Nicos Poulantzas was both an important and influential marxist theorist and a committed communist. He was a member of the Communist Party of Greece (Interior) — he stood as a candidate for parliament in the last Greek elections — and he contributed forcefully to the strategic debates of the West European workers' movement.

Poulantzas’ writings, from the early Political Power and Social Classes to the most recent book State, Power, Socialism, were serious attempts to further a marxist understanding of issues which are central to any project of socialist transformation in the advanced capitalist societies; the character of state power and state apparatuses, their internal and external connections with class struggle, the differing forms of bourgeois domination, the composition of social classes, the relationship between struggles for socialism and democratic forms, etc. His writings, although difficult in parts and at least initially somewhat “formalistic”, again and again addressed practically important issues in a way which combined both theoretical rigor and a sensitivity to the demands of a socialist politics. In the course of his work he produced a number of original and innovative insights. Quite deservedly, his writings opened up and provoked important debates and discussions in which he himself participated and which, of course, still continue.

With the tragic death of Nicos Poulantzas, marxism has undoubtedly lost one of its leading theoreticians. We mourn the loss of a communist, a comrade, and a marxist who made a major contribution to the renewal of marxist theory.

Prompted by Poulantzas’ death, Australian Left Review published what we consider to be a deplorable article (Peter Beilharz, “Poulantzas and Marxist Theory”, ALR 73). The article is presented as an “appreciation” but it is marked by the fact that it avoids any serious contact with Poulantzas’ work. Instead, and worse, the author uses the occasion of Poulantzas’ death to launch a sweeping attack on what he loosely refers to as “Althusserian” or “structuralist” marxism. In the course of this attack a ludicrous caricature of Louis Althusser’s work is constructed and then demolished by means of a few references to “bullshit” (?) and “nonsense”, a manipulation of philosophical categories (“structures”, “subjects”, “objects”), and a rather inane appeal to the need to “change the world”. Insofar as Poulantzas figures in the article it is chiefly as someone who supposedly had begun to emerge from the “structuralist labyrinth” and come to see the world with “growing realism”. In this way Poulantzas is
reduced to some kind of minor philosopher whose career can best be used as a moral lesson regarding the dangers of "Parisian fashion". Although the author does refer at the end of his article to Poulantzas' merit, we have also been warned that "a reformed Althusserian has about as much credibility as a humanist Stalinist!"

We consider that this article is quite inappropriate and that, even in other circumstances, its methods would be at variance with the principles of Marxist debate. It in fact exhibits one of the worst traits of the work of left intellectuals in Australia: an insular and slightly hysterical arrogance combined with a tendency to caricature the objects of the criticism. Such an approach can only have the effect of closing off the possibility of informed discussion.

We feel that Beilharz' article demands some kind of response. We cannot discuss the pros and cons of Althusser's work, nor its relation to the work of Poulantzas. This would have to be the task of a more in-depth article. Nor can we provide a thorough assessment of Poulantzas' achievements (or, indeed, of his deficiencies). Instead, we will simply attempt to provide an alternative "appreciation" of his work by outlining his contribution in three important areas: 1) his analysis of the capitalist state; 2) his analysis of the new petty bourgeoisie; and 3) his reflections on democratic socialism.

1. The capitalist state

Poulantzas' work first became widely known to an English-language audience with the publication of the spirited debate with Ralph Miliband and the subsequent publication of an English translation of his first major book Political Power and Social Classes. In both cases his central concern was with developing an adequate Marxist theory of the capitalist state.

In the writings of the 1960s Marxist analysis of the capitalist state was extremely backward. Indeed, it can be argued that in the strict sense — which understands the "capitalist state" as a concept which needs to be theoretically produced — such an analysis was in fact non-existent. Most Marxists tended to rely on a traditional, vulgarised notion that the state in capitalist societies is merely an "instrument" of the capitalist class (or section of the capitalist class) to be manipulated according to the demands of that class. Insofar as there was any kind of attempt to move beyond this perspective, it mainly took the form of assimilating traditional bourgeois conceptions which treat the state as a set of institutions inhabited and governed by "elites". In the latter case, analysis tended to be reduced to tracing the personal interconnections of the elites in the different institutions of the state and the society as a whole. Poulantzas referred to these as the conception of the state as a thing and the conception of the state as a subject. His great merit lies in the fact that he was able to avoid the false dilemma posed by these two alternatives. He was able to develop a conception of the capitalist state which does not fall into the error of treating the state as a mere instrument but which nevertheless retains the Marxist emphasis on classes or, more correctly, the class struggle.

In developing his theory of the capitalist state Poulantzas returned to the classic texts. But he did not return directly to the analysis presented by Marx in Capital; instead he took up the fragmentary political writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Gramsci. He justified this approach by invoking the useful but ambiguous concept of "relative autonomy". Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, he argued that the articulation of the elements of the capitalist mode of production entails a separation of the political and the economic in which the political is constituted as a relatively autonomous sphere. He argued that because of this separation it is possible to construct a distinct Marxist theory of the political sphere without direct reference to the economic sphere.

Whatever the merits of this procedure — and we think that the notion of the separation of the political and economic does represent an important insight — it allowed Poulantzas to proceed directly to a sophisticated analysis of the capitalist state in relation to the specific character of class struggle. He began by concretising the concept of "relative autonomy" so that it now referred to the necessary autonomy of the capitalist state in relation to the bourgeoisie. Thus, he argued that by virtue of the nature of the capitalist mode of production the bourgeoisie is inevitably divided and does not possess an inherent unity which could somehow simply be expressed at a political level, in the capitalist state. Instead, extending Gramsci's reflections on the role of the bourgeois political parties, he argued that it is only through the capitalist state itself that the bourgeoisie is organised and unified. In other words, it is only through the capitalist state that the bourgeoisie is truly constituted as the dominant or hegemonic class. But in order for the capitalist state to operate in this way it is necessary that it should enjoy a relative autonomy from the given components or "fractions" of the bourgeoisie — this relative autonomy is therefore central to the very nature of the capitalist state.

This approach enabled Poulantzas to develop an analysis which opens up the path to rich empirical studies. The concept of relative autonomy implies an emphasis on what Poulantzas called the "materiality" of the capitalist state, i.e. the distinct structure or form which necessarily
conditions the way in which classes or class fractions operate in the struggles which take place throughout the state. Taking up the remarks of Gramsci and Althusser he was able to sketch in an account of the component parts of the capitalist state — the "repressive state apparatus" and the "ideological state apparatus".

Most importantly, Poulantzas' approach implies an emphasis on the class struggle and a conception of the state apparatuses as sites of class struggle. We have already gestured towards one aspect of this — the struggle among the different fractions of the bourgeoisie. Drawing in particular on Gramsci's work, Poulantzas argued that although this struggle is never finally completed it tends to be resolved in the formation of a "power bloc" in which certain fractions are represented and in which one particular fraction has established its dominance. But there are of course other groups to consider — in particular, the petty bourgeoisie and the working class. Poulantzas stressed that just as the bourgeoisie is organised through the state so too are the subordinate classes disorganised through the state. The analysis here opens up into a number of crucial areas which are bound up with the complexity of class struggle. Poulantzas investigated, for example, the way in which the state represents itself as "the unity of the people-nation" and individualises the process of political participation. He pointed to the fact that the power bloc will seek to safeguard itself by mobilising in particular ways the petty bourgeoisie and social categories such as intellectuals. But the process cuts both ways and he also took into account the specific interests and struggles of these groups. In a point which was to become important for the discussion of strategy, he argued that the working class can and must proceed to exploit the contradictions that are a necessary feature of the operation of the capitalist state.

In place of the traditional conceptions which treat the state as either a thing or a subject Poulantzas offered an alternative conception of the capitalist state as a social relation. But it is a social relation of a particular kind — like capital itself it is a class relationship. As he defined it in his most recent work, the capitalist state is "a relationship of forces, or more precisely the material, condensation of such a relationship among classes and class fractions, such as this is expressed within the state in a necessarily specific form" (State, Power, Socialism, pp.128-9). By means of this conception Poulantzas was able to provide a framework which facilitated the investigation of the specific character of the capitalist state and its apparatuses but which at the same time clearly established the primacy of class struggle. He thereby avoided the familiar error of simply dissolving the state into a set of diverse institutions. He could, for example, insist that power should be seen not as an attribute of the state apparatuses but rather as an attribute of the classes or class fractions whose dominance is established through the state. In this way he was able to argue that, in in spite of the contradictions within the state and the fact that class struggle traverses the state apparatuses, there is nevertheless a unity of state power.

Poulantzas' general position on the capitalist state changed over time. The "formalism" which, on his own admission, marred the earlier works was increasingly jettisoned; the narrowly political focus which characterised his approach was qualified and he showed more appreciation of the parallel work of both the German "capital-logic" school and the economists of the French Communist Party (PCF). And he began to develop more clearly and systematically his ideas on the primacy of class struggle. We cannot of course discuss these changes here. But it is worth pointing out that these were not changes which followed in the wake of any political or philosophical "conversion". They represented a development of Poulantzas' work as he deepened his study and as he responded to the debates on his work and the changing questions thrown up by the political practice of the European workers' movement. As such they are the sort of changes we associate with any serious work of marxist research.

Irrespective of our reservations concerning certain aspects of Poulantzas' position, we regard his general conception of the capitalist state as a major achievement. In particular, it opened the way for and prompted the sort of empirical studies which are crucial to a renewal of marxist theory. Although we have concentrated here on his general conception of the capitalist state, mention should be made of Poulantzas' own attempts to develop such a program of empirical studies. Thus, in Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, he presented a theoretical outline of the different forms of capitalist state in relation to the different stages and phases of the development of the capitalist mode of production. In Fascism and Dictatorship and then in The Crisis of the Dictatorships he undertook concrete studies of what he called the "exceptional regimes" of fascism and military dictatorship. In State, Power, Socialism he investigated the increasing authoritarianism characteristic of the operations of the capitalist state in the current period. In this respect too he made an important contribution.

2. The "New Petty Bourgeoisie"

In his important work Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, Poulantzas discusses the general characteristics of the present phase of monopoly capitalism and then proceeds to an analysis of the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie in the present phase. Although the work as a whole deserves an extended discussion, we will focus
here on the analysis of the petty bourgeoisie since this has proved to be one of the most original and at the same time one of the most contentious aspects of Poulantzas' work.

Poulantzas takes his starting point from the fact that under monopoly capitalism there has been a considerable increase in the number of non-productive wage earners, i.e. groups such as office and service workers, commercial and bank employees, etc. He points out that the development of an alliance with such groups is of vital importance for any project of socialist transformation. But for this purpose it is necessary to develop a precise understanding of their specific interests and of the forces which shape their position in the class struggle.

Poulantzas takes issue with most previous writings on these new wage-earning groups. He rejects those theories which attempt to dissolve them into either the bourgeoisie or the working class, as well, of course, as those theories which treat them as a “third force” in order to prove the obsolescence of all concepts of class and class struggle. He also contests the theory of the PCF which presents the new wage-earning groups as “intermediate strata” between the working class and the bourgeoisie. In opposition to all these theories Poulantzas argues that these groups should be seen as part of the petty bourgeoisie. He argues that such a recognition of their distinct class membership is essential for establishing the correct basis for a popular alliance under the leadership of the working class.

Marxist theory has traditionally understood the petty bourgeoisie as comprising those who own their means of production but are themselves the direct producers and do not exploit wage labor, e.g. “small producers”, “small shopkeepers”. Poulantzas, however, argues that this is only one section of the petty bourgeoisie — what he calls the “traditional” petty bourgeoisie. He concedes that the new wage-earning groups occupy a quite different place within the social division of labor as compared with the traditional petty bourgeoisie. Thus, to focus just on the economic level, they resemble members of the working class in that they do not own the means of production and instead have to sell their labor power in return for wages. But he goes on to argue that the exclusion of both groups from the ranks of the bourgeoisie and the working class entails similar effects at the political and ideological levels and that this is sufficient to justify their inclusion as different sections of the one class, the petty bourgeoisie. In this way the new wage-earning groups come to be designated as part of what is called the “new” petty bourgeoisie.

The major thrust of Poulantzas' analysis of the new petty bourgeoisie in Classes in Contemporary Capitalism is directed towards a more precise delimitation of the boundaries of this group. Here he draws on some of the points made in his introductory essay on the marxist theory of social classes. He stresses that he is chiefly concerned with the structural determination of classes and that this must be clearly distinguished from “class position”, i.e. the specific position adopted by the class or class fraction in a concrete situation of class struggle. He also stresses that in marxist theory the structural determination of classes cannot just refer to a place within the relations of production but must involve an analysis of the place of the group within the social division of labor as a whole. In other words, we cannot just look at the economic relations but must also look at the ideological and political relations (ideological and political relations of domination/subordination). He argues that this last point is of crucial importance for the proper understanding of the class determination of the new petty bourgeoisie.

We cannot discuss Poulantzas' analysis of the class determination of the new petty bourgeoisie in any detail. We will just summarise some of the main features of this analysis. It can be noted, first of all, that Poulantzas argues that the exclusion of the new petty bourgeoisie from economic ownership or possession of the means of production and the related fact that they work as wage-laborers establishes a clear division between this group and the bourgeoisie. The main question therefore becomes one of the relationship of the new petty bourgeoisie to the working class. With respect to the economic level Poulantzas establishes a demarcation line by employing a restricted version of Marx's concept of productive labor. He then moves on to the political and ideological level where he introduces a discussion of management and supervision and the division between mental and manual labor. What he offers here is an exclusive definition of the working class according to which the working class comprises only those who meet the criteria on all three levels. In this way, even groups such as foremen, engineers and technicians who meet the restricted criteria of productive labor but not the criteria associated with the discussion of political and ideological relations are excluded from the working class and assigned to the new petty bourgeoisie.

Poulantzas insists on the importance of a consideration of political and ideological relations in establishing clear class boundaries between the working class and the new petty bourgeoisie. But perhaps the most valuable part of his analysis concerns the way in which he uses a consideration of these relations to investigate both the common situation and the internal differentiation of the new petty bourgeoisie. He lays particular stress here on the division between mental and manual labor and argues that the new petty bourgeoisie as a whole can be characterised by the
fact that, in contrast to the working class, it lies on the “side” of mental labor. He points out, however, that in relation to capital and the bourgeoisie the new petty bourgeoisie occupies a dominated and subordinate place in the order of mental labor and that this entails a complex internal differentiation. As part of the discussion, he investigates the increasing bureaucratisation which affects certain areas of mental labor. Then, on the basis of this investigation and on the basis of his earlier analysis of the way in which the petty bourgeoisie is necessarily fractured by virtue of the fact that the class struggle centres around the bourgeoisie and the working class, he goes on to outline the different fractions of the new petty bourgeoisie. His central concern here is with those fractions which are objectively “polarised” in the direction of the working class and he concludes by once again posing the important question of an alliance between such groups and the working class.

Poulantzas’ analysis of the new petty bourgeoisie has proved highly controversial. His definitional method, his distinction between class determination and class position, his insistence on the political necessity of recognising the new petty bourgeoisie as a distinct class, and, in particular, his “narrow” definition of the working class, have all been contested. Poulantzas’ work, together with the concurrent writings of Harry Braverman, has been of crucial importance in opening up this area to detailed marxist research. We feel that his analysis will continue to be a reference point for many years to come.

3. Democratic Socialism

In his later writings — State, Power, Socialism, the discussion with Henri Weber (Socialist Review 38, March-April 1978), and the interview with Stuart Hall and Alan Hunt (Marxism Today, July 1979) — Poulantzas contributed forcefully to the emerging debates on the need for a new socialist strategy in the advanced capitalist societies. The context for these debates had been provided by the evolution of some of the major communist parties in Western Europe towards what has been called “Eurocommunism”; an evolution which is characterised by a greater emphasis on the need to work within and preserve the institutions of the “bourgeois-democratic” state and, in particular, the parliamentary institutions. Poulantzas’ contribution to these debates falls within the loose consensus of “Eurocommunism”, but it is distinguished by the way in which it so clearly poses the central questions associated with socialist strategy.

In his writings on democratic socialism, Poulantzas takes his starting point from a critical survey of the main conceptions of strategy that have arisen within both the communist and social-democratic movements. He gestures towards the conventional critique of classical social democracy as simply posing a strategy which accepts the constraints of the bourgeois state and which is therefore contained within the limits of parliamentary struggle. But his main concern is with the communist tradition and the hostility towards “bourgeois-democratic” institutions which he regards as a continuing theme within this tradition. Here he begins by summarising the position of Lenin in State and Revolution. He points out that for Lenin the central strategic conception is of a frontal assault on the bourgeois state in a situation of dual power. In the course of this struggle the bourgeois state is destroyed and replaced by the “counter-power” or “counter-state” which is based on the workers’ councils (“soviets”). Integral to this conception is the idea of replacing the existing forms of bourgeois democracy (parliaments, etc.) with the new forms of real, mass democracy which arise from the system of workers’ councils.

Poulantzas traces the evolution of this strategic conception in the subsequent history of the Third International. He notes that in the traditional “model” bequeathed to us from the Third International, Lenin’s crucial emphasis on mass democracy tends to be lost. The influence of stalinism is shown by the emergence of a “statism” and distrust of mass initiative which, despite the retention of the hostility towards “bourgeois” democracy, tends to make this model formally parallel to that of social democracy.

In the development of his critique Poulantzas concentrates on the most compelling and attractive strategic conception — that of Lenin. Drawing on his analysis of the capitalist state, he argues that Lenin’s conception remains marked by a view of the state as an instrument of the bourgeoisie and thus as a “monolithic bloc”. It is this which allows Lenin to assume that the struggle of the working class or the popular masses as a whole will be a purely external struggle of confrontation with the bourgeois state. In opposition to this view, Poulantzas reiterates his argument that the class struggle traverses the state apparatuses and that, particularly in the present period (characterised by the extension of the political and social activities of the state), contradictions and dislocations open up within the state apparatuses. He argues that it is both possible and necessary for the popular masses to exploit these contradictions by mounting struggles within the state apparatuses. Such struggles could then create centres of resistance and breaches within the state which could help to paralyse it and throw it into political crisis.

Poulantzas extends this perspective to consider the specific and central question of democratic reform. He argues that the existing institutions of bourgeois democracy which he refers to as the institutions of representative democracy are to a large extent the consequence of democratic
struggles and cannot be sharply separated from the area of democratic liberties. On the contrary, he argues that these are in fact the material institutions which are necessary to sustain and guarantee such democratic liberties. Referring to the historical evidence, he contends that abolishing these institutions and attempting to rely exclusively on the mass democracy of the workers' councils — which he refers to as direct democracy — is "a path which, sooner or later, inevitably leads to statist despotism or the dictatorship of experts" (State, Power, Socialism p.256). He therefore argues that the socialist movement must develop an explicit commitment to the preservation and extension of the institutions of representative democracy.

As we have summarised it so far, Poulantzas' position might seem to resemble what he himself had described as the strategy characteristic of classical social democracy. But he goes on to clearly establish his differences with this strategy. Thus, he stresses that institutions of direct democracy such as the workers' councils will have a vital role to play in the revolutionary period, and he continues to stress the importance of popular struggles outside of the state. He continues to emphasise that what must be at issue is a sweeping transformation of the state apparatuses based on the increased intervention of the popular masses. And he also distances himself from the social democratic strategy by insisting that, although this transformation may be a long process, it is not a gradual process — and it will inevitably be marked by a series of ruptures leading up to a decisive confrontation. What Poulantzas is seeking is not the watering-down or the institutions of representative democracy and the workers' councils would be actually "combined" in any situation of revolutionary crisis. But the issues which he took up were and continue to be crucial for the future of socialism, both in the advanced capitalist societies and indeed in the world as a whole. His extensive knowledge, his openness to the lessons of historical experience, and his deep commitment to the need for truth, enabled him to do much to clarify the nature and dimensions of these issues. This, in itself, is a worthy and necessary achievement.

Conclusion

Nicos Poulantzas made a major contribution to marxist theory. In the short space available to us here we have not been able to indicate the breadth of his achievement. Instead, by summarising his contribution in just three areas of research, we have merely attempted to break down some of the misconceptions concerning his work and to provide a brief indication of its importance and usefulness. In this way we hope to prompt people to return to his writings, or else to turn to them for the first time. These writings represent an important legacy which it can only be to our own benefit to appropriate.

We have concentrated here on a summary of the content of Poulantzas' work. But before finishing, it is necessary to bring out more clearly one point concerning the orientation of this work. The fundamental orientation of Poulantzas' work was empirical and political. In this respect he broke decisively with the previously dominant tradition in which marxism has tended to be transformed into a general philosophy; either in the form of an "ethical" and "humanist" set of beliefs or, as had been more commonly the case, in the form of a state or party ideology in which "marxism" provides sweeping formulae to justify the latest tactical switch. By contrast, Poulantzas' work represented a return to the classical tradition in which the chief concern is with the development of a strategy for the socialist movement by means of the "concrete analysis of concrete situations". In this way he played a major part in laying the basis for a renewal of marxist theory. In this respect too, as well as in the substantive content of his studies, he has left us an important legacy.