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**Between Progressive Transformation and Authoritarian Takeover:
Towards New Urban Theories of the Local State**

Call for Papers: Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers, 26-29 August 2025, Birmingham

Across the world, local states are in a dire predicament, experiencing the consequences of austerity cuts, shortage of expertise and staff as well as a lack of trust in (local) government. Overlapping crises such as climate change, military conflicts and displacement, precarious provisions of public services, the production of left-behind spaces and the rise of the far right pose severe challenges to its institutions – on various scales and across a wide range of sectors. This situation has sparked seemingly paradoxical developments. In some contexts, it has evoked the loss of legitimacy of democratic institutions and authoritarian takeover, while in other cases the local state is becoming an arena for progressive state projects tailored at social justice and sustainability.

This session sets out to grapple with the changing forms, roles and agencies of local bureaucracies in this era of “polycrisis” and explores to what extent they are marked by an end of neoliberal bureaucracy as we know it. Following accounts that see the neoliberal order coming to a close (Gerstle 2022), we seek papers that interrogate to what extent we are on the cusp of the emergence of new state bureaucracies and institutions. While the state, state formations and statehood have been of major interest to critical human geographers and urban theorists for decades (Brenner 2004, Jessop 2008), in this session we focus on the particular shifts in statecraft that this contemporary moment of transition is witnessing. We are inspired by accounts that shed light onto the political potential of the local state (Beveridge & Cochrane 2023), recent debates around new municipalism (Russell 2019, Thompson 2021), the return of public ownership (Cumbers 2012) as well as bureaucratic insurgencies (Nicholls & Baran 2024). In this light, we are particularly interested in the internal contradictions and procedures of the local state as contested terrain with regards to the rise of the far right (Nettelblatt 2023).

The session aims to discuss two interconnected processes: First, the making of post-neoliberal, transformative forms of the local state and its institutions, advocating socio-ecological change and the provision of essential public services. Second, we want to explore contemporary authoritarian currents and their impact on local state institutions. For that purpose, the session invites contributions from different geographical scales and contexts, methodological backgrounds and heuristics. We invite, but are not limited to, contributions that address the following questions:

- *New spaces within the state.* What are ways for changing the local state and its institutions “from within”? What experiences exist on the local level, what are prospects and contradictions of progressive as well as authoritarian transformations of state institutions? Which endurances, ruptures or incremental changes can be identified?
- *New spaces outside the state.* How do social movements, local initiatives etc. create their own institutions outside of state control while providing public services? What are the potentials as well as limitations or dangers of this approach? How is statehood changed by spaces outside the state? What are the possibilities to collaborate with state actors?
- *New spaces through the state.* Which methodological approaches exist to empirically access changing forms of state and public administration? Which ethnographies, counter-

cartographies as well as emotional geographies can be derived from empirical work on the state? How do we perceive academic institutions as state institutions?

If you are interested to engage with these questions, please send abstracts of 250 words to both matthias.naumann@geo.uni-halle.de and gala.nettelblatt@uni-weimar.de by Friday, 21 February 2025 and indicate if you plan to attend the conference online or in person. Decisions will be communicated by Friday, 28 February 2025. We aim to publish the contributions in a special issue.

References

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Gerstle, Gary (2022): *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harvey, David (1989): From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 71(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.1989.11879583>

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Russell, Bertie (2019): Beyond the Local Trap: New Municipalism and the Rise of the Fearless Cities. *Antipode* 51(3), 989–1010. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12520>

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