

Thirst by Filippo Menga

Reviewed by Yue Xu
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Filippo Menga
Thirst: The Global Quest to Solve the Water Crisis
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When you ask yourself “what does water mean to me?”, what comes first? Its taste, texture, colour, sound or feel? Is it tap water, a warm winter shower, a canned beer, spring rain, dew at dawn, a forest creek, the salty breeze of the Pacific, or rows of bottled water on a shelf? Beyond your utility bill, what else might water be? As an old Chinese saying states, the greatest virtue is like water, nurturing all things without competing with them. In *Thirst: The Global Quest to Solve the Water Crisis*, Filippo Menga urges us to rethink the meaning of water, the so-called water crisis, and its political, economic, social, cultural and ecological costs within a neoliberal context.

In a capitalist world, we are alienated from water, losing sight of how it transcends borders, binds the planet through continuous circulation, and sustains us as part of its living cycle. From the 1980s, neoliberal reforms reshaped the governance of natural resources through market liberalisation and deregulation promoted by institutions including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Within this political economy, capital expands across borders in search of cheap resources, labour and raw materials. In the agrifood sector, as Menga notes, global investors convert cheap agrarian resources in the Global South into water-intensive crops and fresh produce for premium markets in the Global North. This unequal exchange extracts water and resources through an expanding agrifood regime, while imposing pollution and resource depletion on the host countries.

In a capitalist system, water is transformed from a public good into a commodity. Menga shows how local water resources are drained from communities worldwide to produce fossil-fuel-dependent bottled water for global markets. Examples include Nestlé’s bottled water practices, the global promotion of bottled water as safer and more natural than public supplies, and the shortcomings and unintended consequences of the fundraising and water infrastructure programmes of Water.org and WaterAid in Global South countries. As a result, vulnerable populations are increasingly recast as water consumers and utility payers.

Transnational corporations also use greenwashing to shape narratives about the global water crisis and justify profit-making. Greenwashing helps to neutralise resistance, build public trust, and present “sustainable consumption” as the solution. As Menga shows, FIJI Water highlights its environmental commitments while contributing to social injustice and environmental degradation in local communities, and the bottled water division of Nestlé endorses water as a human right but invests only minimally in bringing about positive change. At the same time, corporations such as the beverage firms Constellation and Stella Artois shift responsibility onto consumers while obscuring their large-scale water extraction. These strategies encourage continued consumption and divert attention from real structural change.

Lastly, Menga shows how organisations appropriate charitable ideals of giving to create pseudo-religious philanthropic campaigns that promote ritualised everyday actions. Celebrity-fronted sanitation initiatives promoted with slogans such as “More than a toilet”, along with messages such as “Turn off the tap while brushing”, frame the water crisis as solvable through small individual sacrifices. Reinforced through advertising, social media and everyday encounters, these messages shape how people understand the crisis and guide daily behaviour. They make consumers feel responsible while fostering a form of consumption fetishism that draws individuals deeper into the capitalist system. Together, these processes sustain and normalise the regime of capital accumulation surrounding the water crisis.

Although Menga highlights the roles of the United Arab Emirates, China and other state-capital hybrids in the global water trade, water extraction extends beyond bottled water. A more nuanced discussion of “invisible water” embedded in agricultural commodities, largely driven by nation states, would strengthen Menga’s argument. This is especially relevant to the shift from Western-centred to China-centred agri-food flows in the post-neoliberal era.

Since the 2007–2008 financial crisis, resurgent state capitalism has intensified global competition and expanded resource grabs, as seen in rising meat consumption in middle-income countries that increases demand for water-intensive feed and deepens ecological inequalities. At the same time, state-led water infrastructure investments in Global South countries fail to benefit local communities and instead reinforce elite interests.

Overall, *Thirst: The Global Quest to Solve the Water Crisis* delivers rigorous academic research on water, and a pioneering story of the pseudo-religious consumer culture that shapes life in the neoliberal world. How can we move beyond the consumer-commodity divide? Building on Filippo Menga’s call for culture change, we must critically reflect on the water industry’s linguistic framing and symbolic cues that shape us as consumers. I urge readers to seriously consider Menga’s question: should we see ourselves primarily as consumers, or rethink our role in relation to water?

About the author

Filippo Menga

Filippo Menga is Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Bergamo, Italy, and Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Political Geography*.

About the reviewer

Yue Xu

Yue Xu is a PhD candidate in sociology at Colorado State University, Colorado, USA. Her research focuses on rural development and policy, agrifood systems, and fisheries and marine governance. Her dissertation examines production, processing and consumption in China’s seafood regime, and focuses on the hidden human, social, cultural and environmental costs of rural development. Through this work, she aims to offer a critical rethinking of state-led capital accumulation by dispossession from the perspective of marginalised communities.

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