

15. Structural-functional Marxism

During the early 1960s, structural functionalism had reached its apex as the dominant paradigm in mainstream political sociology and political science. The structural functionalist approach, especially as represented in the “structural analysis” of Talcott Parsons, emphasized a systemic view that explained a social order’s organic unity, natural equilibrium, and tendency toward self-stabilization through the successful generation and distribution of shared values and norms (Schmidt 2005, 100). The popularity of this approach began to decline in that same decade. In particular, Marxist and New Left scholars saw it as having a conservative bias toward systemic stability that implicitly justified the status quo of the Cold War era.

However, in certain respects the dominant influence of structural-functionalism and systems approaches also carried over into Marxism. Louis Althusser’s (Althusser 1965; Althusser et al. 2015) development of a scientific “structural” Marxism from the standpoint of the reproduction of modes of production and the rejection of Marxist humanism, historicism, and empiricism had a major influence on the theoretical developments of the 1960s and 1970s. For critics, Althusser’s contribution represented the grafting of a functionalist approach to Marxist theory (Thompson 1978; Clarke 1980). While never a student of Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas came to be seen as one of the most representative proponents of this Althusserian current in Marxist political theory during the 1970s. This influence is most evident in his first major work, *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales*, published mere months after the May 1968 unrest in Paris (Barrow 2016).

Translated as *Political Power and Social Classes* in 1973, Poulantzas’ systematic exposition of the relative autonomy of the state and its functional role within the capitalist mode of production was a major contribution to the burgeoning interest in Marxist political theory of that time. Bracketing away Poulantzas’ later modifications of his argument, this chapter summarizes his theory of the capitalist state as the cohesive factor of a capitalist social formation. It also discusses

his simultaneous critique of contemporary structural-functionalist sociology and political science, as a way of distinguishing the specifically Marxist dimension of his functionalist approach. Lastly, it concludes by noting some of the contemporary critiques of Poulantzas, mostly predating his shift to a more explicitly relational theory of the state.

The unity and function of the capitalist state

Poulantzas noted that the state posed a general problem for Marxist theory because of the non-systematic and conjunctural treatment of this subject among the “Marxist classics” (Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Gramsci), as well as the economic and reformist approaches in the Second and Third Internationals (Poulantzas 1973, 19–23; 1969). *Political Power* was thus framed as a theoretical intervention building upon Althusser’s groundbreaking works, even as Poulantzas retained important differences from this framework (Barrow 2011; 2016). Poulantzas suggested that the scientific analysis of the capitalist state could not be based in either the inductive and descriptive empiricism characteristic of Anglo-American social science, nor in a Marxist historicism that reduced the political to the question of revolutionary class consciousness, as in Lukács or Korsch. Instead, the capitalist state was a theoretical object of knowledge that needed to be *produced* through the development of scientific concepts that were grounded in the systematic reading of core Marxist texts.

The capitalist mode of production itself made it possible to approach the state as this “autonomous and specific object of science” (Poulantzas 1973, 29). The capitalist mode of production was a specific configuration of the economic, political, and ideological levels or regional instances, which were formally separated and relatively autonomous, even while the economic level remained both the dominant and determinant instance. Poulantzas explained that each of these levels consisted of both structures and class practices or struggles, with the former functionally reproducing the mode of production and the latter potentially dislocating and destabilizing it. Within this complex unity, the general, overarching function of the political level or the state was to constitute and reproduce the

social relations of production, thereby maintaining its overall stability. In Poulantzas' words, the "juridico-political superstructure of the state" has the "particular function of constituting the factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation" (Poulantzas 1973, 37, 44).

By theorizing the state through the lens of its structures and functions rather than its specific institutions, Poulantzas suggested that the presence and unity of the capitalist state was made known by its effects on the relations of production, on class struggles, and on the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. The various functions of the state spanned across the political, economic, and ideological levels, such that it acted as the cohesion of the levels of this complex unity as a whole and the regulating factor of that unity's global equilibrium as a system (Poulantzas 1973, 44–5). The institutional power of the state was the node or "point of condensation" where structures and class practices, and the contradictions and displacements between them, were unified, thereby making it the site upon which the unity of the social formation rested (Poulantzas 1973, 42).

What allowed the state to successfully perform this function of managing class conflict and maintaining social cohesion in societies structured by the capitalist mode of production was precisely its *relative autonomy* from the relations of production. This structural feature of the capitalist state became Poulantzas' best known theoretical contribution. Rather than being an instrument used by the capitalist class, the state was the structural location in which the dominant class fractions were organized in light of their long-term *political* class interests. Through a rereading of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Poulantzas suggested that this relative autonomy allowed the state to both arrange compromises among the dominant classes vis-à-vis the dominated classes, and to intervene against the economic interests of a particular fraction of the capitalist class in the name of the bourgeoisie's political unity as a whole (Poulantzas 1973, 284–5).

Insofar as the state was more than the aggregate of its particular institutions, but rather an "ensemble of structures" possessing a "specific internal cohesion," its functional purpose was to reproduce class rule on behalf of the capitalist class (Poulantzas 1973, 288,

255). By virtue of its position as the political unity of a given social formation, the state had the capacity to structure the limits within which class struggles would take place. In particular, Poulantzas focused on two ways that the state affected class struggles on the political level. First, it organized the political interests of the dominant class into a power bloc – a "contradictory unity of politically dominant classes and fractions" forged into an "unstable equilibrium of compromise" under the hegemony of a particular class or fraction (Poulantzas 1973, 239, 192). Equally importantly, it deployed both juridical-ideological and repressive mechanisms to *disorganize* the dominated classes on the political level. It accomplished this dual function by "relating itself to the dominated classes as representative of the unity of the people-nation," deploying a juridical "isolation effect" of legal individualization and economic competition, and a representation of those interests through ideological collectivities like popular sovereignty and the nation (Poulantzas 1973, 189). However, this unity always remained the particular political interests of the hegemonic class presented as the general interest of the people-nation *through* the effects of the state.

Poulantzas and contemporary structural-functionalism

One can see the functionalist elements of Poulantzas' state theory – above all, in the claim that the state's presence was felt through its effects of stabilizing and reproducing capitalist class domination across the different levels of a social formation. In making this point, Poulantzas drew upon not just the Marxist classics but also contemporary Anglophone scholarship. In the 1960s, functionalism and systems theory underpinned much of the work on economic development and modernization in political sociology, as well as on the relationship between government and interest groups in political science. To that end, Poulantzas referred to functionalism as the "dominant tendency in the analyses of modern political science" and referenced American social scientists like Gabriel Almond, David Apter, David Easton, Robert Dahl, Karl Deutsch, Talcott Parsons, and Sidney Verba, among others (Poulantzas 1973, 40). These figures were credited with the insights that the polit-

ical indeed served as the factor of maintenance in the unity of a given social formation, as well as with positing the relevant question of the relationship between structures and social interests (Poulantzas 1973, 47). In turn, Easton would later see Poulantzas as having “brought Marxism into some kind of uneasy theoretical accommodation” with a systems perspective (Easton 1981, 320).

Despite this overlap, *Political Power* can be understood precisely as a critique leveled against the theories of power, ideology, and social structure developed within these accounts. For one, the book took as its theoretical object the capitalist state, a concept entirely absent from the functionalist problematic. More importantly, Poulantzas insisted on the regional specificity of the political level, as occupying a particular place within the structural matrix of the capitalist mode of production and social formations. This too was a crucial difference between his position and the functionalism of mid-century political sociology.

Following Althusser, Poulantzas identified an affinity between functionalism and Marxist historicism, which he traced to a common origin in the social theories of Hegel and Weber. The latter, particularly as channeled by both Lukács and Parsons, influenced a historicist theory of society as an expressive totality – a perspective in which the unity of a social formation emanated from a central totalizing instance also present in each of its component parts (Poulantzas 1973, 197). Both the Weberian notion of legitimacy and contemporary functionalism’s interpretation of this concept as the origin and allocation of social values ultimately rested on this historicist problematic, which understood the social totality as the outcome of intentional actions by ends-oriented subjects (individuals, status groups, and social classes).

As a result, neither Marxist historicism nor American functionalism could theoretically ground the distinct structural location of the political level in a social formation. Instead, the distinctiveness of the political was reduced to “the simple principle of social totality and the principle of its development” (Poulantzas 1973, 40). Functionalist accounts thus turned the basic question of the role played by the political in generating social unity and stability into the study of the legitimization of the relations of an integrated and equilibrated social system (Poulantzas 1973,

198, 221). Rather than having this structural location occupied by the state, the political – now theorized through the lens of social norms and values – was diffused throughout an integrated and homologous social whole.

Poulantzas further elaborated this critique of functionalism in a later essay, where he rejected the “bourgeois-sociological” idea that political crisis represented a “dysfunctional moment that ruptures an otherwise harmonious functioning of the ‘system’” until a new equilibrium was reached (Poulantzas 2008, 295). The functionalist view overlooked the inherent role of class contradictions and struggles within the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, especially in its monopoly phase, and within the capitalist state. It presented class struggles and socio-political conflicts as conflicts over values and legitimization, and by portraying crises as accidental interruptions to an otherwise normally functioning and self-regulating system. This framing of dysfunction and equilibrium overlooked the constitutive role of both class struggles and political crisis as inherent features of monopoly capitalism and of the reproduction of the state’s institutionalized political power as a unitary whole.

The legacy of Marxist structural-functionalism

Poulantzas’ (1969) review of Ralph Miliband’s *The State in Capitalist Society* and the English appearance of *Political Power* in 1973 led to a rapid uptake of his account as representative of a “structuralist” position distinct from both the power elite framework of C. Wright Mills and the alleged Marxist “instrumentalism” of Miliband (Gold, Lo, and Wright 1975; Aronowitz and Bratsis 2002; Barrow 2008; Jessop 2008; Barrow 2016). However, while acknowledging its theoretical sophistication, contemporary readers also criticized Poulantzas’ account for its abstraction and formalism, ahistoricism, and an excessive focus on political power at the expense of class struggles and the process of capital accumulation (Miliband 1970; 1973; Bridges 1974; Gold, Lo, and Wright 1975; Block 1977; Clarke 1977; Holloway and Picciotto 1978; Skocpol 1980; Jessop 1985; Das 1996).

In his two contributions to their debate, Miliband (1970; 1973) termed Poulantzas’ work as “structural super-determinism” and

“structuralist abstractionism.” For Miliband, Poulantzas’ exclusive stress on objective relations, theorized through structures and levels rather than through historical and empirical investigations, had actually undercut his argument for relative autonomy by merely replacing the concrete actors of the ruling class with a more structural dependence of the state on class power. Conversely, Jessop (1985, 53–4) has suggested that Poulantzas’ work suffered from the opposite problem: an overly politicist account of the state that downplayed the economic apparatuses and functions of the capitalist state. This relative neglect of the economic stemmed from Poulantzas’ theoretical separation of the economic and the political levels, and his tasking the latter with the responsibility for maintaining the unity of a social formation.

Poulantzas had been critical in *Political Power* of the schematic way that Althusser and especially Balibar had theorized the levels of a social formation (Poulantzas 1973, 87–9; Barrow 2016, 111–13). However, the Althusserian premise of the relative autonomy of the political and economic in the capitalist mode of production was also challenged by the German state derivationist or capital logic school (Holloway and Picciotto 1978), as well as by Simon Clarke (1977). For both, Poulantzas’ analysis of the political level as an autonomous and specific object of science merely reproduced the fragmentation of bourgeois society into nominally independent spheres. Without a systematic analysis of the capitalist state and the processes of class struggle and capital accumulation understood as a social totality, Poulantzas was said to have missed how the state both served and was constrained by the contradictions inherent to the realization of surplus value (Holloway and Picciotto 1978, 7). Moreover, for Clarke (1977), Poulantzas’ reliance on a technician understanding of the economic and a functionalist understanding of class struggle had merely reproduced the errors of structural-functionalist sociology in the terminology of Althusserian Marxism.

By the late 1970s, the reception of Poulantzas’ arguments within U.S. political sociology and political science had led to the emergence of neo-statist or institutionalist critiques (Block 1977; Skocpol 1980). Pushing beyond the formalism of *Political Power*, these authors retained the emphasis on the structural constraints faced by social

actors and state institutions; however, they also suggested that the convergence between capitalist class interests and state power was far more historically variable than Poulantzas allowed. Thus, for Skocpol, while Poulantzas’ theory could predict the functional outcomes of state policies and interventions, it both overestimated the regularity with which capitalist states would perform these functions and underestimated how struggles from below could affect the alignment of capitalist class interests and state policy (Skocpol 1980, 172, 178). In a somewhat related vein, Block (1977) saw capitalist state policies as the outcome of a three-sided relationship between capitalist class interests, working class struggles, and state managers. Facing competing constraints from capital and labor, state managers possessed coordinated state policies in the interests of long-term social unity.

In the Anglophone world, these and other critiques, coupled with the delay in the translation of *Political Power* and the waning interest in Marxist theories of the state after the 1980s, had largely frozen in time the reading of Poulantzas as a Marxist functionalist. It is only within the past decade that new attempts have been made to resituate Poulantzas’ earlier positions within the broader political and strategic debates of his time, and to develop their implications for the present (Gallas et al. 2011; Jessop 2016; Sotiris 2017; Kalampokas, Betzelos, and Sotiris 2018; Sotiris and Goes 2018; Ducange and Keucheyan 2019; Gorriti 2020).

RAFAEL KHACHATURIAN

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RAFAEL KHACHATURIAN

Rafael Khachaturian - 9781800375918

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See also

Structural Marxism; Institutional Marxism; Marxist Theory of the State; Poulantzas, Nicos; Miliband, Ralph; New Left Review; Barrow, Clyde W.; Jessop, Bob.