

Reconceptualizing the State: Integrating Environmental Justice for a Sustainable Future via the Environmental Contract

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In the modern era, society has shifted tremendously, making scholars often wonder about the new conceptualization of a just state through the lens of a contemporary scenario. In response to the climate change crisis, the conception of a just state should integrate environmental justice. Regarding this definition, many political philosophers have mentioned concepts such as liberalism, the minimal state, Marxism, and the welfare state. When considering environmental justice as one of the roles of the state, the state should carry out this action so as not to disturb the standard sequencing of society for sustainable development. Connecting individual and collective freedom with environmental justice is important because the exploitation of the environment violates human freedom, and states need to consider individual anatomy when framing environmental solutions. It is also significant to analyze and balance the two opposing viewpoints of liberalism and Marxism because they both present benefits and harms to environmental sustainability. Many contemporary political philosophers have mentioned theories such as libertarian paternalism and distributive justice to achieve environmental justice but do not consider every cornerstone of the contemporary scenario. Because of this, their responses to the Anthropocene lack clarity and applicability, a pressing problem of humanity. With all these influences in mind, I aim to propose a solution combining these theories: the environmental contract. This postulate stems from the social contract to develop the accessibility of sustainable resources and amalgamate environmental justice as a built-in habit of society, thus resolving the climate crisis via collective collaboration.

The Conceptualization of a Just State

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, justice is “the condition of being morally correct or fair”¹ 2024. However, what is justice, and what is the “morally correct” thing to do? What does a just state look like beyond simply being fair¹. Justice is a complex theory related to moral rightness, ethics, societal development, freedom, and judicial administration². This is the starting point of my reflection, on the rise of the Anthropocene and its impact on modern state theory.

The Rising Concern of the Anthropocene and its Impact on State Theory

The concept of a “just state” has long been a concern for political philosophers. Classic formulations of justice—from Plato’s conception of virtuous polis to John Rawls’ egalitarian principles—have sought to define the classification of a just state and its relationship with citizens. However, these traditional theories frequently assumed relatively stable socio-environmental conditions, rarely contemplating environmental changes as a foundational variable. The Anthropocene refers to the critical scenario we live in as the environment changes from human activities such as industrialization, deforestation, pollution, and climate change, altering the planet’s atmosphere, environment,

and habitats³. Today, with the rise of the Anthropocene, these assumptions merit reevaluation; the conception of a just state and its duties also need to be reassessed with the consideration of contemporary problems.

This paper contributes to this ongoing debate by engaging with existing scholarship and examining the fundamental role of the state in the Anthropocene. It will focus on how it can mediate between the rights, responsibilities, and freedom of individuals and the collective to address environmental threats. The significance of this research lies in expanding the conception of a just state in the more traditional theories to include environmental stewardship. In the Anthropocene era, a just state must expand classical notions of state theory to include environmental justice as part of the role of the state and the protection of freedom.

Methodologies for Research

Within this reflection, the state will be considered as the organization of social institutions and the contemporary scenario as the challenges, changes, and development of the modern-day era and status quo⁴. Accordingly, to unfold this argument, three broader dimensions of state theory will be addressed: the role of the state, the relationship between individual freedom and collective freedom, and the environmental contract. This frame-

work aims to build up a new conceptualization of a just state by dissecting the three different elements of it with the new consideration of sustainability.

This paper takes an interdisciplinary approach, as it is located within both political philosophy and political science. I will connect both traditional theories with modern approaches to form qualitative research. This research is backed by quantitative evidence in the “Contemporary Lens” section to provide current statistics that ancient theories lacked. I will also employ many registers, such as academic, public, and popular debates. This approach enables me to cover a lot of ground and tie different concepts together, but it also has the limitation of considering these dimensions in general detail.

Within each section, I will also incorporate both targeted and widespread research on different case studies (in this case, political theories), address some counterpositions, and analyze how these philosophies tie in with the thesis. I have selected thinkers and theories across different regions, time periods, and genders to provide diversity.

The Traditional Views on the Role of the State the Relationship of Individual and Collective Freedom:

The buildup of a just state requires a preliminary understanding of the core principles of the state, its role and its view regarding citizens’ individual freedom. In this section, I will explore some traditional political denominations, theories, and thinkers that addressed these issues by first exploring the role of the state and connecting that with how the state responds to concerns regarding freedom.

The Role of the State

Liberalism’s Lens of the State

Firstly, the conceptualization of a just state involves dealing with the role and responsibilities of the state. To begin with, liberalism is a viewpoint that originated in the 17th century and sets its basis on the fundamental rights of the individual’s equality and liberty⁵. There have been many liberal philosophers throughout history, including Thomas Hobbes, a European philosopher of the 16th century known for his works on understanding human nature⁶. Hobbes argues that humans in the state of nature enlighten the state of war, for he believes that “nature hath made men so equally, in faculties of body and mind” that we need to fight for limited resources⁷. As a result, Hobbes developed the social contract theory, which states that humans come to society for protection and individual and collective profit. Overall, Hobbes believes that the state’s primary role is safety—to protect people from each other—considering his view that human nature is cruel and violent.

Similarly, in the liberal tradition, John Locke addresses the view of humans as in a state of nature in his conception of the state with his theory of natural law. Locke is known as the father of liberalism and was a European philosopher in the 17th century⁸. He mentions the state’s role in protecting natural rights, which he identified as “life, liberty, and property”⁹. In return, the people must obey the laws of their government to receive protection. Locke’s conception of the relationship between humans and nature is his “Law of Spoilage,” which states that one should only use as many resources from nature as one can without spoiling¹⁰.

Considering more contemporary views, Robert Nozick is a modern American liberal political philosopher who provides a unique perspective on the theory of the minimal state (similar to the libertarian state). The concept of a minimal state is unique in that it is not applied to many modern nations in the world¹¹. Nozick’s minimal state, or what he calls the “Night-watchman state,” has the role of a just government that protects fundamental individual rights but does not exceed this minimal function. According to Nozick, “the minimal state best reduces the chances of. . . manipulation of the state by persons desiring power or economic benefits”¹². Essentially, this state maintains laws and order without interfering with individual freedom. This simplistic state structure would allow citizens to manage themselves, which Nozick considers just. Nozick’s framework on environmental ethics suggests respect for individual rights that could potentially extend to environmental stewardship, where individuals themselves manage their approaches and responsibilities towards the environment.

Marxism’s Lens of the State

While the liberal theories that Hobbes, Locke, and Nozick conceptualize provide sufficient liberty and individual freedom to the state, these theories cannot resolve issues over the distribution of socioeconomic welfare; Marxism, in contrast, speaks to this lack. Karl Marx, known as the father of Marxism, was a German philosopher, economist, and political theorist in the 19th century who provided a more socialist perspective on the development of a state. In his theory, stateless societies are characterized by the common ownership of the means of production¹³. Marxism calls for a classless society that is similar to socialism, where production and industries are owned by citizens themselves rather than the state or private corporations¹⁴. Specifically, Marxism is a political philosophy that values commutative interests rather than individual profits¹⁵. This theory’s abdication and class balance models suggest that the bourgeoisie (middle class) “has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation”¹⁶. As a result, the state should stay away from the central political power and instead be fundamentally ruled by the common proletariat (working class). Though often criticized for its lack of environmental concern, Marxism, in fact, emphasizes the

significance of nature; it also critiques capitalist industrialization for its negative environmental impact and exploitation of the lower classes^{17, 18} Marxism recognizes the importance of the environment in development and thus promotes dialectical materialism: the belief that the environment is not a static entity but a dynamic system engaged in development and interaction¹⁹.

Looking at Marxism from a contemporary perspective, Nancy Fraser, a 21st-century American philosopher, provides a Marxist viewpoint on the welfare state and addresses the “politics of need interpretation”²⁰. The welfare state associates reducing poverty and inequality with improving public health, education, and economic stability. This state is actively involved in redistribution²¹. Fraser delivers the concept of temporary versus permanent, for she believes that the role of a just government is not simply in doing what the citizens desire and unlimitedly supplying them with their needs but in defining what is moral and helping the citizens fix their fundamental problems. Her “approach shifts the focus of inquiry from needs to discourses about needs”²².

The Relationship Between Individual Freedom and Collective Freedom

A just state should also address the relationship between individual freedom, welfare, and collective freedom. Here, freedom refers to the right to exercise the individual’s will and liberty within a state^{23, 24}; welfare refers to happiness, prosperity, and well-being²⁵.

Consider John Stuart Mill, an English philosopher in the 19th century known for his utilitarianism and liberty theories²⁶. Mill believes that “pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things that are desirable as ends”²⁶. He emphasizes a person’s autonomy to make their own decisions without the interference of societal norms (because the individual knows themselves best). As a result, Mill believes that the government should provide sufficient individual freedom because that freedom will positively result in societal motivation, which leads to innovation. Mill’s theory is based on the “harm principle,” wherein individuals cannot harm others while living their own lives. Part of the harm principle involves environmentalism: the recognition that the interests of the earth community are not just human interests but environmental interests²⁷. When two individuals’ freedoms clash, the state needs to assess which causes more potential harm to society and the environment. Similarly, although an individual’s actions might not directly harm others, the state needs to assess whether they indirectly harm others. For example, via harming the environment and polluting the water source, the individual is harming other people via health concerns and living threats. Therefore, one can treat the environment as a person in Mill’s theory due to the symbiotic relationship between the two.

Instead of Mill’s individualistic approach, Michael Sandel provides a political opinion on freedom²⁸. Sandel is a con-

temporary American philosopher known for his communitarian perspective on the relationship between individuals and the state. Sandel argues that one’s social identity should be influenced by societal relationships rather than individualism. His perspective argues that society should set boundaries for right and wrong. However, this state provides little to no freedom for the individual because it fundamentally dominates an individual’s perspective. But the basis of his claim is economic. He criticizes the fact that “in 2007, CEOs at major U.S. corporations were paid 344 times the pay of the average worker”²⁸. Overall, Sandel offers a more collective perspective on freedom; decisions should reflect the collective will and pursue common goods that benefit all members instead of one particular individual. This theory leads to Sandel’s perspective on climate change, for he correlates environmental concern with responsibility; since historical responsibility for causing climate change varies amongst different nations, institutions such as the United States and the European Union, which are most responsible, should compensate developing nations. Responsibility refers to the collective welfare of an equal and fair distribution of enforcement based on accountability. These theoretical frameworks have actually been applied to modern-day international climate law under the CBDR (Common-but-Differentiated Responsibilities) system in the Paris Agreement.

Conversely, Rawls argues for the polar opposite of communitarianism. In doing so, Rawls addresses the problem of Sandel’s theory that proposes minimal individual freedom while critiquing Mill’s utilitarianism. John Rawls is a modern American political philosopher known for his works in the liberal tradition¹⁴. In his theory of justice, he advocates for equal opportunities and rights, and he treats justice as fairness. To promote fairness and equality, Rawls believes in a public justification system where political institutions’ decisions must account for the population’s beliefs. Rawls also critiques utilitarianism (the idea of prioritizing pleasure); he states: “In particular, I do not believe that utilitarianism can provide a satisfactory account of the basic rights and liberties of citizens as free and equal persons, a requirement of absolute first importance for an account of democratic institutions”²⁹ Although not explicitly addressing environmental issues, a Rawlsian approach to environmental justice would provide a framework for addressing inequalities in the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits, similar to Sandel’s approach. Institutions should be held accountable and responsible for their actions in a Rawlsian society. In this state, these institutions would be accountable to environmental justice in equal measure to the harm they have already caused to the environment.

These long-established theories have laid the foundation for Western political philosophy and state theory. They have impacted the canonical view of what a state should do and how a state should perform. Thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, and Marx argue that the state’s primary function is to protect individual

rights, collective welfare, and redistributive measures. The social contract theory, in particular, suggests that in exchange for the protection of individuals from violence in the state of war of human nature, citizens give up a certain degree of freedom to the state. Taking sovereignty and state governance to the next level, philosophers such as Mill, Sandel, and Rawls debate the balance between individual autonomy, societal norms, and state sovereignty. These theories all probe how a just state reconciles individual freedoms with collective interests and applies these to concerns such as the Anthropocene by dwelling on state-citizen relationships.

A Just State from the Contemporary Lens Considering the Anthropocene

Although these thinkers have established the foundations of state theory, unforeseen contemporary challenges are challenging these perspectives, changing the conceptualization of the just state and the perspective that we traditionally employ to tackle the question of a just state.

The complexity of the ever-changing world presents new concerns within shifting geopolitical scenarios. Modern state theory springs up as a response to contemporary global crises and presents proposals for what a just state should do in response. These concerns include modern healthcare, inequality, poverty, technological usage, and, most importantly, climate change and the Anthropocene, which I will be focusing on in this section.

The Rise of the Anthropocene

In the modern-day era, another dimension of complexity is on the rise: the challenges of the Anthropocene and climate change. Climate change, an effect of the Anthropocene, refers to long-lasting shifts in weather patterns and global temperature changes caused by human activities related to burning fossil fuels (which produce greenhouse gasses), pollution, and industrial processes³⁰.

This problem is caused primarily by industrial advancements starting in the 20th and 21st centuries, and the current state needs to emphasize resolving this issue in place of unawareness, unwillingness to act, unpleasantness, non-accessibility, non-effectiveness, and economic concerns³¹. Since 1880, the average global temperature has increased by roughly 1.7 degrees Fahrenheit³². The dreadful impact of this temperature increase is evident; it has caused droughts, lack of food supply, poverty, displacement, health concerns, and natural disasters³³.

These scenarios pose challenges to researchers who are dealing with the query of conceptualizing a just state within the contemporary political, economic, societal, and environmental scenario. In this paper, I argue that the conceptualization of a just state addresses the modern scenario by integrating environmental justice into the role of the state and the consideration

of freedom. Sustainable development, the ideology of living in the contemporary scenario without the depletion of natural resources while making economic, environmental, and social advancements that consider environmental justice, needs to be addressed further in a just state^{34, 35, 36}

A Hole in the Traditional State Theory with the Contemporary Crisis

As a result, each of these theories presents advantages and disadvantages when applied in the contemporary scenario. For instance, the liberal traditions that Locke and Barry postulate neglect the importance of community and fail to address the inequity of the contemporary era. Carole Pateman, a feminist and political theorist, states in her theory of the sexual contract that “the story of an original contract that creates civil society is also bound up with controversies over the origins of liberalism and capitalism”³⁷. Liberalism’s focus on individual rights ignores the gendered power dynamics within society that do not take into account women’s perspectives and experiences.

Furthermore, Rawls’ view of public justification as the balance between individual and collective freedom misses a key component in the context of environmental justice. Namely, what should the state do when there is a disagreement between public justification, the ruling of the state, and environmental interests? Mill addresses this concern by considering the “harm principle” that prioritizes the least harmful solution to reduce the overall harm done to all.

But in light of Rawls’ theory, Mill and Sandel provide two contrasting views that both have their drawbacks. For Mill, one of the state’s primary roles is to justify right and wrong, but with an abundance of individual freedom, the government would lose its authority to rule its people. Mill’s overly individualistic approach would struggle when responding to things like environmental degradation because of the gap in how the harm principle expands to address systemic harms. In other words, the Anthropocene is collective harm, but it is so broad that it would result in individual harm towards every citizen, unlike other examples in Mill’s context of prioritizing the entity that receives less or no harm. On the contrary, Sandel’s perspective offers enough power to the state. Still, it fails to consider practicality versus reality; everyone is different and should not be assigned a role by society. Pre-assigning roles to the collective whole would lead to a lack of motivation and momentum for individuals to want to perform environmental justice actively.

In addition, from an environmental perspective, providing excessive individual freedom would cause a lack of commutative motive, and individual proactivity would be essential for resolving the environmental crisis³⁸. Most liberalism theories contradict environmental sustainability. Liberalism’s prioritization and valuation of human agency versus environmental considerations would make it difficult for liberal institutions to

implement environmental policies³⁹.

Ultimately, liberalism leads to capitalism, an economic system in which private corporations rather than governmental agencies decide a society's production⁴⁰. Over the last several centuries, capitalism has undoubtedly contributed to climate change. To this day, the state does not fully regulate private corporations for environmentally sustainable options when they are developing businesses. This capitalist system prioritizes economic growth and profit over environmental concerns, thus allowing businesses to destroy natural habitats, market for over-consumption, and foster unawareness⁴¹. Usually, in a capitalist society, individuals and businesses prioritize their personal interests over environmental concerns, which leads to the exploitation of natural resources and the destruction of the environment. In the status quo, the capitalist country of the United States distributes 14.67 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions per capita. In comparison, the socialist country of China distributes only 7.61 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions per capita⁴². This data clearly demonstrates that without state-imposed restraints and enforcements on its citizens regarding sustainability, capitalist societies fall short of environmental justice.

Additionally, Nozick's minimal state perspective is often associated with libertarianism, the theory of prioritizing the most significant good or pleasure. This theory would lead to more individual rights. However, with more individual rights, the state would further foster social injustice because there would not be any authoritative voice to set regulations and enforce punishment. The state cannot distribute wealth nor provide universal access to supplies. Regarding environmental justice, a minimal state's simplicity would encourage individual misbehavior because it allows individuals to decide their responsibility towards nature without any guidelines or reinforcements. The structure of a minimal state is ultimately unrealistic, primarily because it does not address the contemporary scenario of the environmental crisis⁴³.

On the other hand, the Marxist state that Marx proposes and the welfare state that Fraser delivers do incorporate the authoritative voice of the state to regulate environmental concerns. However, both theories have flaws regarding individual freedom. Additionally, these theories cannot fit into contemporary society because Marx's and Fraser's proposed states lack the necessary resources to help address environmental concerns. For example, during the cultural revolution in 20th-century China, the country suffered huge economic losses because the economy faltered under the people's firm Marxist belief²¹. According to the United Nations, the globe has spent around six trillion dollars on sustainable development goals. Thus, addressing environmental concerns requires a substantial financial budget that an absolute Marxist society would struggle to provide.

When analyzing the state's role, it is crucial to consider numerous contemporary concerns: the environmental harm a capitalist society causes and the financial incapacity to resolve the envi-

ronmental crisis that a full-Marxist society faces. Democratic socialism resolves this balance by incorporating elements from both beliefs while maximizing their benefits⁴⁴. This conception provides a democratic and liberal view regarding freedom and individual rights but also argues for a strict socialist environmental code⁴⁵. Blending the two distinct beliefs leads to a more environmentally and socially applicable option. Environmental protection should also be considered as an integral part of the protection of citizens.

The Relationship of Freedom with the Anthropocene Crisis and Society's Response

Considering these philosophers' viewpoints, environmental justice should incorporate environmental awareness while keeping individual liberty achieved via the theory of treating the environment as freedom⁴⁶. This perspective suggests that a foundational aspect of human liberty is acquiring a healthy and sustainable environment with access to clean resources. From this outlook, environmental degradation that leads to the exploitation of natural resources impedes individual freedoms. As a result, when environmental rights become a part of human rights, humans will promote ecological sustainability because not doing so will interfere with their conception of freedom.

The relationship between freedom and citizens is twofold. First, the environmental regulations and policies enforced need to consider freedom as a primary constraint. Since freedom is an essential part of a just state, the question then becomes how the state can make the citizens voluntarily make green, environmentally sustainable options without contradicting their free will. Second, the environmental and social impacts of the Anthropocene are negatively interfering with individual freedom. There are threats to well-being, collective autonomy, and social cohesion. Therefore, this dual contradiction makes governance within the Anthropocene especially difficult. If the state prioritizes resolving the second concern, the first one will be interfered with and vice versa. A just state must integrate and consider environmental justice, but it cannot forget the basic principles of freedom; the balance becomes difficult. The rise of the Anthropocene creates many two-sided dilemmas like such.

A Contemporary Lens of the State

The Anthropocene, Human Rights, and Freedom

The Anthropocene is already interfering with individual freedom and human rights. For example, in 2022, approximately 32 million people were displaced due to climate hazards. Regions such as the Middle East and North Africa face an 83% high water stress amongst inhabitants; children under five years old bear over 90% of the disease burden attributable to climate change; the 2003 European heatwave resulted in approximately 15,000 excess deaths in France alone^{47, 48, 49}

In response to the Anthropocene, states at the local and federal levels have adopted environmental policies. Local governments often collaborate with citizens via seminars and city meetings to address environmental issues and construct policies such as the Green City Action Plan, Green Building Code, Zero-Waste Plan, and the Carbon-Free Plan. At the national level, different states have regulations and departments that address the Anthropocene at a larger scale.

Modern State Theories on the Anthropocene

To elaborate, many political philosophers have added to traditional theories in response to the Anthropocene. I will begin my argument by examining a modern political and economic philosopher at the University of Cambridge, Duncan Kelly. Kelly is known for his theory that addresses the critical scenario of the Anthropocene in light of contemporary environmental concerns⁵⁰. The Anthropocene “emerged as a concept within the fields of geological, atmospheric, and planetary science. It did so as a direct response to the pronounced changes in climate that have transformed the ecology of planet Earth, and it affirmed that these changes have been significantly brought about by human activity”⁵⁰. Kelly finds political action essential to understanding and developing sustainability to reduce climate change. According to Kelly, the nature of a just state should be built on the rudiments of the interplay of the public and private sectors. There needs to be an economic approach to sustainability, predominantly public-private collaboration and disclosure. Civil society organizations, corporations, and private partnerships should achieve climate objectives by finding alternatives to non-eco-friendly materials, engaging sustainable sources, and decreasing the rate of climate change. Developing society in an eco-friendly manner would indirectly encourage individuals and corporations to make sustainable choices.

In addition, Kelly’s argument psychologically connects with Thaler and Sunstein’s libertarian paternalism. Libertarian paternalism is “an approach that preserves freedom of choice, but that authorizes both private and public institutions to steer people in directions that will promote their welfare”⁵¹. In simpler terms, Thaler and Sunstein use their understanding of the human psyche to interpret two blunders: status quo bias (favoring the current situation) and temporal discounting (choosing the nearest option). As a result of these two blunders, we can indirectly persuade the individual to make the better choice by making the default option a sustainable alternative.

Kelly, Thaler, and Sunstein focus on addressing this environmental issue from a close-up perspective that suggests altering individual behavior. But, these philosophers fail to tie this perspective with its application in broader society. By examining it from a more global perspective, Morgan Bulkeley and Anthony Newell add to the environmental justice theory. Bulkeley and Newell are European philosophers of the 21st century who, in their book *Governing Climate Change*, discuss the role of a state

in terms of environmental justice. They mention that “governance occurs on a global scale through both the coordination of states and the activities of a vast array of rule systems that exercise authority in the pursuit of goals and function outside normal national jurisdictions”⁵². These two thinkers stress the importance of making environmental sustainability a global concern. According to their theories, a just state would need to be involved in two significant aspects: solving environmental issues within the state and coordinating with other states to share the responsibility of tackling the broader humanitarian concern of the Anthropocene. Within the state, the government would need to encourage innovative governance approaches and build policies that support sustainable actions and alternatives. Due to the global nature of climate change, the just state would need to be involved in working within global institutions and agreements to ensure the formation of global governance structures that can support and complement sustainable actions.

Kelly’s Anthropocene and Thaler and Sunstein’s libertarian paternalism address crafting a sustainable environment in order for individuals to have environmental justice. This concept, however, raises the question of whether people would choose the more sustainable option even if it is the default option; this framework is also built on the assumption that one will passively follow the default option and not spark any opposition, thereby lacking the awareness of an individual’s own will.

Similarly, Bulkeley and Newell’s point on sharing responsibility is idealistic but fails to consider distributive justice in the realistic world. Wealthier nations would advocate for an equal share of responsibility, while developing nations would want a distribution of responsibility based on ability⁵³. This point is reflected in the Paris Agreement, a consensus amongst countries to deal with the problem of climate change in their own, applicable way⁵⁴. With tense and complex international relationships and inequalities due to the heritage of Western colonialism in the modern setting, a disagreement about responsibility management might spark further conflicts. International disagreements can potentially hurt the issue of environmental sustainability rather than help it. Potential solutions to the concern of international equity may outline different responsibilities based on a country’s impact on climate change or calculate a certain percentage of their national GDP to give to global sustainability initiatives.

Modern Approaches to the Anthropocene

In the Anthropocene epoch, where human activities significantly influence Earth’s systems, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have adopted innovative strategies to address complex environmental challenges. For example, they are conducting debt-for-nature swaps and facilitating agreements that reduce national debt in exchange for commitments to environmental conservation. During the COP16 biodiversity summit in October 2024, six international conservation groups—including The

Nature Conservancy and The Pew Charitable Trusts—formed a coalition to establish standards for such swaps. They are also participating in transnational environmental governance and promoting inclusive conserving practices by recognizing the importance of environmental stewardship.

NGOs are alternatives to the state because they provide solutions that certain states lack, such as the jurisdiction of broader entities in international law and administration. However, this also threatens statehood, for some of their behaviors are fighting against state practices and substituting state power. The duties and roles that the state should be responsible for are now being spliced to non-state organizations because the state is not tackling it themselves⁵⁵.

Climate change is also triggering many social conflicts and protests. Climate justice movements like Friday for Future and Extinction Rebellion have mobilized millions globally. These movements often emphasize the disproportionate burden faced by marginalized communities, particularly in the Global South, who contribute least to carbon emissions but face severe climate-related consequences. Once again, these practices are positive in resolving the Anthropocene—a common goal of the state and non-state actors—but are simultaneously posing threats to governmental authority. To resolve this multifaceted, entangled issue, the state needs to take on more environmental justice and stewardship.

Alongside the growing roles of NGOs and grassroots movements in addition to political theories, this section ultimately underscores the urgent need for a reimagined, justice-focused state that balances environmental accountability with personal freedoms. It also clarifies that traditional political philosophies alone cannot adequately address the Anthropocene, and a just state must, instead, adopt a hybrid approach that blends both individual freedom and collective responsibility into the role of the state.

A Solution to Environmental Justice: The Environmental Contract

Recently, in the 20th and 21st centuries, many scholars have attempted to tackle the environmental concern of how the contemporary scenario affects more canonical perspectives of the just state. Mitigating the daily consequences of climate change is a critical challenge for the modern state because not doing so will cause multidimensional effects, such as economic problems, health issues, natural disasters, and, most importantly, the eventual extinction of our species⁵⁶. When considering the formation of a just state, addressing this concern needs to be one of the top priorities that the state emphasizes. The solution is environmental justice.

Environmental justice is the development of a state conscious of environmental concerns and the global framework of envi-

ronmental sustainability responsibility across all state sectors⁵⁷,⁵⁸,⁵⁹. The Environmental Justice Movement emerged in the 1980s in response to industrial growth, and the concept of environmental justice has become a crucial point of consideration for institutions in the last forty years⁶⁰,⁶¹,⁶². An important turning point in political thinking about the theory of a state is integrating environmental justice into the discourse of a state in response to contemporary challenges. This section will provide two main proposed solutions to the Anthropocene: environmental education and the environmental contract (the main emphasis).

Environmental Education - Positive Cycle and Addressing the Situation from the Roots

Part of the duty of a state should be to promote environmental education across all sectors. This starts from the K-12 curriculum of secondary school education and expands to community outreach and implementation in public places⁶³. This solution would work well with the second approach of the environmental contract.

There are many opportunities for citizens in the community to learn about environmental studies by visiting natural habitats, engaging in outdoor education/trips, attending national parks, and much more⁶⁴. Networks also exist in different states conducting different projects across the area to help students of all ages experience environmental education. It is important for the state to share its environmental policies and solutions with the individual sectors and work with civilians to tackle this collective issue. In doing so, states would be easier to incentivize individuals to take action and promote a more stable and positive way of addressing the Anthropocene; by installing these thought behaviors into citizens since adolescence, environmental awareness and stewardship would be default aspects of our society. There would be fewer conflicts between individuals and the state about such issues, and individual freedom would be preserved.

Environmental Contract - Compilation of Justice, Freedom, the Role of the State, and the Anthropocene

Two Approaches to the Environmental Contract

In addition to these thinkers' theories, I define environmental justice as addressing the current environmental issues in society with the active collaboration and involvement of individuals and the state through sustainable development. True environmental justice is built upon the cooperation of a just individual and a just state. I suggest making environmental justice work on a more pragmatic level by integrating environmental justice into a just state through the environmental contract. The environmental contract is a conceptual extension of the traditional social contract, proposing a mutual and implicit agreement between individuals and the state to safeguard and sustainably manage

the environment.

The environmental contract, unlike agreements amongst states, strives to form a collaboration between individuals within a state and the state itself for environmental accessibility: the adaptation in society that ensures the health, welfare, safety, and mobility of individuals when they use sustainable alternatives⁶⁵. It is a mutual and invisible agreement made by the individual and the state that integrates environmental justice as part of a natural habit that benefits both the environment and society. Borrowing the social contract framework that Hobbes and Locke propose, the same theory applies to environmental justice as a foundational agreement between the state and the individual. In the status quo, only 30% of people desire a sustainable lifestyle, showing a lack of environmental incentives⁶⁶. Rather than passively enforcing environmental regulations and laws on citizens, environmental justice and sustainability would be more effective by making individuals want to take action themselves. As a result, humans need to treat nature via the environmental contract like we treat each other via the social contract. In the social contract, humans come from a violent natural state to the contract where we agree to treat each other well because it begets individual and collective benefits. Similarly, in the environmental contract, humans come from the exploitative status quo to the contract where we treat the environment sufficiently to benefit both parties.

The environmental contract can be achieved via two possible methods. In the pyramid that refers to societal formation, the federal level is at the top, with the societal level in the middle and the individuals at the bottom. First, the pyramid of society can be regulated from the top to the bottom, with the government addressing the citizens' needs in return for the citizens' addressing environmental justice. The government can also, using the concept of libertarian paternalism, make the default option in communities one that is environmentally sustainable. Limited accessibility to sustainable options in people's lives has proven to be a barrier to a more eco-friendly future. For example, many individuals in Britain desire to live more sustainably but cannot do so due to financial constraints and the accessibility of sustainable options. Studies have shown that "88% of people in the U.K. would like to make more sustainable choices if they could; 88% feel it is too hard to make sustainable choices because of high costs, inconvenience, or limited knowledge; 86% wish leadership on the environment (from government and businesses) was stronger"⁶⁷. With increased accessibility and crafting the default option of living sustainably, society would gradually transform into a positive-cycling, eco-friendly environment.

The environmental contract can also be achieved via the pyramid from the bottom up to the top. As action at the local level is enforced, the federal level will become aware and take action. In economics and social development, society is formed to accommodate the individual's wants, and businesses innovate products and solutions to fit in with the consumer's needs. So,

if the individuals' needs change to a more sustainable option, society will also transform to a more sustainable method. A great example of institutional adaptation to individual needs is the Love Canal tragedy, where individual residents complained of the odors caused by environmental pollution; as a response to the stakeholders in this event, the government enforced air sample and waste regulations⁶⁸.

Both avenues of the societal formation pyramid lead to sustainable development via an environmentally friendly virtuous cycle (where one desirable event leads to another, and the chain continues). Evidence of the top-down and bottom-up societal formation in practice can be found by comparing gas stations and electric charging stations in the United States. There are currently 168,000 gas stations in the United States. This number has, in fact, decreased in the past century⁶⁹. However, charging stations have increased from around 80,000 to 160,000 from 2019 to 2023⁷⁰. This is in alignment with the data for electric car sales; electric cars became more widespread around 2017 (which led to the increase in charging stations), and from 2021 to 2022, electric car sales increased by 55% (because they are becoming more widespread and thus more accessible in society)⁷¹. Electric cars have become a more desirable option because of their increased accessibility in society (as evidenced by the increase in charging stations) and because they generate individual interest by lowering fuel prices (because electricity is cheaper). In 2023, a record 1.2 million electric vehicles were sold, showing the environmental contract's effectiveness in making individuals desire environmental justice by increasing accessibility and promoting interest¹⁶.

The Expansion of the Environmental Contract from the Social Contract

The environmental contract theory aims to expand the social contract theory by integrating environmental well-being as a central pillar of collective life. It expands the scope of collective responsibility by broadening the scope to consider the natural environment as an essential "stakeholder" in the mutualistic society.

Thinkers like Hobbes and Locke famously depicted the "state of nature" as a realm of chaos subject to inconveniences that legitimate governments aim to remedy. The environmental contract reframes this notion of "nature" as not merely a backdrop to human society but a living system under stress from human activity, as it now includes the risk of the Anthropocene. It urges humans to come together under an agreement, akin to the social contract, to prevent further devastation and protect the common good.

The Application of the Environmental Contract:

In liberal democracies, governments can regulate environmental behavior through legislation, financial incentives, or libertarian paternalism so that the easiest choice is also the most sustainable. Other than this top-down policy reform, there can

also be bottom-up civic engagement, where citizen groups, local NGOs, and grassroots movements can pressure officials to enact or expand environmental protections.

In more authoritarian regimes, the environmental contract can be achieved via centralized regulations. Strong governments can impose environmental standards uniformly and quickly. The top-down approach would work extremely effectively, while the bottom-up method would not work as well.

Developing states, on the other hand, often need external support from international organizations or NGOs to strengthen environmental regulations. There can be public-private partnerships between governmental agencies and private sectors to help fund infrastructure and sustainable utilities.

A just state should incorporate practices that promote grassroots environmental action and should not be limited to the solutions provided in this paper. After all, it is the state's responsibility to balance individual freedom with ecological well-being, ensuring that both aspects simultaneously co-exist to form a sustainable world environmentally and socially. Whether through top-down regulations, bottom-up civic engagement, or both, states and citizens should foster a virtuous cycle and act as a team to ensure that the environment is treated as an essential stakeholder in the pursuit of justice and prosperity in society.

Environmental Justice in a Just State

This paper has mapped a path from classical political theories to modern concerns addressing contemporary state theory that concerns the Anthropocene. These ideologies suggest that a just state strives for equilibrium in its spectrum of balancing individual freedom, collective welfare, state governance, and Anthropocentric action. This paper offers the concept of an environmental contract—an evolution of the social contract that extends individual obligations in collaboration with the state to environmental stewardship as an indispensable stakeholder as well. Through this prism, states and citizens collaborate to protect the environment while also preserving personal freedoms.

While global in its thematic approach, this discussion does not delve into the specific political structures of every nation-state. Instead, it sketches a broad theoretical model that could be adapted to various contexts. To develop further research from this paper, one can delve deeper into specific topics such as environmental management, a just state from an economic perspective, and a just state from a political perspective. One could also analyze the application of the environmental contract via real-world simulations and applications in different states today.

As Plato says, “Justice in the life and conduct of the State is possible only as first it resides in the hearts and souls of the citizens;” a just state is an ideal scenario that requires the efforts of the individual, society, and state⁷². Ultimate justice can never be approached, yet a just state has the responsibility to strive

toward environmental justice and sustainable development to resolve the Anthropocene as integral to its duty to safeguard its citizens.

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