

Sociology 924 Interrogations #4. Poulantzas-Miliband debate

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1. João Alexandre Peschanski

I would like to discuss the relationship between dominant classes and the state in Miliband's framework. One of Poulantzas' criticisms to Miliband's book is that the latter does supposedly not take into consideration a certain autonomy of the state. According to Poulantzas, Miliband equates state and class power. In the 1970 reply to Poulantzas, Miliband claims that to some extent all states are autonomous from the ruling class; hence, the state is not a mere instrument of the ruling class, but *something* that has to some extent its own agenda. I found Miliband's claim quite puzzling: I had the impression that the so-called instrumentalist perspective argued that the state was not autonomous, just a neutral set of institutions that ended up under the control of the ruling class (through colonization, lobbying etc.). In the 1970 and 1973 pieces, Miliband does not develop in length what he means by state autonomy and how it plays out that the ruling class is able to appropriate control of the state. Only in the 1983 piece, Miliband develops more that idea, when he talks about partnership: "an accurate and realistic 'model' of the relationship between the dominant class in advanced capitalist societies and the state is one of partnership between two different, separate forces, linked to each other by many threads, yet each having its own separate sphere of concerns" (9). The state and the ruling class are "two different, separate forces", with "separate sphere of concerns", so does Miliband say! *Given that idea of partnership, what are the differences between the notions of autonomy in Miliband and Poulantzas?* One striking difference here is that Miliband considers, still, the capitalist class as a unitary force, with a somewhat singular sphere of concern, so that it "negotiates" with the state in order to sustain its rule, whereas Poulantzas rejects the idea that capitalists would be able to organize around a singular agenda, and that the relative autonomy of the state is functionally necessary to prevent capitalists' collective failures.

I tend to like the idea of state-capitalists' compromise. (I think partnership is a less accurate word, since it does not entail necessarily trade-offs.) *But then how does the negotiation of the compromise happen? What are the mechanisms that reproduce the compromise?* In a traditional Prisoner's Dilemma scenario, the cooperation of the two actors -- state and capitalists -- would depend on creating incentives to avoid defection. **[I am not sure that the metaphor of the PD works for a case like this since the entities in the game are not persons with wills, but aggregates in some sense or other. The capitalist Class" and "the State" do not face a joint collective action problem as such.]** Miliband appears to suggest that the partnership would be self-sustained, because both states and ruling classes would agree on continuing capitalists' profits in the national level ("national interest"). **[The state does not need to coordinate strategies with capitalists to have an interests in continuing capitalist profits – this is in the interests of state actors so long as the state is embedded in capitalism. Miliband fully accepts this external-constraint principle.]** *Does the idea of partnership become obsolete in a scenario of globalization, when one of the available options for capitalists who face a state which plans to do policies that go against their immediate interests is to fly away with their capital?* If that was the case, it would lead to the impossibility of any sort of somewhat redistributive state in globalized capitalism. Empirically, however, this is not the case:

some countries have had economic growth and redistribution (which is the recent experience of Brazil). *Is the idea of partnership relevant to understand those cases?* **[In a way a partnership model might even work better when one party as an exit option. If the game is a bargaining game, and partnerships are forged as compromises within bargains, then if capitalists had no exit options the state would not have as much incentive being a partner.]**

2. Emanuel Ubert

As outlined by Jessop, both, Poulantzas and Miliband, assume that “the class nature of the capitalist state depends entirely on factors external to the state itself”, and that both “ignore the view that the state is a system of political domination, whose forms may be more or less adequate to securing the various requirements of capital accumulation in different situations.”

[Do you think Jessop is really correct in this characterization of Poulantzas? When Poulantzas insists that the state is a relation rather than either a thing or a subject, isn't he trying to affirm that its class character is the result of its place within a system? The specific class character of the state is “condensed” in the state through class struggles, but this is a way of characterizing the functioning of the whole system of relations of which the state is a constituent part – or a constituent relation – not a set of external forces.]

For (late) Poulantzas, political and ideological relations are embodied, as material practices, in and mediated through the state apparatuses whose role is to maintain the unity and cohesion of a social formation. Although state apparatuses do not have power of their own they are the place and center for the exercise of power, which is inherently marked and produced by class struggle (displacement of class struggle from production into state).

While Miliband (1973) states that “it is simply not true that by ‘state power’ we can only mean the ‘power of a determinate class’”, that it is incorrect to deprive the state of any kind of autonomy at all, and although he stresses the importance of the difference in state forms (e.g. to working class movements), I am at this point not sure about his general conception and role of the state apparatus/ form.

How does Miliband's view of the state apparatus, form, functioning, and its wider role in capitalist and social reproduction differ from Poulantzas?

How do these differing views regarding the form of states affect their theories of (systemic) class relation transformations, for example either to a more authoritarian social organization (state autonomy dominating capitalist class e.g. as under fascism) or to a more egalitarian democratic organization (real utopias)?

3. Matt Kearney

Nicos Poulantzas says organizations of ideological reproduction – like the “state ideological apparatuses” of church, school, family – are part of the state. He acknowledges they have a measure of autonomy, since they can vary independently from other segments of the state,

influencing and being influenced by the forms of those segments (esp. 1969:77-8). But in a conceptual map of institutions, these go inside the state, not outside of it.

Milliband rejects this, saying that though ideological purveyors are part of the political system, they are outside the state (1970:59). Much as economics and politics are interrelated but analytically distinct, so are politics and ideology. I think we can take for granted that these writers are talking about highly differentiated societies, so the Egyptian Pharaoh and Caesaropapism are not counter-examples. **[Actually: the debate is only relevant to the capitalist state. Poulantzas is not making some broader claim that in all complex societies ideology is part of the state, only in capitalism.]** Is Poulantzas really disagreeing with the analytical separation between ideology and the state? Does he think ideology is part of the state, or that ideologically-focused *institutions* are part of the state? **[The claim is about the apparatuses. He does analytically distinguish the political and the ideological as two different “instances” or “levels” within a social system, but the corresponding apparatuses are both considered state apparatuses.]**

We might argue out of this debate that, like the distinction between state power and state apparatus, there is a distinction between ideological power and ideological apparatus, with ideological power being the social forces that derive from beliefs about what exists, is good, and is possible, and ideological apparatuses being those institutional forms that promote ideological power. My question is: how would Poulantzas, Milliband, and us locate ideological power and ideological apparatus in relation to the state? **[One thing to think about here is whether or not this is all just about the use of the word “state”. What happens if you replace the word “state” with the word “superstructure” as this term has been elaborated by G.A. Cohen. With a functionalist interpretation of the idea of superstructure, doesn’t the superstructure become “the factor of cohesion of a social formation”? Is there any substantively interesting difference between Cohen and Poulantzas on this specific point?]**

4. Naama Nagar

(a) Definition of State. For Poulantzas (The Problem of the Capitalist State) the state is defined as “the instance that maintains the cohesion of a social formation and which reproduces the conditions of production of a social system” (p. 77). What is the difference between “State” and “Society” according to this definition? **[I am not sure why you think the idea of the state being defined in terms of “cohesion of a social formation” suggests that it might be coterminous with “society”. It wouldn’t make sense to say that “society is the instance that maintains the cohesion of a social formation...” Anyway, Poulantzas is certainly prepared to include a lot of institutions that we think of as part of “society” in the state – the family and churches, for example.]** Such definition - in itself bearing no mention of state apparatuses - could apply to almost any social ‘glue’ (e.g. norms). Furthermore, and probably in his attempt to avoid Bourgeois Weberianism, Poulantzas bears neither mention of territory, not history or shared project. What, then, defines “a social system”?

(b) To take one instance of the above question, consider ideology in the age of globalism. I was thinking of the cable wikileaks. Here is a socialization body which ‘threatens’ (I am not sure there is room for such lingo in Poulantzas’ theory) not really states as such but certainly some of

the foundations of global diplomacy/espionage. And it certainly faced a repressive state apparatus trying to silence it - so it does seem to depend somewhat on (compliance with) state repressive apparatuses. How would Poulantzas understand this internationalization of the relations between states, ideological apparatuses and repressive apparatuses? Do these developments require a re-assessment of the definition of the 'State' or that of "a social system"? **[I think the way to frame this issue is to ask: what are the mechanisms that reproduce the conditions of production and establish the necessary cohesion of social systems in the context of globalization/internationalization? Cohesion is a problem posed by class struggles. Class struggles are mainly local and national even if capital flows globally – perhaps cohesion therefore mainly remains a local problem and therefore can be accomplished by repression & ideology enacted through state apparatuses?]**

(c) Poulantzas wins, so I have no question on Miliband.

5. Bob Osley-Thomas

Martin Carnoy characterizes Poulantzas as arguing that capitalist production as well as the state dissolves class-based identity and reinforces the notion of people being individuals. The state serves a function of unifying people under a particular umbrella that makes them the same and opens a space for competition. In this framework the state appropriates the role of expressing a collective will and the class struggle is turned into a political struggle in which individuals participate as individuals.

I have a question about this distinction between individuals and the whole. Is he claiming that people in their day-to-day life identify themselves as individuals as opposed to members of the whole or members of a class? **[The basic idea here is that capitalism would become very unstable if the primary identity of workers was as members of a class. This is a problem that needs a solution. The creation of the "juridical citizen", which is seen as an effect of the distinctively capitalist type of state – transforms people from potential members of a class into individualized citizens. You cast your vote as an individual; you get paid as an individual; you graduate from high school and get an individual diploma; etc. This individualization may be counteracted by other forces, but if those become powerful enough to create deep collectivities of identities *opposed to capitalism* then the system is likely to lose cohesion. One other note: not all non-individualist identities would necessarily undermine the required forms of cohesion. National identities, for example, are collective and can strengthen cohesion in a way compatible with capitalism.]** To be sure people divide themselves into various groups and establish hierarchies of status and value, but it seems as though distinctions of race, ethnicity, gender, and culture are likely more salient than distinctions between individuals and group membership. If he wants to make claims about the various ways that actual people orient themselves we probably would need serious empirical and likely ethnomethodological studies. Alternatively you might be suggesting that the distinction between individuals and the whole is an analytical category which usefully characterizes all of the various ways that people distinguish themselves. If individuals do indeed orient their lives along this distinction between individuals and the whole, the question remains by what concrete methods is the state able to engender such distinctions. Furthermore, there is the historical question of whether this distinction emerges with the capitalist state. It seems just as easily possible that the

capitalist state is helped along its way by the history of Western thought and various cognitive structures which point to the distinction between the individual and the whole.

6. Ayca Zayim

There are three issues I would like to discuss. Firstly, in “Political Power and Social Classes”, Poulantzas conceptualizes the state as having “the particular function of constituting the factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation” (p.44). Accordingly, the “global role of the state is a political role” (p.51) distinct from various “modalities” of the function of the state such as “technico-economic”, “political” and “ideological”. Furthermore, he argues that these functions aim primarily at the maintenance of “the unity of a social formation based in the last analysis on political class domination”. As such, they are “overdetermined by the state’s political function, in the strict sense, in political class conflict” (p.54). How can we define “overdetermination”? My reading is that class struggle or balance of political power at what he calls a specific “instance” or “social conjuncture” defines the *boundaries or limitations* on the *effects* of economic power dominated classes have such that even when certain state functions satisfy the economic interests of these classes, the political power of the dominant class stays intact. Hence, overdetermination stems from the distinction between economic and political power (or the “political”)? **[Overdetermination is a VERY murky idea. I think in Poulantzas’s case he means that the functioning of a “part” in a system is determined not just by the internal mechanisms of the part, or by external forces, but by its functional place within the whole (although he would not use the word “functional”, I think). This is also intimately connected to his claim that the state is not a thing or a subject but a relation. Fundamentally, then, in this context I think overdetermination means functional determination within a system]**

Secondly, Poulantzas argues that his work is situated against “empiricism and neo-positivism, whose condensates, in the Marxist tradition, are economism and historicism” (p.66, “The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau”). Later in the same article, he compares his work with that of Balibar and contends that in his framework the “mode of production” determines the “specificity, the dimensions of the specific structure of each instance, and hence of the political, in each mode” (p.79). How is this different from economism? **[It is different because the mode of production for Poulantzas is NOT just an economic category, but itself includes ideological and political levels. You are right to be perplexed about this.]** All throughout, Poulantzas mentions class struggle and class relations as defining the political domination of a particular class. However, I am still unclear about the particular/concrete mechanisms through which the state fulfills its function and the way the class struggle mediates it? Despite Poulantzas emphasizes agency (i.e. the class struggle) **[I think Poulantzas would deny that “class struggle” is a way of talking about “agency”. Classes are bearers of the relations which define them. “Struggle” is a way of characterizing the interconnected practices within such relations. Now, I personally cannot make any sense of this without adding an account of agency, choice, strategy, etc., but Poulantzas is pretty insistent that all such references to the social subject should be dropped. “History is a process without a subject” Althusser said, and I think Poulantzas stuck to this.]** the ‘structuralness’ of his framework seems, at times, to become even functionalist: “the autonomy of the political can

allow the satisfaction of the economic interests of certain dominated classes, even to the extent of occasionally limiting the economic power of the dominant classes, restraining, *where necessary*, their capacity to realize their short-term economic interests” (p.192, “Political Power and Social Classes”, emphasis added).

Thirdly, I would like to discuss Poulantzas’ understanding of the “relative autonomy” of the state. Miliband in “Poulantzas and the Capitalist State” questions Poulantzas’ use of this concept and later on in “State Power and Class Interests” proposes a distinction between the weak vs. strong version of state autonomy. I take his critique seriously: can the state be even relatively autonomous if “the demands of the dominated classes can be satisfied only to the extent that they are compatible with the definite economico-political interests of the dominant class and do not challenge the state’s power” (p.191, “Political Power and Social Classes”)? **[A lot rides on what counts as “compatibility”. If compatibility means everything that does not threaten the reproduction of capitalism, then there may be a fairly wide space for autonomy. If it means, everything that is beneficial for capitalism, then the space is smaller.]**

7. Paul Pryse

I’m dismayed by Poulantzas’ functionalist definition of the state. His language tends to get especially cryptic when describing the state as the ‘instance’ that maintains social cohesion or the ‘condensation’ of class antagonisms. He groups all sorts of institutions usually considered part of civil society, such as trade unions, the press, the church, in with the state, because according to Poulantzas they fulfill the same function (Problem of the Capitalist State, 77). My opinion of this method is that it actually overlooks the contradictions within capitalist society and sees everything as a kind of seamless whole. **[Poulantzas does not insist that everything go smoothly or that all of these apparatuses function without conflict, disjunctures, etc. In places in fact he emphasizes these kinds of issues. But what he does say is that if these contradictions ever really undermined the basic cohesion of the social formation – cohesion in the sense of the forms of social integration needed for capitalism – that this would constitute a systemic crisis.]** Of course, it is easy to see how the media and the school system perpetuate capitalist ideology, but it is important to also recognize how these institutions can also cause problems for the ruling class. The press can play an oppositional role and universities can be sites of resistance, particularly in times of crisis. Similarly, even a concession to the working class by the state “not only fails to threaten the political relation of class domination but even constitutes an element of this relation” (PPSC 191). Certainly, state managers hope that concessions will have a pacifying effect, but it is also the case that can have a long term destabilizing effect. Poulantzas’ functionalist definition of the capitalist state, as with other cases of functionalist explanations, seems to leave no room for agency and resistance to the system.

8. Taylan Acar

1) Bonapartism: Disregarding Miliband’s accusation of Poulantzas with having the same approach regarding Bonapartist and parliamentary democratic governments, to **what extent do**

Poulantzas and Miliband's conceptualization of the Bonapartist regimes differ? And how valid are they. The idea they share that Bonapartist regimes emerge during crisis moments, where the bourgeoisie and working class powers are in a stalemate is well taken. However, they tend to miss the point that capitalist regimes went through these crisis moments frequently. Miliband argues that the latest instance of the Bonapartism emerged in Chile. **Do they argue that the Bonapartist regimes only emerge after military or political coups? [I think what is in play here is a contrast between seeing Bonapartism as a very specific form of capitalist state regime and seeing the kind of relative autonomy of that regime as the general characteristic of most capitalist states. Poulantzas wants to use the term that way, whereas Miliband is treating the term as a specific form of mild authoritarian rule.]**

I think the relations of a Bonapart to the classes depend on the contextual factors and the existing class struggle. When Trotsky analyzed Germany in early 1930's in his *The Struggle against Fascism in Germany*, he contends that given the intensifying economic crisis, the fragmented structure of capitalist class, and the ever-increasing labor unrest led to the fact that every successive chancellor came to the office in a short time period had a more right wing character than the previous one (Brüning, von Papen, von Schleicher). These chancellors were not able to resolve the intense crisis between classes, which finally lead to the rise of Hitler as the Bonaparte. This "solution" –according to Trotsky- was one, which would even burn the hands of the capitalists themselves.

Or consider Hugo Chavez. When he came to power in 1999, he was merely a nationalist officer, and a twice-failed putscher. Only after the attempted coup of the business class, and the following mobilization in 2002, where 1 million people swarmed the presidential palace to bring him back to the power he was pushed to a more leftist position. Yet as a Bonapart, a petit-bourgeois military officer, he remains to be a strong obstacle –if not the strongest- in the formulation of a post-capitalist society in Venezuela.

What are the most recent examples of Bonapartist regimes? How can we relate this discussion to the regimes in the developing countries that are articulated to the international capitalist system in the post-independence era via Bonapartist regimes such as Ba'athism, Kemalism, etc?

2) Relative autonomy and the Role of the bureaucracy:

“The relative autonomy of the State with respect to this or that fraction of the power bloc, which is essential to its role as a political unifier of this bloc under the hegemony of a class or fraction (at present the monopoly capitalist fraction) thus appears, in the process of constitution and functioning of the state, as a resultant inter-organ and inter-branch contradictions (the state being divided)” (Poulantzas, 1976, 75).

Given the fact that he contends the state is a relation, rather than a thing or a subject, **is the question of who the bureaucrats are as irrelevant as it is claimed by Poulantzas?**

Moreover, both Poulantzas and Miliband do not discuss the role of the elected officials, such as the executive and legislative branches, but they limit themselves to the bureaucrats. In the examples they provide, they refer to certain presidents from several countries, however it seems to me that the theoretical framework they both rely on merely deals with the institutions of the state such as army, police, etc.

How does the role of the state apparatuses, and the individuals occupy the offices in those

apparatuses relate to the party or president in power? Here I am making the assumption that the elections are a reflection of the existing class struggles as well. For instance, if I am not mistaken, before the 2008 elections, the insurance and pharmaceutical companies were supporting Obama, whereas the firms operating in defense and arms sectors were favoring a McCain government. If this is true of course, certain business groups were more willing to have one president over another. So, the immediate interests of two capitalist sectors differed. How can we develop our theoretical understanding of relative autonomy of the state including the elected officials into the picture as a category in addition to classes and state apparatuses? **[I don't think Poulantzas would argue that the specific persons are irrelevant if what you are trying to explain is why a specific subsidy is passed, or why a particular state in the US gets a particular policy passed that is favorable to their specific farmers, etc. What he objects to is the weight given to the issue of interpersonal connections and origins of personnel for the central questions of state theory. This is very close to the issues G.A. Cohen raises in his contrast between inclusive and restricted historical materialism.]**

9. Aliza Luft

I really appreciate Poulantzas' definition of "political practice", its relationship to political structures, and his explanation for why products' unity (unities?) are revealed in conjunctures, thus making their transformation possible (*note: it is really hard to be clear when writing about Poulantzas' ideas. Sorry in advance if there's a lot of confusion in reading this. I tried...!). It makes sense to me that political practice conceived as such is the motive force of history, but what this idea leaves out is *how* conjunctures are acted upon, and *by whom*, such that when the unity of structures are revealed, transformation becomes possible.

According to Poulantzas, the object (raw material) has multiple, intersecting social levels: economic, ideological, theoretical and political. I'm not sure what the distinction is between the ideological and theoretical in this conceptualization of the object of practice. And what does Poulantzas mean by the word "level" anyway? I find that in itself is confusing. **[These are, indeed, very confusions categories, and Poulantzas does little to make them accessible. The contrast between ideological and theoretical practices has to do with what they transform and the kind of subjectivity which they produce. That is, all practices act on a raw material and transform that raw material into something, a product. The way I understand the contrast here is that ideological practices transform lived experiences into subjectively internalized beliefs or ideas, and theoretical practices transform ideological beliefs into cognitively coherent theoretical knowledge. Or something like that....]**

Furthermore, do the multiple social levels of an object have to interrelate in a particular way for a conjuncture to produce a break with the elements of the original? Does their specific interrelation at any given present influence the shape the break takes? Or the possibility for the kind of transformation produced by it? It seems as if the answer is yes (especially given the fact that the relations of production shape what transformations look like and what their outcomes are), but could we perhaps create a typology, or construct a theory that would predict how different interrelations of social levels influence transformational processes? How does this relate to Therborn?

Last, I think the idea that the state has the function of constituting the cohesion between levels of a social formation is very, very smart. So is the idea that political practice, whose objective is the state, brings about transformations of unity and is thus the motive force of history (p. 45). However, what else might influence the cohesion between levels of a social formation and how might it impact these interrelations in turn? **[I think the way to think about this is that because of the inherently contradictory character of class relations, the cohesion of a social formation is always problematic. To use a different kind of language from P's, there are endogenous processes which are continually present and which, if not countered by some mechanism, would potentially undermine the cohesion to the point where the reproduction of the relations of production (capitalism) could be called into question. If this is a correct characterization of the nature of the social system – explosively self-destructive in the absence of some counteracting force – and if we observe that these systems do not constantly self-destruct, then it is natural to ask the question: what is it that prevents the self-destruction, that provides the necessary cohesion. The answer: the state. Political struggles, then, are crucial because they have the potential of disrupting the cohesion-generating apparatuses.]** The role of the state might be decisive, but what else matters? Moreover, how might varying influences on the interrelations of levels of social formation shape the kinds of transformation that are possible? If the political struggle is the motive power of history, can transformation only occur through the state?

Last (quick) point-- and maybe this helps answer some of my questions above: With regards to the M-P debate, in addition to a more general discussion, I would really like to talk in class about the role of ideology in legitimizing the state, how and in what ways ideologies inhere in institutions, and how ruptures/transformations with hegemonic ideologies [can] occur.

10. Sarah Stefanos

This week's Poulantzas-Miliband debate appears to have started as a small tension that rose to a fevered, vituperative pitch. There is an overarching and perhaps overstated tension between what Miliband at times deems "structural super-determination" or "structuralist abstraction" (Poulantzas and the Capitalist State") and, according to Poulantzas, Miliband's humanist/historicist and empiricism approaches to the problematic of the state. I see fair criticisms that are aimed at each approach. I understand, for example, the spirit of what Miliband means in his "structural super-determination" but agree with Poulantzas ("The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau) that the terms are imprecise and not-defined (64). In his "Fundamental characteristics of the capitalist state," for example, Poulantzas remarks on the contradiction of the capitalist state:

"The state exists as a state of the dominant *classes* whilst excluding from its center the class 'struggle.' Its principal contradiction is not so much that it 'calls' itself the state of all the people, although it is in fact class state, but that, strictly speaking, it presents itself in its very institutions as a 'class' state of a society which is institutionally fixed as one not-divided-into-classes" (189).

Poulantzas characterizes the state and its relation to the class struggle here, but tells us nothing of the specific mechanisms by which the “state” achieves or carries out these contradictions. It is this kind of abstraction that I think Miliband rightly criticizes. (For example, Poulantzas speaks of states as ensembles of structures and relations at the economic, political, and economic level and Miliband states, wisely, that “we want to know the nature of the dynamic which produces this ‘ensemble,’ and which wields the different ‘levels’ into this ensemble” (86, “Poulantzas and the Capitalist state”). The “difficult language” problem to which Poulantzas speaks in his reply to Miliband and Laclau obfuscates some of the more interesting points – and empirical backings – to some of his claims, but Poulantzas does attempt to rectify those concerns in his later rebuttals.

I am interested here in what Erik – and others who have read *The State In Capitalist Society* – have to say about the criticisms leveled against Miliband. Is it fair to claim, as Poulantzas does in “The Capitalist State – A Reply to Miliband and Laclau” that Miliband’s work shows an “absence of any theoretical problematic ..it is hard to find any concrete analyses in his texts” (67)? At a purely cursory level, I seem to have heard and read more about Poulantzas and the Althusserian school; has Miliband achieved equal stature in the literature on the state? How have the problems of the “subject” and humanism been addressed or reconsidered in more contemporary Marxist debates, and what were the Marxist community’s views of the debate between Poulantzas and Miliband at the time? **[At the time Poulantzas was seen as the super-sophisticated theoretically challenging writer, and Miliband the plain-speaking, but overly simplified writer. I was one of the participants in these discussions and endorsed the contrast between structuralist and instrumentalist perspectives as the way of distinguishing P & M, but I (in a paper I wrote with Gosta Esping-Anderson and Roger Friedland) called Miliband the sophisticated instrumentalist in contrast to Domoff who we called the “vulgar instrumentalist”(he never forgave me for that, even though I was only 26 at the time). I think the main criticism of Miliband’s position is that even though he does invoke theoretical ideas about the system of relations within which the state and the capitalist economy interconnect, he still sees these as having their effects primarily through the ways they impact the beliefs, subjective interests and strategies of actors, rather than the way they constitute a functioning, if contradictory, system.]**

11. Kathryn Anderson

On page 47 of *Political Power and Social Classes*, Poulantzas refers to transitions from one dominant mode of production, to an overlapping of several modes of production in a transitory phase, to the re-establishment of a singular dominant mode. If the mode of production includes ideological and political structures, and not just forces and relations of production, what does Poulantzas theorize to happen to the political and ideological superstructures corresponding to the extinct modes of production? What can we learn about the state from empirical analysis of these moments of transition? What happens when there are multiple modes of production? Do some modes simply go unsupported by political superstructures? What does that look like? Can the state politically support multiple modes? What happens when society ideologically support

multiple modes (by continuing to support the old modes) when state policy does not? What can empirical analysis of real sectors with multiple modes of production tell us about the nature of the state unity? **[That is quite a bundle of questions! Transition periods are always a problem for Marxism because the concepts are much more suited to explain the functioning of coherent systems whose reproduction is animated by a coherent problem. Typically when Marxists adopt the Poulantzas-type analysis and see transitions as involving multiple modes of production, the state is seen as unstable until a single mode of production becomes unequivocally dominant and the state form appropriate for that mode of production (or, perhaps: the political instance within that mode of production) is consolidated. There can be cases where what looks like a feudal state functions well enough to be the factor of cohesion in a social formation within which capitalism has become dominant – this is sometimes how Absolutism in the early modern period is described – but when this happens, the claim is, the apparent feudal form is misleading and the state has actually morphed into a proto-capitalist state. What Poulantzas will not really countenance is the ideal of a social formation that is truly a hybrid form, with a mix of various modes of production that interpenetrate in shifting balances without clear dominance and with a state that constitutes the factor of cohesion of the hybrid as such. Cohesion is always of a social formation with a dominant mode of production that enables the reproduction of that dominance.]**

[On a separate note, I'm probably completely wrong, but this seems to be one potential way of answering Offe's question in *Structural Problems of the Capitalist State*: how does one empirically measure a state's structural restrictiveness? That is, how does one discern when a political event or the scope of possible political events is structurally constrained? "How can evidence of what is non-existent, the very thing that is excluded, be established sociologically?" (p.40) When one mode of production is being replaced, do associated political structures not become non-events?]

12. Lindsey Twin

Poulantzas emphasizes the division between the political and the economic inherent to the structure of the capitalist state. As a result of this separation, the state embodies the contradictions and class struggle emanating from capitalist society. How are class relations endogenous to the state?

He asserts that the relative autonomy of the state rests on the political/economic separation. I do not understand why. At the base of this separation, the state protects an unequal distribution of resources and therefore, society's dependence on capital. This leaves a wide range of possibility which does not guarantee state autonomy. **[I think the idea here is that it would be impossible to be both separated and fully non-autonomous, since fully-non-autonomous means that the state would be 100% reducible to the economy, and thus not really separate. The autonomy in question comes along with saying that the state is a relation not a thing or a subject. It is connected to the economy via their mutual roles as parts within a whole, but if they were tied to each other in such a way that there was no autonomy to the state, then**

there would be no point in saying that they were separated. This is, of course, a pretty convoluted way of talking about these matters and has little to do with the ordinary way that people would talk about the autonomy of the state. Poulantzas, of course, sees this “ordinary way” as reflecting “common sense” and therefore infused with bourgeois ideology.

Poulantzas argues that when examining classes, one needs to distinguish legal property in favor of “economic property” which is the “only genuine economic power.” However, property is not property unless it is protected by the state. One cannot exercise [in the last instance] economic power without it. This is the most crucial function of the capitalist state. Why would he overlook this? **[Poulantzas is concerned here with instances in which the legal form is really just a form and has been emptied of real power relations. Real power is what is in play here, which is backed by the state to be sure, but which is not created by the state. This is similar to G.A. Cohen’s argument that the law is a superstructure which backs property relations rather than creates them.]**

13. Mitch Schwartz

I understand the general distinction between Poulantzas’ abstract, functionalist approach to the state and Miliband’s empirical, instrumentalist approach to the state, but I’m having trouble situating these two perspectives in the context of our prior discussions. I originally thought that Poulantzas’ perspective would have state-as-actor implications, wherein the structures of the state fulfill capitalist functions almost independent of human action. But it seems more that Poulantzas is saying the state structures ingrain and maintain capitalist class relations and influence people to act accordingly. So actors maintain agency, but structures highly influence/determine their actions. **[I think you have stated this pretty much correctly. The state is a relation. People are bearers of their place within those relations. They act, but their agency is derivative from the functioning of the relations themselves.]**

So if the crux of the debate doesn’t revolve around the agency of actors, are Poulantzas and Miliband debating the **capitalist** nature of the state. Is Poulantzas arguing that the state is inherently a tool for the functional maintenance of capitalism, while Miliband is countering that the state is a neutral system that reflects power relations? **[Poulantzas would not say that the state is a “tool” for tools are the sorts of thing that people wield. The state does function to maintain capitalism, but not by virtue of being used for this purpose; rather it is by virtue of the relational character of the state within the totality of system of which it is a part. Miliband doesn’t think of the state as neutral, and in fact in the last piece emphasizes that in order for the state to function in a socialist manner it would have to be radically transformed in various ways – democratic deepening, for example.]** And by extension then, would Poulantzas believe that socialist reforms cannot occur within the state, while Miliband would see the state as an appropriate venue for power struggles between capitalist and anti-capitalist interests/actors?

14. Michael Billeaux

I'd like to discuss two themes: 1) Poulantzas' definition and use of the concepts: mode of production, economic/political/ideological instances, and social formation; 2) the importance or redundancy of motivations of state actors in the approach to the capitalist state.

1) My confusion on the first theme may be attributable primarily to the difficulty of Poulantzas' language, noted by Miliband and also Poulantzas himself. Take, for example, Poulantzas on the mode of production and its instances: "...it was the mode of production...that determined, in my view, the specificity, the dimensions and the specific structure of each instance, and hence of the political, in each mode." Somewhat rephrased: the mode of production, comprised of its three instances – economic, political, ideological – determine the specificity of each of these instances, and hence the political instance, in the mode of production. To rephrase again, with more contraction: The mode of production (i.e., the economic/political/ideological instances of the determinations arising from the base/superstructure) determines the specificity of the economic/political/ideological instances, of which it is indeed wholly comprised. I find the formulation here to be completely confusing.

The operative definition here of the mode of production as the whole complex unity of determinations arising from the base and superstructure seems also to seem to evacuate the concept of theoretical usefulness. The construct of the mode of production seems most useful insofar as it is abstract from particular determinations. **[You are not alone in the world for being completely confused here. There is one bit you left off, which I think may help clarify the issues a little: the famous "determination in the last instance by the economic". So, here is how to think about this: A social system can be thought of as a whole with parts. The parts can be called "levels" or "instances." The whole determines the roles for and connections among parts in the sense that all of the parts have to function within the whole. In some wholes religion is the dominant instance, in others the political, etc. But, the economy determines the fundamental problem (i.e. contradictions) that the whole has to solve in order for the whole to be reproducible. The feudal economy thus explains why within the feudal whole religion is the dominant instance. It is still pretty convoluted, but I hope this makes it a bit clearer.]**

Moreover the relationship of the mode of production to the social formation is confusing. The social formation, in Poulantzas' revised argument, is the "effective locus" for the existence and reproduction of the mode of production, yet his definition of the latter seems so expansive as to leave no room for a "social formation" which could be taken as analytically distinct from it. **[Usually in the Poulantzas type analysis a social formation is viewed as a more "concrete" level of analysis than a mode of production. There can be multiple modes of production coexisting within a social formation, for example.]**

2) Re: the importance of the motivations of state actors. Miliband puts a great deal of emphasis here, especially in the final article. The desire to keep power, receive a state salary, and act in the 'national interest' are identified as likely sources of motivation separate from the functional requirements of capitalism or the commands of organized capitalist class interests. They mean that any out of a range of choices (as it is rarely the case that the set of choices contains only one choice) may be taken by state actors. With regard to "acting in the 'national interest,'" Miliband says this: "The people in charge of the state have generally been strongly

imbued with the belief that the 'national interest' was bound up with the well-being of the capitalist enterprise...they have therefore been particularly attentive to the interests of capitalist enterprise, whatever view they might take of capitalists."

In some ways, Miliband is pushing the question back further. What determines the range of the choices, in the end? (To this the answer could surely be "the class struggle," but this doesn't seem to answer the question as to the limits on the range of possible options). What renders the meaning of "national interest" as bound up with the health of the capitalist enterprise in the minds of state actors? **[The range of choices need not be mainly a function of beliefs of actors – there can be a feasible set of actions that can be taken even if actors don't recognize this. I think the idea here is that if an actor were to adopt a policy that was inconsistent with the reproduction of capitalism, the system would be significantly disrupted in ways that would lead to a change in policy, so the policy in question was not stably in the feasible set. Miliband invokes this idea of politicians making bad mistakes.]**

Moreover, while his arguments regarding the existence of autonomous motivations may be right (and I see no reason to object), there may be some limit as to the extent to which those arguments are necessary. Miliband himself argues that "[external] constraints and pressures" cause the state to serve the needs of capital. If this is the case, then at least on some level, argument about motivations of state actors is redundant. In an earlier article, Miliband argues that motivations must be referred to, not because they are in themselves critical, "but precisely in order to show why they are not." In Miliband's account, we are not shown why they are not. The thrust of Poulantzas' argument seems to be precisely this, and I think this is the strength of his approach.

15. Alex Hanna

The debate between Poulantzas and Miliband does a good job of illuminating the issue of state autonomy and the problem of ruling elites. Save for the periods in which Poulantzas's prose is indecipherable and needlessly polemical, the introduction of the idea of relative autonomy and the move away from economic determination is a useful one.

A few issues: when Poulantzas says that the state is the site of class struggle, what does this actually mean concretely? Does this mean that class struggle does not happen over the conflicts over the means of production? I imagine this is somewhat related to his idea that the state helps in maintaining cohesion of class society, but his use of the word "unity" seems overwrought in this context. **[Formulations like this in Poulantzas can be pretty tricky. To say something is a "site" makes it seem like a place, but P insists that the state is a relation, and furthermore that this relation is part of a system (in a part-whole sense). One interpretation of "site of struggle" is simply that the state-relation is itself contradictory because of its capitalist character, so site of struggle = site of contradiction. Struggle for P is not an agency idea, with social subjects and consciousness.]**

I also find his reading of humanist and Western Marxist texts to be uncharitable and overly polemical. His refutation of Hegel as "historicist" attempts to identify it with a model of "genetic" or "unilinear" growth (p.38, *Political Power*), which would be strongly denied by people like Lukacs or Korsch – that society can actually regress in historical development, and

often does if the notion of “dialectic” is taken to mean societal forms overcoming their negation. I agree with Miliband that his adherence to structuralism overdetermines possibilities for reform and agency, although Poulantzas fervently denies this.

16. Chris Carlson

The Poulantzas – Miliband debate brings up many things of interest making it hard to decide which would be the best thing to discuss. I think Poulantzas’s best criticism of Miliband is the latter’s focus on the individuals inside the state apparatus and their personal ties to the capitalist class. I do think this is an important error since it would be entirely conceivable, and is in fact historical fact, that members of the state apparatus can have very few ties to the capitalist class but still carry out the interests of the capitalist class just the same. Focusing exclusively on “personal ties” omits the systemic factors that cause the state to act in the interests of capital even when not lead by, or closely tied to, the capitalist class. (although since I haven’t read the Miliband piece he is referring to I cannot say if Poulantzas criticism is accurate.) **[Miliband never attributes the procapitalist bias of the capitalist state entirely to personal ties. What he says is that personal ties, networks, connections, etc. facilitate such action by the state – these ties provide for information channels, shared world views, a stronger sense of shared fate, etc. than would be the case in the absence of those ties.]**

On the other hand, it seems like Poulantzas goes too far in the opposite direction. By discussing the state purely in regards to its function as a “factor of cohesion” I think Poulantzas does not give a clear explanation of the systemic reasons that the state functions the way he claims it does. Miliband seems to have a point when he says Poulantzas’s “ ‘structural superdeterminism’ makes him *assume* what has to be *explained* about the relationship of the state to classes in the capitalist mode of production.” Poulantzas is so abstract that it makes it hard to understand how he envisions that the state’s function as a “factor of cohesion” is actually maintained under capitalism. He continually refers to class struggle and the structures of the relations of production, but isn’t this precisely what needs to be explained more in detail? How exactly do class struggle and the relations of production shape the state’s activities? In my opinion Miliband at least makes a better attempt at explaining this in detail.

Finally, I would be interested in discussing Miliband’s final piece and any problems people might see in it. Having only quickly read it, one possible flaw that I noticed is that it seems Miliband also ends up assuming what needs to be explained when he states that people in the state “have generally been strongly imbued with the belief that the ‘national interest’ was bound up with the well-being of capitalist enterprise.” The statement isn’t false, but isn’t that what needs to be explained? **[I don’t think this claim necessarily implies that he is dodging the real question. The notion that state actors are imbued with procapitalist beliefs could be the main explanation for why they act in pro-capitalist ways, and then the social ties and recruitment processes could explain why people with those beliefs end up in the state. What Poulantzas argues is that this is largely irrelevant to explaining the capitalism-reproducing effects of the state, which, in his view, comes from the way the system as a whole is organized in relational terms.]**

17. Yotaro Natani

The first question I have concerns state autonomy: if the state is autonomous of the dominant class, and this autonomy allows the state to secure conditions for the reproduction of the overall system and the continued dominance of the capitalist class, then can the capitalist state go under crisis? For Poulantzas, the state seems to have a coherent functional role in reproducing the system – the autonomy is what lets the state identify what is in the interest of capitalism and the capitalist class as a whole. I think we can make an interesting comparison to Claus Offe, who also identifies the same functional role of the state and autonomy from the capitalist class; but he also claims that the state cannot fulfill all necessary functional requirements, and therefore a crisis occurs. I do not see within Poulantzas' framework a clear mechanism that can explain crisis tendencies of the state, given his implicit assumption of functional coherence (unless his discussion of Bonapartism was supposed to be his way of addressing this, which I did not find easy to understand). **[This is an interesting issue – not one addressed directly in the readings (as I recall). Poulantzas does allow for a lot of contradictions and conflicts within the state – across branches, for example. He sees the state as having a certain kind of unity, and he sees it as constituting the factor of cohesion for the system, but I don't think this implies that everything has to work homeostatically and smoothly.]** Miliband talks about a situation when the state can misunderstand what is in the interest of all, and employ decisions that are detrimental to everyone, such as participating in certain wars. This leads us to questions like when can a state become too autonomous, or under what conditions does the state misinterpret the goals and interests of dominant classes. **[The issue of the state making mistakes is not the same as the problem of autonomy: the state could have little autonomy and still make catastrophic mistakes that hurt the capitalist class, or the state could have a lot of autonomy and make such mistakes. Mistakes have to do with miscalculations of actors about the consequences of alternative policies. I don't think Poulantzas would assume that policies are always well informed by their consequences. I think what he would argue is that mistakes set in motion processes which will tend to correct the mistakes, at least if the mistakes undermine significant the cohesion of the system – meaning the ability to reproduce the necessary conditions for sustaining the relations of production. I suppose if for some reason the mistakes were not corrected or not correctable, then this would create the conditions for a rupture. His basic prediction, however, is that this will not happen unless the basic contradictions of capitalism have intensified beyond a containable limit.]**

The other question concerns Poulantzas' view of Marxism as an objective perspective of society; he makes this distinction when talking about Miliband's failure to criticize bourgeois science/ideology from this objective perspective. It is clear that for Poulantzas the two are separate systems of thought. But is his Marxism different from bourgeois ideology based on objectivity? Poulantzas sees the state as expressing class relations/practice and identifies power in this dynamic, whereas bourgeois ideology identifies power within the bureaucracy and its personnel. Is this difference an objective difference, or something that is more substantive yet both scientific? **[I think Poulantzas would distinguish between the truth content of Marxism and Bourgeois social science on this score – although the kind of Althusserian “structuralism” he was part of did eventually lead to a kind of discourse analysis that blurred the distinction between ideology and science.]**
