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Environmental Governance at the Core of Statecraft: Unresolved Questions and Inbuilt Tensions

Abstract: The state is not only a main environmental player, but its involvement in environmental regulation has major consequences for the dynamics of statecraft. Environmental governance is the expression that better summarises the ongoing transformations of state interventions and the search for more flexible, adaptive approaches. A growing body of scholarly work has tried to establish the connections between the failures of environmental governance and the wider commitments of the state. What is largely missing in those studies is the synergy between environmental governance and the statecraft model put forward by Hegel in the early period of the industrial, liberal capitalism. Recent environmental policies have been particularly influenced by the Hegelian constitutional theory, especially considering the pursuit of legitimacy and flexibility. Consequently, the central challenge for geographers and other scholars of environmental governance is still to identify the changes in the rationale and configuration of the state apparatus and relate them to the wider political ecology of state action.

The State as Environmental Player and Object of Contestation

The growing global concern about environmental problems is, primarily, demonstration of the leadership, as well as of the failures, of state agencies and state-led interventions. The state has become the main environmental player and its own initiatives are integral to processes of environmental change and politico-ecological rationalisation (Wissen 2009). State action is highly instrumental in the production of environmental knowledge and also in the coordination of the access to natural resources and ecosystems (Robbins 2000). Starting from the recognition of the environmental commitments and repercussions of state activity, the purpose of the present article is to examine the tensions and the apparent paradox between recent institutional adjustments and mounting environmental problems. The focus will be on environmental governance, which is the expression that better summarises the ongoing transformation of state policies and the search for more flexible regulatory approaches. Since the 1980s, public policies and sectoral regulation (i.e. rules, rationalities and control systems) have evolved from rigid and end-of-the-pipe schemes to more elastic and interactive procedures associated with environmental governance. However, despite the persuasive rhetoric of state agencies in charge of environmental governance, the size and number of issues continue, for the most part, to increase. In order to understand the limitations of contemporary responses, the article will critically review the ideological influences and historico-geographical consequences of environmental governance.

The point of departure is to define the state as an institutional ensemble of power centres (Jessop 1982) that unfolds through different time-space scales, from local regulation to the realm of international relations (Brand and Görg 2008). Instead of a monolithic entity in charge of harmonised regulatory instruments, the ‘apparatus’ of the state contains dynamic structures and constantly evolving strategies that reflect the balance of political power and sociopolitical contestation (Lefebvre 2008). The apparatus of the state comprises the contested association between political society and civil society, as well as the politicised interactions between society and the rest of socionature (i.e. regarding here the hybrid ontology of the world, which is simultaneously and inextricably ‘social’ and ‘natural’). It is therefore pointless to dissociate the politicisation of state action and socioeconomic relations from the politicisation of socionatural questions. The state is not simply a detached administrator of environmental pressures, but an involvement in socionatural issues has direct effects on its organisation, functioning and legitimisation (Ioris 2012a). Following the observation of Gramsci (1971: 182), the state must be conceived of as a continuous process of “formation and superseding of unstable equilibria [...] between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups”. Considering that the state is the main controller of the multiple intersections between spatial and temporal matrices (Poulantzas 1978), a Gramscian perspective can be particularly useful for the examination of the historical and spatial arrangements of the territorialised state (Ekers and Loftus 2013).

The most relevant Gramscian term in that respect is hegemony, that is, the relationship of mobilisation, control and persuasion within and through political discourses. In the terrain of environmental politics, hegemony is described by Mann (2009) as having two separate moments that dynamically complement each other, one economic and another ethnopolitical. In the case of the current discussion, environmental governance can be understood as an expression of hegemonic environmental rationalities (in the Gramscian sense). For instance, the hegemony exerted by environmental governance has served to restrain other grassroots, critical reactions to the same environmental dilemmas. Having said that, the existing politico-geographical literature needs to be expanded in order to embrace more fully the impact of institutional reforms on environmental regulation and also consider how the environmental sector has dialectically contributed to contemporary statecraft. In this manner, it should be possible to recognise the persistent impacts and increasing

disruption of ecosystems as the result of the largely inadequate socioecological responses that follow the politico-ecological commitments of the (capitalist) state. Regulation as environmental governance can be then recognised as an element of the pursuit of malleable forms of statecraft, a phenomenon that prioritises some politico-institutional demands in a way that inscribes the balance of power in the production of socationature itself (see more on statecraft in Brenner 2004).

The next sections deal with the rationale, achievements and failures of environmental governance, which reflect the long legacy of western European political theories that emerged in the early 19th Century. Before that, it will be revised the basis of environmental governance with special attention to the insufficiencies of other critical analyses so far.

The Politics of Environmental Governance

Already at the time of the Second Industrial Revolution, the rate and extent of environmental impacts of modern society were becoming increasingly evident. These prompted the introduction and gradual expansion of the early pieces of environmental legislation and the establishment of state agencies dedicated to problems such as water pollution, over use of resources and deforestation. A more comprehensive structure of regulation had to wait until after the Second World War, which was necessary to mitigate with the negative consequences of growing agro-industrial activity. Multilevel administrative systems were adopted by the industrialised countries and later replicated, through various strategies, to the rest of the world (such institutional dissemination process resembled the introduction of welfare and social protection strategies, although the rise of environmental legislation and policy-making soon surpassed the growth of the overall state apparatus). Probably the most relevant example of this ‘conventional’ mechanism of environmental regulation was the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) passed in the United States in 1969. The core section of NEPA institutionalised action-forcing provisions for federal agencies to enforce policies and regulatory goals. However, the conflict between development and conservation persisted during the implementation of conventional environmental regulation in the post-War decades (Ioris 2014). At the same time that environmental regulation like NEPA occupied a prominent role in the operation of the Keynesian state, the intensity of environmental risks and threats continued to increase.

The inefficiencies of the conventional, top-down model of environmental regulation, together with the liberalising reform of the state, prompted the transition to a more flexible and dynamic arrangement in the last decades of the century. The national state was also expected to produce cost-effective responses to old and newly discovered environmental problems (e.g. the ozone hole, climate change, endangered species, etc.). By the mid-1980s, it was clear that the limitations of conventional state interventions called for a speedy institutional reform able to address mounting pressures from civil society at national and international levels. There was a perceived need to move away from the narrow control of capital-labour relations into a more responsive eco-state formation capable of reworking state-socionature connections (While et al. 2010). The inadequacies of conventional environmental regulation were likewise related to the spatial disjuncture between national territories and the space taken up by ecological problems, together with the persistent exploitation of resources and the apathy of wider society (Paterson et al. 2006). The main practical result was that, twenty years after the first global conference on the environment in Stockholm, in 1972, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in 1992, institutionalised sustainable development as the key concept on which to base environmental governance hereafter.

Governance, instead of government interventions associated with conventional environmental statehood, contains a set of accommodating approaches aimed at facilitating environmental management and conservation. The European Commission (2001: 5) defines governance as “rules, processes and behaviour that affect the way in which powers are exercised at European level, particularly as regards openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence”. In contrast to the prescriptive, centralised responses of the previous decades, the search for sustainability through environmental governance incarnated the argument for fresh associations between the state apparatus and non-state players, such as business sectors, NGOs, think-tanks, and so on. From the perspective of hegemonic groups and of those directly in charge of the state, the discourse behind environmental governance seemed to provide the rationality needed for overcoming the legitimisation and innovation deficit. Environmental governance was cleverly presented as something radically different from traditional environmental regulation, because it focused both on laws and policies and on informal institutions in a search for more effective organisational structures. Crucially, this process provided an opportunity for more sophisticated interventions

related to the promotion of a liberalised economic order and the affirmation of market-based solutions to environmental degradation and conservation.

In effect, rather than a complete transformation of conventional environmental statehood, the advance of environmental governance depended on the re-regulation of conservation and on the use of natural resources, which often combined state-oriented and market-oriented practices (Mansfield 2007). These are all elements of a 'post-political populist politics' where capitalism is taken as given and there is no space left for alternative thinking, but social action must necessarily be contained within the existing state of affairs (Swyngedouw 2010). The experience in the European Union (EU) represents the best example of the pursuit of governance as the ultimate response to the need to maintain and legitimise the public sector's authority over the interconnections between economy, society and the rest of nature. It could even be argued that the EU, after the Single European Act of 1987, took over from the USA in terms of environmental regulation leadership after the golden period of American environmental legislation in the 1970s. EU policies, directives and binding rules became characterised by a more conscientious association between economic demands and environmental protection with a gradual shift from centralised approaches towards an emphasis on the risks and benefits of more responsive strategies at a local level.

As in the previous welfare-developmental phase, the control of socionature through environmental governance remained central to the realisation of state power (Whitehead 2008), while the promotion of novel responses increasingly reflected some of the critical tensions and disputes associated with the contemporary capitalist state. One of the main areas of scholarly concern here has been the contested and contingent relationship between environmental governance and the neoliberalising reforms of the state (Ioris 2012b). Neoliberalism has been recognised as a process that entails the reconfiguration of previous institutional arrangements and the ideological reconstruction of economic and non-economic interests (Brenner and Theodore 2002). This process depends also on the reorganisation of the entitlements of both humans and nonhumans (Bakker 2005), as an environmental management project (McCarthy and Prudham 2004) that combines valuation, enclosure and privatisation of nature under the name of environmental governance (Heynen and Robbins 2005). Environmental governance is actually championed by the neoliberalised state to be coherent with market-friendly policies and various forms of public-private collaboration that, in the end, contribute to reshape statecraft itself (Ioris 2013).

Nonetheless, despite the growing research on the neoliberalisation of socionature, there have been only limited efforts to position ecological politics inside the very process of neoliberal statecraft. Neoliberalisation happens through the implementation of uneven policies in different places and times, but the “architects of neoliberal ideas did not say much about the environment *per se*” (Castree 2010: 1732). There is, therefore, a pending need to improve the understanding how environmental policies informed by neoliberalism incorporate the conflict between the expansion of capital into ecosystem services and the management of socionatural elements in capitalist value forms (Robertson and Wainwright 2013). Comparable scholarly activity has been dedicated to the achievements and failures of the environmental responses under different state formations (e.g. Bernstein 2001; Conca 2006; Eckersley 2004), moreover such body of work normally falls short of establishing the connections between changing state patterns and the deep, class-based origins of socioecological problems.

A related line of interpretation articulates the Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and biopower to expose environmental governance as a key element of ecological modernisation (Hajer 1995). Ecological modernisation uses the discourse of business to conceptualise environmental problems as a matter of inefficiency and excessive state control. Mainstream responses to climate change illustrate how a specifically designed governmentality renders climate politics governable, which coincided with the shift from biopower (i.e. the state apparatus that emerged in the 18th Century) to the advanced liberal state since the mid-1980s (Oels 2005). The process of governing climate change has involved particular ways of seeing and knowing the world making use of techno-bureaucratic tools such as carbon accounting (Lövbrand and Stripple 2011). Foucauldian-informed, poststructural accounts certainly offer a valuable contribution to understand core aspects of state practices and socioecological politics, however fail to address the wider interconnections between socioeconomic relations and the class allegiances that form the entirety of state politico-ecological commitments. Too much attention is paid to the diffuse metabolism of power and discourse, but not enough on environmental politics at the interface between economic and non-economic realms.

A common gap in governmentality-focuses analyses is the failure to perceive the transition to environmental governance as part of the perpetual process of state reconstruction that is needed to deal with the contradictions of contemporary globalised

society and the intrinsic limitations of the capitalist state. Environmental governance is nothing else than a highly specialised locus of political disputes embedded in the broader attempt to address the inconsistencies of a socioeconomic development model that privileges certain groups and spatial locations. The state “puts its stamp on geographical structures” to avoid the perpetual danger of capitalist incoherency and speculation (Harvey 2006). This process, which has been one of the central features of capitalist society, has evolved through concerted mechanisms of mystification and manipulation needed to disguise the unfair and crisis-prone effects of state-led development. Therefore, the work on the political ecology of the state should properly investigate the historico-geographical origins of the false promises of environmental governance. These can be found in the innovative elaboration on the flexibility and legitimisation of the emerging liberal capitalist state by Georg Hegel. The new state formation was seen by Hegel as a safe way forward in a world (in his case, Prussia) still dominated by centralisation, despotism and lack of dynamism. As one of the most creative, and ambitious, philosophers of the first period of industrial capitalism, Hegel put forward a visionary political philosophy that has since then influenced generations of intellectuals.

Environmental Governance and the Realisation of Hegelian Statecraft

Hegel developed a peculiar political elaboration through a sustained emphasis on the coincidence between world history and rationality that served to situate the state as the guarantor of systematic reason. According to Hegel, the whole ethical basis of the state emanates from the Idea, the spirit, the absolute essence (Bobbio 1995). This claim proved to be highly instrumental for the advance of reformist, conservative political agendas, or at least helps to understand the tension between old and new state institutions (as in the case of environmental governance). In his main political text, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel indicated that the ultimate endeavour of public affairs was to “apprehend and present the state as something inherently rational” (Hegel 2008: 15). Already in the preface, Hegel unleashes his infamous claim that “what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational”, which means to reaffirm that reason is an actual power in the world. The realisation (‘actualisation’, in the Hegelian terminology) of reason is the purpose of the state, as the defender of social order and the conciliator of conflicts of interest. For Hegel, history evolves through dialectics and towards the attainment of the ‘Absolute’, that is, the self-reflective appropriation of the

whole process of national and international development. This was a clear attempt to restore the Platonic conceptualisation of the perfect state governed by those that excelled in philosophy and military art, a range of unpaid officers with great authority and moral rectitude (cf. Book VIII of *The Republic*).

It was accurately observed by Habermas (1984) that Hegel was the first thinker for whom Western modernity was a philosophical problem. In effect, Hegel could be considered the initial philosopher of modernity and of the hegemonic spreading of capitalist values and institutions (Rockmore 1989). Beyond the liberalism of Locke, the utilitarianism of Mill and Bentham, and the rationalisation of Weber, the political and moral claims of Hegel provided the intellectual tools for the consolidation of the capitalist state. Hegel insisted on the unification of tradition and modernity according to 'rational' approaches and beyond the constraints of religion. Unlike the tradition of English liberal philosophers, Hegel didn't see the state as primarily the safeguard of people's self-interest, but as the guardian of a moral life and universal altruism (Avineri 1972). Hegel's state system actually only makes sense as the human approximation of the perfect model, that is, the concept of a moral state to be pursued through ethical life. In that sense, Hegel claimed to resolve the fundamental tension between the public and private through a 'mediation of the will' between the family, civil society and the state. Because the state is seen as 'inherently rational', it could become the main promoter of reason and the main force in the course of historic-geographical change. Consequently, conceived as the domain of reason and legitimacy, the Hegelian state is the natural advocate of environmental governance and its associated calls for rationalisation and efficiency.

Hegel's political blueprint is supposedly able to reconcile renovation and permanence, rupture and legality, democratic inclusion and, whenever needed, political repression. As a result, the political philosophy of Hegel offered, even indirectly, the intellectual toolbox needed to update the outmoded environmental regulation of the welfare-developmental state. Decisive elements of Hegel's political argument can be found in this superimposition of environmental governance – portrayed as the expression of wisdom, higher democracy and scientific aptness – over a socionatural reality with growing environmental impacts and associated conflicts. Instead of merely the manifestation of biopolitics or biopower, the introduction of environmental governance replicates the civilisational character of the state proposed by Hegel for the administration and leadership of the expanding industrial-capitalist society of the time.

In that sense, the most influential aspect of Hegel's argument is exactly the adaptability of his constitutional plan above the bare affirmation of power and immediate socioeconomic demands. In a remarkable comment, Hegel (1964: 281) even makes use of a proto-ecological metaphor to affirm that their fundamental error is to focus too much on positive, rigid law, acting "like a landed proprietor whose sandy soil has been covered by fertile humus as a result of a beneficent flood and who yet proposed to plough and farm it exactly as he had done before".

One of central tasks that Hegel set up for his philosophy of politics was the reconciliation of the individual with the state, with the community and the environment (Plant 1973). This suggestion was rather innovative in his own time and, more importantly, anticipated the emphasis on sustainability and public participation that became core aspects of environmental governance. The 'police' approach proposed by Hegel (i.e. the combination of a rational state, profitable market transactions and some moderation of social inequalities) re-emerged later in the attempts to transform the responses to environmental degradation into strategies for capital accumulation. Although Hegel cautioned against the excesses of a laissez-faire economy, as much as against too much state interventionism, his rationalisation of state interventions has a contingent relationship with wider neoliberal trends. Hegel's argument in favour of persistent economic inequalities, as the basis of social progress, is intended to provide justification for economic growth at the expense of environmental concerns. A flexible state apparatus, shielded by the rhetoric of sustainability and public participation, creates many opportunities for the neoliberalisation of nature and the creation of new mechanisms for the circulation of capital through nature conservation (Katz 1998). Examples of that include the payment for ecosystem services, carbon markets and the privatisation of water utilities, which are all advocated as the most efficient and socially responsive forms of natural resource management.

Critically Assessing the Hegelian Influence

The main claim of this article is that the unsustainability of the hegemonic agenda of sustainable development can be ultimately explained by the Hegelian claims of the identity between the real and the rational (i.e. the real is rational by definition). Calls for 'ecological protection' by the contemporary state have been undermined by the parallel legitimisation of politico-economic structures responsible for systematic and widespread socioecological impacts. Despite its internal logic and pragmatist

appeal, the grand plans for the formation of a rational, ethical state have been fundamentally contained by the very reasoning of the Hegelian political thinking and his defence of state's supreme authority and legitimacy. In effect, the alleged victory over absolutism and irrationality defended by Hegel is, from the perspective of social and environmental justice, only a pyrrhic victory. Following the Hegelian model, the contemporary state is the historical necessity of capitalist relations, but it is also predicated upon those same relations and the myriad of socio-natural impacts thus produced. As pointed out by Negri (2011), the interior completeness of the Hegelian scheme has nourished and at the same time imprisoned the philosophical and political thought of the 19th and 20th Centuries. The Hegelian political elaboration is ultimately a cunning trap – the 'Hegelian trap' – left by the Pre-Victorian Era for the contemporary, post-Berlin Wall period.

The primary loyalty of the Hegelian state is not with the communities of individuals, but with the fulfilment of the functions connected to economic and political freedom. The proclamation of the advantages and qualities of the contemporary state, at least from the perspective of political elites and hegemonic economic interests, reinforces the perversity of the 'Hegelian trap', as the clever, but deceitful, defence of the Western configuration of the state. For Hegel the individual and the state are interconnected and interdependent, but this relationship can only happen if the rule of law preserves the existing institutions of private property and the hierarchisation of political life (Hegel in *Realphilosophie*, quoted in Avineri 1973). On the one hand, the state is proclaimed the manifestation of an ethical Idea, the actualisation of freedom; on the other hand the supreme duty of the individual is to become a subordinate member of the state. The result is not simply a harmonic separation between private and public life, as claimed by Hegel, but a frontal antagonism between the functions of the state (predicated as right in advance, as the state brings freedom and reason) and the actuality of private life (in Hegelian terms, logically containing a lower level of rationality). The 'Hegelian trap' has the ultimate consequence in the crystallisation of social inequalities at the cost of legitimating and accelerating the exploitation of the workers and low-income groups. If things go really wrong, the ultimate recommendation of Hegel was then geographical: expand colonisation and transfer part of the population to other parts of the world (Hegel 2008).

Bustamante et al. (2012) present a compelling example of the lasting, subtle legacy of the 'Hegelian trap' and its expansion to the socio-nature in the non-Western world. In Bolivia, the government of Evo Morales has formally institutionalised the

right to water in the new national constitutional order under the claim that it was part of its pro-Indian and pro-poor policies. Although on paper it seems an important democratic measure, Bustamante et al. (2012) criticise the simplistic discourse on rights and its manipulation as part of the intensified exploitation of water resources (aiming, in particular, to sell hydroelectricity to Brazil and to safeguard the interests of the larger irrigators) and the promotion of industrialisation (what is being called the ‘great industrial leap’). In this case, a democratically elected government, with unique rhetoric commitments to the Bolivian poor, has ended up operating within a spurious Hegelian logic and, as a result, imposing mediation between state, nature and society that prioritises the conventional model of economic growth and private property accumulation. The Morales government cannot be blamed for policies that are simply utilitarian and pro-capitalism (vis-à-vis his confrontation of the international capitalist order and concrete poverty alleviation measures), but can certainly be criticised for its Hegelian mystification of the balance of rights and gains. From this example it can be inferred that Hegel provided enough flexibility for the national state to adapt and mutate to other geographical contexts (much beyond the European and German circumstances of the first half of the 19th Century).

Among the many critics of Hegel, Marx (1970) – an author who was influenced but struggled during his entire life to go beyond Hegelian idealism – specifically rejected the view that the state could be described as an all-encompassing political community functioning according to an ethical appeal and acting as the fulfilment of reason. On the contrary, for Marx the capitalist state operates at the contradiction between the interest of the individual and that of the community, but always taking sides in favour of the stronger classes (to the extent that “struggles within the State (...) are merely the illusory forms in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out among one another”, Marx and Engels 1974: 53). In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1975) showed how Hegel, through a skilful handling of ethics and dialectics, ultimately reduced civil society to economic society (something extremely relevant to understand the ambiguities of the European Union settlement). In particular, Marx (1970) recognised a distinctive mystification in Hegel’s defence of the Christian, democratic state. In following Hegelian political philosophy, the perfect Christian state effectively becomes the most perfect atheist state, to the extent that it is still theological but relegates religion to the level of civil society. For Marx, Christian capitalism thus becomes the human basis of

a state that uses mystification (through religion and politics) to maintain the basis of exploitation.

Marx's critique of Hegel prefigured the problems of contemporary environmental politics, which are nothing else than a form of sovereignty in search of a subject, particularly the idea of planetary governance structuring hegemonic responses and operating like a caricature of Hegelian necessity (Wainwright and Mann 2013). One of the core elements of Marx's critique is that Hegel's politico-philosophical argument idealised the role of state bureaucracy and the significance of the crown. Hegel located the ultimate authority and legitimacy in the hands of the monarch, as the repository of maximum wisdom and independent judgment. Although Hegel attempted to bring together state and civil society, following the appeal for reason and liberty, in effect he created a fixed opposition and placed the state outside and above civil society. Instead of democracy and general suffrage, Hegel wants the individuals taking part in politics "as all", as a coherent group, rather than as individuals (Marx 1970: 117). For Hegel, the resolution of social discrepancies could happen through the work of the Assembly of Estates (i.e. the parliament), which is the essential mediation between people and the political state. The legislature (i.e. the convergence of the estates) is thus seen as totality of interests "not only in itself but also for itself" (Hegel 2008: 287). The state is, thus, portrayed by Hegel as a complex organism that functions through estates, the executive and the crown, in which power is supposedly shared in a coordinated way that theoretically assures the perfect, rational government. But for Marx, the subjective freedoms announced by Hegel end up becoming formal, inexistent freedoms for the (majority) of the people. Marx saw great risks associated with the Hegelian institutional arrangement, which was likely to serve mainly the interests of the propertied classes and high bureaucracy. Expressing his criticism of Hegel's political treatise, Marx claimed that "[t]he main thing is to fight against the constitutional monarchy as a hybrid creature, full of internal contradictions and bound to be self-destroying" (in a letter to Ruge on 20/03/1842, mentioned in Avineri 1968: 9).

The main point is that Marx explicitly denounced the mystification of the emerging capitalist state by Hegel. It was in his analysis of the prospects of religious freedom that Marx subverted the conventional argument about political and religious emancipation. For him, the political emancipation of the religious person requires, first of all, the emancipation of the state from religion. In other words, it was not enough to

secure additional political rights within the impact of private property relations promoted and defended by the capitalist state (Marx 1975). In order to become a genuine social being (instead of only an abstract citizen), the individuals needs to secure first their human emancipation, which depends on overcoming the separation of the individual from social forces proposed by Hegel and other prophets of the capitalist world. According to Marx, contradiction of the capitalist state is complete and can be demonstrated by its support of religion. The perfect Christian state is exactly the atheist state (such as in the United States), which granted religious freedom as artefact to promote and consolidate a highly religious society. Likewise, the environmental agenda of the modern state, with its sophisticated green discourse and complex regulatory apparatus, has become the champion of widespread environmental degradation and socionatural impacts. When Marx identified this fundamental failure in the political agenda of the capitalist state, the fallacy of the Hegelian argument is inescapably revealed and the only way ahead is to pursue a radically transformed, and effectively ecologised, state.

Beyond Environmental Governance and its Hegelian References

The fundamental conclusion from the above is that this is a central, crucial debate for human geographers and other scholars interested in unpacking the complexity of environmental policies and the widening gap between official discourses and actual practices. It is evident that the disagreement between Marx and Hegel must be examined in the light of what has been learned since the lifetime of both philosophers. Still, the apparently enlightened states that exist in the world today, such as the European Union constitutional order, contain a profound paradox that can only be properly appreciated with the help of Marx's reading of the Hegelian idealisation of the state: the paradox of achieving all and nothing at the same time. The application of detailed science, parliamentary law-making and systematic public consultation may give the impression that the state is effectively moving towards higher levels of sustainability and ecological citizenship. In effect, the environmental action of the contemporary state is shrouded in mystification, elitism and manipulation. The Hegelian constitutional plan informed the organisation of environmental governance around two key principles, flexibility and legitimacy, which have facilitated the advance of conservative reforms, such as described in the rhetoric of ecological modernisation and sustainable development. The pseudo-democracy of the post-Berlin

Wall period includes, as another manifestation of the creative domination of capitalist structures, the pseudo-sustainability of the mainstream sustainability agenda.

On the one hand, the flexible and apparently responsive basis of the contemporary environmental regulation has been directly and indirectly informed by the Hegelian distortions of state politics. Environmental regulation is produced primarily to serve the wider, self-perpetuating demands of the state and its stronger allies. Environmental statecraft, according to the Hegelian plan, continues to be strategic in the changes of natural resources ownership and manipulation of socionature. On the other hand, despite the ingeniousness of the Hegelian model, the responsive capacity of conventional environmental regulation is also increasing showing signs of inadequacy and exhaustion. Notwithstanding the growing complexity of state policies and agencies, environmental problems and tensions keep expanding in space, scale and intricacy. The Hegelian approach to public policy has represented a true distortion of the causes and consequences of environmental problems, in the sense that the top priorities of public policies are the reinforcement of the rationality associated with the extraction of surplus value from the workforce and the exchange values of nature. This contradictory relationship brings political ecology to the centre of the structure and functioning of the modern capitalist state. The level of protest and contestation depends on the realisation of the connection between environmental problems, socioeconomic trends and the political commitments of the state apparatus. In practice, environmental regulation is not a linear or predetermined process, but it unfolds according to the concreteness of political pressures and the resistance of grassroots groups.

The central dilemma for geographers and other scholars of environmental governance is to identify the changes in the rationale and configuration of the state and relate them to the wider balance of political power hindering state action. The challenge is to go beyond conservative claims of common responsibility and the technocratism of environmental management in order to underscore the fairness and emancipatory character of the responses to socionatural problems. Environmental management only makes sense if it is positioned in the centre of wider processes of politico-economic emancipation. Otherwise, it will remain merely an adjunct of prevailing socioeconomic trends in need of some peripheral forms of mitigation. The fundamental antinomies of flexibility and legitimacy of contemporary environmental policies need to be questioned and overcome. It is not enough to liberate the state from the burden of

environmental degradation and resolve the tensions blocking conventional economic relations if the majority of socionature remains in a condition of exploitation and subordination. As observed by Marx (1975), it is the manner of emancipation that needs to be criticised, given that the state can liberate itself (from religion, in the case of Marx's analysis) without people being set free. In that regard, the fundamental distortions of conservative democratic claims “must be looked for in the *nature* of the state itself” (Marx 1975: 217).

The key ontological and political question is less how the state deals with the environmental policies and strategies per se, but what its ultimate commitments are and how it works to reinforce or eliminate processes of exclusion and exploitation. Democracy between the human and the non-human, between present and future generations is never going to be secured if the basis of economic production and social reproduction remain subordinated to the imperatives of capital accumulation. Instead of generating conflicts to preserve the interest of a small percentage of society, this new, refunded state should be beyond the lasting influence of Hegelian idealism and mystique. That requires sustained and radical transformations in small, specific state practices and also in wider commitments and interventions of the state. What is more, the transformation of existing state formations should happen both from the outside and from the inside of the state. According to Marx (2012: 44) in *The Civil War in France*, “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery” but it needs to be profoundly altered, as much as economy and society need to change. In the end, those multiple answers to socionatural disputes around the state should become a main unifying catalyst that brings together sociopolitical emancipation and a just, ecologically viable, economy.

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