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BOOK REVIEWS

READING POULANTZAS

POULANTZAS LESEN: ZUR AKTUALITÄT MARXISTISCHER STAATSTHEORIE

Edited by Lars Bretthauer, Alexander Gallas, John Kannankulam and Ingo Stützle, Hamburg: VSA Verlag, 2006, ISBN 10: 3-89965-177-4

Reviewer: Tadzio Mueller, Berlin, Germany

The book places two kinds of wagers, one of a more intellectual and academic, one of a more immediately 'political' nature. First, (re-)reading Poulantzas' work will provide critical social science in general, and critical analysis of the state in particular, with a way to heal some of the divisions that have plagued it since its heyday in the 1970s (e.g. Feminism vs. Marxism vs. Post-structuralism). Second, that this re-reading will provide the global anti-capitalist Left, reinvigorated over the last decade, with enhanced tools for dealing with that crucial problem confronting every current, every position within that movement: "their relation to the capitalist state." (p. 8)¹ Coming from within the Left that is at issue here — more specifically, from what will below be called its 'movementist' wing — this review is not an "innocent" reading of *Reading Poulantzas* (pp. 21–2), but one that is primarily interested in whether its political wager succeeds. For it is in the realm of political strategy that the editors' project's greatest promise lies as well as its greatest problems.

The Academic Wager

But first to the academic wager. The volume's central theoretical claim is that Poulantzas' definition of the state, articulated in *State, Power, Socialism*, as "a relationship of forces, or more precisely the material condensation of such a relationship among classes and class fractions" (Poulantzas 2000, p. 128), is his most seminal contribution to a theory of the capitalist state. And indeed, the claim is convincingly made, as shown in the contributions by Bretthauer, who deepens and concretises the definition's central concepts (materiality and condensation), as well as Gallas, and Demirovic, both of whom show in separate chapters that it is this subtle definition that allows Poulantzas to chart a path between the Scylla of seeing the state as immediately determined by social (class) struggles, and the Charybdis of recognising only its role in the perpetuation of capitalist domination (form).

Beyond this central and successfully articulated claim, the book attempts two rapprochements, each in slightly different ways: one between Marxist

(state) theory and feminist (state) theory; the other between Marx and Foucault via Poulantzas. Contributions by Nowak and Buckel both play an easy gambit, and largely succeed: that Poulantzas' understanding of the state as the material condensation of a relationship of forces could just as easily be applied to the gendered structure of the state as to its class structure. That, in other words, feminist theory has much to gain from a reading of Poulantzas, and on the other hand, that Poulantzas in particular and Marxism in general ignore gender relations and their complex articulation to capitalist social relations at their own peril. It is a pity, though far from a failing of this book, that this must largely remain an academic move: while an intellectual rapprochement between the feminist theory and Marxist theory is possible and desirable, there exists, at least in Germany, no feminist movement to speak of that could develop a strategic articulation to contemporary anticapitalist movements.

Things are a bit different for Marx and Foucault: here, the rapprochement that is sought is not one between equals, but rather one where Marxists seek to acknowledge Foucault's subtle conceptualisations of micro-power, knowledge-production as the best in the field (and indeed, occasionally superior to those offered by Poulantzas), while maintaining that these concepts only make sense when integrated

into a wider Marxist/Poulantzian intellectual framework. Although this does smack a wee bit of academic turf-battles, the point is convincingly made in both Lindner's and Stützel's contribution, the latter one of the most though-provoking pieces in the book.

Finally, and concluding the review of the academic wagers, the editors also have the intellectual honesty to include contributions arguing that although Poulantzas may have some things to offer for contemporary analyses of 'globalisation', his concepts remain far too tied to the nation-state form to really provide a useful matrix for analysis. For Bieling, Poulantzas can thus be little more than a "heuristic source of inspiration" (p. 234) in such analyses, while Wissel suggests that Poulantzas' nation-state centrism makes it impossible to use his concepts to decipher the particular forms of global authority constituted in the neoliberal project (p. 246). Only Wissen's contribution seems slightly disingenuous here as it tries to produce a Poulantzian reading of what David Harvey (1982) so evocatively called the 'space-time-compression' produced by capitalist social relations in general, and the last 30-40 years' 'globalisation' project in particular. The problem is not so much that such a reading cannot be produced, but that it in terms of explanatory power and politico-theoretical usefulness it

remains far behind the possibilities of an approach informed by Harvey's work.

So on balance, the academic wager succeeds, admirably so. Although it is occasionally hair-raisingly difficult to wade through Poulantzas' convoluted language and difficult concepts, he is clearly more than worth a read. As, indeed, is *Reading Poulantzas*.

The Political Wager

But now to the far more complex wager, the political one: to provide the global anti-capitalist left with politico-theoretical tools to find its, or at least a way in the political terrain that it has been trying to navigate in the years since the end of the cycle of struggles that began in Seattle. To understand what this wager is, and why it is being placed now, requires that we first investigate the political terrain within which the editors seek to make their move, a terrain that is simultaneously global and inflected by the fact that this book emerges from political context largely shaped within the German left.

The politico-theoretical terrain this book locates itself in can be seen as dominated by three positions. First, the romantic 'movementism' that dominated in the years after Seattle: while it has clearly entered a crisis with the decline of the importance of summit protests and the social forum processes, it remains attractive to

activists and theoretically powerful due to the prominence of its key proponents, Holloway (2002) on one side (who comes in for extremely incisive criticism from Gallas), Hardt/Negri (2000) on the other. Second, the new 'parliamentary antineoliberalism' so prominent in Latin America, which in Germany takes the form of a 'new statism' expounded by the, at least for now, comparatively powerful Left Party. And third, the politically marginal but theoretically relevant ultra-left, which relies on form-analysis and critical theory."

In this context the editors wager that Nicos Poulantzas' subtle and differentiated, yet resolutely critical and strategic understanding of the state allows us to chart a course between these three similarly unappealing alternatives: between a movementism that is past its prime and necessarily politically frustrating, as every moment of political institutionalisation must be seen as a defeat or at least a 'selling out'; the new statism of the Left Party that is bound to repeat the mistakes of the past, as it seems to be labouring under the illusion, already successfully debunked in the 1970s, that the welfare can be expanded so far that it could somehow 'suspend' capitalism; and finally the frustrated political defeatism of those who insist, not unlike their critical theory forebears, that every struggle within a capitalist society is inescapably bound up with the capitalist value and state

forms, and thus ultimately pointless. Brand and Heigl quote Poulantzas with what stands as the programmatic motto of this volume on the relation between struggles inside and outside of the state: "In the democratic road to Socialism, both paths have to connect." (p. 274)

As such, the book is part of a wider 'postautonomist' project in Europe, which identifies the identitarian politics of the various currents of the left — existing in abstract solidarity with each other, but each unable to move outside their respective comfort zones — as one of its main weaknesses and consequently seeks to coax each camp out of their old certainties and into a process of becoming-other, together. It could be argued that the book is seeking to provide part of the theoretico-political 'superstructure' for a non-autonomous, non-statist project that is currently manifested in, for example, the Italian-inspired EuroMayday mobilisations, or the 'Initiative for global social rights' in Germany.

How successful, then, is this political wager (to which, incidentally, this review is extremely sympathetic)? Unlike with the intellectual one, the balance is not as clear here. While the contributions gathered in this impressive volume certainly go some way towards working through the thorny question of the relation between movements, parties and the state, there are two key problems that

hinder the book from reaching its full potential. First of all, there is a noticeable lack of empirical application of the theory developed here — a lack that is especially glaring because the theorist at issue is one whose work was always "directly related to problems of the Left's political strategy", as Sablowski points out (p. 257). Given that Latin America has been the location where the new parliamentary anti-neo-liberalism has scored its greatest successes, a chapter on 'reading Poulantzas in Venezuela' would have been interesting, or maybe 'the 21st of December of Ernesto Kirchner'? Or, closer to the German context, 'Poulantzas and the Left Party'? True, Demirovic very briefly (p. 301) mentions the German Greens' experience in parliament, but does not seriously apply the conceptual apparatus developed by Poulantzas to this failure. Maybe the latter's rather old-fashioned theory of fascism (see Sablowski's contribution) could have done well with an engagement with the dynamics of a reenergised fascist movement in large parts of Germany?

These are not, I believe, merely trifles — they are missed opportunities to reintroduce some of the best that Marxist state theory has to offer to cutting-edge political debates. Given that this desire is one I share with the editors, it is a pity that the volume's first three substantive contributions, in all their erudition, are abstract

almost to the point of tedium. Barrow's discussion of Poulantzas' precise relationship to structural formalism is a case in point. And why does Jessop, arguably the most influential contemporary Marxist state theorist, have to engage in an odd attempt at canonisation, trying to elevate Poulantzas to the status of a 'modern classic'? After all, as Stuart Hall (1980, p. 62) has pointed out, it was precisely a rather misplaced worship of the 'classics' of 'Marxism-Leninism' that occasionally hobbled Poulantzas' work. And the contribution by Hirsch/Kannankulam appears to be kicking up some very old dust indeed when the reader is told that those who, during the Marxist 'state derivation debate' of the 1970s, sought to derive the capitalist state from the sphere of circulation had gone wrong. Of course, the point raised by the volume about form analysis is actually a very important one — form-analysis in the way used by Poulantzas is an important weapon to be deployed against the uncritical 'new statism' of the Left Party and other statist roads to Socialism. But because the book often remains at an extremely high level of abstraction, it is occasionally far too difficult to decipher its political importance.

The second problem that prevents the book from developing its full political potential is that there is too little discussion of Poulantzas' own political

investments. The fact that Poulantzas ran for parliament, surely an important bit of knowledge if we want to decipher a theorist's relationship to parliamentary politics, on a Eurocommunist ticket is not mentioned until p. 298, and then in a footnote. Finding out more about how his relationship to the Communist movement shaped, and possibly distorted, his theory would have been extremely interesting, and could have allowed for a more explicit and indepth debate of his theoretical omissions and shortcomings, such as his state-centrism, his nationalism, his distrust of the 'new social movements' (p. 281). For example, why did he only ever refer to gender-based relations of exploitation and oppression as 'struggles between men and women' (p. 141)? Surely for a theorist of Poulantzas' intellectual power, that is a serious underachievement. Why was he never able to make the theoretical move that seems so obvious in the contributions by Nowak and Buckel that the state as a material condensation of social force relations is at the same time a gender-state as a class-state?

Another example of this relative lack of discussing Poulantzas' theoretical shortfalls in light of his political investments is the chapter by Koch, which points out that Poulantzas' interest in the question of class was primarily the result of his interest in the

left's capacity to become hegemonic (p. 123), and concludes that his theory of class(es) is both theoretically and empirically unsatisfying. But is it not the case that the best way to understand a Marxist's to-ing and fro-ing on the subject of class and class-alliances, and, by extension, the revolutionary subject', can best be understood not as in the first instance theoretical, but as determined largely by the political position of the political current she finds herself in? In particular when he is trying to identify the precise limits of the 'working class' (and thus of the social force that is necessarily represented by the Marxist-Leninist party) along occupational lines.

Conclusion

In the end, the political wager neither fails nor succeeds. Does Nicos Poulantzas — or maybe a new 'Poulantzianism' — offer a new intellectual commons on which movementists, new statisticians and form-analysing ultra-leftists can meet? Only if we recognise that he himself came from a statist wing of the left, and that his concepts are accordingly inflected. After reading this book, Poulantzas stands there, somewhat disembodied: a brilliant theorist who (recall the successful intellectual wager) produced one of the best analyses of the state; but one about whose reasons for doing so we still know too little. For sure, those who want to know more about how to

theorise this relationship should definitely have a look at the book — as should those who want to contribute to furthering a critical analysis of the state (whether Marxist, feminist or otherwise). But from a political perspective the book almost opens more questions than it answers about the crucial problematic of the relationship between movements and more institutionalised political forms. Then again, that may be a good thing.

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¹ All translations from non-English sources by TM.

² This is a more complicated position, ranging from adherents of Moishe Postone's (1996) work to the value critics of the Krisis group, and, on its most extreme end, the Anti-German Communists who have in common with Postone and the Krisis group a grounding in German critical theory.