

## CLIMATE ACTIVISM, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE ROLE OF STATES: ENVISIONING POST-NEOLIBERAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

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This paper examines the relationship between climate movements and states in climate governance, suggesting that movements may improve their political output by adopting a sovereignty-based, democratic framing of their agenda. The ambivalent attitude of climate movements and Green Deal supporters concerning the desired role of states is reconstructed. Moreover, a multidisciplinary review of the literature supporting a “return of the state” in climate politics is offered. Drawing on the critical literature on neoliberal environmentalism and the role of states within globalization, as well as considering issues such as equality, accountability, and scale of the transition process, this paper advocates for a non-nationalistic, democratic understanding of sovereignty as crucial for an efficient and fair green transition. It particularly emphasizes the need to revive the distinction between public interest and private gain and provide a bridge between subaltern agendas and climate movements’ goals in order to successfully envision a post-neoliberal climate governance model.

**Keywords:** Climate Change – State Sovereignty – Climate Movements – Neoliberal Environmentalism

### Introduction

As the IPCC reports that the global response to climate change still falls short of the goal of limiting global warming to +1.5°C, with global warming of 3.2°C projected by 2100 (IPCC 2023), there appears to be some novelty – and a great deal of ambiguity – in the way climate movements and global economic institutions (GEIs) are approaching the climate crisis in their agendas, press releases and reports. On the one hand, scholars have reported traces of a “statist” turn in the agendas of some of the most relevant climate movements, such as FFF and ER (Doherty et al. 2018; de Moor et al. 2021), hence partially breaking with a longstanding tradition of ambivalence concerning the desired role of states among environmental activism and green parties

(Eckersley 2004, 11) and a past commitment to lobbying the international arena rather than national governments (Doherty et al. 2018). On the other hand, evidence suggests that GEIs are increasingly starting to question their three-decade-long support of the “neoliberal” governance model (Dent 2022; Brad et al. 2022) and look more favorably at the role of states and governments in managing the transition. For example, the IEA has recently declared in a report that “it is for governments to take the lead and show the way” in the transition process (IEA 2022, 26). However, as this paper attempts to illustrate, it might be too soon to speak of a return of the state or a “post-governance era” (Brad et al. 2022) as a paradigm shift in global climate governance (GCG), since among the agendas of the social movements, and the GEIs’ reports as well, the desired role of the state remains ambiguously framed. Nevertheless, this paper argues for the burning need for such a paradigm shift and positively looks at the controversial conceptual heritage of sovereignty as a partially original way to frame the climate crisis – for both climate movements and governments.

This paper consists of an exercise in non-ideal theory with a twofold goal: (i) to conduct a literature review identifying the ongoing and past trends in GCG concerning the relationship between states and the agendas of climate movements,<sup>1</sup> as well as the multidisciplinary literature supporting a “return of the state” in climate politics, and (ii) to contribute in terms of a conceptual clarification of the recent “statist” trend among climate movements and GEIs meant to ameliorate their policy output, through the aid of a novel framing centered around non-nationalistic democratic sovereignty and the re-affirmation of the public-private conceptual divide. In the post-Paris era, where international negotiations seem to have stalled, and as geopolitical tension rises, climate movements might be tempted to “go solo” and bypass institutional politics. However, this paper supports the view that they might not be able to generate enough political momentum for change without targeting public authorities and pushing them not only to act but also to *redefine their role* vis-à-vis the market. Furthermore, bridging climate and social justice struggles across developed and developing countries, as the proposed framing does, appears just as crucial and potentially beneficial to the overall cause.

The argument unfolds in three main steps, articulated into four sections and a conclusion. The next section, section I, offers a diachronic overview of environmental and climate movements concerning their oscillating attitude to top-down and state solutions. The point here is (step 1) to argue that despite some changes happening in the agendas of the movements over the last few years, there is still ongoing confusion

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<sup>1</sup> Although a comparative study of the relationship between authoritarian states, their different conception of sovereignty (Paris 2020), forms of climate activism, and environmental policies (Li – Shapir 2020) would be highly crucial, due to the limited space, this paper’s scope is limited to democratic countries.

concerning what movements *want* from states – if they want anything at all. Furthermore, sections II and III (step 2) offer a multidisciplinary review of scholars supporting the need for a “return of the State” in climate governance vis-à-vis decades of (inefficient) “neoliberal” environmentalism. In detail, section II offers anecdotal evidence of “eco-social conflicts” that could be better addressed by stronger state intervention and proposes two climate policy-relevant public choice trade-offs (equity vs. sustainability, efficacy vs. decentralization) to help frame the complexity of the transition. Moreover, section III offers a review of the debate on state sovereignty in environmental political theory, an overview of the critical stances against “neoliberal environmentalism” and a brief literary review of economics, public policy, and political ecology scholars advocating for stronger state intervention concerning climate change. Finally, building on steps 1 and 2 (which are logically mutually independent), the last step (step 3), which is the normative side of the argument, consists in showing that movements ought to put an end to their confusion on the desired role of sovereign powers to maximize their political output and that they can do this by adopting a novel framing for their agendas and goals – one centered around state sovereignty, democracy, and the re-affirmation of the public-private conceptual divide. To accomplish step 3, section IV recalls some elements in the history of sovereignty to support its present utility, grounding the value of democratic sovereignty in the defense of the public good and as endowed with a normative concept of public utility (Bobbio 1989, 3). It then discusses some elements in the agendas of the XR and the FFF pointing at an already happening (but still vague) pro-state shift from the confusion in section I. Furthermore, it advances some consideration on the parallels between the pandemic and the climate crisis concerning the role of the state and answers to an objection concerning planetary sovereignty.

Finally, it appears crucial to point out that, while this article is receptive to the position that minimizing the negative consequence of the climate catastrophe needs us to envision a post-neoliberal GCG paradigm and a “return to the state,” no specific importance is attributed here to the *national* or *ethnonational* dimension as such. In what follows, when the word “state” is deployed, it merely indicates *any polity able to function as a state* – in other words, endowed with a significant set of sovereign prerogatives in respect of the transition (such as control on currency, trade, social spending, industrial planning, environmental regulation). Movements should address sovereign, public authorities wherever they are sited (at the national, regional, or supranational level) and, additionally, push them to embrace a self-understanding as “stewards of the public interest.” Moreover, radical change will not take place within democratic polities without the fundamental role of climate movements in creating political momentum. This paper argues that the conceptual repertoire of sovereignty

might help us unify these burning causes within a single frame and help us address them more properly.

### **I. How Climate Movements See the State: An Oscillating Attitude**

Environmental social movements have a longstanding tradition of ambivalence on the desired role of states in their agenda and their preference for bottom-up or top-down solutions. They have often oscillated between an “anti-state” approach – which is rooted in the history of twentieth-century social movements (Della Porta 2002) – prescribing decentralization, autonomy, grassroots decision-making, and rejection of disciplinary violence – and a pro-state call for stronger state regulation and stronger public institutions vis-à-vis the economy – historically rooted in a socialist and eco-socialist standpoint (de-Shalit 2000) and asking for “large doses of state resources (both fiscal and repressive) to be made available to the causes of desired social change” (Eckersley 2004, 11; Sicotte – Brulle 2017). Moreover, in the wake of the securitization of climate change as a global challenge in the late 1980s, climate movements initially focused on lobbying the international arena (for example, through the UNFCCC framework) rather than national governments with a parallel focus on individual responsibility (Doherty et al. 2018).

Meanwhile, in their ambivalence on the desired role of state and top-down measures, as well as with their initial transnational scope, climate movements might have inadvertently reinforced so-called “neoliberal environmentalism” (Dent 2022), a three-decades-long trend in GCG which systematically favored de-politicizing market-based solutions, privatization of resource control, commodification of resources, withdrawal of direct government intervention, decentralization of resource governance to local authorities and NGOs (Dent 2022), and an emphasis on an eco-consumeristic ethic (Stoner 2020). Despite some relatively successful parenthesis of national level-based climate campaigns in the 2010s – such as the UK’s “golden age” of climate activism and policymaking (Nulman 2015, 24 – 56) – not much changed in the agendas of the movements until COP21, when scholars “increasingly saw climate activists reject any possibility of the UNFCCC solving the climate crisis” (Doherty et al. 2018). Consequently, recently established climate movements such as XR and FFF have been documented to increasingly recognize the need to “bring the (nation) state back in” (Doherty et al. 2018), thus breaking “from prior climate mobilizations targeting transnational institutions or fossil fuel industry and emphasizing ‘*do-it-yourself*’ forms of actions” (de Moor et al. 2021, 622). In this respect, it must be noted that the literature on climate movements supports the view that, to optimize political outcomes, movements should primarily lobby *national* governments rather than engage the international arena (Nulman 2015) or overly localized protests (Brulle – Sicotte 2017).

In more than one way, XR and FFF are thus breaking with the tenets of neoliberal environmentalism concerning the role of states. Nevertheless, many activists participating in XR and FFF continue to engage in lifestyle politics and individual responsibility as the key solutions to climate change (de Moor et al. 2021). Furthermore, one of XR's ten core values is that "we are based on *autonomy* and *decentralization*."<sup>2</sup> We ought to conclude that, despite signs of change, the ambiguity of the climate movements concerning the desired role of the state is yet not gone. On the other hand, despite some recent signs of a post-neoliberal, pro-(nation)-state turn (Dent 2022; Brad et al. 2022), among GEIs' reports and current national and regional climate policymaking the ambivalence persists as well.<sup>3</sup>

Over the last few years, different varieties of the "Green New Deal" have gained momentum among scholars, civil society, and policymakers (Brad et al. 2022), inevitably contributing to the revitalization of the discussion about the desired role of states in GCG and the pros and cons of top-down and bottom-up measures. Nevertheless, even among well-known Green Deal proponents who are also climate movement supporters, the pro-state/anti-state ambiguity seems to resurface once again in the shape of a widespread suspicion against top-down initiatives and a preference for bottom-up initiatives, localism, and decentralization. For example, Naomi Klein theorized "Blockadia" as a global social movement meant to overthrow deregulated fossil capitalism through *localized* popular resistance, in direct opposition to "the failures of top-down environmentalism" (Klein 2014, 253 – 254). Moreover, in a more recent contribution, she is not entirely clear on the role of state-level measures she asks for, as she opposes the centralization of the US New Deal with the spirit of *decentralization* of the Green Deal (Klein 2019). In a similar vein, in Max Ajl's recent book on the Green Deal, top-down Green Deal projects are considered plans seeking "to maintain exclusion and exploitation in the world system" at the expense of the Global South (Ajl 2021, 21). Even some Marxist-inspired scholars seem to prefer horizontality to top-down strategies, for example, Mann and Wainwright are skeptical of global top-down governance and market-based instruments, as well as of state-led green Keynesianism, and highlight instead the key role of a future, bottom-up radical climate movement ("Climate X") (Mann –Wainwright 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> See online: <https://rebellion.global/about-us/> (Retrieved on September 23, 2023; emphasis added.)

<sup>3</sup> Overall, institutional climate initiatives continue to heavily rely on transnational, market-based environmental policies, e.g., the EU is still heavily counting on its ETS mechanism to meet its 2030 targets (ICAP 2023).

## II. Challenging Ambivalence: Problematic Trade-offs and Eco-social Conflicts

The widespread suspicion against top-down Green Deals among scholars and activists is certainly partly justified, given the influence that corporations and global markets exercise on policymakers on all levels to push back or “capture” regulation and protect short-term profit (Davies 2014), and the exclusionary and unjust policies of past instances of state planning (Klein 2019). Nevertheless, the traditional and ongoing ambivalence concerning the desired role of states and top-down policies (section I) remains problematic given the political and social complexity of transition plans. For the movements to maximize their political output, it appears helpful to lay down the most salient traits of the “fair transition” conundrum in terms of public policy.

We can conceptualize the most relevant challenges to transition plans through two trade-offs, which call on climate movements and scholars to clarify their *desiderata* concerning the role of the state and the scale of the plan: (i) the equity vs. sustainability trade-off – concerning the difficulty of protecting the environment while respecting social justice – and (ii) the efficacy vs. decentralization trade-off – describing the need to find the right balance between the *scale* of the plan and the respect for regional diversity, and the special needs of indigenous peoples, different classes and social groups, inclusivity and democratic participation.

Some scholars have been stressing the possible incurrence of tensions between *inclusivity* and *mitigation*, as well as between *mitigation* and *participation* in the management of environmental problems (Rathzel – Uzzell 2011; Ciplet – Harrison 2019; Temper et al. 2020). In recent years, the global North witnessed numerous “eco-social conflicts” that complicated the traditional link between the political left, grassroots movements, and environmentalism, posing new challenges for supporters of Green Deal projects. For the scope of this paper, the term “eco-social conflict” indicates any social conflict in which a trade-off between environmental protection and social welfare or equity is particularly evident (Barca – Leonardi 2018; Scheidel 2020). For example, the *Yellow Vests Movement*, originated in France in 2018 from, among other reasons, the imposition of a fuel tax by the French government which was largely perceived as disproportionately weighing on working and rural classes (Satre et al. 2021).<sup>4</sup> In the French case, as well as in the case of the Dutch right-wing, agrarian political party *Farmer-Citizen Movement* (Novelli 2023), we saw grassroots movements rise to directly confront top-down environmental protection which was perceived to favor the rich and disproportionately affect the low-income and working classes, putting

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<sup>4</sup> Eco-social conflicts have been described as having affected the global South as well, and for a much longer period, with scholars denouncing the unsettling alliance of mitigation strategies and imperialist capitalist accumulation in the form of new ecological enclosures and land grabbing (“carbon complex”) (Anguelovski et al., 2018) or gentrification effects (Anguelovski et al., 2018).

the social justice-climate justice alliance in jeopardy. In light of this, the next sections bring in additional evidence to conclude that sovereign entities can minimize eco-social conflicts by optimizing the relevant trade-offs and that for this reason, the movement should be resolute in demanding sovereign states to act.

### **III. Sovereignty and Its Enemies: The Case of “Neoliberal Environmentalism”**

Political Sovereignty is a complex and evolving political concept that has been used to achieve various goals throughout modern history. At the theoretical level, it has been employed to legitimize absolute monarchy, as well as to assert popular will as the basis of state power, and secure independence for postcolonial nations in the twentieth century (Grimm 2015; Philpott 2020). For many progressive, cosmopolitan, and liberal scholars, as well as activists, “sovereignty” directly recalls anti-environmentalism, nationalism, and authoritarian statism – a perception that makes any environmental re-investment in state sovereignty considerably harder. In environmental political theory, the relationship between sovereignty and environmental protection is a subject of debate. The mainstream argues that state sovereignty hinders effective global climate action (Latour 2018; Stilz 2019; Mancilla 2021) and is detrimental to climate justice (Vanderheiden 2008) and to the environment (Conca 2000). Most scholars have at best sometimes focused on partial aspects of the sovereignty-climate change nexus, but no significant comprehensive study on the issue has been released. Moreover, the noncompliance of several countries to international agreements on emission reduction over the last three decades has often been formulated through the appeal to sovereignty and national interest (Badrinarayana 2010), both for developing countries and for developed countries such as the US, and so-called “sovereignist” populist movements across the globe are increasingly associated to climate skepticism and exclusionary nationalism (Kallis 2018).

However, the reduction of sovereignty to authoritarian rule and nationalism highly undervalues the complexity and potential of the conceptual history of sovereignty (Paris 2020). In this vein, some scholars have suggested that the concept of sovereignty can be actively re-invested to critique and reform a globalization model that impedes an adequate climate change response (Eckersley 2004; Christoff – Eckersley 2013; Mitchell – Fazi 2018). Furthermore, a liberal conception of the sovereign *demos* has been pointed out as a crucial element in supporting trans-generational fairness (Ferrara 2023, 8), which in turn appears to be widely perceived as a crucial endeavor to back up climate action (Caney 2014). As Piketty perfectly summarized, in this case from a social-democratic perspective, a Green Deal project ought to “be *internationalist* in its ultimate objectives but *sovereignist* in its practical modalities,” adding that “the difficulty is that this universalist sovereignty will not always be easy to distinguish from the nationalist type of sovereignty that is currently gaining momentum” (Piketty 2020b).

In particular, the critical literature on neoliberal globalization and “neoliberal environmentalism” highlighted for decades that the weakening of state sovereignty and the “privatization” of norm-making and regulation (Zumbansen 2013) in neoliberal globalization has represented in many instances an *obstacle* to climate action and global justice. Concerning developed countries, scholars considering state sovereignty as a positive resource vis-à-vis the failures of neoliberal climate governance piggyback on three decades of critical globalization studies that denounced an alarming crisis of state sovereignty and accountability and the rise of private powers, such as transnational corporations and NGOs, as well as an increasing power of unaccountable GEIs and trade agreements (Rodrick 2011; Davies 2014). Moreover, a problematic lack of distinction between “public” and “private” domains across multiple domains was highlighted (Sassen 1996), comprising global environmental governance (Pattberg – Stripple 2008; Vatn 2018). Transnational free-trade agreements and GEIs have been widely highlighted as the locus of most crucial tension between free-trade economic growth and environmental protection, undermining the attempts of nation-states to promote radical environmental protection measures (Klein 2014; Ajl 2021; Dent 2022) as well as conflicting with UNFCCC and UNEP (Bierman 2014). Concerning developing countries, scholars have stressed the importance of claiming effective state sovereignty and rejecting unfair climate agreements as a rejection of Western neo-imperialist “green” projects which do not satisfy the basic requirements of climate justice – considering, for example, the disproportion of historic GHG emissions and the uneven distribution of financial and administrative capabilities across developing and developed states (Eckersley 2004, 232), as explicitly stated at the Cochabamba *World People’s Conference on Climate Change* in 2010. In this respect, the discourse over the “green” potential of sovereignty intercepts the content of numerous de-globalization or alter-globalization movements over the last four decades, especially comprising claims for “food sovereignty” (Tramel 2018; Guerrero 2018; Ajl 2021; Liddell – Kington – McKinley 2022) and “clean energy sovereignty” (Menotti 2007) in movements such as *La Via Campesina*. This hints at the possible existence of a Global North-Global South convergence on the environmental and anti-neoliberal potential of states and sovereignty. Therefore, formulating the desiderata of the climate movements in terms of sovereignty claims might help bridge environmental and social justice struggles across developed and developing worlds, amplifying their policy outcomes, and facilitating climate policy dissemination across different nation-states (Nulman 2015, 37 – 9).

Going back to the “efficacy vs. decentralization” trade-off, economists have been increasingly pointing out the need to start betting once again on the sovereign prerogatives of national states and to break with the neoliberal soft regulation and governance system. Under overly free markets and strong free trade and investment

agreements worldwide, Mariana Mazzucato argues, the world economy follows a path-dependent direction that, in the case of climate change, locks us in catastrophic fossil-based inertia (Mazzucato 2015, 6). The view that states are best suited to guide climate action and people's lifestyles (IEA 2022) is increasingly popular in the GEIs' reports (Dent 2022). In this view, states "can lead the way by providing the strategic vision, the spur to innovation, the incentives for consumers, the policy signals and the public finance that catalyzes private investment" (IEA 2022, 26), while simultaneously supporting most affected communities and – crucially – bearing "*the responsibility to avoid unintended consequences* for the security and affordability of supply" (IEA 2022, 26, emphasis added). Consequently, they result in our best chance to green up our "techno-economic paradigm" in a reasonable timeframe and in a *just* way (Mazzucato 2015; IEA 2022). Some degrowth supporters share this view about the government's role as well (Hickel 2020), along with numerous scholars calling for wartime economies during World War II as a model for ideal climate action (Delina 2016; Malm 2020). More radical anti-capitalist positions claim that the restructuring of our productive system must now be so deep-seated that capitalism itself must be deeply transformed in an eco-socialist fashion (Angus 2016; Malm 2020; Ajl 2021). In this vein, Karl Polanyi's seminal idea of a "double movement" between market forces and non-market forces has been widely used to support the necessity of the state in confronting market forces and implementing a fair Green Deal (Dale 2021).

These results seem to point out the fact that nation-states – or, significantly, any supranational organization able to retain a significant set of "sovereign prerogatives" concerning innovation and industrial policy, funding, and regulation, although currently not existing – are the actors most capable of adequately addressing climate change (vs. private firms and individuals or translational institutions), and therefore the most adequate target of climate activism. Regrettably, the *structural* capacity of states to accomplish a task does not imply that they would automatically play the leading role in the transition to a new techno-social paradigm without further pressure from below by the movements and without redefining their role vis-à-vis society (see section IV). If climate movements are determined to maximize their policy outcome, the ambivalence concerning crucial trade-offs should arguably be minimized.

#### **IV. Democratic Sovereignty as a Framework for Climate Activism**

We are then prompted to ask if a "greening of sovereignty" (Eckersley 2004, 203) is possible in the current circumstances, and if framing the agenda of the movements in terms of sovereignty claims will be helpful to reach their goals. A crucial point here is that when the movements set apart their ambivalence and explicitly advocate for a stronger state, as Eckersley pointed out, they do not seem to conceive of the state

merely as *instrumental* to their goals: a *normative* ideal of “the good state” as “some kind of embodiment of the public virtue or democratically determined public values” emerges as well (Eckersley 2004, 29). Elaborating on this insight concerning a stronger sovereignty-movements partnership, it must be noted that the normative ideal of “the good state” is embedded in a vision of democratic sovereignty and of the state (or its government) as the steward of the “public interest.” The genealogy of this view can be traced back to the modern emergence of territorial national states in Europe between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries, during which territorial sovereigns managed to centralize control over the kingdom “neutralizing” all the “indirect powers” (church, guilds, towns, feudal lordship), causing state power and public power to ultimately coincide and reuniting under a single power a bundle of sovereign prerogatives or capabilities which were previously dispersed in the feudal society (Sassen 1996; Grimm 2015). Through a fragmented and complex process, the concept of sovereignty developed into the concept of an abstract, de-personalized public power (Grimm 2015, 37 – 76) which ultimately took on board instances of popular and democratic control over the political ruler, landing on the “comprehensive regulation of public authority” in modern constitutional states (Grimm 2015, 68). Through this process, the concept of sovereignty came to comprise an ideal of “public good” and “public interest,” which gradually detaches from the ruler’s self-interest and becomes increasingly inclusive of multiple interests within society. In this respect, modern sovereignty establishes the distinction between “public” and “private interest,” both responding to a different notion of “*utility*” (Bobbio 1989, 3). It must be noted that adopting this framework implies that the concept of utility that pertains to firms and individuals as economic agents is ontologically different from the one that normatively governs public power – suggesting a structural inability of private agencies to take care of the collective interest.

In the recent agenda change by movements like XR and FFF, some signs are pointing in the direction of a stronger sovereignty-public interest link. Although they blame politicians for their inaction on climate change, many XR activists do *not*, for that reason, steer away from the state and concentrate instead on individuals and private companies (de Moor et al. 2021). Instead, they assign states and governments a crucial epistemic and political role and ethics. Currently, XR’s three central claims demand that governments “tell the truth,” “act now,” and “create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens’ Assembly on climate and ecological justice,”<sup>5</sup> while the “FFF explicitly demands that politicians ‘listen to the science,’ and ‘follow the Paris agreement’” (de Moor et al. 2021, 622). The overall message seems to be that “the government must act

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<sup>5</sup> See more online: <https://rebellion.global/> (retrieved September 23, 2023).

on what climate scientists say, even if the majority of people are opposed” (Moor et al. 2021, 623). This does not appear to be blind faith in politicians. Rather, activists are possibly skimming the surface of the potential lying in the link between sovereignty and “the public interest.” Neither does it imply the discharge of democratic values. According to the different notions of utility schematized above, democratic governments acting on climate change according to science *even if the majority of people are opposed* would just be “doing their job” – protecting the public interest against an existential menace to the well-being of the political community.

To get an idea of the potential of sovereignty as a “steward of the public interest” in addressing collective action problems like climate change, we might have to look at the way countries, and especially Western democracies (from whom we might have expected a softer response), dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic by implementing unprecedented measures – including mass mobilization, property and personal rights infringements, nationalization, and emergence measures – exceeding by far the demands of climate activists concerning the climate crisis (Malm 2020). In a game theory setting, both climate change and the pandemic can be framed as collective action problems, where free-riding behavior is incentivized, although coordination would benefit all. The pandemic management demonstrated that public authorities, even in democratic countries, can mitigate collective action problems through extensive regulation and (relatively moderate) imposition of their sovereign rule on businesses and property rights in case of emergency. Similarly, states can address the trade-offs in section II by *mediating* conflicting interests and compensating the “losers” of the green transition. Examples like the Yellow Vests Movement in France and the Dutch case of BBB illustrate how governments *could* have accompanied controversial policies with incentives or subsidies to mitigate discontent among working-class and rural communities.

One of the reasons why these measures are still so unpopular is that they clash not only with a three-decade-long neoliberal trend in environmental policymaking (Dent 2022) but also with decades of neoliberal macroeconomics influencing European and global politics, prescribing national competitiveness, austerity measures, privatization, tax cuts, public-private partnership, and a managerial approach to public administration (Davies 2014; Klein 2014, 2019). In the end, to envision a post-neoliberal climate regime, a re-politicization of the climate issue (Swyngedouw 2013) through the conceptual resources of the history of sovereignty seems timely.

One objection against re-affirming the value of sovereignty in the context of climate change must be addressed, namely, why, if we are to reframe the demands of activists in terms of sovereignty, restricting ourselves to the existing nation-states (or, at best, hybrid regional polities such as the EU), and not envisioning a *global sovereign*

instead? Admittedly, if we limit ourselves to the goal of climate mitigation and adaptation in an ideal setting, such a solution could meet benign patterns of optimization of the trade-offs in section II – for example, maximizing the scale and the overall efficacy in envisioning a radical transformation of our techno-economic paradigm. The main counterargument to this objection, however, is simply the state of the art of climate science and the reality of the past thirty years of overall unsatisfactory climate negotiations. Contrary, for example, to Latour’s diagnosis concerning the emergence of a new planetary sovereignty in the current climate regime (Latour 2018), or at least three of the geopolitical scenarios envisioned by Mann and Wainwright (Mann, Wainwright 2018), the restricted timeframe for significant climate action (IPCC 2022) and the past failure of climate negotiations leave hardly any hope for such global sovereign scenarios – given that a *Climate Leviathan* (Mann, Wainwright 2018) can be considered a desirable outcome. Therefore, out of a cautionary principle, given the very limited time left to minimize the effect of the climate catastrophe, we should rather focus on plausible scenarios that do not presuppose the birth of entirely new political actors. However, this is not to exclude the possibility that, as is partially the case of the EU’s Green Deal, macroregional political entities (at least if endowed with a proper set of sovereign prerogatives and a proper self-understanding of their role as mediators of trade-offs and stewards of the public interest) could serve the goal of rapid climate action better than nation-states.

## V. Conclusion

This paper examined the relationship between the goals of the climate movements and state sovereignty in the context of the current GCG paradigm and advanced a novel framing of the targets of the climate movements in terms of a democratic conception of sovereignty. Through a multidisciplinary literary review concerning the movements-state relationship, the paper analyzed the shifting attitude of climate movements towards sovereign entities vis-à-vis their heritage of ambivalence towards state-led measures, paralleled by a similar pro-state turn in GEIs reports and economic theories – nonetheless concluding that ambivalence persists on this issue. The following sections drew on political theory and the history of Western political thought to advance a normative proposal concerning the need to re-frame the agendas of the climate movements in terms of a call for political, democratic sovereignty, which is meant to clarify the existing targets and political goals of the movements and to avoid confusion and inefficacy – as well as better linking the climate cause with subaltern struggles in the Global South. This article advocated for a non-nationalistic, democratic understanding of state sovereignty as crucial for an efficient and fair green transition and for a full comprehension of what is at stake in the agendas of the current

climate movement, while particularly emphasizing the need to revive the distinction between public interest and private gain.

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