

# **The Sustainable State. Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on Socio-Ecological Transformations of the State in Times of Compound Crises.**

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## **Scientific objective**

*Background: the renewed interest in the role of the state in sustainable transformation*

The state was a central reference point for political demands and scientific analyses dealing with the management of ecological challenges until the mid-1990s. Yet, it initially played a subordinate role in the discourse on sustainable development, which gained prominence from the early 1990s and soon became a new guiding idea in global environmental policy (and in other policy areas). The then-newly emerging governance perspective dominated theoretical and empirical analyses of sustainable development, pushing the state into the background. Given the complexity of the challenge, sustainable development was assumed to benefit, if not depend, largely on new forms of governance beyond the state, involving a variety of actors from different sectors and levels (Lange et al., 2013).

In recent years, however, the state has increasingly moved into the focus of attention in sustainability politics and research, and there is a growing interest in analyzing the role(s), functions, and impacts of the state in the context of sustainability transformations (e.g. Heinrichs & Laws, 2014; Hysing, 2015; Duit et al. 2016; Bornemann & Christen, 2019; Hausknost & Hammond, 2020; Christen & Bornemann, 2021; Mathis et al., 2022; SAGW, 2020). In this context, emphasis is put on the tensions between environmental demands on the one hand and issues of democratic legitimacy and capitalist imperatives on the other (see also Saretzki, 2011; Blühdorn, 2020; Bornemann et al., 2022). But the role of the state is also increasingly discussed in the context of post-growth approaches to sustainability (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Koch, 2020) and in the field of social policy, where there is growing interests in the eco-social state and sustainable welfare (Coote, 2022; Jakobsson et al., 2018; Koch & Fritz, 2014; Gough 2016, 2022; Laruffa et al., 2022).

This renewed interest is based on at least three developments. First, there is a growing critical understanding of the central role of the (neoliberal) state in creating and perpetuating socio-ecological problems, a politics of unsustainability (Blühdorn & Welsh, 2008), which underscores that the state must transform itself if it is to end its complicity in generating the problems and make a positive contribution to sustainable development (e.g., Hausknost & Hammond 2020). Second, there is spreading disillusionment with the actual and expected future performance of (global) governance arrangements beyond the state in addressing particularly complex social-ecological problems (Park et al., 2008) that give rise to reconsideration and revitalization of the state’s role in sustainability governance. Third, the socio-ecological crisis has evolved – not least as a result of insufficient efforts in the past – from a future scenario to a reality in the here and now, prompting calls for a stronger and more authoritative steering role of the state to grow louder – sometimes with (approving or critical) reference to the (supposed) success of state-led transformation processes in capitalist autocracies such as China (Beeson, 2010; Willke, 2014, Wainwright & Mann, 2018).

Alongside this turn to the state in sustainability governance research, the state is also increasingly coming to the fore in other political and academic debates. In the context of anti-globalist discourses and movements calling – on the left – for a strong redistributive state, or – on the right – for an ethnically based nation-state, the state serves as a beacon of hope for ending an era of neoliberal globalization. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has also sparked a renewed interest in the state. Thus, on the one

hand, the early phase of the pandemic demonstrated that states are indeed capable of more than has long been assumed; on the other hand, as the pandemic progressed, state actions have increasingly encountered legitimacy and capacity limits (Schröter, 2022). Politically, the rise of etatist positions, which would see a strong state also in climate and sustainability policy (see Bornemann & Christen, 2020), is contrasted by a liberal or libertarian countermovement, to which any form of state intervention appears as an unacceptable restriction of individual freedom (see Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2022). Finally, the role of the state is also being reconsidered in light of recent disruptive changes in the global political and economic order, namely the weakening of multilateralism and the shift toward a multipolar world. Overall, there is not only increased discussion about the functions and role(s) of the state in sustainability transformation but also about the state in general. This constellation provokes new questions about understanding the sustainable state, its roles, strategies and ways of acting, as well as its possibilities and limits in shaping socio-ecological transformations in times of crisis.

*Aim: promoting the debate about the sustainable state*

Against this backdrop, this international research workshop brings together scholars working on the sustainable state and processes of state transformation towards sustainability ('sustainabilization of the state') in different academic disciplines and fields, including political theory, political economy, political sociology, governance and public administration, legal studies as well as sustainable transformation studies. The workshop will provide a forum for academic exchange on current theoretical perspectives, innovative methodological approaches and recent empirical findings on sustainability-oriented state transformations in various regional contexts and on various levels of statehood (national, sub-national, local). In addition to stimulating reflection and discussion, the workshop is intended to promote networking and encourage research collaborations that may lead to joint projects.

*Framing: lines of thinking about the sustainable state*

The planned workshop is explicitly not limited to reproducing common narratives about institutional conditions, instruments, possibilities and limits of the ecological or green state (Eckersley, 2004). Rather, it is intended to venture into new intellectual territories. In doing so, we propose to think along the following lines.

- (1) We conceptualize sustainability not just as a (new) goal of (environmental) policy and governance but as a comprehensive idea of social transformation that, in many ways, goes beyond addressing environmental concerns and calls for new forms of integrative policy-making and governance (e.g., Bornemann 2014). In addition to the classical normative frames of reference – from Brundtland to the 2030 Agenda – alternative orientations (degrowth, the Anthropocene etc.) can offer relevant new perspectives.
- (2) We propose to bring together long-term historical lines of development with current crisis events. This will shed light on how the sustainable state is shaping, changing, and functioning against the backdrop of a socio-ecological crisis that is shifting more and more into the present.
- (3) We want to bring into focus the complex interplay between societal and state transformations. As a subject of transformation, the state drives and shapes societal transformations, while as an object, it responds to societal transformations by developing certain governance practices and capacities that, in turn, enable it to shape societal transformations.
- (4) In order to capture the mechanisms of sustainability-oriented state transformations, we will link different levels of analysis. In addition to organizational, institutional, and instrumental changes at the macro and meso levels, the micro level of changing policy and governance practices of specific state actors should also be included.

*Questions: theorizing and analyzing the sustainable state*

Taking this overall framing into account, the workshop addresses (but is not confined to) the following overarching questions:

- How can the sustainable state be conceptualized both in normative and descriptive respects? What are defining characteristics of the sustainable state (in contrast to the well-known concepts of the green and the environmental state)?
- What conceptual types and empirical forms of the sustainable state according to different contextual conditions can be distinguished?
- How do states transform into sustainable states, and how can the sustainabilization of the state be analyzed? What actors (innovative companies, trade unions, social movements, NGOs, etc.) contribute to the sustainabilization of the state?
- What is the relationship between the (de-)democratization processes, the rise of populism and the sustainable state? What are the risks and potentials of an increasingly salient socio-ecological crisis for the development of a sustainable state?
- What role do knowledge and scientific expertise play in the sustainabilization of the state? What balance can/should be sought between scientific evidence and citizen participation?
- What is the relationship between capitalism (and capitalist imperatives, such as economic growth) and the sustainabilization of the state? If going beyond 'green growth' is necessary, can degrowth inspire a realistic reform path for the sustainable state?
- What do the different policy areas, such as social, environmental and economic policy, look like in a sustainable state and how do they interact?
- How do '(de-)globalization' and the sustainabilization of the state relate to each other? How do global challenges interplay with national and sub-national states?
- What are the consequences and (side-)effects of state sustainabilization?

**Organization**

The workshop will be hosted on the central campus of the Leuphana University Lüneburg with the participation of the local School of Public Affairs (Prof Dr Thomas Saretzki) and the School of Sustainability (Prof Dr Jens Newig).

On the evening of the first workshop day (June 1), a public discussion event is planned to bring into conversation academics with practitioners.