



The Future is Public! The Global Reclaiming and Democratization of Public Ownership Beyond the Market

Daniel Chavez^{1,2} · Lavinia Steinfort¹

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Abstract

Faced with the convergence of economic, social, political and environmental crises, the importance of the public sector has been rediscovered on a global scale. The article offers a review of the evolution of political and academic debates on public ownership in general and public services provision in particular over the last decades, with emphasis on the energy sector. Taking as a temporal and analytical reference the research and advocacy work developed by the authors and other scholar-activists based at the Transnational Institute from 2006 to the present, the article summarizes the main issues currently in the spotlight and highlights gaps in knowledge and points of contention. It also suggests elements for future research and campaign agendas around public ownership in different regions of the world.

Keywords Public sector · Public services · Ownership · State · Democratisation · Utilities · Energy · Water · Activist research

When in March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic shook the foundations of the contemporary world economy unexpectedly and on a scale unprecedented in modern history, even traditional and ardent critics of the public sector expressed rather surprising views. A global magazine that for many decades has been advocating the advantages of the market and the superiority of the private sector foretold that ‘the state is likely to play a very different role in the economy’ and noted that ‘history suggests that the effects will be permanent’ (*The Economist* 2020). In a similar vein, a British newspaper that has historically championed the cause of free market economics, warned that ‘radical reforms, reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades, will need to be put on the table’ (*Financial Times* 2020).

In the context of the arduous and uncertain way out of the COVID-19 pandemic and runaway climate change, governments around the world are currently under mounting pressure to deliver basic services, safeguard the environment,

protect jobs and guarantee the supply of essential goods. Facing the convergence of multiple crises, the significance of public ownership will most likely increase in the years to come, as billions of people—particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America—will become more dependent on the state to satisfy vital needs. The key questions to answer will therefore be: What is the scope, mission and purpose of the public sector? How does the public sector currently perform in economic, social and environmental terms? What will public ownership look like in the future? How can the accountability, sustainability and efficiency of the public sector be improved?

A vast academic literature on state theory produced in the past decades has warned that the state is a problematic vector of change (Jessop 1990). Even in the supposedly more advanced and democratic countries of the North, state institutions can be used to curtail rights and tilt toward reactionary reforms—as recent examples of the rise of the far-right to national office in Europe and the United States show. But can climate change, pandemics or other global crises be resolved in any other way besides accelerated state-action? This article argues that within the existing global order it would be impossible to simultaneously address the climate emergency and deepening social and political inequalities without reclaiming and democratizing public ownership.

✉ Daniel Chavez
chavez@tni.org

Lavinia Steinfort
l.steinfort@tni.org

¹ Transnational Institute (TNI), Amsterdam, The Netherlands

² University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa



The two authors—a Dutch political geographer and a Uruguayan social anthropologist—do not claim to be fully objective or dispassionate about the subject matter. In line with critical epistemology currents that evolved in Latin America and other regions of the South, which oppose the alleged ideological neutrality of the social sciences (Sánchez Vázquez 1975), we do not hide our position as scholar-activists committed to the defence and democratization of public ownership. Our approach has been also influenced by feminist perspectives that provide insights into the importance of reflexivity, positionalities and power relations between researchers and the research subject. This perspective also implies challenging the dominant paradigm that treat knowledge production and dissemination as impartial (England 1994). Moreover, in line with the *epistemologies of the South* (de Sousa Santos 2018), the data and the arguments presented in the following pages are not entirely original or produced by the two authors in isolation, but the result of a collective process of intellectual production developed over many years by several teams of researchers and activists in various parts of the world.

The Old Question of Public Ownership and its Relevance Today

The issue of public ownership is not new, but despite several decades of heated academic and political debates many questions remain unresolved and are increasingly relevant today. Many theoretical debates around the nature and the roles of state are resurging in the framework of urgent exchanges on broader policy issues and development strategies. Decades ago, Ralph Miliband had already argued that any serious discussion of alternatives ‘has to tackle an exceedingly difficult question, namely the question of public ownership’ (Miliband 1990: 351), adding that conservative propaganda ‘has succeeded in making the idea of public ownership all but synonymous with bureaucracy, inefficiency, sloth and neglect of the consumer’ (Miliband 1990: 352). More recently, other researchers have contributed new insights to the strategic-relational approach to state power (Jessop 2007; Thwaites Rey 2012; Angel 2020), while some have proposed to rethink the state ‘as a continued terrain of possibility for positive social, economic and environmental change’ (Routledge et al. 2018: 79).

The Transnational Institute (TNI) is a research and advocacy organization based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The Institute’s work around public ownership started two decades ago, when TNI Fellow Hilary Wainwright (2005) published *Reclaim the State: Adventures in Popular Democracy*, a seminal book based on the author’s quest to find out how peoples’ organizations were expanding the meaning of concepts such as participatory democracy and economic

solidarity to take control of local governance and public services in very diverse countries and cities around the world. Her journey started at her home city, in east Manchester, where local community groups were testing the commitment of the British ‘New Labour’ government led by Tony Blair to ‘community-led’ regeneration by getting involved in the way public resources were spent. In Newcastle, she followed the struggle of homecare workers against the threat of privatization of services. In Los Angeles, United States, she followed community-union coalitions that have had major successes in improving the impoverished public transport system. And in Porto Alegre, Brazil, she discovered the wider democratic potential of participatory budgeting, an innovation in local democracy originally developed in Brazil that rapidly spread to many other municipalities around the world in the past two decades, among several other examples of ‘reclaiming the state’.

Two years later, TNI published *Beyond the Market: The Future of Public Services*, a compilation of studies on alternatives to privatization in different regions of the world (Chavez 2007). In the preface, the Chair of the institute’s Board, Susan George (2007), argued that the book was ‘not just a compilation of articles—however important and excellent they may be’, but ‘also a call to arms’ (Chavez 2007: 7). She added that.

Many of its chapters prove that privatisation is not inevitable; that we can and must react to protect, preserve and reclaim our public service inheritance. It is clear that without extensive, universally distributed public services, there is no way the world can realise the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (Chavez 2007: 7).

Around the same time, *Reclaiming Public Water: Achievements, Struggles and Visions from Around the World* (Brennan et al. 2007), a book originally published by TNI and Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) in English and Spanish, was translated into more than ten languages. The book greatly contributed to the consolidation and expansion of the Reclaiming Public Water (RPW) Network. In a few years, RPW grew to include over 300 member organizations in 58 countries. This is an open, multi-sectoral network that enables activists, trade unionists and academics to work together with utility managers and engineers to promote democratic and public ownership models as the best means of ensuring safe, affordable access to water for all. Since its creation, TNI has been functioning as the facilitating hub of the network.

In 2014, TNI and many of its partners and allies refocused their attention on water (re)municipalization. Soon after, the joint work expanded to other sectors, strengthening links with and among trade unions, civil society organizations, progressive academics, local authorities and public



enterprise officials from across the globe. In the introductory chapter of a book on (re)municipalization (Kishimoto et al. 2017: 11) the editors explained in plain language the reasons for the renewed attention on this specific form of (re)publicization:

You would be forgiven, especially if you live in Europe, to think that public services are by nature expensive, inefficient, maybe even somewhat outdated, and that reforming them to adapt to new challenges is difficult. It would seem natural to assume—because this is what most politicians, media and so-called experts tell us continuously—that we, as citizens and users, should resign ourselves to paying ever higher tariffs for services of an ever lower standard, and that service workers have no choice but to accept ever more degraded conditions. It would seem that private companies will inevitably play an ever larger role in the provision of public services, because everything has a price, because politicians have lost sight of the common good and citizens are only interested in their own individual pursuits.

Against this background, the editors of that book argued that increasing empirical evidence from many different countries showed that ‘(re)municipalisations generally succeeded in bringing down costs and tariffs, improving conditions for workers and boosting service quality, while ensuring greater transparency and accountability’ (Kishimoto et al. 2017: 7). At *The Future is Public Conference* that the Transnational Institute and various partners and allies organized in Amsterdam in December 2019, TNI presented 1,408 cases of de-privatized (or re-publicized) basic service provision at national, regional or municipal level in 58 countries (Kishimoto et al. 2020).

The Apparent ‘Return of the State’

At TNI we are seeking to shed new light on the diversity, significance and outlooks of public ownership models across geographical and political contexts. Many partner organizations and networks across the globe are also taking advantage of the convergence of progressive academics’ increasing interest in public services provision and the role of the state and communities, on the one hand, and enhanced social mobilization around reclaiming and democratizing public ownership on the other. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the greater attention that academia and the civil society are currently paying to questions of ownership and democracy in the provision of public services, there are still empirical lacunae and theoretical ‘missing links’ that should be addressed by future research.

Following a period in which public ownership in the provision of essential services and other areas had become a marginalized subject in social science, hundreds of new articles and books have been published in the past decade, marking a resurgence of neo-Keynesian, neo-Marxist and heterodox perspectives that assert that *the state is back*. This trend began after the 2007–08 crisis (Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012; Castro and Filgueiras 2018) and intensified during the pandemic (Golub 2020; Hameiri 2020; Rodrik 2020). Some authors have proclaimed the demise of neoliberalism (Saad-Filho 2020; Wong 2020) and others have even affirmed that we can now ‘watch neoliberalism collapsing in real-time’ (Monbiot 2020). The empirical evidence that backs the most optimistic assumptions about the revival of the public, however, overwhelmingly derives from European and North American experiences, which leads to conclusions hardly applicable to most African, Asian or Latin American countries. Drawing on our activist-research experience in diverse parts of the world, it seems to us that the apparent ‘return of the state’ has different meanings across regions, and that social scientists need to revisit the historically different forces and dynamics at play in the North and the South.

Current debates and calls for the ‘return of the state’ are not new, even though the pandemic has clearly made transparent the huge importance of the public sector in times of crises. Since the 1970s, the public sector has been the subject of many research endeavours, ranging from numerous studies on *new public management* and its sequels (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Reiter and Klenk 2018) to more recent contributions on issues such as *corporatization* (McDonald 2014; 2016) and *remunicipalization* (Kishimoto et al. 2020; Cumbers and Paul 2020; Albalade et al. 2020). Both in the North and in the South there have been heated theoretical debates (very much still relevant and alive today) around the meaning and scope of the *developmental state* (Mkandawire 2012; Fine and Pollen 2018), *state capitalism* (Alami and Dixon 2019), the *entrepreneurial state* and its importance as catalyzer of innovation (Mazzucato 2013; 2021; Castelnovo and Florio 2020), and the role of the state in industrial policy (Wade 2015; Aiginger and Rodrik 2020; Oqubay et al. 2020). Even apparently original and fresh theoretical and conceptual developments are in fact recycled ideas originally developed by researchers from the South. For instance, the notion of *the entrepreneurial state* recently mainstreamed by European academics has plenty in common with the idea of *Estado empresario* coined by Latin American researchers many years ago (Chavez and Torres 2014; Guajardo and Labrador 2015; Cortés Ramos et al. 2016).

Moreover, despite the surge of fresh research on public alternatives, many empirical questions remain unanswered. Global or transregional analyses are rare, and the internationally comparable datasets remain far from exhaustive, only include experiences from a few countries, remain



focused on a narrow set of sectors, or are not publicly accessible (Florio 2014; PwC 2015; Kwiatkowski and Augustynowicz 2015; OECD 2017; Karolyi and Liao 2017). Other related problems refer to who controls the collection and presentation of data and the usefulness of existing datasets for transformative social activism, which is why the *Public Futures* database was launched in 2021.

*Public Futures*¹ is a web-based interactive database that emerged as a collaborative initiative between TNI and the research project GLOBALMUN at the University of Glasgow. It builds on the work and research conducted by TNI in collaboration with partners since 2014. The gathered data is the result of concerted efforts of several citizen organizations, researchers and trade unions. Consequently, the database is expected to be useful as a tool that will support campaigns run by civil society organizations and other transformative purposes. GLOBALMUN (Global Remunicipalisation and the Post-Neoliberal Turn) is a research project based at the University of Glasgow and funded by the European Research Council. The ongoing five-year project investigates the implications of (re)municipalization and public ownership, interrogating the democratic potential and benefits of these socio-economic processes.

Public Enterprises in the Twenty-first Century

One particular form of public ownership, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), deserves special attention. Despite decades of market-driven policies, public enterprises (PEs) remain an essential and enduring component of the global landscape. Indeed, the share of PEs among the world's largest firms has expanded in the last two decades. In many countries, they are a crucial source of employment and play a significant role in public investment (Bernier et al. 2020). After a gap of almost three decades, between the 1980s and the beginning of this century—in which academics from all over the world became fascinated by the siren songs of privatization and liberalization—state-owned enterprises have once again become a priority issue in the international research agenda.

To date, however, there have been no systematic research efforts nor attempts to theoretically engage with the restructuring of the public entrepreneurial sector and its broader implications. In recent years a growing number of social scientists have refocused their research agenda on the potentialities of public alternatives—a trend intensified by the pandemic. Most of this work, though, has been framed by the specific conditions of the wealthier countries of the North,

reinforcing neo-colonial geographies of theory production that sideline Southern experiences.

Definitions of public or state-owned enterprises abound—see for example CIRIEC and Bernier (2014), Bernier et al. (2020), and OECD (2017). These entities exhibit a wide range of organizational forms, with varying degrees of state ownership and/or control, and presence at diverse jurisdictional levels—national, provincial, municipal, etc. Even though to a large extent the concepts of PEs and SOEs are interchangeable, they do not always convey the same idea. The latter refers only to 'ownership': this is clearly a crucial element, but it might obscure the importance of other key components, such as the public mission, the need for democratic governance structures, and the broader institutional and regulatory environments in which these companies operate.

Recently published research has observed that 'it is impossible to say how many SOEs are active and what share of the total number of companies they constitute' (Bernier et al. 2020: 7). In some countries, statistics are not reliable or widely underestimate the coverage and importance of public ownership. Still, according to recent estimates, central or local governments worldwide 'own at least 260.000 companies and possibly many more' (Bernier et al. 2020: 7). A more accurate quantification might be unattainable, but a better and more comprehensive appraisal of the spread and significance of PEs is clearly needed. Besides further mapping the coverage of these companies across regions and sectors, a more detailed typology is also required, looking at the variety of PEs and taking into account diverse historical and spatial contexts. Future research should contemplate the multiplicity of forms, structures, missions and visions driving the objectives and operations of PEs in different world regions, seeking to identify both general trends and features as well as specific regional and national variants. This approach also implies interrogating the evolution of PEs within broader shifts in governance (Jessop 2013) at national, regional and global levels, as well as engaging with ongoing theoretical discussions on alternatives to both failed state-led development strategies and market-driven economics and politics of past decades.

The editors of the encyclopaedic *Routledge Handbook of State-Owned Enterprises* have observed that, despite the surge of scholarship in the past decade, the empirical literature on public ownership 'is voluminous but disjointed', and that while the global databases built by organizations such as the OECD 'cover developed economies fairly well, significant countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia are not considered' (Bernier et al. 2020: 6). Furthermore, in spite of valuable contributions from several disciplines (economics, political science, sociology, geography, law and public administration, to name a few), theoretical developments in

¹ www.publicfutures.org



this field remain highly fragmented and dispersed and are often grounded on very specific spatial contexts.

Notwithstanding the lacunae in empirical research mentioned above, the current importance of PEs in the global economy, particularly in strategic sectors, is easy to appreciate. According to recent studies, state-owned enterprises are major players in three areas: (1) infrastructure and public services, (2) banking and finances, and (3) energy. In many countries, despite decades of privatization, PEs are still the primary providers of electricity, water, rail transport and telecommunications (Bernier et al. 2020). Additionally, public banks occupy a dominant position in several countries (McDonald et al. 2020; Marois 2021). In the energy sector, the 13 largest oil companies, in control of 75% of global reserves, are state-owned (Bernier et al. 2020).

The economic and social importance of PEs has been highlighted by the new wave of research on public alternatives that began in the past decade (Cumbers 2012; McDonald and Ruiters 2012; Chavez and Torres 2014; CIRIEC and Bernier 2014; Guajardo and Labrador 2015; Cortés Ramos et al. 2016; Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017). Much of the recent literature constitutes a direct or implicit reaction to the broken promises of privatization and the failures of restructuring, ‘right-sizing’ or corporatization of state-owned companies. In turn, a portion of that literature focuses on a somewhat naïve and acritical celebration of public ownership, which could be understood as a response to the ideology-charged theoretical framework that guided so many studies between the 1970s and the 2000s and which blindly praised privatization. A more balanced assessment is therefore required, including a critical analysis of the myriad complex factors affecting the successful performance of PEs in some countries and the dysfunctional states of other PEs in other countries, such as in South Africa (Gumede 2016; Ashley et al. 2021; Mazzucato et al. 2021). It also entails distilling the proper lessons from the mixed results of recent processes of renationalization, mainly in Latin America (Berrios et al. 2011; Manzetti 2016; Colbert 2017; Chavez 2018).

An urgent question to address is the role that PEs could play in a world striving to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic in a global context characterized by a widening gap between the affluent North and the impoverished South (IMF 2021). During the ongoing health emergency, in African, Asian and Latin American countries, the public sector in general and public utilities in particular have played an active role in driving the response to the crisis (Filgueira et al. 2020; Chavez et al. 2020; Subramaniam et al. 2021; Zondi 2021). If and how that role could be sustained in the coming years is a challenge that clearly deserves further research.

A recently published study observes that the poor performance of PEs ‘has led many to question whether the state

should hold on to these’ and argues that the key question is not whether they should exist or be privatized: ‘What is of utmost importance is *how their missions are defined and how they operate*’ (Mazzucato et al. 2021; [emphasis added]). This approach, which also guides the authors’ own research, challenges some theoretical perspectives that conceive the state as a monolithic and static entity and fail to see it as a contested space that can be reclaimed and democratized to drive socio-economic development. Drawing on theory of transformation (Wright 2010; 2019), further research should investigate the transformative potential of public ownership in combination with democratic decision-making structures, referencing concrete practices aimed in the direction of social progress and environmental sustainability, in order to better understand its potentialities and shortcomings.

Linked to these theoretical debates, the empirical evidence on the possibilities for a progressive renewal of public enterprises is growing, but the published research only covers a few selected countries (Cortés Ramos et al. 2016; Chavez et al. 2018; Hannah 2018; Comuna 2021). Therefore, the future research agenda should include an assessment of the recent evolution of PEs while exploring new ways to make public ownership more effectful, accountable, and democratic. It also means producing research that will feed ongoing theoretical debates on issues such as (a) social efficiency (Spronk 2010), challenging normative assumptions that fail to address the mission and ethos of PEs; (b) public corporate governance and accountability (Greiling and Schaefer 2020; Papenfuß 2020), looking at the governance, legal and regulatory structures for the control, administration and management of PEs; and (c) the changing nature of PEs in the context of the internationalization of utilities and other state-owned companies (Furlong 2015; Clifton et al. 2016; Cuervo-Cazurra 2018; Clifton and Díaz Fuentes 2022).

Public Ownership in Times of Climate Change

Most of recent assessments of the environmental impacts of PEs have focused on their track record as polluters, pointing in particular to the responsibilities of oil companies. This approach is understandable, considering the fact that 20 companies, of which 12 are state-owned, are responsible for more than one-third of greenhouse gas emissions (Climate Accountability Institute 2020). A recently published report argues that if the investment plans of state-owned oil companies are not reversed, there is no hope of meeting international climate goals (Manley and Heller 2021). But PEs are also key players in the electricity sector, which accounts for 40% of global energy-related emissions. Accordingly, further research on the role of the public sector



in the decarbonization of power generation is increasingly needed (Mayer and Rajavouri 2017; Benoit 2019).

Indeed, some researchers—including the authors of this article—have publicly stated that the energy transition will remain a *myth* without massive direct public investment and a rapid shift towards public ownership in the renewable sector (Steinfort 2020; Sweeney et al. 2021). Since the entire global economy is today dependent on fossil fuels, only radical and swift policy shifts away from liberalization, corporatization and privatization could make it possible to control and then reduce the rise in energy consumption and emissions. Given the current role of PEs in the oil and gas industry and in power generation, additional research on the significance of public ownership and democratic control in the context of climate change, assessing the position of PEs in relevant sectors and countries and exploring options beyond simply divesting from fossil fuels on the road to a low-carbon future, is urgently needed.

The crucial importance of democratic public ownership in times of climate change is evident in the face of the failure of the market-driven approach hegemonic in the energy sector. In short, public authorities have been massively subsidizing private and transnational corporations to incentivize investments in renewable energy. This suppressed prices and consequently, profit margins, leading to a dramatic drop in investments. As a series of recent reports produced by researchers affiliated with TNI and the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) explain (Sweeney et al. 2021), far from representing a simple lack of ambition or the absence of political will on the part of some governments, the increasingly alarming failure of the neoliberal playbook is a structural consequence of a political and economic model that conceives energy as a mere commodity and a source of private profit. This is incompatible with both a transition to renewables sources of generation at the speed that is needed and the provision of energy to ensure social welfare at the scale that the world requires. Moreover, the profit-driven approach blocks efforts to reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Understanding, debating and generating viable public alternatives to overcome this impasse should be a priority for researchers, activists and development practitioners concerned about the climate emergency and its already very obvious effects on the most vulnerable territories and social sectors.

The market-led approach has blocked the energy transition. In addition to the failure of the carbon pricing strategy as a mechanism to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, the price-based approach to promoting renewables has allowed a few commercially risk-averse investors to make a lot of money. The initial expansion of renewables was dependent on subsidies, but as costs to consumers rose, market policies shifted to prioritizing so-called capacity auctions, in which the winning bid is assured a power purchase agreement that

can last between 15 and 20 years. Under this system, falling generation costs have affected the profitability of renewables, which become less attractive to investors seeking satisfactory returns. This trend has led to an investment deficit, which is further impeding the decarbonization of key sectors of the economy (Sweeney et al. 2021).

Moreover, neither the over-reliance on prosumerism (which eliminates the old distinction between energy consumers and producers, made possible by the development of new technologies and institutional mechanisms that enable the connection of consumers to the grid in order to sell surplus solar or wind energy), nor the expected market disruption to be caused by distributed generation, have met environmental expectations. This is apparent today in the European Union and elsewhere in the world where a lot of the subsidies have been revoked and the rules governing the electricity market have been altered (Sweeney et al. 2021). The dominant approach has also failed to effectively address the problems associated with the expected ‘death spiral’ of large utilities (Ashley et al. 2021), with falling energy demand and higher infrastructure costs due to the privatization of renewable energy production. Moreover, it has failed to anticipate the serious technical challenges associated with the installation of large-scale renewables, with challenges still unresolved in countries where wind and solar already account for a significant portion of electricity supply.

Driven by generous public subsidies or by commercially risk-free long-term contracts guaranteed by governments, renewable forms of power generation have experienced impressive growth in recent years (at least when considered in isolation), including in countries of the South (Chavez et al. 2019). Nevertheless, the current growth of renewables does not reflect an energy *transition*, but rather an expansion of energy consumption and production, as global energy demand has far outpaced the growth of renewables, with no significant displacement of fossil fuels by low-carbon alternatives (Sweeney et al. 2021). Despite highly publicized government measures and overly optimistic headlines about the supposed transition, global energy demand grew by more than 20% in the past decade, and three quarters of that new demand was met by burning coal, gas and oil. As a result, GHG emissions have continued to rise (IEA 2019; 2021).

The failure of the market as the driver of the energy transition at the speed and scale of change needed to address the environmental crisis is impossible to ignore. To counter and dismantle the profit-driven paradigm, democratic publicly owned energy systems and resources must be developed. In addition to being less costly, democratized and de-commodified public energy could give working people decision-making powers over how the energy sector is organized, prioritizing essential needs, and facilitate the transfer of technologies and capacities based on social priorities rather than private gains. It would also enable the expansion and



optimization of public transport systems, as well as catalyzing energy efficiency in buildings and more options for the decarbonization of industrial infrastructure (IRENA 2022).

In short, the public alternative means the comprehensive recovery of the whole energy value chain, from generation and transmission to distribution and supply. In contexts where privatization policies have been more aggressive, privatized energy companies need to be brought back into public ownership and control. In other contexts, where the ownership of public utilities has remained in the hands of the state but managed and governed as private companies, a far-reaching democratization of those utilities is required, so that they operate under a logic of social efficiency that is not restricted to neoliberal demands for purely commercial profitability and are guided by a conception of energy as a public good and focused on social needs.

The need for a public ownership approach is now acknowledged even by mainstream international organizations that until recently had championed market-driven mechanisms in the energy sector. A recent report published by the International Renewable Energy Agency highlights the importance of public ownership and explicitly refers to arguments posed by TNI and similar organizations around a public energy transition (IRENA 2022: 122).

Future Public Alternatives

Current academic, political and media debates around the ‘return of the state’ reflect the exhaustion of what has been described as the *neoliberal reason* (Peck 2010). Today’s discussions around the present and future of public ownership seem to be a product of the unfinished search for a post-neoliberal paradigm, as manifested in multiple and ideologically diverse demands for the expansion of the public sector on a scale unseen since the 1970s. Despite the resilience of neoliberal hegemony—as it became clear in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007–08 (Crouch 2011)—the revival of public ownership signals a turning point in the evolution of global politics and economics. In this global context, TNI and many other progressive civil society activists and progressive researchers claim that *the future is public*, but only as long as the public sector becomes more democratic and sensible to the needs, demands and proposals of those segments of the world’s population most affected by the current convergence of crises.

The conjunction of the climate emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly expanded and deepening social inequalities and has showcased the failures and shortcomings of the hegemonic market-driven model. The restructuring of current economic and political structures is urgently needed to enable the shift to a socially just, equitable, democratic and environmentally sustainable world.

To this end, at the time of writing, TNI and many other progressive organizations that represent a diverse range of movements, sectors and regions are busy organizing the international conference *Our Future is Public: from global inequalities to social, economic, and climate justice*, which will take place in Santiago, Chile, from 29 November to 2 December 2022.

This conference aims at fostering public consciousness and building political momentum around the importance of universal quality public services for guaranteeing human rights and facing the many challenges of the twenty-first century. It builds on successful events held in 2019, 2020 and 2021, which brought together representatives from regional human rights bodies, UN experts, and a wide range of civil society organizations behind a common agenda for democratic public services (Kishimoto et al. 2020). The gathering in Santiago is also preceded by the launch of the *Global Manifesto for Public Services*, which intends to serve as the basis for a collective vision, a rallying cry for civil society, and a joint platform to convey a collective message to decision-makers and society at large.² The manifesto, which was launched in October 2021, up to September 2022 had been signed by 214 organizations from around the world that share the conviction that climate-saving, gender-transformative and democratic public services are possible.

The alliance that is building towards and following on from this gathering is expected to further reinforce collaboration between public authorities, civil society organizations and broader social movements to strengthen each and every public service struggle *and* position public services on a whole as foundational to democratizing the social and economic model.

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