

# STILL THE RETURN OF THE STATE? CRITICAL ISSUES AND POSSIBLE NEW RESEARCH AVENUES<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, precisely between the global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, the theme of the “return of the State” has resurfaced often and in different forms. Some authors, for instance, speak of the return of “neo-statism” on the ruins of neo-liberal ideology (Gerbaudo, 2022), some others of “post-neoliberalism” (Cooper, 2021; Davies and Gane, 2021), while international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund have recently recommended (i.e. in the pandemic period) a large-scale intervention of national authorities to deal with the effects of the pandemic. In this essay we critically discuss the issue of the return of the State by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of this literature. In particular, we focus on the need to – first – theoretically frame the State, and in particular the neoliberal State, and – second – foster an alternative view of policy-making that takes into account the relative autonomy of State powers in managing the social conflict while advancing class-based interests. In the

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conclusions, while reasserting the centrality of State analysis, we discuss some possible lines of research capable to grasp continuities and changes at State level.

### **Keywords**

Return of the State; Neoliberalism; Post-neoliberalism; Critical policy analysis.

### **Resumen**

En los últimos años, precisamente entre la crisis financiera mundial y la pandemia de Covid-19, el tema del “retorno del Estado” ha resurgido con frecuencia y bajo diferentes formas. Algunos autores, por ejemplo, hablan del regreso del “neoestatismo” sobre las ruinas de la ideología neoliberal (Gerbaudo, 2022), otros del “posneoliberalismo” (Cooper, 2021; Davies y Gane, 2021), mientras que instituciones internacionales como el Fondo Monetario Internacional han recomendado recientemente (es decir, en el periodo de la pandemia) una intervención a gran escala de las autoridades nacionales para hacer frente a los efectos de la pandemia. En este ensayo discutimos críticamente la cuestión del retorno del Estado evaluando los puntos fuertes y débiles de esta literatura. En particular, nos centramos en la necesidad de —en primer lugar— enmarcar teóricamente el Estado, y en particular el Estado neoliberal, y —en segundo lugar— fomentar una visión alternativa de la elaboración de políticas que tenga en cuenta la relativa autonomía de los poderes del Estado en la gestión del conflicto social al tiempo que se promueven los intereses de clase. En las conclusiones, al tiempo que se reafirma la centralidad del análisis del Estado, se discuten algunas posibles líneas de investigación capaces de captar las continuidades y los cambios a nivel estatal.

### **Palabras clave**

Retorno del Estado; Neoliberalismo; Post-neoliberalismo; Análisis político crítico.

*“We have come to take the state for granted  
as an object of political practice and political analysis  
while remaining quite spectacularly unclear  
as to what the state is”  
(Philippe Abrams, 1977)*

## 1. Introduction

At least since the 1970s the return of the state has been announced regularly, actually being a theme that returns at every critical juncture<sup>2</sup>. This, for instance, happened in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, when – in the context of the hegemonic crisis of neoliberalism – it was pointed out that a strong change in the State, and collateral forms of State intervention, was now imminent. The ideological and policy paradigm shift was due to the weight of growing inequalities (Milanovic, 2016; Alvaredo et al., 2017), the broken promises of neoliberalism (Ferrarese, 2017; Parsi, 2021), the growing mass of the “losers of globalisation”. Specifically, the dominant conception of, and consensus around, the idea of a “minimal State” — whose economic intervention was limited to a function of mere market surveillance — was now increasingly considered outdated. The State, it was argued in the press and some of the literature, would become (post)Keynesian again, and the obsession with permanent austerity would have been finally surpassed. Thus, a new era of budgetary countercyclical expansion and novel forms of State interventions and market-regulation was heralded (Altvater, 2009). And yet, expectations and beliefs about an imminent change were disproved after only a few months. Besides not recording — in general — *permanent* changes whatsoever in State intervention and policy direction, especially in Europe we have witnessed a significant resurgence of austerity policies, often embedded in an institutional framework that has left very little room for possible alternatives. While this has actually provoked political upheavals in the form of the strengthening of populist, right-wing and eurosceptic parties in the long 2010s to the present (Bruno, 2018), and reduced the consensus towards mainstream political forces on both the left and right, on the other hand state policy direction continued to follow the pathway established in the 1980s and 1990s, with few real exceptions.

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2. For an overview of the “State debate” since World War II to present see Cozzolino (2021, chapter 2).

The critical juncture of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has seen the state play a more direct role in citizens' everyday lives, not only in terms of economic and health protection but also in the restriction of some fundamental freedoms, led to the resurgence of the thesis of the return of the State (Amato, 2022; Gerbaudo, 2022; Garrard, 2022). After decades during which wealth and power shifted from States to markets, it seems that we are now witnessing a reverse process (Garrard, 2022) and a possible paradigm shift: from neoliberalism to neostatism (Gerbaudo, 2022). As it was with the 2008 crisis, rather than sticking to the thesis of the "return" as such, it is important to deeply analyse in detail the various dimensions of change, and thus distinguish between contingent responses to the crisis and those that can lead to recognise permanent features of change that presage a possible paradigm shift.

The objective of this paper is therefore to articulate an alternative reading of the processes underway, focusing attention on certain dimensions of analysis that are, in our opinion, capable of complexifying the interpretation of these phenomena, thus at least partially calling into question the thesis of the return of the state. The paper is above all conceptual, that is to say, it aspires to deal conceptually with the question of the "return of the State" pointing to potential new research avenues capable to grasp continuities and changes at State level.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section we advance some critical remarks to the idea of the "return" of the State. In the central section we discuss the most recent version of this idea, which in a way is also the most interesting one: the hypothesis of neostatism, especially in a recent formulation of Paolo Gerbaudo (2021, 2022). Then we lay out possible alternative frameworks to situate policy and policy-making within State theory: a fundamental step to look at policy within the broader framework of State power. The paper closes with some concluding remarks about potential research avenues.

## **2. Problematizing the return of the State and its neoliberalisation**

Despite being full of insights (especially in terms of analysis of ideological changes), the literature on the "eternal return" of the State suffers from several limitations, which prevent a more nuanced and complex analysis of State transformations. In fact, while they are certainly useful in signalling certain discontinuities with the past, those studies contain important theoretical and methodological shortcomings that risk overshadowing

all those elements of continuity that concern State policy and politics. Briefly, those weaknesses can be traced back to: 1) an overly simplistic conception of the State, often described as an autonomous and unitary entity; 2) an overly dichotomous State-market view, which does not help to understand the multiple interpenetrations between the two and often leads to the former being portrayed as eminently positive and the latter as per se negative; and 3) a reductionist and too economic conception of neoliberalism seen as simply the triumph of market forces, and neoliberalization conceived of as the dismantling and downsizing of the State.

These critical issues cut across the three political *dimensions* of the State — the State as polity, the politics of the State and the policies of the State — and concern both theoretical and empirical aspects. For illustration purposes only, with reference to the polity dimension, the literature on the return of the State often presents an unproblematic conceptualisation of the State itself, sometimes seen as a static and too autonomous polity. This leads to a misinterpretation of the changes, which are either poorly contextualised historically or described as the result of abstract State action as completely detached from society. As to the politics dimension, the risk is an underestimation of political agency, resulting in, for example, a misleading interpretation of the transformation of the State, which results in a mechanic process totally disconnected from the power relations expressed by politics and society. Lastly, concerning the policy dimension, it often emerges, also as a consequence of the aforementioned issues, a conceptualisation of policy making (and, broadly, State intervention) that is understood in isolation from the broader analysis of the State. In relation to this last point, for instance, the expansion of State budget (that is a change in a *specific* policy domain) is interpreted as a full-blown return to the Keynesian Welfare State. Yet, in relation to the crisis of 2008 and the following sovereign debt crisis, this kind of policy proved to be a temporal arrangement to mitigate the effects of the crisis and avoid a major political crisis of the State — only to return shortly afterwards to the previous situation with even harsher austerity and neoliberal policies.

In the following part, we focus on some issues related to the dimensions of polity and politics. By highlighting empirical and theoretical shortcomings, we aim at emphasising the elements of continuity in the political dimensions of the State, in order to stress the importance of identifying, and distinguishing between different layers of analysis of State transformations. In this way, the analysis of neoliberalism and the neoliberal State would be placed in its proper position, leading us questioning the thesis of a post-neoliberal paradigm shift (see section n. 3), as well as also indicating some potential avenues for further research (see section n. 4).

In a nutshell, our thesis is that for a paradigm shift to take place, and that therefore we can speak of a “return of the (Keynesian) State”, it would be necessary to register permanent changes on all three dimensions (polity, politics and policies) and levels of analysis (theoretical and empirical) of State transformations. As far as the latter is concerned, a common shortcoming in State theory is the absence of conceptualisation of the different layers encompassed by the concept of “State”. This often leads to regard the State as a thing or person, internally homogenous and mostly separated from society. This unified vision of the state has the effect of underestimating the internal changes within the state itself, which can go in the opposite direction to that imagined by the ‘returners’. Thus, for example, the return of the state is supported, but the centralisation of powers in the executive, the technocratisation, the imbalance of powers between State institutions, the depowering of parliament are not fully problematized.

By contrast, to understand what kind of State is back, it is important — first of all — to “open” the State box and conceive it as a field of political struggle between different power networks and apparatuses. This means, on an empirical level, looking at the specific transformations *within* the State as occurred over the last decades and focusing on the specific and interrelated dimension of state politics and the question of power distribution *within* the State, and how they impacted (*i*) on the State as a polity, (*ii*) on State policies, and (*iii*) the forms and processes of (the crisis of) representative democracy (De Tullio, 2020). While reasons of space prevent us from closer theoretical and empirical investigations, suffice it to say here that — speaking about transformations — one fundamental piece of the neoliberal state puzzle are the processes of strengthening of executive apparatuses and other technocratic institutions (think, for example, about independent authorities), both at national and European level. This process runs in parallel with other fundamental dynamics such as the crisis of political parties (Palano, 2019, 2020) and the marginalisation of representative institutions — actually, a process also defined as *de*-democratization. Accordingly, a change in the politics dimension would manifest itself through a reverse process of democratization and rebalancing of power between executive and legislative, that does not seem to us to be taking place at present.

Furthermore, this argument leads us to further reconsideration of the essence of the neoliberal State. Rather than the “shrinking” State (Strange, 1996) or the minimal state — as alleged by many supporters of the thesis of the return of the state —, several strands of political science, sociology and political economy literatures have demonstrated that the reality of this form of State is part of processes of *selective empowerment* of the aforementioned executive and technocratic apparatuses. Important studies have

made it clear that the *strong* — rather than minimum — State is the real counterpart of free market economy (Gamble, 1994; Bonefeld, 2012, 2017) and of “economic liberty”. A strong State is one that provides for a strong (and stable) legal and institutional framework, possibly as much separated as possible from social-democratic politics and thus possible political economy alternatives. Other strands of study have further effectively highlighted that “although the shorthand phrase ‘strong state and free market’ has its usefulness in explaining neoliberalism, how one defines strength is not self-evident. [...] It makes little sense to think of the state in quantitative rather than qualitative terms; the question of ‘how much’ state should be replaced by ‘what kind’ of state” (Slobodian, 2018, p. 7). In this same direction go the studies that have been pointing out since the beginning of the millennium that the neoliberal project should be conceived of as “a simultaneous roll-back *and* roll-out of state functions” (Peck, 2001, p. 447, italics in the original). Hence, “if we place too much emphasis on the category of market fundamentalism, we will fail to notice that the real focus of neoliberal proposals is not on the market per se but on redesigning states, laws, and other institutions to protect the market” (Slobodian, 2018, p. 6).

This vision of the State is indeed present in the documents of some international institutions. For instance, previous research showed that already by the early 1990s the IFM and the World Bank, the main spreaders of neoliberalism in the world since the 1980s (Peet, 2003), under the label of “good governance”, tried to steer the transformations of the State towards a strengthening of the apparatus of government while reconfiguring its direct role in the economy (Amoretti, Cozzolino, Giannone, 2021). As we read in a report of the World Bank dedicated to former socialist economies of Europe transiting to capitalism, “institutional reforms — establishing clear property rights, sound legal and financial infrastructure, and effective government — will be needed to make markets work efficiently” (1996, 22). In the report, significantly entitled *From Plan to Market*, we also read: “the transition from plan to market calls for a wholesale reinvention of the government. The state has to move from doing many things badly to doing its fewer core tasks well” (1996, p. 110; see also World Bank, 1997). At stake is an idea of State which is, at same time, strong in terms of legal and institutional apparatuses, and limited in terms of redistributive and productive role: a State devoted to free market economy.

This legal and institutional strengthening is also visible in the policy dimension, as shown for instance by monetary policy. The establishment of the “ordoliberal” European Central Bank meets the requirement of separating monetary policy from democratic

politics and therefore exerting strong “disciplinary effects” on the working populations of Europe (Saad-Filho, 2010; Sandbeck and Schneider, 2014). In this framework, the global financial crisis seems to have triggered a further escalation of the processes described above — in the background of the crisis of consensus towards market economy and of growing inequalities. Some have thus spoken of “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff, 2014; Tansel, 2017; Storey, 2019; Wigger, 2020). While “authoritarianism can [...] be observed in the reconfiguring of state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent”, neoliberalism becomes increasingly authoritarian

especially in our current time of crisis [when] the conditions [are set] for the emergence of more coercive neoliberalization processes. Put more simply, in the absence of a hegemonic aura, neoliberal practices are less able to garner the consent or even the reluctant acquiescence necessary for more “normal” modes of governance. Of particular importance for this article is the increasing frequency with which constitutional and legal changes, in the name of economic “necessity,” are seeking to reshape the purpose of the state and associated institutions (Bruff, 2012, p. 115).

Before entering in a detailed analysis of the policy dimension (see section n. 4), in the next section we discuss the most recent version of the idea of the return of the State, which in a way is also the most interesting one: the hypothesis of neostatism, especially in a recent formulation of Paolo Gerbaudo (2021, 2022). The neostatism thesis (correctly) sees in several novel forms of State intervention — such as: planning, industrial policy, budget expansion — as many signs of a renewed State intervention and even a “paradigm change” (Gerbaudo, 2022). However insightful and certainly agreeable, the question is *to what extent* this represents a wholesale rupture with the neoliberal *direction* of policy (a paradigm change), or just a temporary adjustment to avoid that a severe socio-economic crisis develops into a full-blown political crisis of the State.

### 3. From neoliberalism to neostatism?

The crisis of Covid-19 came after a decade or more that neo-liberalism was considered to be in irreversible crisis and somehow already outdated. For instance, the

concept of “post-neoliberalism” begun to be used in different context and in light of different political and politico-economic processes. First born in Latin America to mark the rupture with neoliberal adjustment policies enacted since the 1980s (under the influence of international organizations as International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), the concept has been used in the capitalist Western core to denote especially the new forms of hegemony by the alt-right (Cooper, 2021), which somehow mark a departure from liberal-market enthusiasm. And, if before the onset of Covid-19 the crisis of neo-liberalism was already under way, the coronavirus emergency has significantly accelerated the phenomenon. We have witnessed significant expansionary measures of States’ budgets to sustain working population and business, while strengthening, where possible, health system and produce vaccines. This, it is worth noting, in a context where national and international institutions have suggested national States to resort on bolder fiscal policy measures to help the economy recover (Amoretti, Cozzolino, Giannone, 2021).

It is no surprise, then, that in such a context several authors foresaw a possible (new) return of the State. One of the first attempts to develop a theoretical account of the “neostatism” thesis is that of Gerbaudo whose argument is that the crisis of neoliberalism is paving the way to neostatism, that is “a new ideological horizon based on a minimum consensus on the need for greater State intervention”<sup>3</sup> (2022, pp. 10-11). Importantly, this manifests in a set of policies such as: relaxation of fiscal and monetary policy; trade protectionism and industrial policy through subsidies, regulatory barriers, custom duties, protection of national property and strategic industries; taxation of multinational corporations and great wealth; new forms of planning, especially in the environment and energy. Thus, to Gerbaudo, only a few years ago this set of policy measures would have been rejected by neoliberal political elites on both the left and right. Now, they seem to constitute the core of a new interventionist spirit of State action.

Historically, neostatism — rather than being a coherent ideology — is emerging towards the end of the 2010s from a whole array of new social demands — protection, first of all — to which political classes are trying to answer. These answers are not only a way to remedy to market failures but a leap forward — Gerbaudo defines it as a “paradigm change” in political discourse and practice (2022, p. 13) — embodied by a more proactive role of public authorities. The “return of the State”, therefore, can be seen as an “early sign” of a possible future new paradigm. For now, it is a marker of a phase of

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3. Authors’ translation. Original: “un nuovo orizzonte ideologico basato su un consenso minimo rispetto alla necessità di un maggiore intervento dello Stato”.

*interregnum* — the reference to Gramsci here is clear — between the irreversible crisis of neoliberalism and the neostatism to come (*ibid.*).

The cultural and ideological dimension deserves attention too, as different authors pointed to different ideological and hegemonic forms to address the crisis of neoliberalism and its historical overcoming (Lather, 2020; Davies and Gane, 2021; Slobodian, 2021). In Gerbaudo's line of reasoning (which takes inspiration from the Soviet economist Kondratiev), there are "ideological waves" that roughly last from 40 to 60 years. Examples of these in the past comprise classic liberalism, social-democracy and neoliberalism. Considering the latter's rise from the late 1970s and consolidation in the 1990s, it has arrived to its historical limit, and so as the policies it has inspired. Within the decline of neoliberal ideology — and the endemic crisis of globalization — a new one is rising, an ideological landscape whose core is the return of an active conception of the State. Within this "return", three are the key components of neostatism: sovereignty, protection and control. In relation to the first, the return of the concept of sovereignty — which belongs to the history of modern society — can be conceived as a reaction against the neoliberal distrust towards *popular* sovereignty, the state and democracy. It is, therefore, a means of claiming back decision-making power and reassigning centrality to the *demos* after that neoliberalism, with its strengthening of technocratic apparatuses, has shifted decision-making mechanisms elsewhere (see also the now-endemic crisis of representative democracy). The concept of protection follows a similar logic. Neoliberalism conceived of "protectionism" as going in parallel with pervasive State intervention. By contrast, the (popular) demand for protection has increased in the context of deregulated and transnational market economy. On the other hand, Covid-19 (with both economic and health crisis) and the environmental crisis seem to intensify the need for states and international institutions to intervene to protect populations from the negative effects of markets and changes in the productive sphere, while actively promoting forms of transition to more sustainable sectors and modes of production. The final concept that constitutes the core of neostatism is control. As Gerbaudo remarks, if "protection is the final goal, control is the means" (p. 189). Later on adding: "Control, therefore, designates the capacity of the state to intervene, to determine, to govern people and things, and the specific actions that result from that capacity. [Compared to the concept of sovereignty] this term takes on a more practical and action-oriented sense"<sup>4</sup> (*ibid.*). The need for greater control arises against the uncontrolled movements

4. Italian: "Controllo", dunque, designa la capacità dello Stato di intervenire, di determinare, di governare le persone e le cose, e le azioni specifiche che [Rispetto al concetto di sovranità] questo termine assume un senso più pratico e orientato all'azione".

of globalization: taking back control, for instance, implies a higher capacity of the State to acquire more autonomy on societal processes like taxation (especially of large multinational corporations) and democratic planning.

In conclusion, at stake seems to be an epistemic rupture with the neoliberal era. The State — the key political institution of our era — is the cornerstone of this rupture and one fundamental place of struggle for a new *post-neoliberal* order to arise. While this argument effectively captures some elements of a phase of deep changes, at the same time it is necessary to problematize further the analytical framework and try to offer a more nuanced picture of State transformations.

It seems in fact at least partial to speak of — yet another — “return” of the State. Also because the idea of a “return” to a more Keynesian-oriented State actually bears the risk of hiding the current problems of the crisis of democratic forms and processes. By contrast, a convenient research strategy would begin with a more nuanced view of the complex nature of the State — and of State-society complex — and try to detect on empirical grounds continuities *and* changes occurring at State and policy level.

#### **4. Critical State studies and Critical policy studies: possible research avenues**

In order to try to develop an answer, in this paragraph we discuss more specifically policy and policy-making. The aim is to consider the problem of policy within the broader State-society complex and its transformations. To this aim, we lay out a possible alternative framework to situate policy and policy-making within State theory. In particular, we draw on several strands of critical policy analysis such as Historical Materialist Policy Analysis (HMPA) (Brand et al., 2022; Caterina, 2019) and Cultural Political Economy (CPE) (Jessop and Sum 2010), which explicitly deals with this issue in the framework of critical theories of the State.

The critical analysis of policy differs from mainstream approaches under several respects. First of all, conventional approaches usually conceive policy as a result of a rational process based on given power resources and on a “problem-solving” framework. In other words, such view of policy analysis explicitly or implicitly asserts that “government decisions should be based on sound knowledge, and that such knowledge should rise above politics”, so that “in the modern world these ideas point instead to the conception of a governing elite of technical experts — or technocracy — working as a

neutral instrument on behalf of human progress” (Fisher et al., 2015, p. 1). Thus, at stake there is a positivist episteme and a linear view of the historical process in which policies are rationally enacted in the name of the general interest<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, the policy process usually is, albeit implicitly, *de facto* conceived as isolated from the more general discourse on the State and State-society complex. In contrast, policies should be seen as the result of the (conflictual) intersection of several power networks within and outside State structures, nationally and internationally. Also, this should be also understood within the broader framework of State-society complex. This implies that what happens “within” the State and its apparatuses cannot be abstracted from the specific condition and evolution of social relations of production.

Mainstream policy assumptions have been contested by a variety of approaches that, from different angles, have criticised the rationalist, neutral and interest-free view of policy-making (Fisher et al., 2015). In order to overcome a technocratic, a-historical and positivist view of policy analysis, we introduce a possible alternative framework to study policy and situate it within broader processes of State transformations.

A possible critical study of policy begins with recognising that the “policy process” always occurs within a society characterised by certain structural conditions and conflicts between material interests. In line with a (critical) political economy perspective, this approach recognises the centrality of social relations of production and reproduction engendered by (transnational) capitalism as dominant mode of (re)production. The attention to “material structures” allows to understand policies and policy-making within their broader social context – thus favouring the possibility to understand in greater depths both the policy and the context. Thus avoiding examining policies in terms of abstract “rational” processes.

Within this theoretical framework, history occupies a prominent role in two main respects. First, the historical analysis helps tracing the emergence, consolidation and transformation of social relations of production and related conflicts. Second, history is not a linear process set on the path of progress (i.e., the technocratic view) but is conceived as the contingent result of the dialectical relation between structure(s) and socio-political agency through different spaces and places. Therefore, the complex and intertwined matrix of conflicts comprising material interest, ideas-ideologies and values — all shaping and being shaped by politics — has a prominent role both to

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5. Incidentally, let us note that especially when it comes to “technocrats” and technocratic forms of steering, this underlying rationalist core is even reinforced given their (apparently) non-partisan, problem-oriented and pragmatic *allure*, and of course the high-profile of their expertise.

understand and explain policy, and to give a specific conformation to a polity. Accordingly, this approach “understands policies against the background of manifold social relations of (re)production (including societal relations to nature) that are contradictory, dynamic, crisis-prone and lead to latent or manifest conflicts” (Brand et al., 2022, p. 282).

The other fundamental theoretical-analytical element for critical policy analysis is the State. In a theoretical perspective based on the intellectual legacy of authors as Gramsci and Poulantzas, the State is conceived neither as completely autonomous from society, nor as an instrument in the hands of ruling classes. While the State is always — in Gramsci’s terms — *integral*, namely it is a complex comprising State and society, at the same time State power is, following here Poulantzas, *relatively autonomous*. That is to say that ruling political forces (also: the policy-makers) enjoy a degree of “distance” from social forces (and production relations) that allows establishing compromises and concessions among competing and antagonistic material interests in order to extend indefinitely the dominant societal order. Also crucially, the State is not an internally homogenous entity but it is itself a *field of conflicts*. Following again Poulantzas (2000), the State is the “material condensation” of class relations.

The notion of material condensation means that social relations of forces have been historically inscribed into the material structure of the state (its institutional buildup, the law, the political orientation of state officials), i.e. its different branches and apparatuses (ministries, central bank etc.). This implies specific, asymmetric selectivities, i.e. filter mechanisms with regard to the strategies, interests, discourses and forms of action of different societal interests and political actors in their capacities to access the state and formulate policies (Brand et al., 2022, p. 284; Jessop, 2015).

The State as field of conflicts (among different power networks) is not a symmetric one. On the one hand, the institutional structure of the State constitutes a *strategic selectivity* (Jessop 1990) vis-à-vis the broader structure of societal power relations of classes and class fractions. In other words, how different branches of the State “filter” policy demands and implement policies depends on underlying power relations. On the other hand, State apparatuses and bureaucracies remain critical (and relatively autonomous) agencies in the formulation, definition and implementation of policy. From within State structures and apparatuses, ruling political elites and State bureaucracies formulate and

implement policy according to a certain variety of material and cognitive factors: (i) general balance of power among social forces and their transformations over time; (ii) ruling ideas and visions of the future; (iii) inner conflicts occurring among parties and politicians (also within the same governing coalition and in light of the respective electoral constituencies); (iv) contingent factors that may necessitate extraordinary interventions (a large economic or health crisis that requires additional fiscal stimulus); (v) concrete impact of policies in society at large and conflicts occurring at the level of civil society; (vi) overall need to preserve the dominant social order also through concession to what in Gramsci's terms we can call "subaltern groups".

One final word about the (fundamental) question of public finance and expansionary budget policy, which we already mentioned earlier in the essay. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, many Western States intervened with relevant budget measures both to sustain the banking sector in crisis (avoid the so-called "credit crunch" and a proper recession) and to finance social safety nets for people who lost their jobs. On the one hand, this soon led to further increases in government debt, but on the other, already by 2010-11, the policy direction returned on a strict austerity policy and overall neoliberal direction (Tooze, 2018; Bellofiore, 2013), with serious consequences on the political landscape of many European countries in terms of growing polarization (Hutter and Kriesi, 2020). With the pandemic, we witnessed something similar. The State, under the strong advice from international institutions as the IMF and the World Bank, intervened with important budget measures to sustain businesses and families. This also in tandem with European institutions, which intervened with ambitious financial programmes as the Next Generation EU. These programmes seem to lean towards more incisive interventions by public authorities also in terms of accompanying the transition of production towards new sectors such as green energy and digital.

A paradigm change, then? And, are we really confronted with a "returned" and post-neoliberal State? Or are these measures just concessions to the subaltern classes to avoid a general political crisis? In our view, while it is still premature to speculate on a paradigm shift, it would perhaps be more appropriate to develop a more complex view of the State and its (contradictory) transformations in order to understand, also in relation to the state-democracy-capitalism triad, persistences and changes in this complex relationship, and with what social and political consequences.

## 5. Conclusions. Space for further theoretical and empirical pathways

In this essay, we examined the thesis of the return of the State, highlighting several theoretical and empirical issues. In particular, we focused on the three political dimensions of the State, emphasising that a paradigm shift in the conception of the State would require stable changes in each of those dimensions. We then discussed one of the most recent proposals on the return of the state, namely that of “neo-statism” put forward by Paolo Gerbaudo. Finally, by drawing on Historical Materialist Policy Analysis and Cultural Political Economy, we proposed that, for a more nuanced interpretation of current phenomena, it is necessary to “open” the State box and conceive it as a field of political struggles between different power networks and apparatuses. By analysing these political struggles, it is possible to highlight which changes and on which dimensions are occurring after the pandemic.

If we look back to the 20th century, there have been at least two paradigm shifts in the conception of the State: the one from the liberal State to the welfare State, which occurred after the Second World War, and the one from the welfare state to the neoliberal State, which has occurred since the 1970s. In both cases, there have been more or less stable changes in each of the political dimensions of the State.

For example, the affirmation of the neoliberal state was accompanied by a rebalancing of power between capital and labour in favour of the former; this rebalancing was then manifested at the political level with the arrival in government of leaders and parties that explicitly advocated new policies — such as privatization, liberalization, supply-side economics — and a new idea of the State, which in short has become “hegemonic as a mode of discourse, [and has had] pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2007, p. 3). Within a few years there was a permanent change in the polity, policies and politics of the state.

Without excluding the possibility of a return of the state, we maintain that the analysis of the State after the pandemic must take into account economic and social variables, and look at the State in greater detail, by focusing on “what kind of” State rather than on “how much” State has returned. In this context, changes in the conception of the state, as well as in its politics and policies should be detected that are not simply linked to the contingency of the crisis. While this essay has simply highlighted some problematic

nodes, future research should investigate, for example, what conception of the state is held by the centre-right ruling classes in many European countries, how the notions of sovereignty, protection and control are interpreted, what policies can be reversed in comparison to past decades, what role the European Union will play.

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