

The Role of the State and of Public Policies in Transformation Processes¹

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In Latin America and elsewhere debates and actions addressing possible alternatives to neoliberal and neocolonial policies often assume that a state led by a progressive government can change cultural and socio-economic practices with adequate public policies. These practices are understood to originate in the proposals and struggles that arise in society, but often only the state is seen to be capable of providing continuity to the changing relationships of forces; in Gramsci's words, creating "hegemony, with armed force".

This article aims primarily to contribute to the debate in Latin America, developing a theoretical framework and some hypotheses – both of course produced in Europe and hence to some extent Eurocentric – to understand the difficulties and constraints encountered in the transformation of the state itself and in the development of public policy for achieving far-reaching social change. It begins with a conceptual distinction which might be useful for understanding current circumstances in Latin American and the world, and will go on to develop a historical-materialist theoretical framework, in the tradition of critical theory, in which the state is understood as a social relation. It will end by briefly introducing the concept of the "internationalisation of the state" in order to understand certain dynamics that affect processes of change, and which take place *within and beyond* the national state.

Transition or transformation

I would like to introduce a conceptual distinction important for understanding what we mean when we talk about public policies. When we refer to social and political change, we often use the terms "transition" or "transformation" with no distinction. However, in current debates, *transition* is sometimes understood as a series of strategies and eventually processes of social and political change orchestrated mainly through public policies. This generally involves the creation of a new legal framework which is provided with the necessary funds and identifies the problems in order to establish new political institutions (or redirect existing ones), with the purpose of promoting the changes desired. The problems addressed tend to be the result of the ineffectiveness of the very public policies that are to be changed.

The concept of *transformation*, however, does not focus only on public policies and their structures, but is geared to more comprehensive and profound social change, in various spheres of social life and with various strategies (cf. Geels, 2010, Brand 2012, Brand/Brunnengräber et al. 2013). The fundamental questions here are: which are the players and institutions, the practices and structures, the problems and social relations that must change? How can they be changed through public policy, and with what kind of public policy? What other strategies might be necessary for achieving this?

In the current debate about alternatives, whether in Latin America, Europe or elsewhere, it is the concept of *transition* which prevails. A good example of this are the recent debates over the “Green New Deal” or the “Green Economy”, presented as a solution to the problems of predatory capitalism. These debates are reflected in the documents written for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held in June 2012 (see UNEP, 2009, 2011; European Commission, 2011; for a critical view see also “The tale of the Green Economy”, ALAI, 2011, Salleh, 2013). Most of those who join the debate assume that just with an adequate policy framework, a change of direction towards green growth and a green economy, innovations and the creation of “green” jobs, all the grave environmental problems afflicting the planet will be solved, and at the same time create a win-win situation for companies, employees and nature.

However, it is currently far from certain that the political strategies the green economy proposes will in effect promote a greening of capitalism and how. It is also worth asking what this renewed capitalism would look like. Does it signify partial change not only to a sustainable energy system but also from a centralised to a decentralised energy base, or rather one under the control of the powerful transnational companies? Would it lead to more use of agrofuels, which in the end may foster an even more intense predatory extractivism in many countries? Or will it result in the opposite of a green economy, an intensification of the use of fossil fuels with all their geopolitical and geoeconomic implications?

As the strategies for a green economy mainly focus on public policies in the sense of transition, they do not question the “imperial mode of living” in the centres of capitalism, which depends on and exhausts resources and labour in other parts of the world (Brand/Wissen, 2012). Neither do they question gender or ethnic oppression, which cuts across all class structures. Despite the crisis, the imperial mode of living is still hegemonic in the capitalist centres (and possibly within the middle and upper classes in other societies).

The important point here is that the current debates about the green economy

do not take into account that the previous great transition embarked on, termed sustainable development and launched during the first Rio conference in 1992, has failed. It failed because it underestimated the multiple political, cultural and socio-economic factors which could not be addressed with sustainability policies. A thoroughgoing transformation cannot be reduced to public policy without first asking if – and how – social structures can be changed. Indeed and despite the more or less relative autonomous character of state, public policies are usually an expression of these structures.

The state as a social relation

For a better understanding of the structures that can stand in the way of a profound transformation, the state needs to be understood as a *social relation*, in the tradition of Nicos Poulantzas; but also with reference to Michel Foucault (Poulantzas, 1980; Foucault, 2006; Jessop, 1985; Aronowitz and Bratsis, 2006; Brand and Görg, 2008).³ Basically it is a matter of looking at society as a series of hegemonic social relations – which are not all exclusively capitalist – and as everyday practices that are actively or passively accepted and which are based on relations of power and domination. A critical theory of the state should begin with an analysis of society, not of the state.

The main function of the capitalist state –classist, patriarchal, racist, imperial and post-colonial – is to consolidate the dominant societal relations and give them a certain continuity, although it allows for measured support for moves towards convenient new constellations. Political, cultural and socio-economic reproduction thus functions by taking advantage of conflicts and crises, transforming them into opportunities. A further function of the state – which we can observe currently in Europe quite well – is to intervene in crises, usually in favour of the dominant forces. State apparatuses develop their own ways of working, not independently from society, but neither merely as an instrument of the dominant forces. Historical struggles and developments are inscribed within the state, its legal and material constitution, its internal rules and policies, its modes, priorities and decision-making. Bureaucracies have their own means, incentives and rationale, and have a strong interest in ensuring their own continued existence. The state structure and functioning is selective and usually the social forces consider this selective character in their strategies. Bob Jessop calls this, referring to the work of Nicos Poulantzas, the “strategic selectivity of the state” (see below).

The state is also a battlefield, structured in a particular way, where the different

social and political forces compete as they try to promote their own interests, identities and values and to compromise or to weaken others. Each group aims to have its own interests represent the “general interest” – as we see with dominant factions of capital in powerful countries promoting “competitiveness” as the general interest when it is not – in order for it to be fostered by the state. For this reason also subaltern forces and actors are also found within the state, but in an asymmetrical relationship. Those struggles waged at a distance from the state - social movements which hold that they are “anti-political” for example - might also have some influence on power relations and dominant developments within society and hence on the state.

The state is thus a fundamental factor of societal domination, as it makes the rules and to some extent can also bind the powerful to certain conditions. At the same time, however, the state attempts to concentrate legal, police and financial resources, knowledge and recognition, and capacity for action, and by doing so appropriates the power of ordinary people and weak social organisations. The state claims exclusive competence over many social problems and hinders alternative ways of addressing and processing them.

The concept of the state as a social relation cannot only contemplate power relations. It should also consider the generalised discourses now naturalised in the minds of the majority. This aspect is key to understanding gender relations or racism.

What are public policies?

Bearing in mind the brief analyses presented above, public policies are not (only) an instrument for the action of the state, which would act neutrally. They must be understood in relation to:

- the heterogeneous structures within the state itself;
- the heterogeneous structures of society;
- the functions in reproducing the state itself and society.

Clearly, and against most conceptions in political science, public policies are not an “instrument” of the state, but must be understood as an unstable equilibrium, the result of rivalry between different social and political actors, which always correspond to a particular set of circumstances.

Many factors have a bearing on whether public policies can effectively solve the problems they aim to address. This does not depend only on the measures adopted, but also the social and political structures which formulate them. Here I would like to enlarge upon some aspects in order to better conceptualize public policies.

1. Public policies and existing social structures

A question framed by Claus Offe and Gero Lenhardt in 1977 still seems to me to be an important starting point (acknowledging, with reference to the following quote, that societies are not permeated exclusively by class contradictions and that it is not only the private expropriation of capital gain that is in play): “How do (particular) public policies *arise* (...) from the specific problems of economic and class structures that are based on a private valorisation of capital and ‘free’ wage labour and what functions have [these public policies] in this structure?” (1977: 100).

In other words, a first look at public policies considers existing social structures and how these policies are a complex reflection – or, to be more precise, a condensed articulation - of them. For Offe and Lenhardt, the structural problems of capitalism are articulated as: a) the demands of the social actors which need to be, to a certain degree, fulfilled in order to maintain legitimacy and b) the driving imperative to uphold the process of accumulation. Their argument is interesting here, because the claims and demands translate into inter- and intra-organisational tensions within the state, i.e. in the actions of the political parties, bureaucracies and other actors, all trying to address the problems in their own way.

For Latin America today, we could ask a similar question: how is the accumulation process maintained through extractivism? What are the social demands that promote extractivism and the distribution policies for the surplus these produce? And finally, in contrast, what demands are being formulated against extractivism? In addition, we should also study how the state apparatuses process these demands and imperatives and tries to reproduce a certain legitimacy.

Going beyond Offe and Lenhardt, we could also ask how the state organises its knowledge of the problems to be addressed, as a precondition for formulating public policies. Of course, it is the actors themselves who formulate the demands, but there are other mechanisms (such as reports and statistics, secretariats or commissions), which promote a particular kind of knowledge about the problems

and solutions. For an emancipatory perspective, it is important to understand the contradictions, demands and requirements.

2. The state as a social relation

The state is not a neutral stakeholder that acts “above” society, formulating the general will and solving problems, nor is it the instrument of capital or the colonial powers, as is sometimes thought. I think it is more productive to think of the state as a social relation which for centuries has safeguarded the dominant social relations and their more or less dynamic and crisis-driven development. In fact, the state often actively organises the dominant forces (which are also in a competitive relationship, like the bourgeoisie) and disorganises the weaker and dominated forces. In its structures and through public policies, the state “materially condenses” (Poulantzas, 1980) the contradictions of society, it shapes them so that they become viable and is a permanent attempt to prevent the break up of social cohesion. To carry out any emancipatory project, this fact must be considered: that the structure of the state is a power relation, but also a series of apparatuses whose transformation is necessary. This does not mean embracing the state, but it does mean it is necessary to understand it in order to be able to change it profoundly, and to reorganise power relations – or, more precisely: relationships of forces, discourses and practices - through struggles and democratic and learning processes.

3. The state's role in reproducing the capitalist colonial structure

What is striking about the processes of change in Bolivia and Ecuador, with progressive governments, is that they are having great difficulty changing the structure of the state. The countries' social forces must articulate their interests, values and projects within the same capitalist and post-colonial state as ever, and take action using a structure that forces them to submit to its rules ... and this hampers change.

Marx spoke about capitalist social forms like value and money to throw light on some crucial forms of societal reproduction. In their actions, human beings unconsciously reproduce value. This ‘value’ is based on the separation of producers and the means of production, their need to reproduce themselves through wage labour and the need of capitalists to produce a surplus in competitive conditions, dealing with the demands of the wage earners. The form of value is not only a structural condition, it is also a way of seeing society and acting in it – as a wage

earner and as a capitalist. The relationships of domination and exploitation are not explicit at all times, as they are not, for example, when the workers themselves also are concerned for the economic success of “their” company.

The same occurs with the political form, which is strongly – not exclusively – institutionalised within the state. Structurally, the state reproduces important conditions for societal reproduction, and is a way of dealing with the conflicts that arise. This structure reproduces itself however, through a multitude of actions carried out daily by the staff of the state apparatuses, with their own orientation, knowledge and micro-practices, with their rules and resources; by political parties and lobbyists, by associations and many others. It reproduces and legitimises itself with the support of civil society and the media, where they embrace a specific role for the state in society.

It is important to note that the state reproduces inequalities by guaranteeing private property and recognising certain interests before others, even though this bias is not always clearly visible. As noted above, Poulantzas introduced the concept of the “selectivity” of the state: the structuring of a particular state apparatus - its staff, budget and rules - to show how its attention is more geared to certain problems (private property for example, or competitiveness), and to certain actors and interests (those of the dominant classes, men, white people) than to others. This means that public policies are part of a state structure that is classist and patriarchal, imperial and post-colonial, and likely resistant to progressive political change which stands against dominant structures and processes (while the state can promote other interests and policies quite effectively as we know from the neoliberal era).

4. The state and hegemony

The state and its apparatuses are, then, a heterogeneous whole and a material condensation of specific relationships of forces. In Brazil, for example, a political project for land reform and another for the further industrialisation of agriculture coexist. Not only do they contradict each other in many aspects, but their relationship is asymmetrical. This means that different state apparatuses concentrate particular relationships of forces, in which the agrarian bourgeoisie, the urban population, peasants, landless peasants and others come into play. Public policies are part of a process in itself, the aim of which is to formulate and implement “state projects” (like neoliberalism, which despite “slimming down” the state, was and is a state project and implies, to refer to our example, a tendency towards a further industrialisation of agriculture)

that permeate the various apparatuses with their own logic and tasks. A state project does not develop independently of hegemonic projects in a society, or of those imposed from abroad, such as neoliberalism in Latin America). They are projects which are (ultimately) based on the threat – or actual use - of force, but also on negotiated commitments and on consent. For an emancipatory project to arise then, it would be important to formulate and/or identify the hegemonic projects, which are possible, already existing, or in construction. These hegemonic projects can still be emancipatory and can be many at any one time, in a world in which many worlds fit.. State projects – its structures and its public policies – cannot be independent of the projects formulated by society.

For our discussion, it is important to observe therefore that a certain absence of coherence often found in public policy is not a political problem in suggesting that the fundamental actors are not able to reach agreement. *The lack of coherence is an indicator of the lack of hegemony*, in other words, the inability of one power bloc to lead the dominant patterns of the organisation of society. Only when a hegemonic project exists in society can this be translated into one or several state projects. This is an important condition for emancipatory strategies. Under hegemony, i.e. broadly accepted and viable conditions of capitalist development, it is more difficult to formulate alternatives than in a constellation where the dominant project is already contested. This poses different and important questions concerning the current model of resource extractivism and possible alternatives.

Hegemony however does not imply the absence of conflict or debate, nor of domination and power. In my view, hegemony is a particular constellation in which the main actors are adequately represented in the political structures and can reproduce themselves materially, while also reproducing their identities. An emancipatory perspective of hegemony should be much more inclusive than the capitalist hegemony.

5. Public policies and adequate knowledge of society

State officials – and this is clearly visible in the processes of change in Latin America – tend to act as if they had a sufficiently accurate knowledge of the problems, actors and other issues, that public policies address. But their perspective is limited: developing public policy is not merely a technical process. The state has to be organised to get a solid grasp of the problems and the social structures that have to be changed. The neoliberal project looked to neoclassical knowledge and

chose to discover it through the state itself, through private advisers, companies, etc. (Lander, 2006).

Emancipatory public policies are also in charge of organising, very carefully and non-hierarchically, this form of developing knowledge about society; its problems, its demands, interests, values, etc. The danger lies in the state apparatuses continuing to think that they already have enough knowledge about the problems, wishes, interests of society and reasons for social conflicts. This dominant perspective is one of the reasons –apart from any imposed interests and the self-interest of the bureaucracy – why many public policies are not effective. In the end they reproduce an authoritarian political attitude and a view that separates the state from society.

The internationalisation of the state

One aspect which seems to me to be greatly underestimated in the debates in the Andean region and in political practices, is the fact that not only the economy but also the state are internationalised. In other words, the demands of the world market, such as extractivism, are *written into* state structures and public policies. Furthermore, international political structures also have the character of a state (Brand and Görg, 2008).

The anti-neoliberal policies of the progressive Latin American governments reconstitute a certain “relative autonomy” of the state, which for example strengthens its economic base through tax collection. Formally, this occurs at the national level. So while social forces and neoliberal economic and political thinking may change certain economic and social relations and certain ways of thinking, progressive distributive policies are based ultimately on a certain integration into the world market. This means that the intensification of extractivism is profoundly inscribed into the structures of the state itself and even, end up providing greater room for political manoeuvring and greater legitimacy to the progressive governments in question.

What I want to emphasise here regarding public policy is that the internationalised state is reproducing this same model; in other words, it is fostering the conditions for the commodification and industrialisation of nature on various scales (on the international scale, the actors are the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the UN Framework Agreement on Climate Change, etc.).

The political consequence is that for an emancipatory project to prosper, we

need alternative public policies both on the national and international scale, simultaneously. And if the state is a social relation, we need to work at the same time on profound changes in cultural and socio-economic relations, modes of production and of living, societal discourses and power relations or relationship of forces, respectively. We need experienced orientations about the meaning of *Buen Vivir* and about what is “rational” and “plausible”. This opens up an enormous array of fields of struggle which must be faced for the transformation of societies that go far beyond the promise of a transition achieved through public policies.

Notes

1. This text results from a lecture given in Quito in April 2011. Therefore, references are scarce.
2. Chair of International Politics at the University of Vienna. Brand works on critical and especially state and governance theory, global political economy, resource and environmental politics, and on critiques of neoliberal globalisation. He was a member of the “Growth, Well-Being, Quality of Life” Expert Commission of the German parliament (January 2011-April 2013), is a member of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and on the Scientific Council of Attac Germany.
3. Again, for the purpose of the lecture in Quito I referred to theoretical debates in Europe and acknowledged that they might contribute some elements for understanding aspects of actual problems of transformation in Latin America. I did not want to deny the rich debate on the state and heterogeneous societies in Latin America.

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