a trad-

¹⁴ Bakker, Karen, *Privatizing Water: Governance Failure and the World's Urban Water Crisis*, Cornell University Press, 2010, pp. 72, 214.

¹⁵ Colon, Marine, and Lætitia Guérin-Schneider. "The reform of New Public Management and the creation of public values: compatible processes? An empirical analysis of public water utilities." *International Review Of Administrative Sciences* 2015, 81, no. 2, p. 266.

able and measurable, performing asset.¹⁶

3.2 The human-nature relation

Dealing with water and the way it is used and understood by humans requires attention to the more general relationship between humans and nature. There are many possible approaches to this topic, but I want to take starting point in the notion of *the Anthropocene*. During the past decade geologists and others have debated whether to name the current geological period the Anthropocene, which means the epoch (cene) of the human (anthropo).¹⁷ Proponents of this categorization argue that human activity to a high extent causes environmental changes, and that humanity is defining for the whole geological period. Critics see it as anthropocentric, and argue that it neglects the non-human world.¹⁸ There is general agreement that the impact of humanity on the environment is mainly negative. The discussion about the anthropocene is focused on how much weight or importance is assigned to humanity in a geological context, and not whether this human influence is bad or good.

The Anthropocene bears witness to what Val Plumwood names *the logic of mastery*. She argues that humans and non-humans are hyper-separated, and that nature has become instrumental to humans, causing blindness towards humans as parts of ecosystems. Using feminist theory she and other ecofeminists¹⁹ draw parallels between the human-nature relation and colonial, racial and gender oppressions. The solution to humanity's drive towards destroying the planet, she argues, is to question and rethink fundamental, cultural narratives.²⁰ This view resembles the purpose of this paper, which seeks to uncover narratives of human-water relation in a specific context.

¹⁶ Bresnihan, Patrick. 2016, p. 123.

¹⁷ Zalasiewicz, Jan, et al. "Introduction: The Anthropocene: a new epoch of geological time?." *Philosophical Transactions: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences*, 2011. p. 835.

¹⁸ Grear, Anna. "Deconstructing Anthropos: A Critical Legal Reflection on 'Anthropocentric' Law and Anthropocene 'Humanity'." *Law & Critique* 26, no. 3 (November 2015): 237.

¹⁹ For instance Chaone Mallory, Sumi Krishna, Karen J. Warren and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

²⁰ Plumwood, Val, "Nature in the Active Voice", *Australian Humanities Review*, 2009. And Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, London, 1993.

In a similar line of thinking, David Harvey argues that liberal principles from the Enlightenment remain today. The desire for freedom from state interference is evident in free-market policies and privatization, which have generated “a highly instrumental view of nature as consisting of capital assets – as resources – available for human exploitation.”²¹

The notion of scarcity also plays into the anthropocentric mentality of nature as instrumental to humanity. Water scarcity, as argued by ecological economist Federico Aguilera-Klink et al., is not caused by environmental changes, but is socially constructed. In a case study of Tenerife they examine how water privatization and groundwater exploitation has been addressed and defined in society, and which solutions are deemed acceptable in the social and political context. They argue that water has different meaning for different people and is influenced by social factors, such as place of living, class etc. Considering the social legitimacy of the water appropriation process, they argue that water scarcity is socially constructed, given that the issue is anthropogenic.²² Rather than descriptively indicating the deficit of water in a given context, the concept of water scarcity is normative and anthropocentric. However, as Jaeger et al. emphasize the concept of water scarcity holds the potential to advance understandings of the variety of interests and uses of water from a human perspective.²³

Environmental psychologist Susan Clayton and social psychologist Susan Opatow welcome the increased academic and public acknowledgement of environmental degradation as a matter of attitudes and behaviour, and not purely as a technical issue. In examining the value of nature beyond economic value, they argue that identity is key in matters of ecological justice, because worth is assigned in relation to identity. They further state that one’s social orientation influences one’s environmental position and iden-

²¹ Harvey, David, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 124.

²² Aguilera-Klink, Federico, Eduardo Pérez-Moriana, and Juan Sánchez-García. "The social construction of scarcity. The case of water in Tenerife (Canary Islands)." *Ecological Economics* 34, no. 2, August 2000.

²³ Jaeger, W. K., et al. "Toward a formal definition of water scarcity in natural-human systems." *Water Resources Research* 49, no. 7 (July 2013): 4506.

tity.²⁴

The human-nature relation is dynamic and varies with time and space, but there are some general tendencies as those presented above. It is easy to see how water is instrumental to humanity today with its use in numerous industries, energy production and hygiene. But it is less obvious how this pattern should or could be changed, given that water is necessary for human survival.

3.3 Solutions and approaches

Issues and problems within water research are manifold and are articulated in various ways. Water scarcity, a global water crisis and environmental degradation have already been mentioned. In addition to the privatization or commercialization strategies, there are more academic conceptualizations of water management. Environmental researcher Jess Schoeman et al. evaluate and compare three prominent approaches to water management. Considering integrated water resources management (IWRM), ecosystem-based approaches (EBA's) and adaptive management (AM), they argue that despite their different origins and focuses, the different approaches are part of a new water management paradigm. This new water paradigm recognizes the complexities and unpredictability of social-ecological systems; includes sustainability, water security and adaptive capacity as goals of water management; and focuses on implementation through learning, governance and human dimensions of water management. The authors conclude that it is beneficial to combine the three approaches.²⁵

As mentioned water research often engage with developing countries and technical solutions or approaches. My aim is to study the narratives of water in order to understand how water is assigned meaning. This paper contributes to the research field pri-

²⁴ Clayton, Susan and Susan Opatow ed. *Identity and the Natural Environment- the Psychological Significance of Nature*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2003, pp. 3-4; 11.

²⁵ Schoeman, Jess, Catherine Allan, and C. Max Finlayson. n.d. "A new paradigm for water? A comparative review of integrated, adaptive and ecosystem-based water management in the Anthropocene." *International Journal Of Water Resources Development* 30, no. 3, 2014.

marily in the choice of a narrative approach, but additionally in terms of a developed context.

4 Method

In order to examine understandings of water and the human-water relation, I apply a narrative method. The narrative field of research encompasses a broad range of approaches. I have chosen the approach of Jörn Rüsen, a German historian, who has developed a comprehensive theory of history and historic knowledge. Rüsen is inspired by one of the most significant theoreticians in German historicism, Johann Gustav Droysen.²⁶ I use a number of academic articles by and about Rüsen as well as his two books *Berättande och Förnuft* and *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation*.

I have chosen the historical narrative approach, because a narrative in itself is an interpretation of events and time, as well as an attempt to make sense of the world. Therefore, the analysis results can be contextualized in terms of what they reveal about the human-water relation. Rüsen's methodology allows me to consider understandings of water and water management through stories. His conceptualization of historical narratives emphasizes the role of temporal orientation, that is how past, present and future is operationalized in a given narrative. This way I will be able to identify and compare different types of narratives, and consider the human-water relation in general.

Rüsen's theory has been criticized of being incomprehensible, and that his presentation of the narration typology is too rigid.²⁷ While it is a complex theory of history, his notion of narratives and the typology of historical narration are applicable in this paper, as they shed light on the use of past, present and future in water narratives.

Rüsen defines history as actualized past in the form of narrative.²⁸ Historical narration is an attempt of humans to overcome the uncertainty of time in conjunction with the threat of death. In this sense, historical narratives produce patterns of meaning, and attempt to transcend mortality. Through historical narratives it is possible to make

²⁶ Wiklund, Martin. "Det historiska berättandet och historiekulturens fornuft" in *Berättande och Förnuft*, Jörn Rüsen. Daidalos, 2004, p. 15.

²⁷ Skopp, Douglas R. "History: Narration--Interpretation--Orientation." *History: Reviews Of New Books* 33, no. 3, 2005, p. 123.

²⁸ Rüsen, Jörn, *Berättande och Förnuft*. Daidalos, 2004, p.88.

“sense of the experience of time”²⁹ and orient oneself. The past becomes history through the activity of *historical consciousness*.³⁰ In other words, a historical narrative is a pattern of meaning, in which humans can situate and orient themselves in order to understand the present and expect the future.

In historical narratives the past is understood in empirical and normative terms, while allowing subjects to understand their current situation and circumstances. A historical narrative also functions to establish the identity of the author and the listeners.³¹ Historical consciousness responds to the need of temporal orientation, because human intentions transcend the present.³²

What distinguishes historical narratives from other narratives is their concern with actual events and tendencies. When we say story, we often think of fiction, but by considering interpretations of actual events as stories – or *narratives* – we can trace different patterns of meaning. Whether historical narratives are ‘true’ or not is therefore not the focus of this paper. Rather, I want to examine *how* water is narrated.

4.1 Typology of historical narration

The concept of continuity or *course of time* is essential to Rüsen, because it reveals how past, present and future are connected in historical narratives. Rüsen has developed a *typology of historical narration*, in which he presents four types of narratives and their characteristics. Each of these narrative types has a distinguished concept of continuity. Below is a table with the main characteristics of the four types of historical narratives; *traditional, exemplary, genetic and critical*. The different types do not exclude one another. Rather they should be understood as a spectrum, and can all be found in any given historical text.

²⁹ Rüsen, Jörn. "Historical Narration: Foundation, Types, Reason", in *History & Theory*, 26, 1987, p. 88.

³⁰ Rüsen, Jörn. "Tradition: a Principle of Historical Sense-generation and its Logic and Effect in Historical Culture", in *History & Theory*, 51, 2012, p. 47.

³¹ Rüsen, Jörn, 1987, p. 89.

³² Megill, Alan. "Jörn Rüsen's Theory of Historiography Between Modernism and Rhetoric of Inquiry" in *History and Theory*, 39, 1994. p. 48.

A *traditional narrative* is based on common and non-disputable concepts, and interprets past events as defining moments. Origins and continuity of patterns give a sense of eternity. An example of a traditional narrative is conservatism, where tradition and values in a given society are important, and should be maintained. Here tradition is central and is used as a guideline in the present and future.

An *exemplary narrative* uses examples from the past to demonstrate rules with the purpose of applying them in the present. Here past events have no value in themselves, but give meaning when related to an abstract idea or principle. The time frame is significantly expanded compared to traditional narratives, because an infinite number of examples can be utilized. An example of exemplary narration is ethnic profiling, where a connection between a certain ethnicity and criminality is drawn using cases from the past. This generalization is used to guide actions in the present and future.

The genetic narrative is exemplified in evolutionary theory, where change gives meaning to history and past events. The narrator is at a point of transition or development, because every point in history is seen as subject to progress. Patterns of life and culture change in order to maintain their permanence; human beings evolve in order to persist. In contrast to the other three types, genetic narration has a dynamic concept of permanence.

The *critical narrative* is a counter-narrative. Feminist theories that question established social roles are examples of the critical type of narration. They negate and discredit established “truths” or conventions, and seek out obscured elements of the past to counter the established order. This is for instance the case when female figures are highlighted in historical accounts. Critical narration has a sense of rupture as it seeks to change ideas of continuity.³³

Rüsen argues that there is a “natural progression” from the traditional type to the exemplary and further on to the genetic narrative. The critical narrative he names the catalyst of this development, due to its nature of rejecting or negating other narratives. Elements of the four narrative types occur in most narratives, but there tends to be one

³³ Rüsen, Jörn, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation*. Berghahn Books, 2005, pp. 28-34.

type that dominates in general in society in a given period. The dominant narrative type contributes to defining the epoch.³⁴

Types of narration	Reference to the past	Course of time	Mode of communication	Forming identity by	Sense of time
<i>Traditional</i>	Origins and continuity of life-order	Duration in change	Based on agreement about non-disputable concepts	Taking over pre-given (“natural”) patterns of belonging	Time gets sense by eternity in change
<i>Exemplary</i>	Events as cases demonstrating general rules	Pragmatic sequence of events	Argumentation by discernment and judgment	Rule-competence (prudence)	Time gets sense by super-temporal morality
<i>Genetic</i>	Change of forms of life	Development	Temporal contextualization	Individualization	Time gets sense by temporalization
<i>Critical</i>	Events negating the validity of pre-given orders	Rupture, discontinuity	Partially against established orientations	Resisting demands of commitment	Time gets sense by judgment

Rüsen, Jörn, 2012, p.52.

The typology of historical narration is relevant for the purpose of this paper in that it provides a framework to categorize and break down different narratives. Elements of the four different types are as mentioned present in any historical narrative. In the analysis I use this method to deconstruct the Debate, trace narratives and compare them.

³⁴ Rüsen, Jörn, 1987, pp. 90-94.

One could argue that each speaker represents their own narrative – or vice versa. However, due to the purpose of this paper, I look beyond the particularities of each speaker, in order to consider broader tendencies in the way water and water management is understood. I will consider the political positions, in terms of government or opposition affiliation, as these are relevant to the content and the form of the Debate.

5 Theory

For the purpose of this paper I have chosen the theoretical perspective of Karen Bakker, a Canadian professor in water governance. Bakker goes beyond the private-public dichotomy and offers a contextualization of current water issues in terms of historical background and contemporary development. She traces general and global tendencies in water management in particular in the 20th and 21st centuries.

I draw on two of her books; *An Uncooperative Commodity* from 2003 and *Privatizing Water – Governance Failure and the World’s Urban Water Crisis* from 2011. The former deals with the privatization of water in England and Wales from the 1980’s to the beginning of the 21st century. The latter is more general and considers international frameworks and policies in particular with regard to urban water supply in historical and contemporary contexts.

Bakker’s work has generally been met with much praise from different disciplines. Critique of her book *Privatizing Water* points to the absence of theorizing the role of the state in water provision beyond service delivery, and requests a more differentiated analysis of local contexts so as to give further insights.³⁵ Further, her conceptualization of the state is criticized for being a somewhat stable entity, and her accounts of water struggles fail to give adequate space to the complexities or messiness that often exist.³⁶

In her research from different contexts, Karen Bakker has developed a set of useful concepts. I have selected four themes, which will be presented in this section, and subsequently constitute the structure of the analysis. The selected themes are *the status of water*, *the private-public binary*, *water as an emblem of citizenship* and *market environmentalism*. I have chosen these themes because they, in spite of Bakker’s focus on developing countries, are useful in explaining and framing the Irish water conflict. Furthermore, the themes will assist the method in uncovering the constellations of the human-water relation in the chosen Debate.

³⁵ Punjabi, Bharat. "Debate on Karen Bakker's Privatizing Water." *International Journal Of Urban & Regional Research* 39, 2015, no. 5, 1037-1039.

³⁶ Loftus, Alex. "Book review: Privatizing Water: Governance Failure and the World’s Urban Water Crisis." *Progress In Human Geography* 36, no. 2, 2012: 286.

5.1 Beyond the private-public binary

In the 1990's there was much agreement that *the municipal hydraulic paradigm*, characterized by local water management, had failed. The prevalence of inadequate access to water was perceived a 'failure' of the paradigm, but as Bakker emphasizes, the lack of investment in water infrastructure for decades played a significant role in this failure.³⁷ The consensus on the failure of municipal hydraulic systems became a key element in the legitimization and justification of privatization and private sector participation.

Advocates of privatization of water management argue that the introduction of competition and financial liberalization will increase efficiency, and stimulate conservation. They argue that the pricing system will encourage people to conserve and limit their water use and decrease waste.³⁸ In this way economic benefit is linked to environmental benefit. In an international development context privatization has been prominent as the 'best option' of supplying the world's poor with adequate water.

Anti-privatization activists deny that profit-driven management will improve the access to water. They regard it as highly unethical to make profit of an essential resource for human (and nonhuman) life. Furthermore, concerns are raised that privatization of water services will lack transparency, as private firms or actors are protected by corporate confidentiality. In this line of thinking, when water management is removed from public scrutiny, it is seen as a threat to democracy.³⁹ Risk of water poverty is also a concern within the anti-privatization movement, and in general among people, who object to pricing water.

Anti-privatization campaigns and protests are often formed in broad coalitions. They vary with the context, but examples are connections to religious groups, women's rights groups, and anti-poverty groups. Anti-privatization protests are in particular often enforced by political and economical protests and claims.⁴⁰

According to Bakker the public-private binary is too simple and obscures the complexities of water management. Few water supplies are purely public or private, but lie

³⁷ Bakker, Karen, 2010, p. 87.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 87.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 138.

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 137, 142.

somewhere in between. In terms of past experiences, Bakker emphasizes that, “whereas many governments have consistently failed to adequately deliver water supply, private companies have typically failed to improve the situation.”⁴¹ The association of ‘public’ with ‘government’ and ‘private’ with ‘market’ lacks appreciation of the social activities that go beyond states and private corporations.⁴² However, the public-private binary remains a key part of debates about water management, and it is relevant to this paper.

5.2 The status of water

Bakker calls the status of water ambiguous, as it is neither public nor private.⁴³ The status of water, and the names it gets differs with context and perspective. Water is and can be understood as an ecological necessity, an industrial input, a religious symbol, a commodity, an economic good or a public good. The ambiguous status of water as well as its irreplaceability renders it a political issue. In comparing government and private provisions Bakker describe their similarities;

[...] their commitment to a modernist, humanist worldview of water. This worldview defines water as a resource, to be put to instrumental use by humans, via centralized, standardized hydraulic technology, in a drive for maximization (whether of water supply or profits) [...]⁴⁴

The status of water and how it is assigned meaning is the subject of this paper. To this end the narratives of water in the parliamentary debate will be analysed with focus on the way water is conceptualized and its relation to humanity.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 215.

⁴² Ibid. p. 105.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 105.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 216.

5.3 Water as an emblem of citizenship

Bakker argues that access to water is a *material emblem of citizenship*. In her account on the development in water management, Bakker goes back to the 19th century bourgeois residents of European cities. They linked physical hygiene to moral hygiene or cleanliness, and water use gained a new dimension. Access to water was seen as an expression of political inclusion. In this view service provisions such as water supply became imperative to citizenship. This type of argumentation also influenced and contributed to the emergence of the welfare state in the 20th century.⁴⁵

The link between citizenship and service provisions can be found today in development policies and the human rights doctrine. While access to water meant political inclusion or attaining citizenship to the European bourgeoisie, the contemporary link between the two phenomenon is reversed; citizenship or political inclusion entitle one to water and other basic needs. It is fairly obvious that all human beings need water to live, but it remains disputed who is responsible to provide water and how.

Conceptualizing water as a human right is controversial both in national and international contexts. In addition to debates of the status of water, it is disputed whether the provision of water should be free or affordable. Therefore, as Bakker points out, the human rights doctrine is compatible both with a pro-private perspective and an anti-private perspective on water access.⁴⁶

There are several disadvantages with using human rights as a strategy in claims of water access, such as its failure to recognize nonhuman/ecological rights, its reinforcement of the public-private binary, and its failure to incorporate community-based approaches to water management. However, the moral and semantic weight of the human rights doctrine can provide local protests with legitimacy. Therefore it is a strategy that is applicable to the abovementioned broad coalitions often associated with anti-privatization protests.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid. pp. 54-55.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 152.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 159.

First, if we broaden our approach to redistributive justice to include the environment, the necessity of improving watershed governance becomes an imperative for both ecological and socioeconomic justice; protecting hydrological environments will also improve living conditions for the urban poor.⁴⁸

To Bakker it is necessary to look beyond the financial gap – the focus on funding in water management, and consider the human right to water in relation to ecological rights. She is not opposed to the human rights to water, but insists that in isolation it is incapable of success. Furthermore, she emphasizes involvement and consideration of communities and private actors in transformations of water supplies, and reconsideration of their roles herein.⁴⁹

5.4 Market environmentalism

Market environmentalism refers to an approach to water management, in which the environment and economics are central. It takes different forms in different contexts, and varies with jurisdiction and the cultural and socio-economic framework. However, Bakker identifies some common characteristics. Market environmentalism prioritizes water conservation, and environmental protection in different forms has become increasingly important in the framework. The assumption that marketization generates an increase in water consumption is thus challenged. The private sector is in general seen as more important, both as owner and manager of water supply systems, than the government or state. Water management systems are centralized as this is presumed to be more efficient.

Bakker identifies three elements of market environmentalism; *privatization*, *commercialization* and *liberalization*. Privatization has already been dealt with in the subsection above, but to recap; privatizing water supplies means selling water infrastructure

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 211.

⁴⁹ Ibid. pp. 224-225.

to private sector actors such as individuals or firms. Privatization can be part of market environmentalism, but is not a necessity, as the approach is broader in scope.⁵⁰

Commercialization is a common strategy for market environmentalism. Commercialization is a transition in the organizational structure of water management, where market-oriented actors and institutions and the norms that follow are incorporated. Here metering, changes in water tariffs and the willingness-to-pay principle is often applied. Market environmentalism prioritizes economic efficiency over access and social equity, and uses cost-reflective pricing systems. Water consumers pay the full cost of the infrastructure as well as for their consumption.

Liberalization of governance means reducing the role of government agencies in decision-making and regulation in order to inspire competition. In some instances liberalization is complemented with marketization of governance, also known as New Public Management, in which market principles and norms are introduced into civil service. Bakker uses the EU's Water Framework Directive as an example of market environmentalism, as it instructs in cost-benefit analysis, full-cost pricing and collaborative decision-making processes.

Market environmentalism marks a shift in water management ethics from social equity principles in the form of 'ability-to-pay' models, to principles of economic equity.⁵¹ The shift in water management also meant a shift in the understanding of water. From being seen as a public good it was increasingly considered an economic good. Access to water is premised on the customer's purchase of water as a "quasi commodity" rather than an entitlement of the citizen.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 38.

⁵¹ Bakker, Karen, *An Uncooperative Commodity: Privatizing Water in England and Wales*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 124.

⁵² Bakker, Karen, 2010, pp. 36-38.

6 Analysis

6.1 The Dáil Éireann debate

The Dáil Éireann debate is a text in which different narratives are present. The Debate takes place on the evening of October 21st 2014 in the Dáil Éireann, and lasts 1,5 hours. 14 TD's (members of Dáil Éireann) speak, including the Acting Chairman of the House. The speakers represent Fine Gael, Labour – the two parties in government - Fianna Fáil, Sinn Fein, The Anti-Austerity Alliance and The Socialist Party. In addition there are two independent TD's.

The Debate is held due to a Private Member Motion proposed by members of Fian-na Fail. Halfway through the Debate, Labour politician and Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Alan Kelly, arrives. The debate was broadcasted on Oireachtas TV.

The analysis will be structured thematically based on Karen Bakker's concepts; the private-public binary, market environmentalism, emblem of citizenship, and the status of water.

6.2 The private-public binary

The private-public binary is evident at several points in the Debate. As a *quango*, Irish Water is somewhere between private and public due to its structure of a private company, but it is partly financed by the Irish government. Several speakers are concerned about the possibility of privatization of Irish Water, and the Private Member Motion proposed by Fianna Fáil calls on the government to confirm that it has no intention of privatization.⁵³ Barry Cowen presents the motion.

⁵³ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], Dáil Éireann, 21st October 2014, Barry Cowen.

I want the House to confirm categorically in this debate, once and for all, that there will be no privatisation. I want the Government to enshrine in this Irish Water model, which it has pushed ahead, an equitable regime that has at its core an ability-to-pay clause.⁵⁴

Across the different views and political interests, he seeks consensus that privatization is not an option. He is critical to the establishment of Irish Water, or at least the model chosen by the government. He claims that the model was “pushed ahead”, and previously talks about the “Government’s total and absolute disregard for the democratic process”⁵⁵. In doing so, he positions the problems with Irish Water as the prescribed outcome of a sequence of events. This is an exemplary element in the narrative, because he uses selected past events to show that the government ignores the democratic rules, and that its water management policy is therefore a failure. At the same time the narrative is critical, as it challenges the legitimacy of the government, and oppose the Irish Water model.

The role of the opposition and the people is emphasized, as the deficiencies of Irish Water is attributed to the lack of public participation in the establishing process. Cowen demonstrates his identity by referring to pre-given patterns of belonging; the democratic tradition, and the role of the people. This attests to traditional traits in the narrative.

Another traditional element in this narrative is the reference to social equity principles. The welfare principles are seen as the valid moral base of the society, and should not be questioned. This argumentation resembles the anti-privatization arguments. It opposes free market principles, and insists on a public responsibility to ensure social equity in the distribution of water. The narrative includes different narration elements to point to the failures of the government and its immoral conduct, and to position the speaker as the good and just alternative.

Paul Murphy contributes to the Debate with a highly critical narrative, in that he problematizes the establishment of Irish Water, and seeks to negate what the govern-

⁵⁴ Ibid,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

ment representative has said. He calls Irish Water “the Frankenstein creation of the government. Its specific purpose is to impose this bondholders' charge on people and to prepare for privatization.”⁵⁶ Using this metaphor he compares the Irish government to a mad scientist. In a way he is claiming rationality or reason by positioning the government and Irish Water as unreal, reckless and dangerous. In addition to attributing this surreal and negative characteristic to Irish Water, he argues that the outcome of this change in water management will ultimately be privatization. He denies the validity of the government’s arguments and policies. He also applies exemplary narration, when he gathers evidence for the shortcomings of the government, and connects these examples to predict the outcome of privatization as inevitable.

Another element that resonates with the critical narrative type is when he, at the end of his speech, tears up an Irish Water Registration Form. This scene gives rise to a discussion with the Acting Chairman about whether it is respectable and appropriate behaviour in the Dáil Éireann. Murphy, who is also a prominent activist in the We Won’t Pay campaign, is literally protesting Irish Water, while asking for the abolition of both the water charges and the *quango*. His behaviour in the House and his disregard for its norms emphasize his critical position and his unwillingness to accept existing demands.

Murphy claims to position himself on the side of the people and in opposition to the government. Working class people are a particular focus to him. He speaks of the water charges as “the latest austerity robbery”⁵⁷. Here the narrative takes an exemplary form. He sees the water charges as yet another harmful initiative directed at the people.

We are being told that if we pay water charges, investment in water infrastructure will automatically increase. We know that the opposite happened in Britain.⁵⁸

He uses an example from a country that is comparable with Ireland. He is not referring to a number of examples, but lets the British example stand on its own. He is presenting a pragmatic sequence of events; that water charges will undoubtedly lead to

⁵⁶ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Paul Murphy.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

privatization. In addition to exemplary element, the quote has critical elements as he seeks to delegitimize the government's narrative. This narrative is both critical to privatization and to commercialization. It seeks to invalidate and mock the government's policies and narrative about the establishment of Irish Water. Further, it uses past events and examples to predict or expect future development, thus calling for present action to reverse the current development.

I would like to take this opportunity to dispel certain myths that have grown around the establishment of Irish Water. First, it cannot be privatised. This is the law of the land. While this is a legitimate concern many people have, it is based on falsehood and it cannot happen.⁵⁹

When the government representative Alan Kelly, who is also the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, assures the Dáil that Irish Water will not be privatized, he uses two tools to make his argument. First, he uses an element of traditional narration, when he refers to the law of the land. The law is a non-disputable and pre-given concept, and his time frame appears eternal, as the law has a sense of permanence. Second, he seeks to delegitimize the privatization concern by calling it a myth, and saying that it is impossible. He makes use of the future in his interpretation of how things can develop. The mode of communication in this narrative is temporal and focuses on the specific context. This narrative combines traditional and critical elements.

There are no advocates for privatization in the Debate, but the claims used for and against commercialization resemble those in the general privatization debate. Despite the complex nature of the Irish water management and sector, the private-public binary and the association of private with market are evident in the debate.

⁵⁹ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Alan Kelly.

6.3 Market environmentalism

The traditional water services system was in need of fundamental change. Water infrastructure is deficient and inadequate as a consequence of decades of under investment and of not having a truly national approach that could maximise the impact of investment.⁶⁰

Alan Kelly engages in a genetic narrative, which expresses elements of market environmentalism. He frames the establishment of Irish Water and the commercialization of water services as a necessary change, a development. He uses what he conceives as failures of past governments to justify this new change. Using the bad state of the Irish water infrastructure, he presents two elements of the solution; investment and centralization. He documents this failure by saying “The result has been a national leakage rate of 49%”⁶¹ and listing several other environmental issues. This narrative resembles the market environmentalist narrative that gained support following the municipal hydraulic paradigm, where focus is on conservation and efficiency.

The establishment of Irish Water is a critical long-term project for this country and an absolute economic necessity. It will become among the largest utilities in the history of the State and is necessary for a safe and secure supply of water into the future.⁶²

His language use is influenced by economic terminology, and his main visions are based on intentions of maximizing, making efficient, cost recovery. He uses the future to position his standpoint and the establishment of Irish Water as a necessity. He conceptualizes the future challenges as the demographic growth and increase in demands on industries due to the recovery of the economy. Using both past and future to situate his argument, he reasons that this change in Irish water governance, whilst it may seem inconvenient at the present, will benefit the Irish economy and population in the long

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

run. This market environmentalist narrative is to a high extent genetic as it is based on the assumption that changes or adaptation is needed to persist. However, it also includes critical elements. The failure of past water management systems is used to legitimize commercialization of water services as well as a restructuring of the system.

Kelly stresses that Irish Water represents “a new water services framework that is designed to remain in public ownership”⁶³. The influence of the WFD is visible in the government narrative in the emphasis on commercialization as a sustainable model, both economically and in terms of conservation. It is clear that the government is seeking to comply with the Directive, while also aiming at economic progress. The WFD’s association with the government is also evident in critical narrative of opposition politician Brian Stanley.

What will happen at the end of 2016, when the current allowances, the rate per litre, and the household and child allowances will be reviewed, along with the rebate to people on social welfare and the tax credits? [...] Will the EU framework directive be used to ram that average charge down the throats of taxpayers?⁶⁴

Concerns about social equity and welfare in the future are used to critique and question the new Irish water management approach. These questions may serve as direct questions to the government representatives, but also has a rhetorical purpose. The social security of the present is used to emphasize the unpredictability and risks of the future, and present the government as untrustworthy. Additionally, the WFD is referred to in a critical way. Here the Directive is seen as a cover or excuse for the government’s introduction of unpopular economic schemes.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Brian Stanley.

6.4 Water as an emblem of citizenship

In addition to the abovementioned examples of calls for social equity in the water management approach, there is a general focus of opposition politicians on marginalized groups and economic inequality. This focus is evident in concerns about economic matters and political inclusion.

A total of 750,000 people in the country, that is one in six, live below the poverty line. Hundreds of thousands more are struggling just barely above that line. The population as a whole has been battered by year after year of austerity, cuts, charges and impositions of all sorts, both covert and overt.⁶⁵

The proximity of the financial crisis is apparent in this quote, where the domestic charges are understood as part of a sequence of initiatives harming citizens. This narrative device is exemplary, and resembles the narration of Murphy mentioned in section 6.2. In a way the opposition politicians are using the popular protests and dissatisfaction to support their arguments of alternative water management approaches. At the same time the protests are an effect of the introduction on water charges. It is impossible to go further into additional causes of the popular unrest, but I want to bring attention to how the opposition politicians attempt to position themselves on the side of the people and against Irish Water – even though some of them were in government, when the troika deal was made.⁶⁶

Kelly meets these concerns by stating that “The Government recognises that the poorest and most marginal in society must be protected from water poverty.”⁶⁷ He goes on to list of number of provisions and allowances, and argues, “Through the various supports and reliefs available from Government, I believe that a fair, equitable and af-

⁶⁵ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Willie O’Dea.

⁶⁶ Ryan, Philip, ” Fianna Fáil planned water charges before Troika bailout”, *Independent.ie*, October 19 2015, <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/water/irish-water-crisis/fianna-fil-planned-water-charges-before-troika-bailout-34120454.html> (Accessed 19.05.2017)

⁶⁷ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Alan Kelly.

fordable charging system is being produced.”⁶⁸ The introduction of water charges, and the establishment of Irish Water should be understood in the light of the financial troubles of the Irish state. Kelly is thus presenting it as a long-term solution to both the economic and water sector crises. His concept of equity is different from the above-mentioned social-equality claims, in that he refers to affordability and a pricing system based on economic equity. However, he does underline the need for social allowances and reliefs.

One group of people, children, are particularly discussed in the Debate. Free allowances to cover the water consumption of children were introduced, but oppositional politicians worry that they will be abolished.⁶⁹ Furthermore, as Pearse Doherty points out, some categories of children are not covered by the free allowances, for instance children who do not receive child benefits.⁷⁰

The subject of children involves two aspects important to the different narratives. First, children are seen as innocent and without political or economic power. Therefore, they come to symbolize the most vulnerable in the Irish society. Social equity principles and the tradition of the welfare state play into this discussion. In the critical narratives children are used to highlight injustices and to question the fairness of the current form of water management as a whole. Second, the children represent the future, and in the narratives they bring attention to the durability and sustainability, or lack of such, in the current way of things and the suggested policies. Both government and opposition politicians use the group in this way.

In addition to social concerns, democracy and democratic principles are pointed out, when critiquing the government policies. In the following quote, Cowen connects public participation with economic concerns.

Many citizens [...] are angry to such an extent that many feel it necessary to follow a path of disobedience. Such a course of action threatens the ability of the Government and this House to bring the public with them towards meaningful recovery for all; rich and poor, young

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Brian Stanley.

⁷⁰ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Pearse Doherty.

and old, employed and unemployed, public and private sector, urban dwellers and rural dwellers. Divisions have been created that will be hard to mend.⁷¹

The protests of the people are here seen as a direct outcome of government policies. Additionally, the civil disobedience and societal divisions are put on the shoulders of the government. These claimed effects and the government policies are contrasted with the vision of “meaningful recovery for all”. Cowen suggests that the Irish Water model is only meaningful for some, and in this way he claims to position himself on the side of every group and part in the Irish society – except for the government.

This narrative is exemplary in its course of time – it presents a sequence of events, and in its mode of communication, where events are judged and evaluated. At the same time it has critical elements evident in the disapproval of both the path of disobedience, and that of the government. In this sense it is invalidating the other narratives. The solution conceptualized in “meaningful recovery for all” holds a genetic element in the calls for change or development. The water services have to evolve in order to persist. At the same time the use of the word “recovery” bears witness to a wish for a return to the ‘normal’ state of the Irish society. It is unlikely that he here refers to the normal way of water management, due to the failures of infrastructure. Rather, it seems he refers to the recovery of the economy. This claim shows traces of traditional narration.

The Government has taken away democracy. There are some examples in other countries of services being taken out of the hands of corporate structures and put back under the remit of local councils and municipalities. There is precedent for that. The Government has gone down the wrong road in this case. This is a monster that cannot be handled.⁷²

This quote illustrates both exemplary and traditional narration. Brian Stanley refers

⁷¹ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Barry Cowen.

⁷² Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Brian Stanley.

to examples where transitions into commercialization have been successfully rolled back. In an attempt to discredit the government's genetic narrative, in which the change is seen as development, he argues that there is a need to counter the current change in water management, and return to traditional water systems such as the municipal hydraulic system. He links these forms of community-based systems to democracy, and by doing so he makes use of the indisputable good of democracy, whilst positioning the government as its foe. He calls Irish Water a monster and associates it with something surreal and uncontrollable, similar to the strategy of Murphy, who called it 'a Frankenstein creation'.

References to democratic principles such as transparency and public participation are brought up by several speakers, and used as a tool to delegitimize the policies of the government.⁷³ This is a classic element in parliamentary debates. Furthermore, it resonates with Bakker's account of anti-privatization advocates, who see the removal of water management from public scrutiny as a threat to democracy.

The Government is unwilling to listen. [...] It needs to listen to the people, take notice of the right to water marches that will take place in every village and town, and scrap the water charges.⁷⁴

In this quote Pearse Doherty is directing attention to the protests and demonstration in the name of a right to water. He emphasizes to the voices of the citizens as well as the responsibility of the elected politicians and especially the government to listen to the people. When Kelly later mentions the protests he does so by saying "Despite *some* protests, the metering programme is being successfully rolled out".⁷⁵ The two narratives differ in terms of the scale and significance of the public protests that took place, as well as the success of Irish Water.

In general the connection between citizenship and water access is made, though not through explicit reference to the contested human right to water. Rather, the availability of water in households is linked to entitlements and democratic principles. The rights

⁷³ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Brian Stanley, Willie O'Dea, Sean Flemming.

⁷⁴ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Pearse Doherty.

⁷⁵ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Alan Kelly. (My italics).

language and strategy is not used directly by the politicians, but through reference to the Right2Water protests. The exception is Michael Fitzmaurice, who states,

After ten years of working on a voluntary water scheme, the Government has decided to cut the amount of water that people need to meet their basic human rights. [...] The system's administration will cost a great deal of money, as it involves the Government spending on social welfare payments to which people are entitled as well as on the Revenue staff engaged in it. This is like asking someone to buy a crashed car for what the full price would be were it fixed.⁷⁶

Fitzmaurice holds that water is a human right, and he points to the double standard in having to pay for something one is entitled to. Furthermore, the car metaphor is used to show the paradox in having to pay a fee for less water than the amount one used to get by means of general taxation. However, as mentioned above the previous system of water management was not sustainable in terms of infrastructure, and failed to provide for universal access to adequate water. This narration is critical of the change, and traditional in its reference to a former water management system.

The notion of water as an emblem of citizenship is traceable in the vision of universal access to water, which is shared by all parts. However, the means of securing universal access is contested. The arguments highlighted here speak into the debate on a human right to water, where the question of free or affordable access and the tension between social and economic equity is central.

6.5 Status of water

The difference in perceptions of water and its status is evident in the terms used to describe the subjects of the domestic water charges. In the social equity narrative the term *taxpayers* is used. It emphasizes the people as shareholders in the water management

⁷⁶ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Michael Fitzmaurice.

system, and brings attention to the fact that they already pay tax. Additionally, the term *citizen* is used, when democratic control, participation and personal identification numbers are discussed.⁷⁷ Water and access to water is here seen as something earned by the Irish population through participation in the commons. The citizen's approach suggests that water is an entitlement bound to a position of political inclusion.

In the government narrative the Irish subjects are mostly referred to as *customers*, though once as *consumers*.⁷⁸ This language use bears witness to the market environmentalist perception of the government and its policies, and a marketization of governance, in which private sector principles and norms are used in governance. This view corresponds to water as a commodity.

In all three narratives the term *people* is applied. In the anti-commercialization narrative it is used with special reference to working people or *the people*.⁷⁹

“We have got to realise that if we talk about water as a commodity, we are going down a dangerous road. The service of water is what we should be on about.”⁸⁰

In this quote Fitzmaurice denies the present pattern of identity; that water is a commodity. He suggests that the current trail is dangerous and that the government and the Dáil should act differently. While water has not been referred to as a commodity previously in the debate, it is evident in most speeches, that water is closely linked to economic terms such as bills, allowances and charges.⁸¹ This is not necessarily a central element in the all the narratives, but rather an expression of the government's introduction of domestic water charges.

Fitzmaurice narrates the future in such a way as to suggest that the present is a turning point – a possibility to avoid wrongdoings. He takes a step back from the economic language used by different politicians, but Alan Kelly in particular, and keeps open the possibility of reversing the development that has been initiated. This narrative holds

⁷⁷ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Barry Cowen, Brian Stanley.

⁷⁸ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Alan Kelly.

⁷⁹ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Paul Murphy,

⁸⁰ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Michael Fitzmaurice.

⁸¹ Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Alan Kelly, Pearse Doherty, Sean Flemming.

critical elements, as it seeks to display a sort of rupture. He is opposing the very premise the debate is based on. He is not like the other speakers debating how water should be priced, but he is questioning whether it should be subjected to payment at all. Instead of commodity, Fitzmaurice puts emphasis on water as a service. Alan Kelly also use the term service and in particular in regard to Irish Water as a service delivery model.⁸²

The status of water is narrated in different ways, and it is assigned a number of meanings even within one narrative. Service, commodity, human right, social good and entitlement are some of the ways in which the status of water is conceptualized.

⁸² Irish Water: Motion [Private Members], 2014, Alan Kelly.

7 Conclusion

The analysis showed that there are three main narratives in the parliamentary debate; a market environmentalist narrative, a social equity narrative, and an anti-commercialization narrative. Rösen's narrative approach contributed to the understanding of how the narratives are structured, what is prioritized in them, and how water is valued. The analysis confirmed that most narratives involve elements of all the four narration types. The most dominant type of narration was the critical type. However, it does not necessarily mean that the critical type is defining for this epoch. Rather, I would argue, it is the dominant type due to the context of a parliamentary debate, which is proposed by the opposition.

The market environmentalist narrative is the government narrative, but it is also evident in the economic language used in the debate in general. In part, this is a consequence of the focus on the water charges and the funding of the new water delivery model. The government's narrative focuses on commercialization as a positive change in water management and advocates domestic water charges to establish a cost-reflective pricing system. The narrative is compatible with the EU's WFD, which can also be categorized under market environmentalism. The government narrative combines traditional and critical elements to defend an overall genetic narrative, in which change and development give meaning. Water is to some extent perceived as a commodity, or at least an economic good. The link between water and the Irish economy is emphasized, and a restructuring of water management is presented as a solution to economic, infrastructure and some environmental problems.

The other two narratives share a number of similarities in their critique of Irish Water and market environmentalism. The social equity narrative focuses on equitable access to water, where people pay what they can afford. This narrative is not completely opposed to commercialization or restructuring of the water delivery system, but maintains that universal provision is more important than cost-recovery. The narrative is traditional in the sense that it wants to improve water management by using familiar and known principles of distribution. It involves exemplary narrative elements and proves a general austerity rule imposed by the government by referring to past cases, relating them to the present, and expecting similar action in the future. The social-equity narra-

tive is critical towards government policies and the Irish Water model. In this narrative water is perceived as a social good, which should be equally accessible and distributed throughout the Irish society. Inequalities in water access are linked to economic issues, and water poverty is a central concern.

The anti-commercialization narrative also involves concerns in terms of social effects of commercialization. However, this position is completely critical towards the establishment of Irish Water and the domestic water charges. Using exemplary narration it presents this change as dangerous and a potential road to privatization, which it perceives as harmful. This critical narrative challenges current orientations of water management, in particular the economic focus of the government. The arguments and elements of the anti-commercialization narrative thus resemble those common to anti-privatization narratives and protests. The economic value of water in terms of a commodity is refused, and water is seen as a service and an entitlement. The narrative involves traditional narration in the desire of returning to municipal water management.

The three narratives uses past, present and future, in the form of both concrete examples and abstract visions, to orient and position themselves within a broader Irish and international context, as well as distinguishing themselves from other narratives. The accounts of the past and future are contrasting, but even the narration of the present differs in what is accentuated, and how it is told.

All three narratives are premised on water as instrumental for human life. This assumption is not questioned or problematized. Additionally, water is instrumental to the economy through its use in various industries, and at the time of the debate through the domestic water charges. Water is understood in national terms. What I mean is that the concern with water is restricted by the Irish borders. However, the attempt to comply with the WFD brings the water conflict into a European context.

References to environmental and ecological concerns are almost non-existent in the debate, and water management is discussed with focus on human beings. However, the concern with water waste is the exception. It is mentioned both in terms of reducing water consumption on the consumer side, and in relation to improving water supply infrastructure so as to reduce waste of water in the phase before it reaches the consumer. The market environmentalist narrative is as mentioned concerned with conservation of water. This is however from a cost-effective point of view.

It is evident that water in the Irish conflict is contested at several levels. First, the status of water is disputed. Second how it should be managed is debated. And finally, the connection between economy and water is contested. The three aspects depend on how the human-water relation is understood. The three narratives respectively presented a customer-economic good relation, a citizen-social good relation, and a people-entitlement relation.

It is clear that critical narration is a catalyst of the other three types of historical narration. There are critical elements in the main narratives in the debate, all of which challenge established patterns, whether it is commercialization of water, economic inequality or municipal water management.

8 Discussion

In this section I discuss the relation between humans and water with consideration of the notion of humanity's perceived distinctness from nature. The narrative approach to water perceptions has proven useful in discovering different stories about water's value in the human world. In the Debate water is generally perceived as instrumental to human existence and the functioning of everyday life. The necessity of water is obvious, but it is disputed how to characterize water. Commodity, social good and entitlement are some of the proposals, all of which define water based on how humans use it.

In other words water has no value in itself, but gains meaning through its interaction and relation to humans. Water is thus never a subject, but always an object. This notion of water is anthropocentric and corresponds to *the logic of mastery*, in which humanity is the master of nature.⁸³ In ecofeminist thought this relation is seen as oppression or domination of nature. The lack of appreciation of nature and water is also evident in Clarke's notion of water blindness.

Every project and almost any process in society and in nature need water, but few mention it. Invariably, water is taken for granted. A kind of water blindness has become common in discussions about development projects and even in key policy documents about our future.⁸⁴

This quote concerns developing countries, but the description of the human disconnect concerning water is relevant even in this context. Whether a commodity, social good or an entitlement, water is at all times seen as something outside the human itself. According to Harvey, this alienation from nature is a trait from the Enlightenment tradition, in which people are increasingly separated from the means of production, and the domination of nature is seen as necessary for self-realization and emancipation of hu-

⁸³ Plumwood, Val, 1993, p. 191.

⁸⁴ Strong, Maurice et al. "Preface" in Robin Clarke, *Water: The International Crisis*, Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1991, p. ix.

manity.⁸⁵ The construction of the human-nature binary is part of a human ambition to escape the limits of being part of nature.

The instrumental view of water positions it as a resource, but another aspect is attributed to water in the debate and in particular through the market environmentalist narration, in which water gains financial value and is subjected to private sector models and norms. As Bresnihan explains,

Irish Water represents important and novel steps in the process of bio-financial engineering through which more and more aspects of the hydro-social cycle become measurable and thus legible within globalized financial and regulatory domains. It is also important to note that what is becoming valuable here is not the use-value of Ireland's water resources or existing infrastructure but their future value as performing asset.⁸⁶

The measurability of water is convenient for New Public Management models and market environmentalism in offering ways to calculate efficiency and cost-effectiveness. But it means a shift in the valuation of water, and a possible shift in the goal of water management from universal provision of water to economic profit or progress.

While the market environmentalist narrative exemplifies how water is seen to have economic value, the social-equity narrative illustrates the social value of water. Here economics is involved in terms of the ability of households to pay for the water charges, but equity across socio-economic conditions is emphasized. Irish citizenship is seen as the ticket to affordable water, and focus is on securing water access for marginalized groups within the Irish society. In this sense the social-equity narrative acknowledges water as an emblem of citizenship. Here, the narrative moves nearer to the human rights claim, but even the notion of a human right to water represents an instrumental view on

⁸⁵ Harvey, David, 1996, pp. 125, 128, 149.

⁸⁶ Bresnihan, Patrick, 2016, pp. 122.

water. The notion of entitlement to water builds on water's availability to humans and water becomes a claimable object.

In the Debate legitimacy for commercialization of water lies in the failure of former management strategies and the need of economic recovery. Humanity's use – or exploitation, as Harvey calls it, of water is never questioned, but is considered a truism. To follow his line of thinking, the Debate is concerned with *how* to exploit nature. On the other hand, the water conflict in Ireland bears witness to the challenge and controversy that surround the question of the status of water. It is neither private, nor public, but then what is it?

The ambiguous status of water is connected to its importance to human life and its role in various aspects. Maybe the importance of water has generally been downplayed, or maybe European citizens are too used to water running from the faucet. Paradoxically, the value of water has been obscured by its integral part of our everyday lives. The global water crisis attests to the risk of diminishing and obscuring the value of water to human survival.

Lastly, I want to comment on the possibility of escaping the instrumental view of water exemplified in the Irish water conflict. While religious or spiritual practices, such as animism, may offer alternative ways of relating to nature, within a Western epistemology such alternatives appear unlikely to gain ground. The issue of nature's instrumentality to humanity is grounded in physical necessities, but is just as much a product of the hegemonic dualist perception of humanity as detached from nature. It seems impossible to escape this instrumental view on water, but maybe the solution lies in what Val Plumwood proposed; an open rethink of our cultural patterns and narratives.⁸⁷

What if water and nature were considered right-holding subjects instead of objects? Corporations have obtained legal personhood, so maybe it is not so far out to acknowledge the rights *of* water and other ecological rights? What would happen to our cultural narratives and self-understanding, if we did?

⁸⁷ Plumwood, Val, 2009.

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