

Nicos Poulantzas: Philosopher of Democratic Socialism

Poulantzas tried to envision how the left could simultaneously champion rank-and-file democracy at a distance from the state and push for radical transformation from within it.

David Sessions Spring 2019



In his final years, Poulantzas seemed to be straining against the seams of his thinking – and perhaps even against the Marxist tradition itself.

As Marxism's old messianic character faded in the late twentieth century, too many forgot that wandering in the wilderness is often the precondition of a prophet's appearance. With the collapse of "really existing" socialism came what seemed like a permanent triumph of capitalism and the slow, grinding destruction of whatever resisted the market's advance. But the far-too-unexpected renaissance of socialism in the twenty-first century reveals not only how much ground has been lost, but how much baggage has been shed. The presence of an authoritarian communist superpower was not only an ideological ball and chain for left politics outside the Eastern bloc, but also a real geopolitical straitjacket: at the

electoral peak of European communist parties in the 1970s, the Soviet Union never kept secret that it preferred reactionaries in power in the West.

Now that this old shadow has passed and socialists are making a slow exit from the desert, they have a chance to redefine themselves for a new century. That involves taking bigger and more difficult steps, and it is not surprising that the effort has sent contemporary democratic socialists back to the 1970s, the last historical moment when socialist thinkers enjoyed even the illusion of political possibilities. In the brief window before the neoliberal era, socialists were just beginning to ask what a left politics that could win elections in a democratic system would look like. Who would its base be—what sort of alliance between classes and identity groups would it appeal to? How would it act toward a “bourgeois” political system that communists had always seen as an unredeemable instrument of class domination? Is it even possible to be a democratic revolutionary?

These questions came together in the work of Nicos Poulantzas, a Greek thinker who spent much of the 1960s and 1970s in Paris. There, Poulantzas argued that a sophisticated understanding of the capitalist state was central to a strategy for democratic socialism. Pushing as far as possible toward a Marxist theory of politics while still holding onto the central role of class struggle, Poulantzas tried to combine the insights of revolutionary strategy with a defense of parliamentary democracy against what he called “authoritarian statism.”

Recent signs of a Poulantzas renaissance, including the republication of several of his books in French and English, have a lot to do with the fact that his dual strategy for democratic socialism resonates with the task of today’s socialists: to understand how to use the capitalist state as a strategic weapon without succumbing to a long history of failed electoral projects and realignment strategies. The tensions in Poulantzas’s thinking resemble the current tensions within the left: is winning back power a matter of casting the oligarchs out of government and restoring a lost fairness, or is a more radical

transformation of the state required?

It is an open question whether Poulantzas himself was able to articulate a satisfying vision for democratic socialism. His work, nevertheless, goes straight to the heart of the problems that twenty-first-century socialism must face.

Toward a Structural Theory of the Capitalist State

Nicos Poulantzas was born in Athens in 1936. In his twenties, he began a law degree at the University of Athens as a back door into philosophy. Jean-Paul Sartre's writings became a conduit for Marxism among young Greek intellectuals since, as Poulantzas later explained, it was difficult to get the original canonical Marxist texts in a country that had suffered Nazi occupation, then civil war, then a repressive anticommunist government. After a brief stint in legal studies in Germany, Poulantzas made his way to Paris, where he was soon teaching law at the Sorbonne and mingling with the editors of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's journal *Les Temps modernes*. Poulantzas was drafted among a crop of new, younger writers for the journal, which published his earliest writings on law and the state and his engagements with British and Italian Marxists, including the Italian Communist Party's in-house theorist, Antonio Gramsci. His 1964 doctoral thesis on the philosophy of law was broadly influenced by Sartre's existentialism and the thought of Georg Lukács and Lucien Goldmann, who harmonized with the Hegelian Marxism dominant in France. Louis Althusser, then a more marginal French philosopher but soon to be famous across Europe, dissented from this Hegelian turn. Althusser's 1965 seminar, "Reading Capital," was a curious event in the history of Marxism that marked the intellectual itineraries of well-known theorists like Étienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière. The framework it launched into Marxist theory, usually described as "structuralism," was inextricable from Althusser's dual opposition to Stalinist economism and the humanism of thinkers like Sartre. In the classic Marxist schema, the economic "base" gives rise to political and ideological "superstructures"—in other words, most

everything about capitalist society, from its political institutions to its culture, are ultimately fated by the laws of economics. The Althusserians argued that, on the contrary, all of the domains of capitalist society operate quasi-independently of one another in order to more flexibly reproduce capitalist domination. Of course, they are tightly interrelated, and the economic decides “in the last instance” whether economics or something else will take priority, but, according to Althusser himself, “the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.”

Poulantzas was not a major participant in the “Reading Capital” seminar, but applied some of its theoretical principles to his own thinking about law and the state. Like Marx and Engels before him, Poulantzas believed that the fundamental role of the state is to defend class power. But the capitalist state, he argued, does this in a complex way that is obscured both by liberal and traditional Marxist theory. The capitalist state is not merely, as liberals imagined, a political structure that represents the unity of the individual members of a “civil society.” Nor is it, as in base-and-superstructure Marxism, simply an outgrowth of capital’s economic domination of labor, a straightforward tool of class power. On the contrary, liberal ideals—popular sovereignty, individual rights—are what enable the capitalist state to act in the interests of the dominant classes. Because it can pose as the representative of the people, the capitalist state is the ideal manager of the interests of the capitalist class. It can arrange compromises with the “dominated classes” necessary to establish the legitimacy of the social order while maintaining a distance from the most venal and short-sighted fractions of the capitalist class, whose natural instinct is to pursue what Marx called “the narrowest and most sordid private interests” over the well-being of the dominant classes as a whole.

Poulantzas’s shift of emphasis away from the struggle between capital and labor required him to rethink of the nature of “class” and “class struggle.” Classes, he argued, are born in traditional “economic” confrontation over wages, time, and working conditions, but they are also made politically, depending on

how they organize themselves and exert pressure on the political system. Poulantzas argued that the political in capitalist society in fact “overdetermines”—establishes a kind of complex, contradiction-

riddled hierarchy over—other kinds of class struggle by rigging things from the beginning against the dominated classes. The same legal setup that enables the capitalist state to “organize” the interests of the dominant classes simultaneously disorganizes the dominated classes: it recognizes them, legally and politically, only as isolated individuals, with no recognition of the economic position into which they have been sorted. The capitalist state’s separation of the political from the economic isolates class struggle in factories and workplaces while the real battle has already been decided in the very functioning of the political system.

As a work of militant Marxist sociology, *Political Power and Social Classes* struck out onto a terrain that, since the end of the Second World War, had grown over with new liberal theories of social groups, bureaucracy, and “industrial relations” that celebrated the postwar order as an era of growing social integration and declining class conflict. Liberal sociology tended to see the growth of bureaucracy in both private firms and state administration as an inevitable result of the complexity of social organization, a new era of “managerial” or “industrial” society that was, for some, a welcome overcoming of the competition and conflict of laissez-faire capitalism. Many, though certainly not all, liberal social scientists and technocrats took an elitist view of postwar society: the Keynesian compromise delivered real gains to the masses while keeping political power safely in the hands of rational experts.

Poulantzas was not the only figure of the late 1960s to sense that Marxist theory had to advance in order to demonstrate what most everyone to the left of social democrats believed: that the liberal orthodoxy of the epoch was a delusional obfuscation of the real nature of the new technocratic Keynesian state. In *The State in Capitalist Society*, published just months after Poulantzas’s book, the British political

scientist Ralph Miliband demonstrated empirically that the transition from the more limited liberal state to the interventionist, managerial state, had done nothing to threaten the ruling class's consolidation of power. In many cases, he argued, it wasn't even true that big business kept a distance from the state—in fact, it had a direct and constant presence in executive cabinets and the apparatuses of financial governance and economic planning. Influenced by the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, who tried to diagnose the tight interlocking of the American ruling classes in *The Power Elite* (1956), Miliband assembled a mass of evidence that different kinds of elites share social origins, cultural backgrounds, educational trajectories, and mentalities, and the exceptions were subtly indoctrinated into conforming to the rules. Whatever its compromises with the working class, the capitalist state was still the instrument of the dominant classes.

Miliband's approach to the capitalist state had certain affinities with the communist view that was Poulantzas's other primary target. For Poulantzas, this view mistakenly saw the state as a neutral infrastructure that was corrupted by who had power over it. On the contrary, he argued, it made zero difference who was in charge because the capitalist state was already a highly calibrated machine for manufacturing class domination. This was a theoretical point with big strategic consequences, Poulantzas argued: if the left imagined the state could be left intact and steered toward socialism, it was in for a rude awakening. "Lenin said that it was necessary to win state power by smashing the state machine," he declared, "and I need say no more."

Authoritarian Statism, or How We Got Neoliberalism All Wrong

As Poulantzas was debating the nature of the state in the late sixties and seventies, the postwar, post-ideological consensus was coming undone. Left-wing movements with new ideas sprouted everywhere at the same time traditional social democratic and communist parties' memberships swelled,

apparently putting them on the path to electoral power. But almost everywhere, socialism's steps toward power were answered by brutal reaction. Fears of a left-wing government led to a military coup in Greece in 1967, and the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile was crushed by a similar—and equally U.S.-supported—coup in 1973. By the end of the decade, economic crisis had further complicated the situation, heralding a long period of retreat from the use of state power for redistributive and egalitarian projects.

Poulantzas stood out among 1970s thinkers in seeing military dictatorship and the beginnings of neoliberalism as part of a single menu of options capitalist governments had in response to economic and political crisis. There is a doggedly persistent view that the post-1970s political-economic order involved a weakening of the nation-state: that big business demanded a retreat from state intervention in the economy, while the increasingly global system enabled capitalists to circumvent national government. For Poulantzas, neoliberalism was only one facet of a broader turn he called “authoritarian statism”: a combination of the managerial powers of the Keynesian state with a strategic retreat from some of its former economic functions. New state tactics included deliberate submission to anti-democratic international institutions, economic policies that made life more atomized and precarious, and intensified surveillance and repression. In extreme situations, especially in countries dependent on larger “imperialist” powers, economic crisis could lead to “exceptional forms” of capitalism, like fascism or military dictatorship. In advanced liberal-democratic countries it was likely to look like a subtler combination of selective internationalism, intensified technocracy, and police violence.

Early in his trajectory, Poulantzas had highlighted the importance of locating each nation's position in a global “imperialist chain” to make sense of the particular form its state needed to take to reproduce capitalist class power. In the 1970s, he focused particularly on the emerging dependence of

European states and their dominant classes on the U.S. imperialism, expressed in the growing investment of American capital in Europe during the 1960s. It was not enough for the European left to conclude that the crises of “monopoly capitalism” were destined to destroy it from within, as many communist parties held. For strategic reasons, they needed to understand the specific relations of imperialism and the crises they produced, including the relations between the “imperialist metropoles” of the United States and Europe. American capital, Poulantzas argued, had increased its hold over Europe through direct investment in sectors where American corporations already exercised highly consolidated international control. By doing so, they were able to exert even broader economic influence, setting the standards for raw materials, insisting on reorganizing the labor process, and imposing certain management ideologies.

The answer to Europe’s new dependence, or “satellite imperialism,” was not, as even some French liberals argued, one of the nation-state versus “multinational corporations,” or, as some leftists imagined, the chance for a coalition that aligned a national bourgeoisie with the left against the dominating forces of international capital. Despite the internationalization of the economy and the growth of supranational institutions like the European Economic Community, Poulantzas insisted that the national state was still the primary site of the “reproduction” of capitalism. The rise of supranational institutions itself was merely a part of the national state’s transformation of its role in managing the economy, facilitating economic internationalization as part of its efforts on behalf of its national ruling class.

But acting as the primary agent of internationalization put the capitalist nation-state in a position particularly vulnerable to crisis and with a limited range of responses. Internationalization weakened the unity of the domestic ruling classes, as the state acted on behalf of certain fractions of capital at the expense of others. It put the ideological unity of the nation in jeopardy by supporting lopsided economic development within its own

territory—as illustrated by our current situation where booming mega-cities power the global economy while small towns and rural areas suffer painful depopulation and decline. Such contradictions are certain to cause political tension and revolt because they shatter the myth that the state is a neutral arbiter on behalf of the whole nation. (They, might, for example, get people thinking about “nationalists” versus “globalists.”) “In a certain sense, the state is caught in its own trap,” Poulantzas writes. “It is not an all-powerful state with which we are dealing with, but rather a state with its back to the wall and its front poised before a ditch.”

“Authoritarian statism,” then, was a general term for the type of capitalist governance that had emerged in the postwar period and only been accentuated by the political and economic crises of the 1970s and the upsurge of popular militancy. He deliberately intended the term as a broad stand-in for what seemed to be the transformation of capitalist government: the massive shift in power from parliaments to the executive, the decline of traditional political parties, the shift of more and more functions of governance from representative institutions to permanent bureaucratic apparatuses controlled by executive power. It also had dimensions of direct repression: the increased use of police and military violence against domestic populations, arbitrary curtailments of civil liberties, and the rise of government on an emergency basis that transcended—sometimes permanently—the normal “state of law.”

State, Power, Socialism (1978) was Poulantzas’s last major update to his theory of the capitalist state, in which one of his major tasks was to think through the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s theory of power, and to articulate how authoritarian statism, as he later put it, brought a shift from “organized brute force to internalized repression.” Unlike Foucault, however, Poulantzas insisted that such disciplinary techniques, even though they are laundered through the state, are ultimately linked back to economic exploitation and class power.

Poulantzas had already argued that the separation of the political from the economic, with its attendant creation of

atomized legal individuals, was part of the infrastructure of the capitalist state. In *State, Power, Socialism*, he reiterated that dividing up individuals for domination in the economy is the liberal state's "primal" role; it continually institutionalizes that fracturing, reinforcing it both ideologically and materially. In other words, the state uses its own practices to make the neoliberal individual. Old markers of social hierarchy and relationships are replaced with scientific-bureaucratic norms that classify and measure people and remind them of their status as individualized social atoms.

Poulantzas's conception of the state had grown progressively more dynamic: where he had initially emphasized its functional, machine-like qualities, he now dramatized its internal fractures and divisions, and the contingencies introduced by its vulnerability to crisis and its tight links to class struggle. The state, in Poulantzas's most famous formulation, was "the condensation of a relationship of forces between classes. . . . Class contradictions are the very stuff of the state: they are present in its material framework and pattern its organization." Poulantzas's insistence on the materiality of the state's apparatuses and their reproduction of class power was thus a direct challenge to the Foucauldian theorization of power as the all-encompassing fabric of society, a kind of game in which every act of resistance was a strategic "move." "Power always has a precise basis," Poulantzas countered. The state "is a site and a center of the exercise of power, but it possesses no power of its own."

Inside and Outside the State: The Democratic Road to Socialism

Poulantzas's evolution toward a more dynamic conception of the state had important implications for socialist strategy, one of the features of his thought that has attracted the most attention from contemporary democratic socialists. In his early work, the central argument of his theory of the capitalist state—that it was a structural device for reproducing class domination—led him to affirm a traditional Leninist strategy of "smashing the state." But

as Poulantzas got more specific about the complexity of the state's apparatuses and their status as a force field of class struggle, he reached a new conclusion: if the state was a set of relationships rather than a "thing," could it really be encircled or charged like a fortress?

There was no question that, in its current form, the state acted as the organizer of class domination. But a crucial dimension of Poulantzas's theory was that, in nontrivial ways, the dominated classes were already a part of the state. In the twentieth century, the capitalist state's fundamental task of "organizing" class struggles had forced it to take major steps—not least the creation of the welfare state—toward accommodating working-class demands. While such achievements were always under threat from capital, they were still achievements that had become a real part of the state infrastructure. In the mid-1970s, as the dictatorships of Southern Europe transitioned to democracy, and as the Italian and French Communist parties wrestled with how to participate in parliamentary politics, Poulantzas began to think about how the balance of power between classes could be radically shifted so that the weak and marginal positions the dominated classes already held in the struggles over the state could be turned into bases for rupture and transformation.

For both theoretical and strategic reasons, Poulantzas reconsidered the relevance of Leninist "dual-power" strategies that aimed to build working-class counter-institutions that would eventually grow strong enough to "smash" the capitalist state. This strategy had originated in a rather ad-hoc fashion in the run-up to the Russian Revolution in 1917. For Poulantzas, looking at the political systems of Western Europe in the late 1970s, it was impossible to imagine a position entirely outside the state. While the dominated classes could and should build rank-and-file institutional power at a distance from the state, they could never be truly outside its field of power. "Today, less than ever is the state an ivory tower isolated from the popular masses," he wrote. "The state is neither a thing-instrument that may be taken away, nor a fortress that may be penetrated by

means of a wooden horse, nor yet a safe that may be cracked by a burglary: it is the heart of the exercise of political power.” The rhetoric of “smashing” the state not only failed to see that the state was not a “thing” to smash, but also implied—as it ultimately had in the October Revolution—a suppression of institutions of representative democracy that could serve as a defense against an authoritarian statism under new management. Poulantzas tried to envision a way that the left could simultaneously champion both rank-and-file democracy at a distance from the state and a push for radical transformation within it. Working within the state would aim to produce “breaks” that would polarize the highly conflictual state apparatuses toward the working class, assisted by external pressure from rank-and-file organizations. “It is not simply a matter of entering state institutions in order to use their characteristic levers for a good purpose,” Poulantzas wrote. “In addition struggle must always express itself in the development of popular movements, the mushrooming of democratic organs at the base, and the rise of centers of self-management.” Poulantzas’s attempt at an internal-external strategy aimed to walk a narrow line between a social democratic reformism that merely practiced parliamentary politics as usual and a Leninist revolutionary strategy that he saw as potentially authoritarian and in any case doomed to perpetual isolation from really-existing paths to socialism. Revolutionary critics from the 1970s to the present have argued that this was merely a reformism in disguise. Poulantzas agreed that the risk of falling into reformism was real, but suggested that such a risk was endemic to every revolutionary position in the late twentieth century. “History has not yet given us a successful experience of the democratic road to socialism,” he wrote. “What it has provided—and that is not insignificant—is some negative examples to avoid and some mistakes upon which to reflect. . . . But one thing is certain: socialism will be democratic or it will not be at all.”

A Marxism for the Twenty-First Century?

Poulantzas threw himself from a window in Paris in 1979. In his final years, he seemed to be straining against the seams of his thinking—and perhaps even against the Marxist tradition itself. He had tried to remake the theory of the capitalist state for the twentieth century and socialist strategy for an era of democratic politics. Fellow Marxists have accused him of every transgression in the book: of “scholasticism,” of reformism, of abandoning the concept of class, of remaining too attached to class struggle and the determining power of the economic. He considered his own position as far as one could go toward a Marxist politics without abandoning the fundamental commitment to the determinant role of the relations of production. “If we remain within this conceptual framework, I think that the most that one can do for the specificity of politics is what I have done,” he confessed to the British journal Marxism Today in 1979. “I am not absolutely sure myself that I am right to be Marxist; one is never sure.”

The ambiguities of the final Poulantzas could stand for the whole of his work. Is it possible to square a structural theory of the capitalist state with a dynamic sense of class struggle? Can the vision of a machine-like state whose infrastructure unfailingly spits out class domination be reconciled with one that has “no power of its own,” that merely reflects the balance of class forces in society? Can we really think about class struggle without attention to historical subjects, to the consciousness of all the past discriminations and defeats that, as Marx put it, “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living?” Is the strategy of combining struggle within the capitalist state with popular movements outside it any less of a pipe dream than all the revolutionary strategies that went before? There is certainly no question of Poulantzas answering all, or even most, of the questions that democratic socialists face today. If nothing else, his at times maddeningly abstract and incantatory writing style make his work a forbidding thicket for a reader of almost any level of preparation to penetrate. But it is also possible to argue that his very contradictions and ambiguities, which reflected an era of uncertainty that strongly

resembles our own, are precisely what makes Poulantzas a provocative source today. Even if he failed to provide satisfying answers to the challenges of the 1970s, he did a great deal to highlight them.

Above all, Poulantzas draws attention to the what the British political theorist Ed Rooksby calls “one of the oldest and most fundamental controversies in socialist thought”—that is, “how, and to what extent, capitalist state power might be utilized for socialist objectives.” Poulantzas’s conception of the capitalist state reveals the clear limits of the view typical on the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, likely to be on full display in the 2020 election campaign, that reversing American oligarchy is primarily a matter of restoring smart governance and rolling back the grip of the wealthy on the political system. At the same time, however, it is skeptical that unreconstructed revolutionism, which has a small but vocal presence in the resurgent American left, is anything but a fantasy and a path to continued marginality. A nuanced theoretical understanding of the state could serve as an antidote to both kinds of error.

Relatedly, Poulantzas’s sense of the modulations of the capitalist state through its succession of crises are a welcome challenge to simplistic narratives that have colored even left-wing understandings of twentieth-century history. By trying to understand the phases and crisis forms of a fundamentally continuous capitalist state, Poulantzas is a helpful corrective to the notion of a mid-century Keynesian period of strong state interventionism followed by a deregulated neoliberal period marked by a weakened and undermined national state. For strategic reasons, it is important that the contemporary left understand neoliberalism as neither an overall weakening of the nation-state nor a decline in its strategic importance.

Technocratic statism is, rather, a combination of state practices developed during the twentieth century, including the selective delegation of governing powers to international bodies, that have both effectively disorganized the dominated classes and provoked social resistance that now makes them sites of controversy and struggle.

And then there are his writings on the democratic road to socialism, sketches that, while providing no answers in advance, leave a series of suggestive blanks begging to be filled in. “There is only one sure way of avoiding the risks of democratic socialism,” Poulantzas concluded his final book, “and that is to keep quiet and march ahead under the tutelage and the rod of advanced liberal democracy.” We know that path has frightening risks of its own.

David Sessions is a doctoral candidate in European history at Boston College and a graduate fellow at the Clough Center for Constitutional Democracy. His essays and reviews have appeared in *The New Republic*, *Jacobin*, *Commonweal*, and elsewhere.