

POULANTZAS AND MARXIST THEORY

By Peter Beilharz



Nicos Poulantzas

For Athol — who dialogues with me still

— Peter Beilharz

Nicos Poulantzas died on October 3, 1979 in Paris, aged 43. He was the author of six books, theoretical works which most people could not afford, let alone understand. Socialists should not feel obliged to mourn the dead simply because the world — or Parisian fashion — tells us they were Great. So why mourn Poulantzas? Other recent deaths, such as that of Marcuse, have not been unexpected. The entire generation of socialists which has survived two wars is now disappearing; we can expect many more theoretical obituaries in the next decade. Though older than some of us, Poulantzas was of our generation. He spoke to those of us now in our twenties and thirties. And as Paul Patton pointed out in his obituary (*Tribune*, November 7) Poulantzas served as a point of introduction to the classics of marxism, or at least to a particular view of them.

What was it that Poulantzas had to say to us? Why was it important? What was his effect on the Australian left? We can proceed to these questions through the necessary historical context. The young Poulantzas left Athens for Paris where he examined law as a follower of Lukacs. By 1965 Paris, renowned for its vulnerability to theoretical fashion,

was swept by the new trend in marxism initiated by Louis Althusser. Poulantzas followed in the wake of this wave without conspicuously joining the Althusserian entourage.

Unlike the others (e.g. Balibar), he did not co-write or co-publish with Althusser, but nevertheless came to be thought of as one of them. Poulantzas' distance from Althusser was an important one, because those directly associated with Althusser later found it difficult to modify their positions. Poulantzas did not publicly proclaim himself to be an Althusserian, and thus was more readily able to cast off the Althusserian shell when it became uncomfortably restricting.

Most English-speaking marxists came upon Poulantzas in the early 'seventies. Poulantzas had written a moderately scathing review of Ralph Miliband's book *The State in Capitalist Society* in *New Left Review*. New Left Books then translated Poulantzas' own book on the state, *Political Power and Social Classes*. Other translations followed, notably *Fascism and Dictatorship* and *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*. These works witnessed a certain gradual development in which Poulantzas became progressively less structuralist. The main limitation of his study of fascism was that the living histories of the Italian and German working classes were forced into inadequate structuralist schemes. The most

notorious of these schemes was the so-called "new petty bourgeoisie". NPB in structuralist jargon. The "NPB" was a strawman category which soaked up problem cases which could not be incorporated elsewhere in the set of structures. But Poulantzas was nevertheless able to distance himself from Althusser, and particularly from Althusser's mechanical position on the state (again constructed in terms of RSA's, ISA's, CMP's and other kinds of BS).

Poulantzas' study of class and his analysis of dictatorships in crisis saw further developments in the historicisation of marxist politics. In his last years this growing realism meant that Poulantzas rejected his structuralist standoffishness and became a left euro-communist. His final book, *State, Power, Socialism* contains many indicators of substantial developments yet to come. Poulantzas came to the conclusion that the leninist theory of revolution was not only obsolete but was also inadequately thought out in the first place. He came to reject the structuralist notion of the state as a monolithic bloc free of contradictions, arguing instead that it was an ensemble of relations between people and other people, and between people and things. The ritualistic references to class struggle in his earlier work became more concrete.

If the state was not a "thing" and could not therefore be "smashed" some alternative response to everyday politics must be arrived at. In standard marxist terms Poulantzas was arguing for "revolution from within", not precluding the possibility of violence but avoiding the old argument that a vanguard would seize state power on behalf of a passive majority who would of course remain passive under the new regime. But this last book was not free from elements of despair either. Poulantzas was casting off the security which structuralist-marxism had to offer and therefore had to admit that after all the prospects for socialism were not good. No doubt such elements of political despair participated in Poulantzas' eventual decision to take his life.



Marxists have always had a soft spot for science, for certainty. We can sleep better if we believe that history is on our side. This is

an important factor in explaining the great popularity of Althusser in the English-speaking world. It is comforting to feel that we have all the answers, and anyone knows that Althusserians have all the answers. Like strangers overseas they find all solved in a phrase-book which closely resembles the Glossary to *Reading Capital*. It is still something of a heresy to suggest that Althusserian marxism has had a negative effect on the Australian left. The new Australian left was taken to the cleaners by Althusser but nevertheless took out franchise for the exclusive sale of his wares. Anyone looking up back numbers of *Australian Left Review* or *Intervention* will see clear evidence of this. It remains a real and living problem, for a reformed Althusserian has about as much credibility as a humanist stalinist.

Structuralist-marxists rarely paused to consider the real nature of their project. Structuralism began in France in the study of linguistics. People like Saussure argued that language was like a game of chess, there were rules to its system and basic units in its composition. Saussure, however, did not believe that these understandings could be transferred to the study of history or of economics. The originator of structuralism, it seems, was one of the few who understood that the study of society could not be reduced to the study of its structures. In contact with the Prague school another Frenchman, Levi-Strauss, denied Saussure and applied structural linguistics to the study of anthropology. Levi-Strauss claimed that his system had "practically unlimited capacity for extension". Levi-Strauss' own work was, however, quite productive; his studies were still relatively "innocent" in terms of what was to follow. Other Parisians such as Barthes also displayed that structuralism could do much to enlighten us as to the meaning of social signs.

But people like Althusser could not enlighten us much, for they wanted to universalise structure into what they understood as Science, i.e. Historical Materialism. A long, long way from Saussure, Althusser sought to explain the world as a set of structures which speak through humans. Althusser's project was based on the death or denial of the subject and the theorisation of the world as an immovable object. After the failure of May

1968 such a theory had an obvious appeal to disillusioned marxists. Structuralist marxism had a peculiar appeal to the Eng! speaking left because of its fundamental positivism. Like any other theory with a claim to strict scientificity, structuralist-marxism rested on a belief in absolute scientific truth. History could be known, and known objectively, known without reference to us as particular participating subjects. Such claims to objectivity unite the entire history of bourgeois thought. If the world of objects is in permanent control of the world of subjects, the project of changing the world is impossible.

How can it be that the Australian left was taken for such a ride. Perhaps it can be explained this way. Structuralist marxism was never much more than a sophisticated variation on the Comintern base-superstructure schema. We should know the tune well enough: rub any Althusserian up the wrong way and you hear it with the order and precision of a juke-box. A social formation is a combination of three levels (?), the economic, the political and the ideological. The economy is the primary determinant (?) i.e. the last instance (?) and the other levels are relatively autonomous (?) and capable of overdetermining (?) the other levels. On the economic level forces of production break through relations of production and the Great Day arrives. If it arrives, it has been explained; if it fails to arrive then we can blame relative autonomy. The alternative outcomes of the scheme are either the reduction of everything to the economy, in which case the last instance comes all the time and revolution is automatic; or the severance and absolute autonomy of levels. Nothing has been explained except that society exists of three building blocks which might lie directly one on the other or which might be cushioned by layers of relative autonomy.

What kind of marxism is this? What can be the place of class struggle here? What is the place of the subject (i.e. people) in its series of architectural structures? This is politics made easy: but not so if marxism is a politics which seeks to actively change the world so that people can become more autonomous or free from domination. If the capitalist social formation is built of bricks, it is held together by the living mortar of hegemony. The

politics of bourgeois consensus then moves into focus. Poulantzas was able to work his way out of the Althusserian Scheme because he chose to focus on the "level" of politics.

Notions that the world reduces to sets of immovable or self-moving structures cannot theorise the transition from one social formation (capitalism) to another (socialism). Thus Althusser's appeal for sociologists: structuralist marxism explains not how we can overcome capital but on the contrary how it is eternal. In the structuralist scheme capital quietly reproduces itself unless a non-correspondence between forces and relations of production occurs. Need the futility of this kind of automatic marxism still be pointed out? How long will it take for us to accept that socialism only makes sense in terms of the conscious struggles which we and other progressive forces take up?

Poulantzas' work was a long process of dialogue from within the Althusserian framework with Gramsci and Lukacs. It is this dialogue which enabled Poulantzas to work his way out of the structuralist labyrinth. Gramsci is important for Poulantzas because he was the first marxist to give serious reflection to politics as the decisive realm. For Gramsci the problem was one of facilitating the unity and autonomy which might allow people to take hold of their futures. Any rallying point which emerged in spontaneous struggles should be the contact point for marxists; the world could be responded to only in its own terms, "common sense" could be transformed into "good sense". The working class could come to understand how it had made the world of capital which in turn made it. People could come to understand the world in the process of changing it.

Lukacs has a different importance for marxism. For Lukacs, as for Gramsci, the world is a world in motion. There can be no point in inquiring into its origin, into what comes first chicken-and-egg style. Men and women have never known the world in itself, they have only known it as they have constituted it. As Marx first understood in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, politics begins with the world as it is. Both materialism and idealism in the old sense are transcended, because neither material forces nor ideas can

be elevated to the status of prime mover if we are to maintain this focus on the combination of object and subject.

Marxism's point of departure then is not the sham objectivity of Althusser but the practices of real subjects in the world. For marxism there is but one order of reality which can be understood in different ways. There is no room in marxism for nonsense about the "real world" and the "thought world". The world can be understood in its subjective or everyday manifestations, or it can be understood critically or objectively. This means not that there are two worlds but that there are two ways of understanding one world, understanding it gut-wise or intellectually. Marxist politics is about the everyday world and the problems involved in changing it; marxist critique is concerned with decoding the chaos of everyday so that it can be systematically understood. Taken as a whole marxism is the project in which changing the world and understanding it can be combined. The development of marxist politics has been delayed for so long because people like Althusser have blurred this distinction. They have acted as though it were enough for marxist intellectuals to understand the world; but we know well that our object must be to understand and change it.

Lukacs also made mistakes; in particular he read the unity of subject and object as an identity. He thought that the subject, the working class, could come to understand and overcome its object, capital, simply by coming into contact with it in the labor-process. This was a different kind of automatic marxism, one based on the misconstruction of the correct principle of combination of subject and object. Structuralist-marxism in comparison only ever attempted to explain the objective world of structures, assuming that its subjective aspects were either silenced or alternatively were the mere consequences of structures. The subject here could only be reduced to victim or to Pavlovian outcome. In exaggerating the strength of the objective world the Althusserians reproduced the logic of the fetish of commodities, allowing the reproduction of a world view in which objects or structures are treated as the insuperable commanders of their producers, who must toil on endlessly beneath them.

Poulantzas began within this framework but was able to work his way out of it by focusing on politics and on the subjective moment. He was thus able to achieve something of a balance, a theoretical perspective in which we, the subjects of bourgeois society, can become conscious of its objective structures and be able to respond to these structures with a view to transforming them. Poulantzas' transition was slow and painful. Its most grating symptom was Poulantzas' difficulty in explaining class. Poulantzas began explaining class with the structuralist categories of structure and bearer. He misused the productive-unproductive labor debate to determined the working class as that class which produces material commodities. Only later did he see that whatever the situation in terms of objective class structure, class exists politically only in class struggle, when people take up positions regardless of whether they produce commodities as things or services. Poulantzas only realise late that class is therefore crucially subjective for marxist politics. In returning to these political/subjective interests he again ran the risk of becoming one-sided, of arguing as though the world were a world of subjects without objective structural limits and characterisations. He made the mistake of theorising class separately from capital, of abstracting from the objective moment, mode of production and labor-process.

His work on the state likewise avoided the accumulation process and the state's role in it. But what developments we witness here in comparison to the drone of the Althusserians! Poulantzas came to reject the classical reform-revolution dichotomy precisely because of the one-sidedness of these positions, which presume that revolution is either a concrete objective seizure of power or that socialism is the gradual internal accumulation of improvements.

Needless to say, not only Gramsci and Lukacs but also the "Italian Road" lurks behind these developments. Poulantzas came to argue that the autonomous movements were central to the struggle for socialism, that agitation and participation was necessary in all aspects of contemporary political life. In this context the Historical Compromise must be seen as a compromise

with established powers at the expense of autonomous struggles. Whatever the case with the PCI, Poulantzas was moving beyond the traditional dualism of party communism and council communism, beginning to visualise the struggle for socialism as a systematic exercise in prefigurative pluralism, a struggle in which only the particular victims of an oppression could respond to it by articulating their interest.

Poulantzas indeed introduced us to the classics of marxism. But this in itself does not set Poulantzas apart as a man who dared to think. People like Mandel, for example, introduce many to Trotsky, but do little more as neither the originator nor the contemporary have much to say to us. Poulantzas' great merit was to reintroduce the present generation not only to the classics of marxism-leninism but also to the innovative theorists of marxism's political tradition, Gramsci and Lukacs, and in the process of this introduction to contribute many new insights himself. Poulantzas' own uneven development was the development from structure to subject. His last writings suggest that he was beginning to combine them in a way which marxism has always pursued. Like many great forerunners Poulantzas has passed us the baton. If we believe that we must both understand and criticise and respond to and change the world, then the real struggle still remains before us. Poulantzas' place in the history of marxist theory was that of a rare educator who understood that in these senses the majority of marxists still need educating.

Further Reading

Books by Poulantzas include *The Right of Hot Pursuit in International Law* (The Netherlands, Sijthoff 1969); *Political Power and Social Classes* (1973), *Fascism and Dictatorship* (1974), *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (1975), *The Crisis of the Dictatorships* (1976) and *State, Power, Socialism* (1978). The last five books were published by New Left Books of London.

Articles by Poulantzas include "Marxist Political Theory in Great Britain", *New Left Review* 43. The debate with Miliband conducted in *New Left Review* 58/59 is reprinted in R. Blackburn (editor) *Ideology in Social Science* (London 1973); the initial debate was continued in *New Left Review* 82 and 95. Several other of Poulantzas' articles were incorporated into the books listed above.

Interviews with Poulantzas can be found in *Socialist Review* 38 (1978), *Marxism Today*, July 1979 and *Eurored* 6.

Responses to Poulantzas' work on fascism include A. Rabinach, "Poulantzas and the Problem of Fascism", *New German Critique* 6; J. Caplan, "Poulantzas as Historian", *History Workshop* 3 (1977); A. Cutler, "Fascism and Political Theory", *Theoretical Practice* 2 (1971); and M. Kelly "Dos Santos and Poulantzas on Fascism", *Insurgent Sociologist* 7/2 (1977).

On Poulantzas and class, see G. Carchedi, *On the Economic Identification of the New Middle Classes* (London 1978); E. Wright, "Class Boundaries", *New Left Review* 98; B. Hindess, "Classes and Politics in Marxist Theory", in G. Littlejohn et al (editors) *Power and the State* (London 1978); A. Hunt (editor) *Class and Class Structure* (London 1977); P. Walker (ed.) *Between Labor and Capital* (Boston 1979); T. Johnson, "The Structural Determination of Social Class", *Economy and Society* 6/2 (1977); E. Laclau, "The Specificity of the Political", *Economy and Society* 4/1 (1975); G. Ross, "Marxism and the New Middle Classes", *Theory and Society* 5/2 (1978).

On Poulantzas and the State, good overviews and contexts can be found in B. Frankel, *Marxian Theories of the State: A Critique of Orthodoxy* (Arena Monograph 3, 1978), and in B. Jessop, "Recent Theories of the Capitalist State", *Australian Left Review* 68 (1979). Specific critiques can be found in A. Bridges, "Poulantzas and the Marxist Theory of the State", *Politics and Society* 4/2 (1974) and S. Clarke, "Marxism, Sociology and Poulantzas' Theory of the State", *Capital and Class* 2 (1977). See also J. Holloway and S. Picciotto, *The State and Capital* (London 1978).

Other Critiques of Poulantzas are P. Hirst's review of "State, Power, Socialism" in *Eurored* 9; and M. Plaut, "Positivism in Poulantzas", *Telos* 36. On the important relationship between structuralist-marxism and Gramsci, see in general the relevant papers collected in the volume edited by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *On Ideology* (London 1978). The most thorough critique of Althusser is E.P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory* (London 1978); Thompson fails to confront the development in Althusser's positions, which are laced with Gramscian insights in his *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London 1976) e.g. pages 160, 72 and following, 78 and following, 36, 47, 49. A. Davidson, in a review of the new Italian edition of Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks", *Telos* 32, makes some fascinating comments on Gramsci's relation to Structuralism, comments which should be taken up in any discussion of the problems involved here for marxist politics.