



States of just transition: Realising climate justice through and against the state



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ABSTRACT

Possibilities for engendering sustainable and just futures are foundering in part because key resources are managed by elites through ‘top down’ environmental governance and management, and knowledge production regimes, largely committed to retaining the status quo, fail to pursue new ways of managing resource consumption and distribution. In this paper, we argue for an alternative climate justice agenda that is enabled through grassroots mobilisation in collaboration with state action. To do this we consider the state as a continued terrain of possibility for *positive* social, economic and environmental change, noting the imperative of historically attentive state-enabled redistribution along persistent axes of difference. In articulating an alternative understanding of the state, we emphasise the importance of social movements capable of cultivating networked militant particularisms that can be channeled through and beyond state governance processes. In order to ground these ideas, we provide two brief case studies, tracking food sovereignty and energy remunicipalization initiatives.

1. Introduction

Climate change raises urgent questions about social justice (UNDP, 2007), such as how adaptation might exacerbate existing inequities and create new ones, and how voices from grassroots communities can be incorporated into just, democratic and workable transitions (Page, 2006). The possibilities for engendering sustainable and just futures founder, however, in part because key resources are managed by elites through top down environmental governance, and knowledge production regimes committed to retaining the status quo fail to pursue new ways of managing resource consumption and distribution. In addition, policy responses increasingly framed around discourses of security, marketisation and austerity perpetuate the production of scarcity and exacerbate resource dispossessions (O’Lear, 2016). Dominant neoliberal economic doctrine has also wrought profound damage to democratic practices, cultures, institutions and imaginaries. Political participation and the right to equality have been reduced to market freedom, the right to compete, and the making of rational consumer choices, while individual activity in the market has replaced shared political deliberation and rule (Brown, 2015).

These trends have been exemplified in governmental responses to climate change – represented by the United Nations Framework

Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, or Conference of Parties, [COP]) process – which have been framed primarily within the territorial logics of the nation-state as well as firmly within the parameters of neoliberal forms of global governance (e.g. OECD, 2015). Although there have been recent attempts to begin to orchestrate climate related initiatives by non-state and sub-state actors to which we will return below (Chan et al., 2015; Hale, 2016), the institutions, strategies, practices and scales of action represented by twenty-one years of the UN process have been woefully inadequate in addressing changing climatic regimes, as illustrated by ever increasing greenhouse gas emissions (O’Lear, 2016). Further, persistent inequalities along axes of difference, within and between states, contribute to an uneven distribution of both climate change vulnerability and the ability to meaningfully influence climate futures (Derickson and MacKinnon, 2015).

Hence, the UNFCCC process is itself marked by a series of exclusions and inequalities concerning who are considered legitimate participants in the final decision-making process. The most economically and politically powerful states (such as the United States and China, and secondarily the G20) determine what is included in any ‘agreement’ that emerges from the COP. Moreover, the historical experiences of colonialism, development, and neoliberalism have bred a climate of distrust at

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the COP between the majority and minority world states, leading to ineffective negotiations that favour the powerful at the expense of the rest (Roberts and Parks, 2007).

Working largely outside the state, climate justice movements have been articulating a very different agenda to that evident in the COP process. In opposition to the COP, over 150 grassroots organisations from around the world converged on Paris, France in late 2015 to offer an alternative agenda with a more radical commitment to non-capitalist values, radical democratic forms of governance and representation, and a climate justice agenda framed around economic and social rights for all (Ortiz et al., 2013; Klein, 2014). In articulating a vision for climate justice, these movements offer a significant reorientation of contemporary philosophies of governance by emphasising place-based, environmentally sustainable approaches to resource management as well as the broader socio-economic formation that drives resource distribution.

Those social movements present in Paris clearly rejected fundamental elements of contemporary neoliberal state architecture and practice, and are also engaged around the world in direct conflicts with states over key environmental resources such as land (e.g. monoculture developments such as palm oil), water (e.g. mega-dam construction) and forests (e.g. displacement of indigenous people). However, such movements were in Paris to not only to confront the UN process with its own contradictions, but to press for climate justice demands on the state. What should we make of this apparently contradictory stance by movements toward the state as both the source of the problem, but also a key part of the solution?

Taking our lead from the praxis of social movements and contemporary activism around issues of energy remunicipalisation (Cumbers, 2012, 2016) and food sovereignty (La Via Campesina, 2009), we argue for a reinvigorated engagement with the possibilities of reconfiguring the state. In particular, we offer a conception of the state as a *process* embedded in a responsive architecture for solidarity and shared governance at a range of scales. We argue for a climate justice agenda that is enabled through grassroots mobilisation in collaboration with state action. Following on from the arguments and practices made by the various social movements we study and, in some cases collaborate with, we argue that another state is *possible, necessary, and insufficient* for engendering just social formations in the context of a changing climate.

To understand the state as a process is to recognize that it is constantly being reworked and remade in ways that shift the balance of power across institutions and scales with evolving implications for justice-oriented political responses. In the US, the national scale has often been seen as a crucial site for redistributive policies and environmental regulations and a bulwark against discriminatory and anti-labour policies. The state restructuring that characterized neoliberalization and the devolution of state power to lower scales of government took the form, on balance, of regulatory roll back. Under the Trump administration, however, the political power and promise of the urban scale is coming into a different sort of relief. As the US under Trump backs out of the Paris climate agreement, for example, cities and states are taking the lead on meeting the terms of the agreement.¹ Cities have also been important sites of resistance to other policy changes under Trump, such as immigration enforcement. The US case is one example of the shifting form and power distributions of various state formations and the way in which more or less social justice oriented state formations are conjuncturally specific. Following on from this conception of the state, in this piece we do not advocate for or attempt to distill an ideal-type of the state for which social movements ought to advocate. Nor, indeed, do we propose a ‘model’ of social movement-state engagement applicable to all times and places. Instead, we argue

for a conception of, and engagement with, the state that is conjuncturally and contextually situated (see Peck, 2017).

We begin by making the case that climate justice politics should continue to contest and engage with state spaces to prosecute an alternative agenda. We argue that activists and critical geographers should consider the state as a continued terrain of possibility for *positive* social, economic and environmental change, noting the imperative of historically attentive state-enabled redistribution along persistent axes of difference, and emphasising the importance of social movements to be able to cultivate networked militant particularisms that can be channeled through and beyond state processes (Cumbers, 2015). To ground these ideas we provide two brief case studies, tracking food sovereignty and energy remunicipalisation initiatives and conclude with comments on states of transition.

Our case studies are drawn from long-term and ongoing collaborative relationships with communities of practice in each location. Routledge has worked for fifteen years with social movements engaged in food sovereignty politics in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. Food sovereignty as an idea, a practice and a demand is an instructive example of forms of engagement that work with, against, and outside the state (Wright, 2010). Food sovereignty is the product of both local action and a global imaginary that has developed beyond the state, but has been articulated by social movements in their struggles against national governments and their agricultural policies. However, food sovereignty has tended to be most successful beyond the local scale when an engagement with the state has taken place. Cumbers is working with various NGOs, activist groups, trade unions and left platforms within the social democratic, green and left parties across Europe, including through the remunicipalisation process, to advance an agenda around more democratic and decentralized forms of public ownership (Cumbers, 2016). This has recently involved advising the UK Labour Party leadership on more democratic ownership models (e.g. Labour Party, 2017).

2. Climate justice action and state action

Climate justice refers to a set of context-specific iterations that stress self-determination; the material access, use and control of particular resources; innovative livelihood knowledges; and the potential of collective organisation for more socially, economically and ecologically just futures (Bond, 2012). A range of antagonistic demands lie at the root of such elaborations that include leaving fossil fuels in the ground, reasserting peoples’ and community control over the production of food and renewable energy, massively reducing over-consumption, particularly in the Global North, respecting indigenous and forest people’s rights, and recognising the ecological and climate debt owed to the peoples in the Global South by the societies of the Global North necessitating the making of reparations (Chatterton et al., 2013).

In thinking through the practical politics of climate justice as articulated by social movements, we turn to the work of Erik Olin Wright (2010) *contra* John Holloway (2002, 2010). Holloway makes a powerful argument for a strategic anti-capitalist politics as an ‘interstitial process’, where alternatives create ‘cracks’ in the edifice of capitalism, in support of a broader argument against more traditional revolutionary strategies of rupturing capitalist social relations through state capture. We part company, however, with Holloway’s rejection of the state as an arena for prosecuting social (and, by association, climate) justice when he argues that: “the state is not an adequate interstitial form simply because, as a form of social relations, it is part of the social synthesis that we are rejecting: the state is part of the cohesive suction of capital” (Holloway, 2010, 63). While recognising that the capitalist state is of course not neutral in its role in maintaining capitalist social relations – indeed the COP process illustrates this well through the dominant market tropes that permeate its discourse – Holloway’s approach to the state denies the complex, multi-scalar and diverse spatial forms that the state assumes in practice (although he does allude to this when he

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/climate/american-cities-climate-standards.html?_r=0

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