

The Environmental State

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Article Summary

An environmental state is the constellation of public institutions that reshape production, consumption, and daily life to prevent long-term ecological harm and secure “environmental welfare,” understood as the material and social conditions needed to sustain life. We review contributions to this understanding made by environmental historians, political theorists, and political scientists, and argue that environmental sociologists have largely relegated the state to analytically secondary status, downstream of capitalist and market dynamics. Extending calls Fred Buttel made a quarter century ago, we propose invigorating sociological study of environmental states by drawing on political-sociological insights from welfare-state theory to explain the provision of environmental rights and the distribution of environmental “goods” and “bads”; developmental-state theory to help explain how and why states reorganize economic production in service of environmental welfare; world-polity research and institutional theory

more broadly to understand the cause and consequences of the diffusion of environmental regulatory and developmental institutions; and cultural sociology to reveal how meanings linked to “nature” structure environmental statecraft. We conclude with a FAQ section that answers several common inquiries we’ve encountered about environmental states.

Keywords

Environmental state, political sociology, environmental welfare, environmental regulation, environmental policy

Introduction

The environmental state “encompasses all governmental organizations and institutions that aim to reorganize production, consumption, and other forms of human activity in ways that try to minimize long-term ecological degradation and that attempt to uphold environmental rights, understood broadly as entitlements to a life-supporting natural environment for present and future generations. The policy focus of environmental states, in other words, is on the provision of environmental welfare, defined as the set of biophysical and social conditions required to support life and livelihoods into the imagined future” (Rea and Frickel 2023, 256). Despite its centrality to modern governance and statecraft (Duit et al. 2016), however, the environmental state has received scant attention from sociologists and has generally been treated skeptically. Where some see a set of regulatory institutions in retreat and increasingly buttressed by non-governmental entities (A. P. J. Mol 2016), others see a set of captured bureaucratic elements more deeply beholden to business interests and capitalists than to environmental protection (Schnaiberg et al. 2002). Slowly, however, the environmental state is becoming more central to

sociological inquiry, as scholars unearth ways that even loosely neoliberal reforms and market-oriented governance schemes remain tightly coupled to state regulation (Tim Bartley 2018; Distelhorst et al. 2015; Rea 2017; S. K. Vogel 1996); as researchers come to appreciate remarkable state-led achievements of environmental protection and regulation in many contexts (Keiser and Shapiro 2019; Meadowcroft 2023; Ross et al. 2012; Rudel 2019, 2023; Silva-Muller forthcoming); as scholars have drawn out the parallels between the development of social welfare protections and environmental protections (Gough 2016; Meadowcroft 2005); as green industrial policy has grown increasingly prominent around the world (Allan and Nahm 2025; Block et al. 2024; Meckling and Nahm 2018), and as international climate negotiations and global-environmental networks more broadly have thrust environmental issues centrally into national-level politics and statecraft (Duit et al. 2016; Frank et al. 2000; Gray and Cointet 2023; Hironaka 2014). This entry reviews several intellectual lineages that have contributed to contemporary sociological understandings of the environmental state, discuss important insights we argue ought to be incorporated more centrally from political and cultural sociology, and answer several frequently asked questions about environmental states.

Existing Understandings of the Environmental State

If the environmental state as an object of explicit study has remained uncommon in social science and especially sociology, the state as a central component of environmental governance has always lurked in the conceptual and empirical background. Environmental historians, political theorists, political scientists, and sociologists have all retained the state as a central – if not always explicit – feature of their analyses. Their empirical engagements with elements of the environmental state (e.g., environmental ministries and agencies) and theoretical engagements

with state theory more broadly (e.g., in debates over state autonomy) lay the intellectual foundations that contemporary theories of the environmental state can build upon.

Environmental History

More than any other field, environmental historians have laid down the earliest and most robust conceptual girders for sociological approaches to environmental states. Many historical accounts document the development of state institutions for regulating natural resource use and protecting human health, typically in response to harms to people and to industry in pre-regulatory contexts. Hayes (1999, 2009), for instance, details the emergence of the early environmental bureaucracy in the United States, emphasizing the role of state-centric, Progressive Era reforms focused on rationalism, the “right use” of resources, and technocracy to address problems of overexploitation of timber, fish, and other natural resources. Worster (1992, 2004) orients scholarly attention to the role of the state in infrastructural development in the name of resource control and capitalist growth. Extending Hays’ (1989) later work on the mid-twentieth century environmental movement, revisionist histories like Gottlieb’s *Forcing the Spring* (2005) call attention to the role of diverse environmental movements in shaping state reactions to material environmental problems, both in the mid-twentieth century construction of an environmental bureaucracy focused on regulating industrial pollution, and also earlier, during the Progressive Era formation of state organizations like the U.S. Forest Service focused on natural resource management.

Historians also foreground the role of ideas in shaping environmental governance and state development. Cronan (1996), for example, details how problematic notions of “wilderness” have shaped U.S. environmental politics and statecraft – ideas that have shaped environmental policy in other frontier and settler colonial states (Brockington 2002; De Andrade Franco and

Augusto Drummond 2008; Death 2016b; Lines and Lines 1991). Working in what sociologists might label as a Weberian tradition, Stoll (2015) revises White's (1967) foundational thesis on the links between Christian notions of dominion and ecological destruction to show how protestant values shaped early American environmental statecraft, often in fundamentally progressive ways. Notably, Stoll (2015) calls into question the oft-emphasized influence of transcendentalist thinkers like Henry David Thoreau, focusing instead on, for example, the Presbyterian values of many Progressive Era environmental bureaucrats and reformers who played central roles in crafting the U.S. national park system among other early features of the environmental state.

Conceptual foundations for sociological environmental state theory extend beyond the environmental history of the United States. Comparative work and studies grounded in other national contexts – mostly Europe – illuminate how concerns about rational resource management shaped modern statecraft in its earliest instantiations, often driven by elite concerns for sustained economic growth, military superiority, and imperialism (Matteson 2015; Scott 1998). Uekotter (2009) shows how movements and technocrats differently shaped early state-led pollution regulation in the United States and Germany, mostly at the municipal level, and how expertise factored differently in the regulatory responses of each country, in more deeply institutionalized and less contested ways in Germany, and more contested and fragmented ways in the United States. In a sweeping argument that bridges history, political theory, and science and technology studies, Mitchell (2013) turns attention to the ways that biophysical features of particular energy extraction regimes have shaped political history, contending that geographically concentrated, labor-intensive coal extraction created political-economic conditions ripe for the emergence of representative democracy in the West, while advances in mechanized and

dispersed oil and gas extraction facilitated a shift in political power towards elite and oligarchic interests. Environmental histories like these foreground the ways that politics and statecraft are ecologically embedded (for a parallel sociological argument, see Kaup 2015).

Political Theory

Political theorists have also laid rich conceptual ground for an evolving sociology of environmental states. Much of this thinking builds from Eckersley's (2004) foundational work on the "green state," which posits that in order to address substantial and growing planetary risks, states must become much more radically participatory, inclusive of granting non-human nature standing in representative deliberation (see also Dobson 1996); become far more transnational, since environmental problems cannot be confined to national boundaries; and be far more ecologically focused, inasmuch as deliberative, democratic decision-making takes into account long-term eco-social wellbeing (see also Dryzek 1987). Kindred scholars often discuss the development of environmental rights, sometimes with reference to Marshall's (1950) discussion of citizenship and social rights (Duit 2016; Eckersley 2020), which reframe environmental "goods" that can, implicitly, be traded off for environmental "bads," as irrevocable, inalienable entitlements. The political implications of these theorizations are deeply radical relative to liberal environmental regimes in which individual rights are treated as sacrosanct and where decision-making often focuses on tradeoffs between environmental costs and benefits. Where a safe and enduring biophysical environment is a universal right, after all, the costs of environmental protection are moot and threats to liberty necessary to guarantee environmental rights, e.g. curtailment of private property rights, are taken as unavoidable and expected – a stark departure from the liberal status quo (see also Bernstein 2001).

The literature on the “green” or “eco” state developed by political theorists is self-consciously normative and often utopian. Clearly, no modern state is fully “green” in this idealized sense. Some argue that such a transformation is all but impossible on its own theoretical terms, to say nothing of eschewing empirical political realities (Hausknost 2020).

Shifts towards the provision of environmental rights, however, are not entirely hypothetical (Eckersley 2020). For example, as of 2010, over 60% of national constitutions contain some reference to environmental rights (Jeffords 2013), and in many other contexts, civil rights and human rights laws that have been used to grant legal protections for individuals and jurisdictions from various forms of environmental injustice or environmental racism (Cole and Foster 2000). A more limited but growing number of states have gone so far as granting rights to non-human nature, like rivers, mountains, or mangrove ecosystems (Kauffman and Martin 2021; Tănăsescu 2025). Indeed, environmental welfare provision in one form or another is, in the 21st century, a broadly institutionalized state prerogative in a large majority of countries (Duit et al. 2016; Frank et al. 2000; Hironaka 2014): states *must*, at least symbolically, take action to clean up water, air, toxic waste, and so on. Such action often falls short of stated goals, but it can also result in real, demonstrable improvements in environmental quality, as in the remarkable reductions in water pollution and non-carbon air pollution in the United States after the passage and relatively vigorous enforcement of the Clean Air Act of 1970 and Clean Water Act of 1972 (Keiser and Shapiro 2019; Ross et al. 2012). It can also create leverage points for movements and other advocates to push for change (Mann 1993; Rudel 2019). Thus, environmental political theory offers sociologists conceptual tools for understanding how growing environmental state obligations reconfigure politics, create new institutional footholds for movements making

environmental demands, reshape the components of state legitimacy, change material environmental quality, and refashion notions of democracy and citizenship.

Political Science

Empirically oriented political scientists have also turned to the study of environmental states. Recent attention to the topic was invigorated by a 2016 special issue of *Environmental Politics*, led by Duit et al. (2016), which argued for the continued relevance of states as central objects of social scientific inquiry even as questions of environment (e.g. climate and biodiversity) are increasingly framed in global terms. The special issue introduced a range of empirical and theoretical topics, including classification of environmental states by levels of robustness (Duit 2016; Sommerer and Lim 2016) and discussions of distinctive features of environmental states emerging in the Global South (Duit 2016b).

Most political scientists, however, turn their attention to the politics that shape the state's capacity to provide environmental welfare without explicitly theorizing or invoking the "environmental state." One important strand of this work emerges from the historical institutionalist and American political development traditions. Dryzek et al. (2003), for example, theorize the ways that state institutional openness and receptiveness to political challenges structure the influence of environmental social movements across Norway, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, and thus how environmental policy evolves in each country. Mildemberger (2020) details how the "double representation" of both labor and capital in energy policy debates often inhibits decarbonization around the world. Stokes (2020) asks how and when pro-environmental movements successfully reshape energy politics and when anti-environmental interests gain the upper hand politically, especially as threats to incumbent fossil fuel industries become clearer. And work on American political economy also explicitly flags

U.S. environmental retrenchment as a puzzle ripe for political-institutional analysis (Hacker et al. 2022).

Zeroing in on sub-national politics, many political scientists also grapple with variance in state-level environmental policy, for example, calling into question simple accounts of a deregulatory “race to the bottom” (Konisky 2007; Rabe 2016; D. Vogel 2018); showing that firms seem to engage in regulatory arbitrage by selecting into U.S. states with weaker regulatory regimes (Monogan et al. 2017; for related evidence in a non-environmental context, see Rao et al. 2011); and that, in line with environmental justice scholarship, state-led regulatory enforcement is often weaker and takes longer in disadvantaged and fenceline communities (Konisky and Reenock 2018; Konisky et al. 2021). Indeed, the literature on sub-national environmental politics increasingly transcends disciplinary boundaries, with sociologists and legal scholars, among others, also working to reveal the coalitions that obstruct climate action and to illuminate the reasons for variance in state-level climate policy (Hall et al. 2024; Hess and Ruhl 2025; Nosek et al. 2025; for reviews, see Basseches et al. 2022; Basseches 2025; Vasi and Walker 2024).

Scholars of international relations and political economy also lay important intellectual groundwork for understanding environmental states. Green and colleagues (Green 2013; Green et al. 2025), for example, show how international climate governance regimes, including increasingly common net-zero targets, seem to have fostered policy convergence across nation-states – and also firms – around the world (see also the world polity scholarship discussed below). These commitments to reduce emissions are often more symbolic than substantive, but as Meadowcroft (2023) points out in the (admittedly somewhat different) context of air pollution, they provide real political footholds for advocates to try to “ratchet up” national-level climate policy over time. Aklin and Mildenberger (2020) point out that the ensuing contests over

national-level climate policy are far more readily explained by focusing on distributional conflicts than by focusing on collective action problems; less powerful nation-states, particularly from the Global South, have many reasons to take action on climate but often lack resources to do so – or are actively prevented from taking action – by more powerful and higher emitting counterparts, mostly from the global North (for a related sociological account, see Gray and Cointet 2023). Colgan, Green, and Hale (2021) further suggest that climate politics can be understood as pitting “climate forcing” (i.e., fossil fuel-dependent) against “climate vulnerable” interests, suggesting that climate policy at all levels – subnational, national, and international – will turn on the evolving balance of power between these factions, including the ways their constellations shift in response to a changing climate itself. A growing literature on the development and implications of green industrial policy takes up a similar perspective, showing how the composition of national economies, including import and export sectors and dependence on fossil fuels, shape the state’s propensity to support green energy innovations and structure the balance of power in environmental coalitions (Allan and Nahm 2025; Meckling and Nahm 2018).

Most broadly, political scientists studying bureaucratic administration and regulation have left a long trail of theoretical crumbs relevant to an emergent sociology of environmental states. For example, McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast’s (1987) influential account of administrative procedures as means of ensuring political control by the most engaged and well-resourced political constituencies focuses on the U.S. National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 as an illustrative case. Their argument has direct relevance for understanding how procedural law and policy, common in environmental statecraft, invites elite interest group domination in environmental politics as in other substantive domains. Likewise, in his influential essay on *The*

Politics of Bureaucratic Structure, Moe (1989) uses the formation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as a key example of how broad-based social regulation is often driven by powerful interest groups intent on creating bureaucratic structures capable of withstanding attacks by counterposing interests (e.g. anti-environmental business groups), almost always at the expense of administrative effectiveness and efficiency. Carpenter (2001) excavates the early formation of the U.S. Forest Service to understand how networks of scientific expertise, shaped by movement pressures, can foster bureaucratic autonomy vis-à-vis associated reputational strength and networked power linked to movements and advocates beyond the state (see also Carpenter 2010). And Kitschelt (1986) famously uses the differential influence of the anti-nuclear movement across Sweden, France, West Germany, and the United States to show how state political “input” and “output” structures create or foreclose upon political opportunities for movements to shape (environmental) statecraft.

In short, political scientists offer a great deal, indeed, for a sociology of environmental states to build from, both in the more recent turn towards environmental states and environmental politics explicitly, and in a broader canon of work that takes the environmental state as an object of empirical analysis in service of developing political theory.

Sociology

Sociologists have been the most reticent among social scientists and humanists to systematically study environmental states. Rea and Frickel (2024) speculate as to why this may be. Whatever these reasons, rather than focusing on the state, environmental sociological attention has roughly divided between broadly Marxian accounts of environmental harm that emphasize the dominance of capitalist production and tend to see the state as an ancillary actor beholden to those interests, sometimes not treating the state at all (Foster and Clark 2020; Moore 2015); and

ecological modernization approaches that for years turned their attention to market and civil society-led environmental reforms, also implicitly de-emphasizing state action (A. P. J. Mol et al. 2009).

There has been at least some explicit environmental sociological attention directed towards the state for years. In his original articulation of his canonical treadmill of production theory, for example, Schnaiberg (1980) kept the state front and center, noting that, “if the treadmill is to be slowed and reversed, the central social agency that will have to bring this about is the state,” by way of its redistributive and regulatory functions (p. 249; see also pp. 241-247), as mediated by the external pressure of environmental movements (pp. 387-393). Unfortunately for sociologists, however, Schnaiberg never expanded on this line of reasoning and in fact seemed to turn away from it (e.g. Schnaiberg et al. 2002). Two decades later, Buttel (2000) seeded a wavelet of interest when he urged a political turn for ecological modernization theory and environmental sociology more broadly, arguing that “a full-blown theory of ecological modernization must ultimately be a theory of politics and the state” and noting the close but as yet undeveloped affinities between that theoretical approach and “embedded autonomy, civil society, and state-society synergy theories in political sociology” (p. 57). In short succession, Mol and Buttel (2002) published *The Environmental State Under Pressure*, an edited volume with a diverse collection of essays ranging from Marxian accounts that cast serious doubt on the capacity of the state to take any action that impinged upon economic growth (Schnaiberg et al. 2002) to more optimistic and nuanced accounts of environmental regulation in places as diverse as Vietnam (O’Rourke 2002), Portugal and the Netherlands (Koppen 2002), and Russia (Aksenova and Nedelkov 2002). And, Frickel and Davidson (2004; Davidson and Frickel 2004) explored the

conditions they posited were necessary for environmental states to grow and strengthen around the world.

These brief bursts of sociological attention on the environmental state, first in the 1980s and then in the early 2000s, however, did not yield extended engagements with the concept. Other scholars, like world polity theorists, discussed below, took up important questions about the state, social structure, and environmental policy, especially as shaped by global institutions (e.g. Frank et al. 2000; Hironaka 2014), but treatments of the environmental state itself remained implicit in sociological scholarship, particularly in environmental sociology. It took another two decades for explicit sociological treatments of the concept to return once more, first via our own preliminary theoretical treatment (Rea and Frickel 2023; see also A. P. J. Mol 2016; A. P. Mol 2018) and then in a small but growing number of related works, e.g. on the emergence of the Brazilian environmental state (Silva-Muller forthcoming), forest governance in low and middle income countries (Harper et al. 2025), and discussions of subnational environmental policy (Vasi and Walker 2024). Time will tell if the concept has more staying power now.

Building from Political Sociology

If sociological treatments of the environmental state are to prove useful to sociologists and kindred scholars, in line with Buttel (2000), the path forward lies in building linkages to other areas of sociological theory and scholarship, particularly in political sociology. Insights from welfare state theory, developmental state theory, world polity theory, and a growing appreciation for the cultural dimensions of environmental politics seem to us to be promising strands of scholarship for building a more robust sociology of environmental states.

Insights from Welfare State Theory

The most basic insight environmental sociologists can import from sociological state theory is that “the state” is, in fact, a diverse network of institutions and organizations that is neither internally consistent nor centrally coordinated, even in relatively centralized nation-states (Mann 1993; Moe 1989; Morgan and Orloff 2017). This insight alone invites all manner of investigation into the ways that environmental agencies and ministries evolve out of preexisting organizational forms, often with complex and contradictory histories and objectives (e.g., Gough 2016; Hays 2009); the ways that environmental governance prerogatives sit in relation to and often conflict with other state objectives, like supporting economic growth and militarism (Downey 2015; Jorgenson et al. 2023); how science and expertise shape the politics and processes of environmental state development and strength, including their links to environmental injustice (Demortain 2019; Frickel and Moore 2025); and how the provision of environmental welfare evolves unevenly depending on who has access to political power and which environmental problems are prioritized (Harrison 2019, 2023). The last point is particularly well-developed in (social) welfare state theory, which has over decades developed sophisticated accounts of how particular interests and classes of citizens – e.g. organized labor (Amenta 1998; Esping-Andersen 1990) or soldiers and mothers (Skocpol 1992) or farmers (Prasad 2012) – have been able to gain political power and influence in particular historical moments and therefore shape welfare state development. The analogy between social welfare states and environmental states is not perfect. As Schnaiberg (1980) understood, class interests often configure differently in environmental as opposed to social welfare politics (see also Mildemberger 2020), and the social welfare state is arguably antecedent to the environmental state (Gough 2016; Meadowcroft 2005). Nevertheless, attending to the internal heterogeneity of the environmental state and the particular social groups

and organizations that play central roles in the diverse politics of the many forms of environmental welfare promises to substantially enrich sociological environmental state theory. Welfare state scholarship also offers useful lessons in the politics of redistribution with probable lessons for understanding the politics of environmental states and environmental welfare. Political theory offers broad insights into the ways that narrowly concentrated versus broadly distributed costs (e.g., taxes) and benefits (e.g., health or unemployment insurance) might affect public support for social welfare policies (Wilson 1984); a range of empirical studies in political science and sociology document how patterns of taxation and redistribution seem to shape popular sentiments for welfare state policy along these theoretical lines, often through powerful policy feedback loops (Campbell 2003; Mettler and Soss 2004; Pierson 1993). Means-tested benefits, for example, are more common in liberal welfare regimes than in social democratic ones and tend to generate narrower political support than universal benefits (Amenta 1998; Esping-Andersen 1990). Highly visible progressive taxes (e.g. income taxes) may inspire more political backlash than less visible and more regressive approaches to taxation (e.g. value added taxes; Martin 2013; Prasad 2012, 2018). Culturally celebrated and sympathetic groups as understood by political powerholders, like soldiers and widowed mothers (Skocpol 1992), may generate broad bases support for redistribution and social support, while ideas about the non-deservingness of other groups, often refracted through the prisms of racism and xenophobia, undermine popular support for redistribution to others (e.g., Black Americans and non-white immigrants; see Gilens 2009; Quadagno 1996). Once more, analogies to environmental states and environmental welfare are imperfect, but social welfare state scholarship offers a broad array of lessons for understanding how the politics of environmental redistribution and protection — who gets what kind of environmental goods and bads, and who bears environmental or other

costs, including economic ones like lost jobs – may shape longer-term patterns of support for environmental welfare, from land conservation to toxics regulation to climate mitigation.

Finally, welfare state scholarship offers lenses for theorizing environmental state development as a social-historical process. In his path-defining work categorizing welfare states, for example, Esping-Anderson (1990) focuses on the degree to which states de-commodify goods like labor and healthcare, thereby insulating individuals from the whims of market forces; conceptualizes the welfare states as a systems of social stratification, inasmuch as welfare states reorder wealth and privilege in capitalist market societies; and documents the degree to which these interventions are universal versus targeted across national contexts. There is important work to be done on environmental states in this same spirit, focusing on *varieties* of environmental states, i.e., classifying environmental states, like welfare states, in terms of qualitative differences in their institutional features, as apart from classifying them by the degree of their development or robustness as, for example, Duit (2016) and Sommerer and Lim (2016) do. Scholars might be able to make meaningful distinctions between environmental states in terms of their approaches to environmental decommodification (the means they use to protect environmental goods from the whims of the market), environmental stratification (how environmental “goods” and “bads” or rights are distributed and reordered across social groups), and the universality of environmental welfare provision (whether environmental benefits or rights are broadly or narrowly enjoyed). Of course, any such classification invites a causally prior question of equal importance: why do states vary as they do along these and other dimensions? This is another key area of inquiry sociologists might take up.

Insights from Developmental State Theory

The environmental state is most often conceived of in regulatory and not developmental terms, with emphasis on state institutions and capacities focused on controlling industrial processes in the name of environmental protection. Mol (2016, 49; A. P. Mol 2018, 120), for example, defines the environmental state as “the set of governmental organizations, institutions and practices that have been developed and installed over a six-decade period to cope with the modern environmental burdens,” and, in subsequent discussion, focuses mostly on regulatory capacity (see also Meadowcroft 2005). Duit et al. (2016:7–8) emphasize four dimensions of environmental states – regulatory, administrative, ideational, and their roles as “arena[s] for environmental conflict” – again mostly skipping over environmentally-focused economic developmentalism. In separate work, Duit (2016) includes environmental research and development spending as one element of an empirical classification of environmental states but theorizes this in terms of environmental knowledge production and not economic developmentalism. In a discussion of the environmental state in Africa, Death (2016a, see also 2016b) may come closest to theorizing links between state environmentalism and developmentalism, e.g., by way of Egypt’s investments in controlling the Nile and agricultural production, or South Africa’s comparable investments in agricultural development and the creation of a vast network of national parks. In line with the multivalent and contradictory character of modern states, these environmental-developmental interventions often work in tandem with other socially and environmentally unjust activities, such as the maintenance of apartheid in South Africa and the dispossession of land from Indigenous people.

These theoretical threads that Death (2016a, 2016b) tugs on are, in our view, in need of substantial further exploration across national contexts, and not only in the Global South. Developmental state theory illuminates how networks linking bureaucrats to civil society and

business interests are key to economic development and effective governance (Bradlow 2024; Evans 1995), and state investments in nascent technologies and industries are key to economic vitalism, even where those state roles are not widely appreciated and may be “hidden” (Block 2008). In many cases, state-led developmentalism is ecologically destructive. Bunker and Ciccantell (2005), for example, show through comparative historical analysis how states have engineered global trade policies anchored in natural resource extraction, especially iron and copper mining. Moore (2015) develops a sweeping world-historical theory of the exploitation and appropriation of value from nature – activities that have always worked with strong state support.

But as Buttel (2000) recognized a quarter century ago, developmentalist dynamics like these are also central to understanding environmental states and their role supporting various “green” economic innovations. Carpenter (2001), for example, explores these dynamics in the context of the early twentieth century environmental state building in domains like forest management. Using different language, Taylor (2016) implicitly reveals similar developmental dynamics linking the early U.S. conservation movement to progressive but also expansionist and racist state-building projects, including railroad development and national park formation. At the start of the 21st century, large-scale public investments in the renewable energy transition have emerged as central environmentally focused state activities around the world, including in the United States (Allan and Nahm 2025; Block et al. 2024; Meckling and Nahm 2018). China, while the world’s largest greenhouse gas emitter, is also very actively using state power to reshape its economy – and its global influence – as relates to the renewable energy economy (Lo et al. 2025; Mathews 2015). And as a reviewer of this article emphasized, many European nation-states have explicitly committed to decarbonizing their economies to reach net-zero by the

middle of the 21st century. Such changes reach far beyond pollution control and cannot be reduced to industrial policy alone; to the extent that these commitments are realized – an open question – they would amount to, as the reviewer put it, ‘steering by a developmental state on a grand scale.’

In short, environmental states are also developmental states, playing central roles in early state development and also today, through ongoing public investment in environmental innovations like renewable energy technologies. Any full treatment of environmental states must therefore grapple with these developmental dimensions, including how environmental developmentalism sits in tension with well-theorized growth dynamics in capitalism (e.g. Moore 2015; O’Connor 1988), and also what roles civil society groups, movements, and bureaucrats play in shaping the environmental developmentalism of states through time and across national and sub-national contexts (T. Bartley 2007; Tim Bartley 2018; Brandtner 2022; Fisher et al. 2021, 2009).

Questions of decoupling between stated environmental goals and observable environmental outcomes; the role of the state in picking technological winners and losers for addressing environmental problems; and developmental networks within and beyond formal state structures are all important but understudied elements of environmental states.

Insights from World Polity Theory

Since the early 2000s, world polity theorists may have made more explicit contributions to environmental state theory than any other area of sociological scholarship. The diffusion of various environmental governance innovations around the world, like national parks and environmental ministries, and the spread of environmental values more broadly, has not escaped the attention of scholars interested in how such institutional changes spread around the world (Frank et al. 2000; Hironaka 2014; Meyer et al. 1997). There is considerable evidence that the

global diffusion of environmental state institutions is driven by linkages to international governance bodies and international nonprofits (Frank et al. 2000); that nation-states more robustly and persistently enmeshed in the global environmental regime have better environmental outcomes (Schofer and Hironaka 2005) even as they fail to address environmental problems at the root (Hironaka 2014); and that highly industrialized environmental states support the formation of domestic environmental associations while global forces play a larger role in less industrialized contexts (Longhofer and Schofer 2010).

As with the world polity approach more broadly, however, there is a great deal of ambiguity about the mechanisms and processes that link local and even national-level environmental outcomes to global and transnational networks and governance institutions. Silva-Muller (forthcoming), for example, traces the development of the Brazilian environmental state through four phases (learning, expansion, stalemates, dismantling) which are all shaped by well-documented linkages to international organizations, including important resource inputs, but which are principally domestic in character, centered most profoundly in the environmental and developmental politics of Brazil as they evolved over four decades. Indeed, in separate work, Silva-Muller and Sposito (2024) show that Brazilian presidents since the 1980s have shifted their framing of the Amazon – the central environmental problematic of Brazil on the global stage – depending on their audience, constructing the vast rainforest region as abstract environmental problem when speaking to distant domestic and international audiences but principally as an economic and developmental problem when addressing Amazonian audiences directly. The broader implication is that the translation of any environmentally focused ‘world polity’ to domestic and local environmental state action is not likely straightforward and will be mediated by local context, including by the self-conscious strategies of political leaders highly sensitive to

the mores and concerns of particular audiences, be they transnational elites or local political groups and civil society. The lesson for sociologists is that observing correlations between embeddedness in transnational (environmental) networks and high-level environment outcomes is only a starting place. How these network effects translate into environmental state action and development is a critical and open question.

Insights from Cultural Sociology

The cultural politics of nature also remain understudied and theorized in environmental state theory. Conventional environmental sociological approaches to the state have been, at root, materially focused political-economic theories (A. P. J. Mol and Spaargaren 2000; Schnaiberg 1980) and have paid less attention to the role of culture in shaping environmental outcomes.

Even so, a wide and growing range of sociological literature highlights how understandings of nature and the natural world, often as mediated through state institutions, shape environmental statecraft. Fourcade (2011), for example, highlights how legal-cultural constructions of nature dramatically shape the valuation of ecological harm in the United States and France, while Bargheer (2018) uses culturally particular understandings of birds to help explain different protection regimes in Germany and the United Kingdom. Angelo (2021) foregrounds the ways that particular constructions of nature as public benefit shaped urban development in the Ruhr Valley in northwestern Germany. Elliott (2021) uncovers the ways that the moral politics of value shape state response to climate disasters, while Scoville (2022) shows how different understandings of nature in legal and scientific domains shape the conflicts that structure environmental governance and, more exactly, endangered species protection in the Sacramento River Delta (see also Farrell 2015). In a similar way, Elliott (2024) helps reveal how particular ideas about home ownership evolve along with changing understanding of environmental risk in

a climate changed world, as questions of ownership rights and economic value are mediated by courts, the law, and scientific and economic expertise. And Farrell (2020) documents the ways that the ultra-wealthy reshape conservation politics in the U.S. West, at least in part as a means of moral legitimization of their extreme privilege.

To be sure, environmental statecraft cannot be entirely reduced to questions of social construction and the cultural mores that shape it. But neither can it be fully reduced to “objective” questions of material environmental harm and benefit. As the literature cited here foregrounds, how people understand the natural world is both collectively constituted and also constitutive of the politics that shape how environmental policy is made and implemented, and thus how environmental welfare is provided. A full-blown sociology of environmental states must grapple squarely with these sorts of phenomena: not just who wins and losses in environmental conflicts, and with what biophysical consequences, but also, in tandem, how culturally contingent and contested understandings of nature shape those conflicts, as they manifest within and shape environmental state activity.

Environmental State FAQ

What is environmental welfare and why focus on it?

Environmental welfare is the set of biophysical and social conditions required to support life and livelihoods into the imagined future. The term is far more encompassing than just regulation and enforcement and implies all manner of ancillary roles – administrative, executive, judicial, scientific, technological, developmental – that are required in order to provide environmental welfare. Environmental welfare is defined with respect to “biophysical and social conditions” because both shape the possibilities for its realization and is defined with respect to “imagined

futures” because actions taken to provide environmental welfare are always historically contingent and socially constructed, including by science, in ways that may not – likely do not – perfectly map onto realized future outcomes, but that are always shaped by ideas about possible futures (Beckert 2016).

What about state and local governments, or other subnational units of government?

State and local governments can be part of the environmental state, too. The heterogeneity of the environmental state extends not just laterally, across and between different ministries and offices at any given level of government, but also vertically, between higher and lower levels of environmental governance, e.g. national or federal, state or provincial, local or municipal. See, e.g., Angelo (2021), Brandtner (2022), and Uekotter (2009) for three very different accounts of municipal-level environmental state activity.

Are all states environmental states?

To the extent that states all provide some level of environmental welfare, yes, most-to-all modern states can be thought of as being environmental states in part. But providing environmental welfare was not always a central part of state activity and the degree to which environmental welfare is provided varies substantially across national contexts (Duit 2016; Sommerer and Lim 2016). Apart from questions of kind, i.e., identifying varieties of environmental states, a critical question is thus of degree: how “environmental” are different environmental states?

Can a state be “environmental” when its leaders are hostile to environmental regulation?

Yes, inasmuch as environmental state institutions are durable enough to outlast anti-environmental leaders. Environmental states are complex, historically constructed institutions and governmental organizations that have developed over decades, shaped over the long durée

by civil society as much as by formal politics. Environmental states therefore transcend particular heads of state and political parties even as they are shaped by them.

How does energy fit into the environmental statecraft?

The provision of energy is not inherently the provision of environmental welfare, so the politics of energy do not map one-to-one onto the politics of environmental welfare. Whether any given state activity is part of environmental statecraft turns on whether the activity provides environmental welfare, as we have defined it. This implies that there are no hard boundaries between “environmental” and “non-environmental” activity and that, like all other areas of governance, classifications of (environmental) state activity exist on spectra, subject to theoretical debate, empirical investigation, and historically specific understandings of the environmental implications of state activities.

What about all the state activities that harm the environment?

A great deal of state activity is environmentally harmful. By our definition, these activities are not part of environmental state activity except when they are explicitly linked to the provision of environmental welfare, e.g., when some environmental harm derives from related attempts to provide some kind of environmental benefit. This approach invites debate as to what is and is not part of environmental statecraft. Such debate will help refine understandings of the environmental state, its relations to other elements of the state and civil society, and ultimately will contribute to more robust theorizations of the state as a whole.

Isn't the state's principal role sustaining economic growth, not protecting the environment?

The tension between promoting economic growth and providing environmental welfare is one of the many internal tensions typical of modern nation-states. Rather than treating such conflicts as

a priori theoretical problems to be resolved analytically, scholars can engage with these tensions as research questions: where and under what political conditions can growth and environmental welfare align? Where and under what conditions do they conflict? Empirically investigating such questions and developing theoretical accounts that can accommodate contingency and indeterminacy is fertile ground for the sociology of environmental states.

How does material nature, including geography and natural resource endowments, factor into environmental state theory?

As others have documented, biophysical features of specific places can have substantial impacts on environmental statecraft (Bunker 1984). Mitchell (2013) places the physical features of coal, as they intersect with a particular moment of industrial development, at the center of the development of representative democracy, and the physical features of oil and gas as they intersect with a different moment of industrial development, at the center to an oligarchic and anti-democratic turn in statecraft. Vogel (2018) places the biophysical geography of California at the center of his account of its long environmental legacy, inclusive of, for example, the ways the distinctive features of the Los Angeles Basin trap smog and drive concern over air pollution. And, Carroll (2012) offers an account of “water” as a boundary object central to environmental statecraft in California’s Sacramento Valley. More generally, science and technology scholars have long called attention to the ways that non-human entities and “actants” shape all manner of social processes (Johnson 1988; Law 1992). Our own view is that well-developed sociology of environmental states need not take up a full-blown actor-network approach (although it could), but it must seriously grapple with the ways non-human entities and systems, including the climate, shape politics and statecraft (e.g. Elliott 2021).

How do cultural constructions of nature factor into environmental state theory?

Nature is as much social construct as it is biophysical entity. How nature is understood, which components are celebrated, which are reviled, and which are ignored, including how those respective positions change, must factor centrally in any fully fledged sociology of environmental statecraft. This is well-worn territory for environmental historians (Cronon 1996, 2003; Nash 2006; Stoll 2015) and is a growing area of inquiry for environmental sociologists (e.g., Angelo 2021; Bargheer 2018; Elliott 2021, 2024; Farrell 2015, 2020; Scoville 2022; Taylor 2016).

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