Background paper for my input for closing session / final debate:

Crisis, state and democracy –

Working with Nicos Poulantzas’ theory to confront authoritarian capitalism

- Summing up the sessions
- How to continue working with Nicos Poulantzas’ concepts and ideas
- Toolkit in social theory and activist strategy

Other input by Aristidis Baltas; facilitation: Marica Frangakis

I will try my best to give in the first 5 minutes a quick wrap-up of the sessions (some aspects and coordinated with Aristidis).

During the conference we will discuss the usefulness of the concept of authoritarian statism, its updating against the background of authoritarian neoliberalism and the structural changes of the state towards the “national competition state” and the Europeanisation of the state apparatuses (and even beyond, their internationalisation).

Authoritarian statism was part and outcome of the crisis of bourgeois hegemony and hence of the state, the centralization and personalization of state power, the growing importance of state bureaucracies for the organisation of social classes, and the crisis of the bourgeois and workers’ parties. One of the defining characteristics of authoritarian statism, he wrote in State, Power, Socialism, is that public administration “tends to play a monopoly role in politically organizing social classes and ensuring hegemony”, and that parties become “veritable transmission belts for executive decisions, rather than being centres engaged in political elaboration and in working out compromises and alliances around a more or less precise programme” (SPS, 229).

During the conference we might also get a better picture of the corridor of the possible of capitalist development: from business-as-usual and/or even more authoritarian forms to forms of green capitalism guided by strategies of a Green Economy.

- What are related strategies (and unintended outcomes) to enhance the production of absolute and relative surplus value, to de-value certain fractions of capital, to (des-)organise the power bloc?
- What are the characteristic of capitalism as spatially and temporarily uneven development deepened or in some ways countered?
- Are the current states and related forces (at different scales) able to cope with the crisis?

I refer to some aspects of Poulantzas’ work and concepts which will form the background of my argument at the end of the conference.
Struggling on the terrain of the state and “outside”

Poulantzas’ conception of the state as a social relation suggested that neither the ‘inside’ nor the ‘outside’ of the state should be the privileged terrain of a fundamental transformation of society: “In the democratic road to socialism, these two forms of struggle must be combined” (SPS, 260). Accordingly, it was impossible for Poulantzas to imagine socialist transformation without changes to the state. After all, he argued that the latter neither constituted an instrument of the ruling class nor a neutral instance, but an asymmetric field of compromises.

Emancipatory movements would be mistaken to assume that state actors necessarily implement policies in line with the ‘common good’, or that the state can be ‘taken over’ and transformed into an instrument they can control.

Poulantzas follows Rosa Luxemburg, who pointed to the danger of underestimating the achievements of representative democracy and of reconstituting authoritarian political relations by way of a supposedly grassroots democracy. The “institutions of representative democracy are at the same time expressions of the bourgeoisie and conquests of the popular masses” (Poulantzas 1979a: 32, translated). Poulantzas points to how this is demonstrated by the Russian and Portuguese experiences, where relatively strong radical left-wing forces focussed only on autonomy and paid too little attention to the state, thus allowing the social democrats to take it over (1979b: 7).

Social movements

Poulantzas’s understanding of the relationship between the state and social movements is based on his distinction between state power as the condensation of social relations of forces that traverse the state apparatus and are shaped by it at the same time, and state apparatuses as the institutional materialisation of these relations of forces. There is, however, no necessary correlation here. The power of the state comprises all social forces that act within and through it, but not all of them are present to same extent. There are social forces, in particular social movements, that constitute themselves outside of the state apparatuses affecting the latter only from a distance. It is essential to bear this relationship in mind in the transition to socialism.

In any given historical phase, the state provides a certain stability and form to the relations of forces through temporary compromises. This also applies to the achievements of emancipatory struggles. However, Poulantzas (1979b) also points out that repression is frequently used against left-wing forces. In order to stabilize bourgeois hegemony, the state deploys a variety of techniques: the state apparatuses disorganize and divide the dominated classes and movements, they insulate institutional power centres against subaltern actors, but they also initiate compromises by forcing certain fractions of the power bloc to grant material concessions to some of the dominated forces.

Poulantzas also argued that the struggles of social movements are present not only through the establishment of centres of opposition, but also by virtue of the fact that the terrain of the state is pervaded by contradictions within the power bloc and contradictions between the latter and the dominated classes. Therefore, divisions within the state are not just the result of the representation of different interests of the bourgeoisie by different apparatuses: “for those processes depend equally, or even above all, on the State’s role vis-à-vis the dominated classes” (SPS, 140). The state and social movements are always interlinked. Even if movements constitute themselves at a distance from the state they always affect its institutional configuration and become part of it.

Poulantzas remained sceptical about the capacities of social movements to affect social transformation. In his view, their activities resulted mostly in neo-corporatism and social segmentation: “If there is no moment of
political generalization, (...) these movements march side by side — each without knowing what the one next to it wants” (1979a: 31, translated).

Poulantzas rejected Pietro Ingrao’s proposal for the integration of movements into the democratized state, because state apparatuses and parties have a tendency to absorb movements and their procedures of grassroots democracy. Total autonomy, on the other hand, is also deeply problematic. Poulantzas suggests looking for a “middle way” that preserves the “unrelenting tension” between movement and party (1979b: 9, translated; 1979c: 10). However, he did not specify what exactly this means.

Some critiques were formulated:

1. Poulantzas has been criticized for focussing too much on forces and struggles, and paying insufficient attention to the structural solidifications of capitalist social formations. Partly as a result of this, Bob Jessop speaks of the state as a “form-determined condensation of the balance of forces in political and politically-relevant struggle” (1985: 338).

2. Alex Demirović’s charged Poulantzas of “overrating of the state” politically and conceptually (1987: 133, translated) Therefore, a Gramscian understanding of the processes through which hegemony is established and which accords a larger role to conflicts within civil society might be more accurate.

3. Demirović (1987: 145), too, argued that Poulantzas ignores some important problems of representative democracy, namely the separation of ‘public’ and ‘private’ or ‘politics’ and ‘economics’, as well as the relationship of this separation to forms of direct democracy. If these relations are taken seriously, then social movements need to take into account not only the state, but also other forms of social reproduction

4. Poulantzas referred to the – in a certain way - class reductionist idea that the possibility of social generalization was to be found within the working class, and was in turn expressed by the workers’ party/ies. In addition, due to his theoretical and political focus on the state, the existence of strong movements and weakened representative institutions lead him to sound warnings of the disintegration and atomization of the social whole. He underestimated the transformative dynamics of mobilization and politicization unleashed by movements, as well as the learning processes they entail. Two questions arise: Why should autonomous movements only represent particular interests? Why should a generalization of interests, norms and identities that is based on experience and geared towards compromise only occur via parties and the state?

Radical transformation and the prospects of democratic socialism

Instead of revolution, Poulantzas speaks of “radical transformation” (SPS, 43). I propose for the closing session to refer systematically to Poulantzas’ concept of radical transformation.¹

Socio-economic and political crises, which sometimes turn into crises of the state, were for him an important precondition for radical transformation (257).

He still identifies the need for rupture and for escalation, but no longer for a moment of revolutionary transformation. He envisages a long road to socialism, “during which the masses will act to conquer power and transform the state apparatuses” (254). Given that the ruling classes held a systematic advantage in the

¹ In my input I will highlight some aspects of recent discussions. In 2012/2013, I was leading a European wide research project on the concept of transformation, especially within the debates about climate change; a group around the German Rosa Luxemburg Foundation recently published the book “Futuring. Transformation of Capitalism and Beyond”; Michael Brie (de.), only in German yet.
unstable balance of compromises, the task was to transform the terrain upon which compromises were formed. This constituted a ‘double strategy’ that aimed at transforming the state in the sense of specific relationships of forces, and modifying the materiality of state apparatuses: “It is true that the State retains a specific materiality: not only is a shift in the relationship of forces within the State insufficient to alter that materiality, but the relationship itself can crystallize in the State only to the extent that the apparatuses of the latter undergo transformation. [...] In this context, I talked above of a sweeping transformation of the state apparatus during the transition to democratic socialism” (SPS, 260-1). The transformation of the state on the basis of broad mass movements also matters because Poulantzas is astute to the danger that the state and in particular the bourgeoisie might resort to repression when faced with a strengthening of left-wing movements (188-9). Thus for Poulantzas “the choice is not [...] between a struggle ‘within’ the state apparatuses (that is, physically invested and inserted in their material space) and a struggle located at a certain physical distance from these apparatuses” (259). Struggles at a distance are always also ‘refracted’ within the apparatuses and present “through intermediaries” (ibid.).

For Poulantzas, it requires massive and diverse struggles by mass movements. There is no (longer a) master plan: “History has not yet given us a successful experience of the democratic road to socialism: what it has provided [...] is some negative examples to avoid and some mistakes upon which to reflect” (265; cf. 1979b: 7f.). However, a general feature of radical transformations would be the “increased intervention of the popular masses in the State” and the expansion of mechanisms for democratic conflict resolution and discussion (SPS, 261).

For Poulantzas, what is required is a policy of broad alliances and the integration of a multiple demands (e.g., those of the women’s or the green movement). An implicit assumption here is that a mass movement shares an interest that is relatively homogeneous, or that at least remains unproblematic. At the same time, Poulantzas suggests that such a movement should increase tensions within state apparatuses, and expand networks of resistance within the institutional framework of the capitalist state. Shifting the relationship of forces within the State “denotes nothing other than a stage of real ruptures, the climax of which – and there has to be one – is reached when the relationship of forces on the strategic terrain of the State swings over to the side of the popular masses” (SPS, 258-9). Poulantzas not only has in mind elections, parliamentary activity or the occupation of ever-higher posts in government (259-60). He always also indicates that one should aim for the transformation of the relations of forces in all the apparatuses and dispositifs of the state – a transformation that has to occur both within and at a distance to the state apparatuses.

The attempt to establish and subsequently expand elements of grassroots democracy takes place on the strategic terrain of the state and at the same time transforms representative democracy. Poulantzas is thinking of new social forms of opinion formation and coordination of interests whose establishment would render the political form of the state superfluous.

What seem more difficult and complex today:

- Transformation under conditions of Europeanisation
- A deeply inscribed form of organised competition and orientations towards competitiveness within Europe and worldwide via specific forms of de- and re-regulation (“neoliberal imperial global constitutionalism”; one theoretical outcome on the terrain of critical thinking is the Varieties of Capitalism approach).
- Multiple forms of hierarchies, claims, struggles; the “popular masses” (Poulantzas) are not so easy to detect and to organise; not only given its fragmentation but also due to a more or less hegemonic “imperial mode of living”
- How is self-organisation, the building of social movements achieved and over a certain period of time secured
- In the 1970s there existed almost world-wide a debate about democratic forms of socialism and the legitimacy of the latter; this was lost during the neoliberal counter-revolution
- How do we make sense of recent experiences of self

To sum up

Poulantzas poses a political and theoretical question: to what extent can particular struggles defend and promote not only particular interests, norms and identities, but also transform the terrain of struggles in itself, and organize the general features of society in a non-hierarchical way?

The radical transformation of society is riddled with uncertainties and dilemmas: To what extent can emancipatory forces exploit contradictions and crises within hegemonic constellations? How is a far-reaching transformation of the institutional materiality of the state possible that takes competing actors into account?

To what extent can emancipatory forces enter into coalitions with other forces whose fundamental interest lies in the maintenance of bourgeois-capitalist society? What is the role of international relations? To what extent does the practical critique articulated by anti-capitalist forces generate a modernizing dynamic for capitalism?

Poulantzas’s term ‘radical transformation’ refers to the state, i.e., to its power and its institutional materiality. A post-capitalist or socialist strategy, however, has to fundamentally transform all social relations, not just the state: ways of producing, reproducing and living; ethnic and gender relations; relations with nature; and the forms of international exchange. Poulantzas can help us to make sense of this theoretically, but his strategic considerations fall far short of it.

Since the 1980s, however, the concept of radical reformism (Joachim Hirsch) has provided a necessary change of perspective. Radical reformism focuses more on the step-by-step transformation of all social relations in and through conflicts, experiences, and learning processes. The perspective shifts to include the existing divergences within emancipatory movements, as well as the need to address them. Generally speaking, radical reformism envisages action that occurs within, and transforms institutions. In so doing, it also affects wider social structures.

In more recent debates about “double transformation” and “social-ecological transformation” many of those aspects are highlighted (e.g. Brie 2014).

Finally, the question of critical social sciences and intellectuals emerge. What does it mean today “to risk something” (Poulantzas) as intellectuals, to acknowledge uncertainties and (own) contradictions? Given weak mobilisations and self-organisation in many European countries, what are relevant emancipatory actors and initiatives (Poulantzas referred often to the role of the bureaucracy)?

Some references (to be completed)


Poulantzas, Nicos (1979c): »La crise des partis«, Le Monde Diplomatique, 26-09-1979