

POULANTZAS, STATE, SOCIALISM

The preceding interview from the journal *Dialectiques* (Vol. 28, 1979) entitled “The State, the social movements, the Party” (“L’État, les mouvements sociaux, le Parti”), and the September 1979 article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* entitled “The crisis of the parties” (“La crise des partis”) are two interventions by Nicos Poulantzas which, as far as we know, have not been published in English. They are of particular value because, as far as we know, they are the last statements of his views. Poulantzas focuses his attention on three central problematics: theorization of the state, the special character of authoritarian statism, and appropriate leftist strategy. This triumvirate serves to particularize and deepen positions Poulantzas explored in his last book – *State, Power, Socialism (L’État, le pouvoir, le socialisme)*. In what follows, I offer a five-part commentary on these three points of departure.

I) The Theory of the State

The first point underlined by Nicos Poulantzas in contrast to the position adopted by Louis Althusser pertains to the *positive* aspect of the state. The capitalist state is something more than its aggregate of ideology and repression. It cultivates an economic role, shaping the relations of production through the creation of the infrastructures necessary for the functioning of capital (for example, public transport and telecommunications). It also structures for the purpose of production labor power as a whole and the ideas and institutions related to such matters (such as education and health). The activity of the state is characterized by its relative dual autonomies: autonomy as a collective capitalist against one or the other fractions of capital, and also autonomy from the totality of capitals vis à vis concessions to the laboring classes. Such concessions are twofold in character. They constitute products of popular struggles, imprinted within the structure of the state and as absorbed expenses— necessary for the reproduction of labor power and the upgrading of its productivity. Poulantzas’s second point locates class struggle as registered within the state, impacting upon its *form*. Such distinctions are key to comprehending existing differences between contemporary capitalist states and the evolution of state forms over time.

Poulantzas places particular emphasis on the value of representative institutions, which he regards as a basic vehicle, in a context of socialist transformation, for the further elaboration of political liberties. Such a view marks his reserve towards the Leninist conception of the withering away of the State. He believes that the abolition of representative institutions leads to the authoritarian evolution seen in eastern regimes. This puts him in disagreement not only with Althusser, but also with Lenin who in *State and Revolution* expresses

rejection of representative institutions, perceiving them as a constitutive element of the bourgeois state.¹ Institutions as a whole must be done away with through the development of dual power and replaced by a new form of political power based on the functioning of councils (Soviets) and direct democracy (Kouvelakis 2012: 4-5). This view of Poulantzas derives from his acceptance of the positive aspect of States—there are aspects of the bourgeois state and its representative institutions, that can be favorably mobilized to hasten socialist transition.

Poulantzas insists that it is a mistake to conceive the State as a monolithic construction with rifts in it reflecting either intra-bourgeois contradictions or the Ideological Mechanisms of the State but leaving its hard core untouched. This is an instrumentalist-essentialist view (there is an essential element to the State: that of being an instrument of the ruling class). There is an essential element to the State. It is indeed an instrument of the ruling class. In accordance with this view, either the masses are inside the State and integrated into it, or they are outside of it, remaining uncontaminated by bourgeois ideology-- outside and seeking, through the externality of the revolutionary party the State's dismantling. The conquest of State power can therefore be achieved only from outside, through a process where the development of dual power under the guidance of the revolutionary party will ensue from either a head-on clash (Gramsci's war of movement) or encirclement (war of position).

All of the above is a corollary to Poulantzas' position that the State is not an instrument but rather a relationship. The State is the condensation of a relationship of forces between classes and class fractions. A change in the relationship of forces through the growth of popular struggles may lead also to significant transformations in the mechanisms of State in a direction benefiting the popular forces. without this meaning, however, that it can drive to a radical transformation of the State. What Poulantzas calls the democratic road to socialism. It is a specific conjuncture in which authoritarian statism is predominant as a form of the capitalist state, yet the democratic road to socialism offers a mode of transcendence both of the pathogenesis of the authoritarian eastern regimes and of social democracy's desire to peacefully incorporate its precepts into an already existing capitalism. For the content of the democratic road to become comprehensible, clarifying the concept of authoritarian statism is helpful.

¹ Characteristically, Lenin says "In capitalist society, providing it develops under the most favorable conditions we have a more or less complete democracy in the democratic republic. But this democracy is always hemmed in by the narrow limits set by capitalist exploitation, and consequently always remains, in effect, a democracy for the minority, only for the propertied classes, only for the rich" (Lenin 1977: 83).

II) Authoritarian statism

Consider some basic characteristics of authoritarian statism:

1. The transference of power from the legislative to the executive branch.
2. The elevation of the administration as key decision-making center.
3. The creation of a parallel decision-making network in which all three branches of government participate. Along with the administration and representatives of monopoly capital,
4. The creation of conditions of policing which go beyond “unlawful” actions to “unlawful” attitudes in a pre-emptive level on the basis of the notion that abuses are being perpetrated in the exercise of democratic freedoms.
5. Downgrading of the role of parties from being representatives of the general will and accordingly privileged exponents of social demands vis a vis the state administration to being vehicles for transmission of the choices of political power,
6. The emergence of a neo-corporatism whereby in marginalizing the parties, the administration directly addresses the various groupings in society,
7. The upgrade of the mass media as the par excellence ideological mechanism of state (IMS).
8. The sidelining of concepts such as the general will and democracy in favor of rationalization and the technocratic logic (Boukalas 2012: 219; Jessop 2008: 131-132).

Even laws that are passed by the parliament are subjected to processing and specialization that in essence are shaped by administrative government technocrats (Poulantzas 1978: 218- 219). All this amounts to an investment in the ideological discourse of neoliberalism, which upholds the limitation of the (social) State to shield the individual from statist overreach. In reality this is all for the benefit of the capitalists who will be spared the very taxation that funds the state’s operation.

With this thesis, Poulantzas maintains that the capitalist state has moved into a new phase characterized by limitation on mass participation in decision mak-

ing through intensification of state control in every sphere of socio-political life. The reasons for this transformation are to be found in the demands brought to the surface by the economic crisis of the 70s. Essentially, in order to overcome the consequences of such a crisis, the State was required on the one hand to manage the contradictions emerging between monopoly and non-monopoly capitalism, and on the other to organize a shift of the burdens of the crisis to the popular strata. These two key activities of the State generate a series of serious consequences: such as the tendency of polarization of the new petty bourgeois class towards the working class on account of the technological changes and the dissolution of the traditional alliance between the bourgeoisie and the (new and traditional) petty bourgeoisie. The development of new social movements, emerging as they do outside the classical factory milieu, require special modes of treatment from traditional Left parties (Jessop 2011: 49).

III) The Democratic Road to Socialism

For Poulantzas, one basic aspect of the democratic transition to socialism is the radical transformation of the State that will emerge through changes in intra-state balance of power. Another aspect is the development of social movements organized on the basis of direct democracy, not delimited by the state's confines. The new social movements (for example, the student, ecological, and women's movement) unfold chiefly outside the realm of production and do not amount to any kind of alternative political proposal. They are not marginal in character because they embody a widespread popular protest which, at the same time is oriented towards the realm of politics.

The basic problem for Poulantzas is how these two aspects of transition process can be linked. In other words, the question is not the abolition of representative institutions, which are a conquest of the popular classes, and the privileging of struggles outside the State and direct democracy, as would be proposed under the a "classical" Leninist approach. But neither is it the abandonment, much less the repression, of the social movement, simply proposing reforms within the framework of representative democracy, as prescribed under the social-democratic approach.

What Poulantzas opposed was that the social movements should become implicated in the workings of the State. This could occur through their integration into the institutions of the democratized state and in that case because of the materiality of the State the movements would be incorporated and disintegrated through the machinery of administration.

The need for articulation of the practice of the social movements with the action of the traditional workers' parties has to do with the economic crisis, the overall crisis of the political party system, the emergence of authoritarian statism, and the specific crisis of the Left parties. The latter were molded within

the bipolarities party/state and trade union/firm. Such a schema fails to capture the complexity of the class struggles as established after the appearance of the new movements, which are largely multi-class in character. Faced with these new realities, the parties of the Left should not adopt a stance of exteriority towards the new movements, but rather participate actively with them. But for this to happen it would have to be preceded by significant transformation within the Left parties. They would have to acquire a positive attitude to such movements, modifying their internal organization and their relationship to the trade unions and mass organizations, accordingly. This raises two new problems: a) How can parties be linked with the movements in such a way as to avert the danger of being transformed from class parties into catch-all parties? b) How can the movements avoid losing their specificity, while also integrated into a transformed leftist party? The more so because the movements have not found the particular organizational forms that could lead to a new type of party/ mass organizations. Poulantzas' final problematic wrestled with the question of whether the necessary prerequisite for transition to democratic socialism entails continuous tension in relations between Leftist parties and social movements.

IV) Poulantzas' Contribution

Poulantzas's specific reading of the materiality of the State and his stance on Authoritarian statism embody an unequivocal advance in Marxist theory of politics. On the question of the State, Poulantzas insists on highlighting the importance of state economic mechanisms for the smooth functioning and reproduction of capitalist relations and, through their positivity. Incorporation of the dominated classes—even if the State is obliged through the intensity of the class struggle to proceed to material concessions towards them. Poulantzas insists that the State is characterized by relative autonomy both vis à vis every fraction of capital separately and vis à vis the totality of capitalists. The reason for this is that if it accepted every demand of a section of capital, a chaotic situation would be created that would damage the overall reproduction of the system. For example, excessive increase in interest rates on business loans could operate for the benefit of banking capital while also detriment of industrial and commercial capital. On the other hand, excessive reduction in interest rates would produce the diametrically opposite result. The State must therefore provide for maintenance of the relevant balance. It is the steward of such balance. Correspondingly, it must take into account workers' demands. A capitalist may want to pay a wage of 200 dollars a month to a building laborer working an 8-hour day, but such would drastically reduce the consumption potentialities of his workers, thus damaging other capitalists. In both cases the State is able to act in this way because of the relative autonomy it possesses.

Poulantzas launches a significant polemic against the thesis that the State is a tool, or at any rate a mechanism for the generation of bourgeois power, as

asserted by Althusser. For Poulantzas: “if we perceive the State to be a mechanism we instrumentalize it: we accept that it may function differently if the social class managing it is changed. By contrast, it is the separation of the State from the relations of production that enables us to understand the periodization of the capitalist state, from the classical liberal state to the welfare state and authoritarian statism and on the other hand the transition from the forms of parliamentary democracy to the forms of national emergency state (fascism, military dictatorship).”

Last but not least, I consider it imperative to highlight how Poulantzas has highlighted the specific characteristics of authoritarian statism. Authoritarian statism is the state form whose predominant tendency is monopolistic management by the state of all sectors of social and economic life, management articulated through degradation of representative institutions and formal restriction of traditional civil liberties (Poulantzas 1978: 203).

Such implications frame the contemporary State as a latter-day Janus: a formally democratic schema surviving as a relic of earlier popular struggles that had imposed institutions of representative democracy and the presence of demands by the dominated classes within the bourgeois state; together with the simultaneous emergence of a prophylactic institutional system aimed at forestalling aggravation of the class struggle created by the proliferating effects of economic crisis. The state is obliged to block all the channels that might permit intrusion by popular struggles and at the same time resolve the crisis in favour of the most powerful sectors of monopoly capital.

Poulantzas predicted the shaping and the evolution of the State up to the present day, due to the direction of authoritarian statism. Such an orientation was consolidated at the time, assuming more intense forms, starting with the war “against terrorism” at the beginning of 21st century when the attack on the Twin Towers. This functioned as a trigger for introducing legislation that, from a human-rights viewpoint, would have been unthinkable under other circumstances. Such legislation included provisions for the detention of suspects without charge, legalization of electronic surveillance through Bush’s Patriot Act, declaration of martial law in France in the autumn of 2005 in response to mobilizations in the Paris suburbs, introduction of special anti-terrorist legislation which not only criminalizes ideas but makes it possible for there to be detention without trial, testimonies from anonymous witnesses, etc. (Belandis 2012). Today, the need to manage the current international economic crisis is accelerating this repressive development even further.

V) A critical assessment

Offering up a counter-point, I will now consider a number of weaknesses in the positions of Poulantzas' later period.

To start, consider his the theory of the State. Poulantzas' thesis that the State swims amidst class struggles fails to establish gradations of significance. It merely offers a general observation that "everything is class struggle", without taking it into account that the class struggle does not start from scratch but is waged on the basis of already existing results of class struggle, i.e. enshrined and inheriting hierarchical state structures that crystallize class correlations. The problem with Poulantzas' view is that the combination of the relational approach and acceptance of the existence of popular struggles within the State in effect leads to the conception of the State as neutral arbiter. This re-authorizes a position he had previously renounced—criticizing the instrumentalist theory of the State.

Instead, the State constitutes the material outcome of a correlation of forces in the context of a specific mode of production which, operating dynamically within a social formation as a generator of social action (Bihar 1989: 96) The State intervenes actively in society and receives back the reflection of its intervention, altering, transforming or revising its policy (Sakellariopoulos 2001: 256). Yet there is a limit to the changes that may be made within the capitalist mode of production, a limit that is not unrelated to the way the relations of proprietorship of the means of production and extraction of surplus value are reproduced. What determines, on each occasion, the number and the significance of the concessions the bourgeoisie is prepared to make is the correlation of forces between the various social actors. But the concessions cannot under any circumstances exceed the abovementioned limit. To put it differently, and perhaps a little schematically, over a long historical period the dominance of a specific mode of production brings to political power a social class which establishes an institutional framework that best serves its interests, albeit not in any absolute sense. Whatever changes are made to the institutional framework, they cannot override the need for perpetuation of this mode of production. The social classes who wish to change this particular mode of production are obliged to seek the overturn of its institutional framework. In other words, the fact that the class struggle has a presence within the State does not on any account imply that the State no longer organizes the reproduction of bourgeois power. In the event that the individual militant disputes achieve a uniformity in their targeted anti-capitalist demands acquires resonance among broader popular layers, then the policy of the State towards the opposing social forces undergoes radical change. A policy of open violence is implemented. This includes overt repression of popular mobilizations, without invocation – necessarily – of any legal pretext beyond vague gestures in the direction of "law and order". This happens because within the State the so-called "hard core" has its seat, established in an entirely hierarchical and bureaucratic manner. It is char-

acterized by the predominance of an ostensibly “classless” mode of operation centered on an ideology of “common national interest” and housed primarily in the repressive apparatuses (Army, Police, National Intelligence Service), the instrumentalities for the execution of economic policy, the judiciary and the higher levels of implementation of the government’s national policy, ministry officials, technocrats in public administration, etc. (Milios 1990: 66- 67). The existence of the hard core implies the presence of a structural boundary within the State that clearly defines the “forbidden area” into which the class struggle is not allowed to penetrate. Within the State the boundary is movable (e.g. it can shift from the judiciary to the army) delineating a territory that is kept clear of influence from popular struggles (Tzarellas 2016: 147).

To conclude, it is true that struggles are registered within the state but it is also true that the State has a class character

A second point of criticism has to do with the question of representative institutions. Poulantzas, as we have seen, in contrast to Lenin, defends them vigorously. The significant issue, in my opinion, is that Poulantzas’ critique of Lenin is somewhat ahistorical. When Lenin wrote *State and Revolution*, the women’s vote (i.e. the vote of half the population) had been established in very few countries and there were very many restrictions for men also. The October Revolution gave the right to vote to women and it was gradually extended to most countries in the world, along with the lifting of the restrictions that had applied for men. Voting for the representative institutions was thus universalized. This was the outcome of class struggle and as such its significance should not be overlooked given that it is regarded by the popular classes as a right that was won through struggle (and taken away when dictatorial regimes come to power).

Apart from this there is the question of multi-partyism. Here Poulantzas’s argument is powerful from the viewpoint that what happened finally in the countries of real existing socialism under the monopoly of power of one party, a contributing factor influencing the authoritarian character of those regimes and their gradual de-legitimation and fall. The question which arises is fundamentally: What else could exist? Such signals the problem of the socialist transition and the difficulties and hurdles such transitions encounter. As Chile demonstrates, both internal and external forces will emerge that will attempt in every way to overturn revolutionary or radical reformist processes. Can these social forces and the political vehicles that serve them act uncontrollably and wage war against the construction of socialism?? Poulantzas seems uncertain on that very basic question, as he agrees that such a development offers stronger potentialities to the class opponent.² Here I agree with S. Kouvelakis that

² In so far as what is involved is no longer destruction of that apparatus and its replacement with a second power, but rather a long process of transformation, the enemy has greater possibilities of boycotting an experience of democratic socialism and of brutally intervening to cut it short» (Poulantzas 1978: 263).

the conquest of power by the many entails a situation of unfreedom for the few (Kouvelakis 2012: 12).³ Such is the essence of the dictatorship of the proletariat. As against the dictatorship of capital expressed, in a variety of forms, by the capitalist state, constitutes the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁴ Such cannot be avoided by the forces of socialist transformation, unless they wish to end up like the socialist experiments of Chile and Indonesia. Nevertheless, it is my view such outcomes do not lead ineluctably to acceptance of one-party rule.⁵ Multi-partyism, such as representative democracy can exist within the parameters of socialist transformation from the moment that the existing parties accept the fundamental provisions of the new constitution, emerging from a constitutional assembly: the socialist character of the State, collective ownership of the means of production, an internationalist anti-imperialist orientation in external policy, and creativity and an active role for workers' councils.

Another aspect, which is linked however to the role of the state but also to democracy in the period of socialist transformation, has to do with the function of the mass media. Poulantzas rightly observes that at the end of the 1970s there is a shift in the weighting of the ideological state apparatus away from the family and education to the mass media. Forty years later, with the gigantic growth of a private mass media and the establishment of private means of social networking this development becomes even more momentous in its reach. Citizens are bombarded on a daily basis with messages from the dominant mass media which essentially amount to the messages their owners wish to communicate, adapted to serve their own interests. In such a context, there can be no plausible mention of equality in the opportunity to shape opinion. On the contrary, there is outright inequality which is exemplified (also) in the course of elections to representative institutions. At the moment of voting there is indeed formal equality, which is however accompanied by perennial inequality of social/class influence. In the course of socialist transformation, it will become impossible for such a process to go forward with the overwhelming majority inveighing 24/7 against this social experimentation.

3 “Democracy for the vast majority of the people, and suppression by force, i.e. exclusion from democracy, of the and oppressors of the people – this is the change democracy undergoes during transition from capitalism to communism” (Lenin 1977: 85)

4 As Lukacs very pertinently observes in his criticism of Rosa Luxemburg “as long as class persists — that is to say: for a long time — even the later forms of organization will preserve the ‘negative’ quality of the struggle, i.e. the tendency to tear down and keep down” (Lukacs 1971: 278).

5 On this point, however, Luxemburg is right when she criticizes Lenin and Trotsky for dissolving the Constituent Assembly, abolishing the existing representative democracy. In place of the representative bodies created by general, popular elections, Lenin and Trotsky have laid down the soviets as the only true representation of political life in the land as a whole, life in the soviets must also become more and more crippled. Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. (Luxembourg 1919). I think that Luxemburg’s general attitude to political liberties is right in its orientation in so far as it involves popular strata, nevertheless questioning, for my part, the possibility in the present day of free functioning of all the mass media and free action of the bourgeois forces (see below).

Poulantzas' basic weakness is that he appears to have been excessively influenced by two special cases at the center of his attention: the end of the Southern European dictatorships and the potential entry of one or more communist parties into coalition governments with the socialists. Regarding the crisis of the dictatorships, Poulantzas was concerned by the fact that both in Portugal and in Greece their overturn started from movements within the armed forces themselves, defying their typical role as bulwarks of the regime. However, in the case of Greece what was involved was merely a transition to a typical bourgeois parliamentary regime faced with the threat of war with Turkey and humiliating defeat of Greece. In Portugal, the majority of Portuguese officers may have revolted to overturn the dictatorship, but they soon also supported orderly transition to parliamentary democracy while those who sought continuation of the revolution, like Carvalho, found themselves in prison (Lowy 2001: 499). At the same time, the three cases he had in mind for the formation of a Left government would lead, by various routes, to a similar number of defeats. In Italy the historic compromise of the Italian communist party with the Christian Democracy would lead to consensus on politics of austerity and a 4% reduction in the Communist Party vote in the 1979 elections. In Greece, the Communist Party of the Interior, of which Poulantzas was a member, was not able to play a significant role. The socialist PASOK would dominate the political life of the country for the next decades. France, which Poulantzas regarded as the most plausible setting for the beginning of a democratic route to socialism, the 1981 alliance of socialists and communists dissolved in 1983. The socialist party was transformed gradually into a neo-liberal party and the influence of the French Communist Party was curtailed drastically. The developments to follow (the fall of "really existing" socialism, the disappearance of the Non-Aligned Movement, the defeat of the various communist guerrilla movements everywhere in the world, the incorporation of the new social movements in the strategies of the State and the International Organizations, the absence of any credible alternative social prospect in the contemporary world) all suggest that the problem was something deeper than the formation of a government of the Left in conjunction with a specific form of alliance with social movements.

In any case, the preceding critique in no way negates the contribution made by Nicos Poulantzas to the progress of research into the theory of the State. His deepening of the analyses of Gramsci, the highlighting of the relative autonomy of the State, the rejection of both economism and historicism, his emphasis on the primacy of class struggle—all are inextricable elements of a militant Marxist inheritance.

References

- Belantis D., 2012, Theses on the contemporary “state of emergency” 2012, Δημήτρης Μπελαντίης-Θέσεις για το σύγχρονο “κράτος έκτακτης ανάγκης - Controversy, - Controversy, accessed 13/7/2021 (in Greek).
- Bihar A., 1989, *Entre Bourgeoisie et Proletariat*, Paris: L’Harmattan.
- Boukalas C., 2012, “Anti-terrorism and authoritarian statism” in *Poulantzas Today* (ed. C. Golemis-I. Oikonomou), Athens: Nisos Poulantzas Institute, pp. 215-231 (in Greek).
- Jessop B., 2008, *State Power. A strategic relational approach*, Cambridge: Polity press.
- Jessop B., 2011, “Poulantzas State, Power, Socialism as a modern classic” in A. Gallas, L. Brettbauer, J. Kannankulam and I. Stutzle (eds), *Reading Poulantzas*, Pontypool: Merlin Press, σελ. 41- 55.
- Kouvelakis S., “Prologue” in E. Achtsioglou, S. Mitas and I. Koumasidis, Recovering the thread. On the link between socialism and democracy, Thyrathen editions, Thessaloniki, pp. 1-15 (in Greek). https://www.academia.edu/38727483/Μεταξύ_Δένιν_και_Πουλαντζά_Σοσιαλισμός_και_δημοκρατία_σήμερα?auto=download&campaign=weekly_digest, access 9/5/2019
- Lenin V.I, 1977, *The State and Revolution*, Moscow: The Progress Publishers. .
- Lowy M., 2001, “Democracy and Socialism, Reflections inspired by an essay of N. Poulantzas” in A. Rigos and K. Tsoukalas (eds.), *Politics Today. Nikos Poulantzas and the Relevance of his work*, Athens: Themelio, pp. 495-503 (in Greek).
- Lukacs G, 1971, *History and Class Consciousness, Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, London: Merlin Press.
- Luxemburg R., 1919, *The Russian Revolution*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch06.htm>, access 9/5/2019
- Milios G., 1990, “From the destruction of the machinery of state” to the crisis and further evolution of the State”, *Theseis* 30: 59-78. (in Greek)
- Poulantzas N., 1978, *State, Power, Socialism*, London: New Left Books..
- Sakellariopoulos S., 2001, *Greece in the Post-Junta Period. Political and social developments 1974-1988*, Athens: Livanis (in Greek)
- Tzarellas D., 2016, *The Relationship Between Economics and Politics in Marxist Theory: Bourgeois State and Capitalist Crisis*. Doctoral dissertation, AtheTns: Panteio University (in Greek).