25. The state in the Anthropocene Daniel Hausknost

INTRODUCTION: THE STATE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

The state is the ultimate anthropogenic structure. Since its emergence in Mesopotamia more than 5,000 years ago, it has been the institutional fabric that conditions and stabilises social order (Hay and Lister, 2022). In so doing, it is – and has always been – at the very centre of any society's metabolism with nature¹: it structures, mediates, and directs the flows of matter and energy that enter and leave its territory and that define the relations between the people populating it, as well as between them and the external world. Through the ages, states have been concerned with the sourcing, channelling, distribution, and strategic deployment of material and energy resources in one way or another. From the ancient empires of Egypt, Rome, and the Hellenic world to the modern day, states have relied, for their survival, on the securing and maintenance of a reliable domestic production and external provision of energy and critical resources, for example in the form of staple food and fodder, timber, and somatic energy (i.e., human labour and draught animal power) (Bang and Scheidel, 2013; Smil, 2017). The state as a social relation has therefore always been concomitant with a historically and geographically specific configuration of society-nature relations.

The *modern* state is unique in that it co-evolved with a global capitalist economy² that has been based on a dynamically expanding social metabolism with nature from the outset (Fischer-Kowalski et al., 2014; Hausknost, 2017; Pellizzoni, this volume). During the eighteenth century, the sociometabolic regime characterising European economies started to be dominated by fossil energy carriers that were increasingly used to convert thermal energy into kinetic energy in steam engines – a sociotechnical revolution that changed not only the deep structures of societies but also the very nature of the state and ultimately the surface of the planet and even its geological composition (Smil, 2017; Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). The modern state and the Anthropocene are inseparably intertwined in that the state facilitated, promoted, and benefited from the dynamic expansion of the fossil energy system that lies at the heart of contemporary societies. But while the modern state has always been involved to some extent in the facilitation and channelling of material and energy flows, it was with some

¹ The concept of social metabolism refers to the flows of energy and matter that occur between societies and nature and that are characteristic of a society's political economy. It is usually traced back to the famous remark by Karl Marx in *Capital* that the metabolism between man and nature is controlled through the labour process (Marx, 2004, 238). In recent years, it has become the conceptual backbone of the interdisciplinary field of social ecology, which studies the historically and geographically variable relationship of societies with nature.

² I concur with Immanuel Wallerstein (2011) that capitalism began to transform the world as early as the sixteenth century and that, hence, the modern state co-evolved with capitalism. All resulting secular state forms are derivatives of that co-evolutionary process, including state socialism as its dialectic other.

delay that it took on a gradually stronger role in the governance of environmental conditions on its territory. Initially, at least, these efforts to implement some standards of public health and environmental safety in response to the escalating industrialisation of society were instrumental to the state's function of securing the reproduction of its population and thus of its critical workforce and military capacity. This original environmental management function of the state was – and arguably still is to an important extent – deeply associated with what Foucault (2008) termed *biopolitics*.

It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the then democratic Westerntype nation-state began to be pressured by social movements to take on a stronger responsibility for the environmental conditions within its territory, and for the ecological state of the planet more generally (Dryzek et al., 2003). This came after a phase of rapid oil-based sociometabolic expansion, termed the 'Great Acceleration', had started to leave its mark on the natural lifeworld of citizens, with phenomena like forest dieback, poisoned rivers, smog, and unsafe drinking water increasingly beclouding the general sense of progress and improvement (Steffen et al., 2015). Environmental concerns entered the political agenda of modern representative democracies around the 1970s, and the management of environmental burdens was successively integrated into the institutional architecture of states through the establishment of environmental ministries and agencies, framework environmental laws, and specialised legal and expert bodies (Duit et al., 2016). Politically, 'ecology' became an empty signifier capturing various societal visions and demands that aimed at overcoming the inherent destructiveness of industrialism and its instrumental form of reason. It also strove for a new type of (often expressly post-capitalist) society that is at peace with nature and (by implication) with itself (see Griffin and Revill, this volume). Green movements and parties came to epitomise a new emancipatory project to liberate modernity (and the modern subject) from its toxic relationship with technology and capital (Hayward, 1992; Doyle and Doherty, 2006). The scope of the emerging green project was planetary and all-encompassing; at its core, it was not (just) about protecting citizens from environmental harm, but about establishing an entirely new societal relationship with nature, which included the need to transform the state (Eckersley, 2004), democracy (Morrison, 1996; Schlosberg et al., 2019), and the very concept and practice of citizenship (Dobson, 2003). Unsurprisingly, however, advanced industrial states did not live up to the green challenge. They sidelined it by incorporating only one carefully dissected part into their functional structures: the management of environmental risks and burdens by way of an 'ecological modernisation' of capitalism (Mol et al., 2010). In adding this new layer to its repertoire of functions, the Western democratic welfare state evolved into what has been termed the 'environmental state': a state capable not only of mitigating social and distributive tensions through its welfare institutions, but also of managing some of the environmental 'externalities' of industrial wealth creation that had started to threaten the well-being of its citizens (Meadowcroft, 2005; Gough, 2016).

In what follows, I first assess the environmental performance of modern democratic states, based on an analytic distinction between 'lifeworld' and 'system' sustainability (next section). Thereafter, I revisit prevalent explanations of the state's failure to ensure systemic sustainability, including critical-materialist, functionalist, and legitimationist literatures. I then complement these explanatory strategies with a social-constructivist explanation that is geared towards the structural reactivity of the state, that is, the state's propensity to deny authorship of unpalatable social facts and to construct external sources of facticity.

THE SYSTEMIC UNSUSTAINABILITY OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL STATE

The performance of these newly emerged environmental states has been highly ambivalent and selective from the beginning. While in these states, the 'management of environmental problems [has] become an irreducible element of what governments actually do' (Duit et al., 2016, 6); an assessment of their performance depends on what counts as an 'environmental problem' and its successful 'management' in the first place. Most notably, there appears to be a rift between two categories of 'problems': those that are directly perceptible in the lifeworld of citizens and are resolvable without challenging deep socioeconomic structures and those that pertain to the protection of the earth system more generally, are not immediately perceptible as problems to citizens and require deep structural transformations. The first category comprises problems like smog and local air pollution, water quality, the industrial pollution of rivers, the regulation of toxic substances, food safety, domestic forest dieback, and the protection of nature for recreational purposes. The second category of problems relates to the stabilisation of several dimensions of the earth system, including the climate and key biogeochemical cycles within margins that should ensure the long-term habitability of the planet for humans and ideally avert the socioeconomic collapse of contemporary societies. Elsewhere, I suggested referring to the first category as problems of 'lifeworld sustainability' (LWS) to highlight their rootedness in the aspiration of citizens to live a materially prosperous and convenient life within a safe and enjoyable environment (Hausknost, 2020). The second category of problems I suggested pertains to the realm of 'system sustainability' (SYS), which refers to the 'objective' conditions of the earth system and the sustainability criteria that can be derived from them. One way of doing so is the definition of 'planetary boundaries' within which the human metabolism with nature would need to be embedded in order to define an ecologically 'safe operating space for humanity' (Rockström et al., 2009). In distinction to SYS, the notion of LWS is meant to emphasise the observation that citizens of advanced capitalist democracies tend to expect their governments to create, protect, and sustain a condition of their lifeworld that is clean and safe, but from an earth system perspective is proven to be unsustainable (Blühdorn, 2007). While SYS refers to a scientifically objectified 'safe operating space' humanity must secure for itself in the Anthropocene through balancing earth system parameters, LWS can be said to refer to the politically more salient desire to secure a 'safe and enjoyable lifeworld' for modern democratic citizens. Both SYS and LWS are two dimensions of sustainability understood as 'the capacity to continue a desired condition or process, social or ecological' (Tainter, 2006, 92). This definition of sustainability allows one to grasp the socially constructed nature of any notion of sustainability as a desire to continue a certain 'condition or process'. The two dimensions reflect different kinds of desires, however: one relating to the lifeworld as the citizens' 'fundamental and paramount reality' (Schütz and Luckmann, 1973, 3), and the other relating to the scientific abstraction of the 'earth system' as a symbolic representation of future states of the lifeworld. For the contemporary state, LWS is by far the more relevant category, as it is directly linked to acute problems of power, legitimacy, and state functionality (as will be elaborated below).

Although the long-term survivability of contemporary civilisations and hence the modern state itself, is dependent on the achievement of SYS, curiously, the environmental state has always and consistently put its focus on LWS. From the very beginning of environmental policymaking, states have focused on those environmental problems that relate to the lifeworld

of citizens and could be solved without obstructing other critical lifeworld qualities like consumer choice and material prosperity. This focus on pollution control and the management of immediate environmental risks in polities of the Global North had the ironic effect of an absolute decoupling of LWS from SYS: advanced consumer democracies became increasingly clean and environmentally refurbished while at the same time exhibiting an ever-greater ecological footprint in terms of energy use, greenhouse gas emissions, and resource consumption. Their negative impact on the earth system continued to grow or stabilised at a dramatically unsustainable level, while the lifeworld of the average citizen became 'greener' and healthier. At the same time, the *absolute decoupling* of economic activity from the earth system that would be required for the advancement of SYS remained an illusion (Schandl et al., 2018; Haberl et al., 2020). Indeed, the reliance of high-income countries on unsustainable external resource inputs increased over time and continues to exhibit an 'imperialist' pattern (Brand and Wissen, 2018): the local environment is saved through an ever-higher reliance on external inputs of resources. In the case of biomass imports, this 'growing societal disconnect from domestic ecological productivity enables a domestic conservation of ecosystems while satisfying growing demand' (Dorninger et al., 2021, 1). This suggests that LWS is (and arguably has always been) achieved at the expense of SYS (Lessenich, 2019b). To use a stark metaphor, citizens of environmental states live cosily like embryos in a womb that is 'telecoupled' (Lenschow et al., 2016) with the outside world through the umbilical cord of world trade, which supplies them with unsustainable levels of energy and natural resources. The high quality of the lifeworld in environmental states is sustained in that, for example, forests for soybean and palm oil production are burnt down somewhere else, the mining for rare minerals needed in electric vehicles and electronic gadgets takes place somewhere far away (Giljum et al., 2022) and the excessive emissions of greenhouse gases vanish from the lifeworld into the atmosphere.

Now that the climate crisis is becoming ever more acute in the Global North, the effects of systemic unsustainability are beginning to haunt the lifeworld of high-income countries: sustained droughts are plaguing countries like Italy and France, infernal forest fires return every year to destroy vast areas in ever more countries, floods and extreme weather destroy crops, and many countries are beginning to face persistent drops in groundwater levels and permanent shifts in precipitation patterns. Thus, the failure to achieve SYS is beginning to jeopardise the LWS of the Global North and beyond. This time, however, the state does not have the option to respond through pollution control and environmental management but would need to shift its focus to halting the rapid earth system decay. The pressure is on the state to evolve from an *environmental* state into a *transformational* state that accepts as its main purpose the transformation of society-nature relations to conform with the requirements of earth system sustainability (SYS). This, however, might be a task the state is structurally unable to perform. In other words, there might be a structural barrier akin to a glass ceiling to transformation (Hausknost, 2020) that locks the modern state into functions that allow for environmental reform and climate adaptation while inhibiting the abdication of the historical trajectory of economic growth and sociometabolic expansion. Whereas the environmental state as a guardian of domestic lifeworld sustainability can be regarded as a success, we are currently witnessing evidence of fundamental transformative state failure around the globe.

PREVALENT EXPLANATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE STATE FAILURE

Why, then, are environmental states seemingly unable to redirect their focus on the transformation of societies towards SYS, which may be a precondition of their own longer-term survival? What are the forces and mechanisms that keep states within certain patterns of environmental management that do not sufficiently engage in the substantive transformation of energy and material flows, consumption and mobility patterns, and the institutional structures that govern the economy? There are three broad categories of answers to these questions in the literature on the state: *critical-materialist, functionalist,* and *legitimationist*.

In the wake of the Marxist tradition, critical-materialist accounts privilege the concepts of power and social struggle as explanatory variables to determine the transformative capacities of the state. Those following classical Marxist reasoning regard the modern state as an instrument of the ruling (capitalist) class to promote its interests in capital accumulation and hence economic growth. The state, in this view, is inherently capitalist and inherently instrumental to capitalist interests. To the extent that a socio-ecological transformation requires the active abdication of economic growth, the state cannot be an agent, promoter, or even neutral arbiter of any such programme, but will continue to resist it. It lures the public into programmes of green growth and ecological modernisation that promise a more sustainable form of capitalism. The more prevalent current of critical-materialist thinking today, however, builds on a different conception of the state, which does not conceive of the state as intrinsically tied to capitalist interests, but as a strategic site traversed by social struggles, which shift the bounds of the possible in path-dependent but contingent ways (cf. Jessop, 2016). Following Poulantzas (2014, 128 f.), the state is thought of as the 'material condensation' of a relationship of forces and therefore as a field whose structure is historically contingent to some extent. Power here is understood in Gramscian terms of hegemony as domination by consensus. Capitalism does not rule because it has managed to erect an inherently capitalist state, but because it has managed to 'win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci, 2007, 244) through hegemonic operations in civil society. The capitalist hegemony is deeply infused into the state, but it can, in principle, be supplanted by something else. Thus, Robyn Eckersley (2021, 253) suggests that for the necessary transformation to emerge, the 'culturally hegemonic understanding of growth as a necessity' that fixates the state's reliance on an expansive and thus unsustainable economic system could be 'loosen[ed] and dislodge[d]' by a 'counter-hegemonic and more reflexive understanding of growth and development'.

In principle, therefore, there is no reason, according to the critical-materialist view, to rule out the emergence of a state that is functionally orientated towards systemic sustainability and based on a steady-state economic system that first needs to go through a phase of deliberate degrowth. All it needs, as it were, is the formation of a promising grassroots movement to 'prefigure' (Raekstad and Gradin, 2020) the desired degrowth society on the ground (and thus in the lifeworld of citizens) and to 'construct a counter-hegemony that reorders commonsenses' (D'Alisa and Kallis, 2020, 6). The resulting socio-ecological hegemony would gain power within the state and ultimately *become* it in the Gramscian sense of an integral state that comprises civil society and the formal political institutions of the state. Rather curiously, however, this understanding renders the state a *neutral* concept that may be filled with whatever content (and respective functions) the historically contingent hegemony requires – there is no *inherent* functional constraint in the concept of the state that would work as a selector towards what types of hegemonic blocs are *at all* compatible with the notion of the (democratic) state itself. The state, in this view, is not ontologically presupposed, but the *effect* of hegemony.

Functionalist explanations of transformative state failure, on the other hand, are highly sceptical of conceptions of the state as a mere incarnation of hegemonic projects. They argue that the modern state historically has accumulated a growing number of functions (or 'imperatives') that could not easily be undone or neglected even under post-capitalist conditions. Some of these functions are part and parcel of the very notion of statehood and would need to be observed in any conceivable form of state. State actors tend to protect the stability of the state (and thus of social order) by prioritising the fulfilment of core state functions over actions that might undermine them. Examples of state functions are external defence, internal order, the provision of social welfare, democratic legitimation, and the raising of state revenue to finance other state functions (cf. Skocpol, 1979; Dryzek et al., 2003). The very point of the functionalist argument is that *no matter who is in charge*, and no matter which ideology becomes hegemonic, the political options of governments will always be constrained to some extent by functional necessities of the state qua state. Most notably in our case, it has been argued that the sustenance of the modern democratic state's welfare function depends critically on the sustenance of 'taxable economic activity' (Bailey, 2020, 6, original emphasis) and thus on economic growth. While this functional constraint can also be found in Marxist literature (e.g., Offe, 1984), the core of the functional explanation goes further by stressing that *any* conceivable (modern, secular, democratic) state would arguably depend on a highly dynamic economic base to fund its core functions. The need to overcome this constraint has led to a burgeoning literature on proposals for 'sustainable welfare' and an 'eco-social state' that is supposed to fulfil criteria of SYS while keeping high levels of social welfare (Berg and Saikkonen, 2019; Koch, 2021; Gough, 2022). In an attempt to overcome growth-dependence, proponents of the eco-social state typically subscribe to a needs-based approach, in which the state defines 'floors' and 'ceilings' to consumption, wealth, and income (Gough, 2022). The state then takes on the (new) function of a guarantor of floors and guardian of ceilings. The general idea is that the state secures a sustainable corridor for human flourishing within planetary boundaries by capping excess wealth and consumption and guaranteeing the required 'provisioning systems' for basic need fulfilment (Fanning et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2021). So far, however, this literature has not made a convincing case for how the eco-social state would indeed be able to sustain itself without relying on a growing economy. How, that is, can the floors be guaranteed in the long run and on a socially acceptable level that indeed allows for human flourishing rather than languishing? How, to put it another way, does the eco-social state deal with yet another functional constraint that may be intimately tied to both the welfare and the growth functions – the imperative of legitimation, that is, the functional necessity for the democratic state to secure substantive public allegiance to state authority and to subject governmental policy to democratic control?

Hence and finally, the legitimationist explanation of transformative state failure builds on the observation that governmental policy that detrimentally impinges on the established standards of consumer choice, motorised mobility, open-ended income opportunities, and individualised self-actualisation fails to gather sufficient public support. To the extent that a transformation towards SYS requires the institutionalisation of a perspective of sufficiency, frugality, and relinquishment, it becomes, first and foremost, a legitimation problem for the state. There seems to be little appetite among citizens of rich countries to let go of accomplished sociometabolic privileges and liberties. A society that was orientated towards keeping within planetary boundaries rather than towards the continued transgression of technological and economic bounds would be perceived by many as constraining and oppressive. Advocates of the legitimationist account like Ingolfur Blühdorn (2007, 2013) refuse to reduce this lack of enthusiasm for an eco-social state to the hegemonic power of capitalism. He does not accept the view that citizens of rich capitalist nations only need to be emancipated from their adherence to consumerist lifestyles to embrace the greater good of socio-ecological sufficiency and 'real democracy' (cf. Asara et al., 2013). Rather, Blühdorn argues, democracy itself has turned 'into a powerful tool for the prevailing politics of unsustainability' (2020, 40) in that it is used by citizens to protect and fight for their *unsustainable* ways of life while expecting from the state to deal with the climate crisis in a way that does not challenge their convenient lifeworld. An even more unsettling idea is that democracy itself may be (and has always been) structurally dependent on the appropriation of external resources and the externalisation of burdens and emissions to keep citizens content and to mitigate social conflicts (Lessenich, 2019a). From this perspective, it may be difficult or even impossible to 'decouple' democracy from systemic unsustainability without undermining the very mechanisms of 'dynamic selfstabilisation' that engender its sociological legitimacy (Rosa et al., 2017).

STRUCTURAL REACTIVITY: A SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIVIST EXPLANATION FOR THE LIMITATIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL STATE

Arguably, all three explanatory dimensions contribute important insights into the transformative shortcomings of the environmental state. It is evident that power relations, established state imperatives, and legitimation problems all play an important role in keeping the state from tackling the deep and structural transformations required for achieving SYS.

There is, however, a fourth angle that may add another layer of explanation by fusing the functionalist and legitimationist views. This angle privileges the structural reactiveness of any representative political order (democratic or otherwise) as a key explanatory mechanism (Tănăsescu, this volume). It builds on the observation that it makes a fundamental difference, politically speaking, whether an unpalatable social fact (for instance, an increase in energy prices or a shortage of critical commodities) is generated by a representative body (such as a government) or in an external, independent sphere like the world market or 'nature'. The simple point is that a government can be held accountable for the facts it authors whereas external sources of reality cannot: they function as black boxes out of which facts emanate that in turn become the reified objects of governmental action. A carbon tax issued by a government willing to combat climate change is an instantly political, contestable, and purposive fact that is marked by *contingency* precisely because it is authored by accountable actors who have the authority to impose facts on the public. It is contingent because it needs to be justified in order to be accepted as a fact: otherwise, it can be resisted, rejected, and ultimately revoked. A price hike emanating out of the world market (viz. the recent energy and inflation crisis) or a shortage of water due to persistent droughts have a different status of 'reality': they are reified 'external and coercive fact[s]' in the sense of being 'taken for granted' precisely because they cannot be traced back to a wilful authority that can be held accountable (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, 59; Berger, 1967, 24). The tripling of gas prices due to geopolitical

perturbations (as experienced in 2022) may thus be grudgingly accepted by the public, while a 5 percent increase due to a wilful governmental interaction may well trigger public unrest.

What may sound like a truism or a rather obvious observation, in fact, reveals a deeper logic of reality construction in representative systems. Rather than being a dyadic, that is, dichotomic relationship between the represented and a representative body, representation is always ultimately a *triadic*, that is, a *triangular* relationship, where the third element functions as an external source of reality (Simmel, 1992; Nooteboom, 2006). Representation can only function stably to the extent that it is based on an external source of reality that is epistemically separated from the representative relation itself so that it provides reified facts that the representing instance is then able to process (Hausknost, 2023). Governments, therefore, have very limited scope for authoring reality as such (the typical exception being economic reconstruction after a war). Rather, they tend to relegate authorship of reality into external spheres like 'the market' in order to present themselves as the competent managers of facts that are ontologically cleansed of any trace of contingency. It is important to note that states play an important role in actively constructing and maintaining these 'external sources' of reality (e.g., markets), which they need to produce social objectivity. Representation is ultimately the business of managing external facts that structure the common reality of the representative order. The modern representative state, from this perspective, co-evolved with the capitalist market economy in a process of functional adaptation: the market became the ideal self-sustaining, dynamic, and opaque source of facticity upon which a stable representative order (exclusive at first, democratic later) emerged. Modern representative order conforms to a perfectly triangular architecture of reality: a dynamic black box churning out facts as the apex and the parliamentary system of representatives and represented processing these facts at the base. Incidentally, it is this very triangular nature of political order that constitutes the original meaning of the ancient Greek term hegemony (*hēgemonia*), as found in the works of Thucydides and Herodotus. The notion 'was tied to the idea of a league, whose members were in principle equal, raising one of their number to direct them all for a given purpose' (Anderson, 2017, 1). What formed the league of city-states was their common exposure to an external threat (the looming Persian invasion) that defined a common purpose and provided the precondition for raising one of the equals to lead them all.

The implications of these considerations for the (environmental) state's transformative capacities are grave: first, the structural reactiveness of the representative state means that it is much more in line with its functional logic to *manage* the rapidly worsening but epistemically 'external' reality of the climate crisis than to *prevent* the crisis by taking on authorship of an unpalatable reality. Governments take responsive action in relation to the politically salient problems of the lifeworld but face difficulties burdening the current lifeworld with unpopular facts to prevent future hardship. This functional mechanism goes deeper than the infamous electoral short-termism: it is a fundamental feature of representation itself. With the climate crisis rapidly encroaching on the lifeworlds of citizens in environmental states, this cycle might well pick up dynamism and the scope for transformative state action might expand to some extent; but the functional logic will remain that states will be unlikely to further burden their citizens' lifeworlds for the sake of future sustainability unless they turn into complete crisis mode and thus into a state of emergency that suspends the democratic dimension of representation (Wainwright and Mann, 2018; Bruun, this volume). Secondly, there is the fundamental problem that the *external reality machine* (as it were) is at the same time the key stabilising mechanism of the state and the source of its very unsustainability. The fact-producing

engine of the capitalist market has always been sociometabolically expansive, fossil-fuelled, and ecologically unsustainable. To 're-embed' it into the functional boundaries of the earth system would mean destroying its dynamism and thus its functionality as the stabilising mechanism of the representative order. Even if a popular majority supported an eco-social 'counter-hegemonic' project, the prospect of this project resulting in a stable political order is dim precisely because any such project would require that the formerly opaque mechanisms of external reality generation through an unsustainable world market would need to be internalised and subjected to transparent (political) will-formation. The prospective eco-social hegemonic project would thus inherently fail to become 'hegemonic' in the original sense of the term: it would lack an external source of reality welding the bond of representation.

CONCLUSION

This chapter started with the observation that the state has always played a pivotal role in organising and maintaining the social metabolism with nature and thus in structuring societynature relations. This could take the form of the imperial appropriation and extraction of resources and labour or the construction and maintenance of markets, their institutionalisation, and sometimes their violent imposition on other societies. If 'sustainability' was a concern, then it was the sustainability of the state, for which flows of matter and energy had to be mobilised, channelled and secured. Only very late in its 5,000-year-long history was the state confronted with demands to take care of the environmental conditions of its own territory and, most recently, of the conditions of the planetary biosphere as a whole. These new tasks led to the emergence of what has been termed the environmental state in the 1970s. However, as this chapter showed, the environmental state of the Global North tended to these tasks in a highly selective manner that yielded some success on the ground but so far failed to transform the unsustainable social metabolism of modern capitalist societies.

As a concept to orient human action, the Anthropocene not only marks a new era of human impact on the planet but also the end of a dualistic understanding of society-nature relations. Of course, societies have always been profoundly enmeshed in nature and dependent upon the flows of natural resources and energy they require to maintain their specific negentropic position within thermodynamic order (Schrödinger, 2017). Until recently, however, states could content themselves with securing these resources for the purpose of their self-preservation. Now, the Anthropocene symbolises a shift that challenges this linear and dualistic understanding of a functional dependence of an 'inside' (a state) from an 'outside' (the natural world, from where resources are appropriated). The imperative of self-preservation no longer commands states simply to secure external resources, but to preserve them and to change society's position within the thermodynamic order: in order to survive, societies must find a new equilibrium on a lower energetic level. This is an outrageous demand on the state: never in history have states had the function to reduce their societies' metabolic level; being a state had hitherto meant to look upwards and onwards in terms of resources and energy.

The chapter has argued that the modern state is having great difficulties executing this shift. The demand on the state to accept the earth system as a functional authority setting the bounds of the state's activities may indeed contradict the very nature of the state itself. Rich states have been astonishingly successful in reforming and improving their domestic environmental conditions, but to recalibrate their own sociometabolic profile according to specifications

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provided by earth system science may undermine the contemporary state's stability on several levels, not least that of political legitimacy. The transformative state, the eco-social state, the green state, or the sustainable state: these are normative objectives that exhibit a structural break with the logic of the modern state, which may prove more difficult to surmount than normative state theorists are willing to concede. The considerations presented in this chapter suggest that the capitalist democratic state will be able to intensify its transformative action only to the extent that the lifeworld of its citizens is sliding into a mode of crisis. Even then, however, the priorities of state action may remain with the short-term improvement of lifeworld conditions and the maintenance of capital accumulation, which may both contradict the very requirements of systemic sustainability.