

*The Capitalist State:  
Reply to Nicos Poulantzas*

I very much welcome Nicos Poulantzas's critique of *The State in Capitalist Society* in the last issue of NLR: this is exactly the kind of discussion which is most likely to contribute to the elucidation of concepts and issues that are generally agreed on the Left to be of crucial importance for the socialist project, yet which have for a very long time received altogether inadequate attention, or even no attention at all. While some of Poulantzas's criticisms are, as I shall try to show, unwarranted, my purpose in the following comments is only incidentally to 'defend' the book; my main purpose is rather to take up some general points which arise from his review and which seem to me of particular interest in the investigation of the nature and role of the state in capitalist society. I hope that others may be similarly provoked into entering the discussion.

I. The Problem of Method

The first such point concerns the question of method. Poulantzas suggests that, notwithstanding the book's merits (about which he is more than generous) the analysis which it attempts is vitiated by the absence of a 'problematic' which would adequately situate the concrete data it

presents. In effect, Poulantzas taxes me with what C. Wright Mills called 'abstracted empiricism', and with which I myself, as it happens, tax pluralist writers.<sup>1</sup> Poulantzas quite rightly states that 'a precondition of any scientific approach to the "concrete" is to make explicit the epistemological principles of its own treatment of it'; and he then goes on to say that 'Miliband nowhere deals with the Marxist theory of the state as such, although it is constantly implicit in his work' (p. 69). In fact, I do quite explicitly give an outline of the Marxist theory of the state<sup>2</sup> but undoubtedly do so very briefly. One reason for this, quite apart from the fact that I have discussed Marx's theory of the state elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> is that, having outlined the Marxist theory of the state, I was concerned to set it against the dominant, democratic-pluralist view and to show the latter's deficiencies in the only way in which this seems to me to be possible, namely in empirical terms. It is perfectly proper for Poulantzas to stress the importance of an appropriate 'problematic' in such an undertaking; and it is probably true that mine is insufficiently elucidated; but since he notes that such a 'problematic' is 'constantly implicit in my work', I doubt that my exposition is quite as vitiated by empiricist deformations as he suggests; i.e. that the required 'problematic' is not absent from the work, and that I am not therefore led 'to attack bourgeois ideologies of the State whilst placing [myself] on their own terrain' (p. 69).

Poulantzas gives as an example of this alleged failing the fact that, while I maintain against pluralist writers the view that a plurality of élites does not exclude the existence of a ruling class (and I do in fact entitle one chapter 'Economic Elites and Dominant Class') I fail to provide a critique of the ideological notion of élite and do therefore place myself inside the 'problematic' which I seek to oppose. Here too, however, I doubt whether the comment is justified. I am aware of the degree to which the usage of certain words and concepts is ideologically and politically loaded, and indeed I provide a number of examples of their far from 'innocent' usage;<sup>4</sup> and I did in fact, for this very reason, hesitate to speak of 'élites'. But I finally decided to do so, firstly because I thought, perhaps mistakenly, that it had by now acquired a sufficiently neutral connotation (incidentally, it may still have a much more ideological ring in its French usage than in its English one); and secondly because it seemed, in its neutral sense, the most convenient word at hand to suggest the basic point that, while there do exist such separate 'élites' inside the dominant class, which Poulantzas describes by the admittedly more neutral but rather weak word 'fractions', they are perfectly compatible with the existence of a dominant class, and are in fact parts of that class. He suggests that the 'concrete reality' concealed by the notion of 'plural élites' can only be grasped 'if the very notion of elite is rejected' (p. 70). I would say myself that the

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<sup>1</sup> *The State in Capitalist Society*, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 93.

<sup>3</sup> 'Marx and the State' in *The Socialist Register*, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. 'Governments may be solely concerned with the better running of "the economy"'. But the descriptions of systems as "the economy" is part of the idiom of ideology, and obscures the real process. For what is being improved is a *capitalist* economy; and this ensures that whoever may or may not gain, capitalist interests are least likely to lose' (op. cit. p. 79. Italics is original).

concrete reality can only be grasped if the concept of *élite* is turned against those who use it for apologetic purposes and shown to require integration into the concept of a dominant or ruling class: i.e. there *are* concepts of bourgeois social science which can be used for critical as well as for apologetic purposes. The enterprise may often be risky, but is sometimes legitimate and necessary.

However, the general point which Poulantzas raises goes far beyond the use of this or that concept. In fact, it concerns nothing less than the status of empirical enquiry and its relationship to theory. In this regard, I would readily grant that *The State in Capitalist Society* may be insufficiently 'theoretical' in the sense in which Poulantzas means it; but I also tend to think that his own approach, as suggested in his review and in his otherwise important book, *Pouvoir Politique et Classes Sociales*, a translation of which into English is urgently needed, errs in the opposite direction. To put the point plainly, I think it is possible, in this field at least, to be so profoundly concerned with the elaboration of an appropriate 'problematic' and with the avoidance of any contamination with opposed 'problematics', as to lose sight of the absolute necessity of empirical enquiry, and of the empirical demonstration of the falsity of these opposed and apologetic 'problematics'. Poulantzas declares himself not to be against the study of the 'concrete': I would go much farther and suggest that, of course on the basis of an appropriate 'problematic', such a study of the concrete, is a *sine qua non* of the kind of 'demystifying' enterprise which, he kindly suggests, my book accomplishes. After all, it was none other than Marx who stressed the importance of empirical validation (or invalidation) and who spent many years of his life in precisely such an undertaking; and while I do not suggest for a moment that Poulantzas is unaware of this fact, I do think that he, and the point also goes for Louis Althusser and his collaborators, may tend to give it rather less attention than it deserves. This, I must stress, is not a crude (and false) contraposition of empiricist versus non- or anti-empiricist approaches: it is a matter of emphasis—but the emphasis is important.

## 2. The Objective Nature of the State

Poulantzas's critique of my approach also underlies other points of difference between us. But before dealing with these, I should like to take up very briefly what he calls 'the false problem of managerialism'. Managerialism *is* a false problem in one sense, not in another. It is a false problem in the sense that the 'motivations' of managers (of which more in a moment) are not such as to distinguish the latter in any fundamental way from other members of the capitalist class: i.e. he and I are agreed that the thesis of the 'soulful corporation' is a mystification. But he also suggests that I attribute to the managers 'an importance they do not possess' (p. 72). This seems to me to underestimate the significance of the 'managerial' phenomenon in the internal organization of capitalist production (which, incidentally, Marx writing a hundred years ago, did not do).<sup>5</sup> Poulantzas for his own part chooses to

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<sup>5</sup>In fact, *his* formulations may go rather further than is warranted: 'A large part of the social capital is employed by people who do not own it and who consequently

stress 'the differences and relations between fractions of capital'. But while these *are* important and need to be comprehended in an economic and political analysis of contemporary capitalism I would argue myself that the emphasis which he gives to these differences and relations may well obscure the underlying cohesion of these various elements—and may well play into the hands of those who focus on these differences in order to deny the fundamental cohesion of the capitalist class in the conditions of advanced capitalism.

More important, however, Poulantzas also suggests that I attach undue importance, indeed that I am altogether mistaken in attaching *any* importance to the 'motivations' of the managers. Thus, 'the characterization of the existing social system as capitalist in no way depends on the motivations of the conduct of the managers . . . to characterize the class position of managers, one need not refer to the motivations of their conduct, but only to their place in production and their relation to the ownership of the means of production' (p. 71). I think myself that one must refer to both not because managerial 'motivations' are in themselves critical (and Poulantzas is mistaken in believing that I think they are)<sup>6</sup> but precisely in order to show why they are not. By ignoring them altogether, one leaves a dangerous gap in the argument which needs to be put forward against managerialist apologetics. This is why, I take it, Baran and Sweezy, for instance, devote a good deal of attention to 'business behaviour' in their *Monopoly Capital*.

This issue of 'motivations' also arises, in a much more significant and far-reaching way, in connection with what I have called the state élite and its relation to the ruling class. Poulantzas notes that, in order to rebut the ideologies which affirm the neutrality of the state, I bring forward evidence to show that members of that class are themselves involved in government, and also show the degree to which those who man the command posts of the various parts of the state system are, by social origin, status, milieu (and, he might have added, ideological dispositions) connected with the ruling class. But, he also adds, this procedure, while having a 'capital *demystifying* importance',<sup>7</sup> is 'not the most significant one' (p. 72). His reason for saying this is so basic that I must here quote him at some length: 'The relation between the bourgeois class and the State is an *objective relation*. This means that if the *function* of the State in a determinate social formation and the *interests* of the dominant class in this formation *coincide*, it is by reason of the system itself (p. 73).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the members of the State apparatus 'function according to a specific internal unity. Their class origin—

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tackle things quite differently than the owner' (*Capital*, Moscow 1962, III, p. 431) 'This is the abolition of the capitalist mode of production within the capitalist mode of production itself, and hence a self-dissolving contradiction, which *prima facie* represents a mere phase of transition to a new form of production' (ibid. p. 429).

<sup>6</sup> e.g. 'Like the vulgar owner-entrepreneur of the bad old days, the modern manager, however bright and shiny, must also submit to the imperative demands inherent in the system of which he is both master and servant; and the most important such demand is that he should make the "highest possible" profits. Whatever his motives and aims may be, they can only be fulfilled on the basis of his success in this regard.' (*The State in Capitalist Society*, p. 34.)

<sup>7</sup> Italics in text.

<sup>8</sup> ditto.

*class situation*—recedes into the background in relation to that which unifies them—their *class position*: that is to say, the fact that they belong precisely to the State apparatus and that they have as their *objective function* the actualization of the role of the State. The totality of this role coincides with the interests of the ruling class' (pp. 73–4).<sup>9</sup>

I should like to make two comments about this. The first and less important is that Poulantzas greatly under-estimates the extent to which I myself do take account of the 'objective relations' which affect and shape the role of the State. In fact, I repeatedly note how government and bureaucracy, irrespective of social origin, class situation and even ideological dispositions, are subject to the structural constraints of the system. Even so, I should perhaps have stressed this aspect of the matter more.

But however that may be, I believe—and this is my second point—that Poulantzas himself is here rather one-sided and that he goes much too far in dismissing the nature of the state élite as of altogether no account. For what his *exclusive* stress on 'objective relations' suggests is that what the state does is in every particular and at all times *wholly* determined by these 'objective relations': in other words, that the structural constraints of the system are so absolutely compelling as to turn those who run the state into the merest functionaries and executants of policies imposed upon them by 'the system'. At the same time, however, he also rejects the 'long Marxist tradition (which) has considered that the State is only a simple tool or instrument manipulated at will by the ruling class' (p. 74). Instead, he stresses the 'relative autonomy of the state'. But all that this seems to me to do is to substitute the notion of 'objective structures' and 'objective relations' for the notion of 'ruling' class. But since the ruling class is a dominant element of the system, we are in effect back at the point of total subordination of the state élite to that class; i.e. the state is not 'manipulated' by the ruling class into doing its bidding: it does so autonomously but totally because of the 'objective relations' imposed upon it by the system. Poulantzas condemns the 'economism' of the Second and Third Internationals and attributes to it their neglect of the State (p. 68). But his own analysis seems to me to lead straight towards a kind of structural determinism, or rather a structural super-determinism, which makes impossible a truly realistic consideration of the dialectical relationship between the State and 'the system'.

For my own part, I do believe that 'the state in these class societies is primarily and inevitably the guardian and protector of the economic interests which are dominant in them. Its "real" purpose and mission is to ensure their continued predominance, not to prevent it.'<sup>10</sup> But I also believe that within this 'problematic', the state élite is involved in a far more complex relationship with 'the system' and with society as a whole than Poulantzas's scheme allows; and that at least to a certain but definite and important extent that relationship is shaped by the kind of factors which I bring into the analysis and which Poulantzas dismisses as of no account.

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<sup>9</sup> ditto.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit. p. 265.

The political danger of structural super-determinism would seem to me to be obvious. For if the state élite is as totally imprisoned in objective structures as is suggested, it follows that there is *really* no difference between a state ruled, say, by bourgeois constitutionalists, whether conservative or social-democrat, and one ruled by, say, Fascists. It was the same approach which led the Comintern in its 'class against class' period fatally to under-estimate what the victory of the Nazis would mean for the German working-class movement. This is an ultra-left deviation which is also not uncommon today; and it is the obverse of a right deviation which assumes that changes in government, for instance the election of a social-democratic government, accompanied by some changes in the personnel of the state system, are sufficient to impart an entirely new character to the nature and role of the state. Both are deviations, and both are dangerous.

It is the same sort of obliteration of differences in the forms of government and state which appears in Poulantzas's references to the 'relative autonomy' of the state. He suggests that Marx designated Bonapartism as the 'religion of the bourgeoisie', and takes Marx to mean that Bonapartism was 'characteristic of *all* forms of the capitalist state' (p. 74).<sup>11</sup> I stand to be corrected but I know of no work of Marx which admits of such an interpretation; and if he had said anything which did admit of such an interpretation, he would have been utterly mistaken. For in any meaningful sense of the concept, Bonapartism has *not* been characteristic of all forms of the capitalist state —rather the reverse. What Marx did say was that Bonapartism in France 'was the only form of government possible at the time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation'.<sup>12</sup> It is perfectly true that all states are in some degree 'autonomous', and Poulantzas misreads me when he suggests that I 'finally admit this autonomy only in the extreme case of Fascism' (p. 74).<sup>13</sup> What I do say is that Fascism is the extreme case of the state's autonomy in the context of capitalist society, which is not at all the same thing—and that between the kind of autonomy which is achieved by the state under Fascism, and that which is achieved by it under the conditions of bourgeois democracy, there is a large gulf, which it is dangerous to underestimate. This scarcely leads me to an apotheosis of bourgeois democracy. It leads me rather to say that 'the point of the socialist critique of "bourgeois freedoms" is not (or should not be) that they are of no consequence, but they are profoundly inadequate, and need to be extended by the radical transformation of the context, economic, social and political, which condemns them to inadequacy and erosion.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Italics in text.

<sup>12</sup> *The Civil War in France*, in *Selected Works*, (Moscow, 1950) I, p. 469.

<sup>13</sup> It is, incidentally, this recognition on my part of the 'relative autonomy' of the state which leads me, *inter alia*, to suggest that Poulantzas also misreads me when he states that my analysis 'converges with the orthodox communist thesis of *State monopoly capitalism*, according to which the present form of the State is specified by increasingly close inter-personal relations between the monopolies and the members of the State apparatus, by the "fusion of State and monopolies into a single mechanism"' (p. 71). In fact, I think this scheme to be *simplexite* and explicitly question its usefulness (*The State in Capitalist Society*, p. 11, ft. 2).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

### 3. The Ideological Institutions

Poulantzas's references to the sections of my book devoted to ideology also raises points of great substance. He suggests that both he and I 'have ended by considering that ideology only exists in ideas, customs and morals without seeing that ideology can be embodied, in the strong sense, in *institutions*' (p. 76).<sup>15</sup> I myself must plead not guilty to the charge. What he, again most generously, calls my 'long and excellent analyses' of the subject largely focus precisely on the institutions which are the purveyors of ideology, and on the degree to which they are part and parcel, as institutions, of the general system of domination—and I do this in relation to parties, churches, pressure groups, the mass media, education, and so on. What value my analyses may have lies, I think, in my attempted demonstration of the fact that 'political socialization' *is* a process performed by institutions, many of which never cease to insist on their 'un-ideological', 'un-political' and 'neutral' character.

The much more important point is that Poulantzas suggests that these institutions 'belong to the system of the State' and he proposes the thesis that this system of the State 'is composed of *several apparatuses or institutions* of which certain have a principally repressive role, and others a principally ideological role', and among these he lists the Church, political parties, unions, the schools, the mass media and, from a certain point of view, the family (p. 77).<sup>16</sup>

I am extremely dubious about this. I suggest in *The State in Capitalist Society* that the state is increasingly involved in the process of 'political socialization' and that it plays, in certain respects, an extremely important role in it.<sup>17</sup> But I also think that, just as it is necessary to show that the institutions mentioned earlier *are* part of a system of power, and that they are, as Poulantzas says, increasingly linked to and buttressed by the state, so is it important not to blur the fact that they are not, in bourgeois democracies, part of the state but of the political system. These institutions *are* increasingly subject to a process of 'statization'; and as I also note in the book, that process is likely to be enhanced by the fact that the state must, in the conditions of permanent crisis of advanced capitalism, assume ever greater responsibility for political indoctrination and mystification. But to suggest that the relevant institutions are actually part of the state system does not seem to me to accord with reality, and tends to obscure the difference in this respect between these political systems and systems where ideological institutions are indeed part of a state monopolistic system of power. In the former systems, ideological institutions do retain a very high degree of autonomy; and are therefore the better able to conceal the degree to which they do belong to the system of power of capitalist society. The way to show that they do, is not to claim that they are part of the state system, but to show how they do perform their ideological functions outside it; and this is what I have tried to do.

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<sup>15</sup> Italics in Text.

<sup>16</sup> ditto.

<sup>17</sup> Op. cit. pp. 183 and ff.

Finally, Poulantzas notes that my book says very little by way of 'political conclusions'. If by 'political conclusions' is meant 'where do we go from here?' and 'how?', the point is well taken. I have no difficulties in suggesting that the aim of socialists is to create an 'authentically democratic social order, a truly free society of self-governing men and women, in which, in Marx's phrase, the state will be converted "from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it"<sup>18</sup>. But this obviously raises very large and complex questions which I did not believe it possible to tackle, let alone answer with any kind of rigour, at the tail-end of this particular book.

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<sup>18</sup> Op. cit. p. 277.