

# Marxism, Sociology and Poulantzas's Theory of the State

Simon Clarke

## 1 Introduction

Political developments in the last ten years have led to a very considerable renewal of interest in Marxist economic and political analysis, and to a concerted attempt to reinvigorate Marxist theory as a revolutionary force. The focus of this movement is the attempt to develop a Marxist critique of Stalinist dogmatism and of post-Stalinist revisionism. Its material conditions are the end of the long wave of post-war capitalist expansion and the reappearance of capitalist crisis, on the one hand, and the development of working class resistance to the domination of capital independently of the orthodox Communist Parties, on the other.

This Marxist renaissance is taking place in conditions which make it extremely vulnerable to absorption into the frame of reference of bourgeois ideology. Since 1930 Marxist theory has been positively or negatively dominated by the official Marxism of the orthodox Communist Parties (which I shall refer to as 'dogmatism'). Those Marxists who were not prepared to subordinate themselves to dogmatism were not able to challenge it either. The period of cold war and the absence of independent working class resistance to capital meant that there was no basis on which such a challenge could be mounted. The independence of such Marxism was maintained by its diversion of attention from political and economic concerns. It was dominated by the attempt to explain the apparent solidity of bourgeois domination by reference to specific superstructural features which varied from one country to another, thus constituting various national schools of 'Western Marxism', which borrowed heavily from the dominant bourgeois cultural theories in the various countries. The 'Marxist' alternatives to dogmatism systematically evaded the fundamental theoretical issues which would have been raised by any direct challenge to dogmatism ( Anderson, 1976).

The development of capitalist crisis and the corresponding development of political alternatives to revisionism has created new conditions for Marxist theory. These dictate a return to the foundations of Marxism, to the generality of the capital relation, and a confrontation with the dogmatist orthodoxy. However the novelty of these conditions also indicates a weakness of contemporary Marxism. In the absence of a Marxist critique of dogmatism, various forms of bourgeois ideology, and above all bourgeois sociology, have monopolised such

criticism. The renewal of Marxist theory is therefore very vulnerable to absorption by bourgeois ideology, innocently basing its critique of dogmatism on that offered by the bourgeois social sciences, and so being led to adopt bourgeois solutions to the theoretical problems posed. It is therefore as important for Marxism to state its distance from the bourgeois social sciences as from Marxist dogmatism.

It is my argument in this paper that Poulantzas's theory of the state fails to do this. Although I would not presume to question Poulantzas's own political motives, the many genuinely original and important insights contained in his work are nullified by its domination by a theory quite alien to Marxism, a theory whose implications, indeed, Poulantzas constantly tries to avoid. This theory, adopted from Althusser, is based on a superficial criticism of dogmatism which leaves the theoretical foundation of the latter untouched and which reproduces that offered by bourgeois sociology. This leads Poulantzas to reproduce with uncanny accuracy the theory characteristic of contemporary structural-functionalism, the dominant tendency of bourgeois sociology. Poulantzas's many insights can only be integrated into Marxism in the wake of a thoroughgoing theoretical critique which relates his work both to Marxist dogmatism and to bourgeois social science. This paper is offered as a contribution to that critique.

## 2 The 'Neo-Gramscian' Critique of the Theory of State Monopoly Capitalism

Contemporary Marxist developments in the theory of the capitalist state centre on the critique of the dogmatist theory of State Monopoly Capitalism. The latter, in its crudest but most common form, argues that the state is the instrument of monopoly capital in the era of imperialism, and so the means by which the domination of capital over civil society is maintained. This role of the state is itself an expression of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, representing the socialisation of the latter in response to the socialisation of the former, but under the control of monopoly capital. The revolutionary task of the proletariat is to lead a coalition of democratic forces which will free the state from this control and use it as the instrument of the transition to socialism.

The most obvious faults of this theory can be characterised as its evolutionism and its economistic reductionism. The former implies that the contemporary capitalist state is in some sense transitional, and so can be the neutral instrument of the transition to socialism. The theory is therefore unable to grasp the *limits* of state interventionism inherent in the character of the state as a capitalist state. The economistic reductionism of the theory implies that the state is the *instrument* of capital, ignoring the specificity of the capitalist state as a political institution and the complexity of the class struggle in its relation to the state.

Any adequate theory of the capitalist state must embrace these critical points, which are of great political as well as theoretical importance. Poulantzas's

work clearly attempts to do this, for it is centred precisely on questions of the autonomy of the state relative to the economy and to the dominant class, of the complexity of the class structure and of class relations, of the structural limits on the action of the state, and so on. His work can be seen as an attempt to build a theory of the state in opposition to the theory of State Monopoly Capitalism which avoids the evolutionism and economism of the latter and so has an obvious appeal to contemporary Marxists.

However an anti-evolutionist and anti-economist theory of the capitalist state is not necessarily a Marxist theory. It is not Marxism, but bourgeois sociology, which has constantly condemned dogmatism for its economism and evolutionism, and bourgeois sociology has built a theory of society which avoids these errors. The crucial problem for Marxists is that of theorising the institutional separation of the state from capitalist enterprises, the political separation of the state from the capitalist class, the differentiation and fragmentation of social classes, the representative relations between classes and political parties, and the limits of state intervention, without losing the fundamental Marxist premise of the capital relation as principle of the unity of the social formation. The temptation which faces Marxism is that of adopting a bourgeois sociological theory of the state and of giving that theory a ‘Marxist’ twist by emphasising the primacy of the relations of production. This was the tendency of an earlier generation of British Marxists who developed theories which can be described as ‘neo-Gramscian’, in the sense that they derived their authority from a particular interpretation of Gramsci’s work.<sup>1</sup>

These theories interpose a level of ‘civil society’ between the relations of production and the state, which is distinct from both. In ‘civil society’ ideological and institutional relations are added onto relations of production to create a sphere of interacting social groups, the ‘society’ of bourgeois sociology. The theory is given a radical slant in that it tries to theorise the dominance of capital in this sphere of interaction, the dominance in question consisting fundamentally in the imposition of a normative order on society, in the management of a consensus, which is the basis of the relative autonomy of the state, but at the same time the basis of the state as the power of capital ( Negri, 1976, pp. 7–8). The dominance of capital is explained as the dominance of a social group endowed with a disproportionate share of material resources, and so is founded at the level of ‘social interaction’ and not at the level of the relations of production. The relations of production are thus introduced into a purely sociological theory to give it a contingently radical, but not Marxist, orientation. The latter can be reduced to the assertions that economic interests play a primary role in the constitution of social groups, and that material resources are predominant in determining the course of social interaction. Inequality is therefore self-perpetuating and the state, as institutionalisation of the dominance of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Negri, (1976). Examples of such theories range from sociologists like Vic Allen to the editors of *New Left Review*, notably Perry Anderson. R. Miliband (1969), far from being ‘marked by the absence of any theoretical problematic’ ( Poulantzas, 1976, p. 64) is dominated by such a theory. It is in relation to these theories that Poulantzas’s work has been received in this country (n. 43 below) (c.f. Poulantzas, 1967).

well-endowed, plays a major part in perpetuating that inequality. This ‘Marxist sociology’ is characterised by the empirical assertion that economic interests and material resources play a preponderant role in defining social interaction, but is not *theoretically* differentiated from bourgeois sociology.

These neo-Gramscian theories get beyond economism and evolutionism only by adopting a sociological conception of society. Paradoxically they are not incompatible with the revisionist politics associated with the theory of State Monopoly Capitalism. The state itself continues to be a neutral instrument dominated by the interests of big capital. The task of the proletariat is still to free the state from this domination. The difference is that the domination of capital is now indirect, mediated by its domination over civil society. It is no longer sufficient to break the direct grip of capital on the state apparatus, but it is also necessary to contest bourgeois domination of civil society by contesting the ideological consensus imposed by the bourgeoisie.

Poulantzas has sharply attacked the neo-Gramscian analysis of the state put forward by Miliband.<sup>2</sup> He criticises Miliband for reproducing bourgeois ideological theorisations by confining his critique of bourgeois accounts to their empirical adequacy. He correctly insists that a Marxist critique must be properly theoretical. What he objects to in this conception of society is the focus on social actors, the view of ‘individuals as the origin of *social action*’ in a ‘*problematic of the subject*’. To this Poulantzas counterposes the conception of ‘social classes and the State as *objective structures*, and their relations as an *objective system of regular connections*’ ( Poulantzas, 1969, p. 70). Poulantzas does not, however, show that this distinction is constitutive of Marxist as opposed to bourgeois theories of society. On the contrary, as I shall indicate later, it is a distinction *within* bourgeois sociology.<sup>3</sup> The crucial question for the Marxist critique is not so much that of the objective character of the structures, but rather that of their substantive content. I shall argue that Poulantzas offers the objective ‘structures’ of structural-functionalist sociology, and not the Marxist relations of production. In order to establish this a detour is called for. In the next two sections I shall look at the substantive foundation of bourgeois conceptions of society, and its critique by Marx.

### 3 Marx’s Concept of Production and the Critique of Political Economy

The theoretical foundation of bourgeois ideology can be precisely located *in a particular conception of production*. The classical formulation of this conception of production is found in classical political economy, and it was to its critique that Marx dedicated the most fertile ten years of his life.

For classical political economy the realm of production is seen in technical terms as the realm in which labour sets to work means of production to make

---

<sup>2</sup>The debate between the two is in Poulantzas (1969, 1976) and Miliband (1970, 1973).

<sup>3</sup>See below, pp. 11, 27.

products.<sup>4</sup> Relations of distribution determine the transformation of the product into revenues accruing to the various classes. These relations are therefore superimposed on production as the social framework within which material production takes place, but production itself is not seen as a fundamentally social process. In the capitalist mode of production this superimposition is achieved simply by ascribing revenues to factors of production (labour, land and means of production) and assigning classes to these factors as owners.<sup>5</sup> This is Marx's 'trinity formula', the form of appearance of bourgeois relations of production. It is a form of appearance which eternises the latter relations, because it makes them appear as relations already inscribed in the technical structure of the material production process by ascribing revenues to factors of production. This can be clearly seen in the treatment of non-capitalist modes of production by classical political economy. Since revenues 'naturally' belong to the classes of capitalist society, non-capitalist relations of distribution must be based on political intervention by which revenues are diverted from their natural recipients. This political intervention secures a class monopolisation of particular factors of production which makes possible the extortion of excessive 'profits' by the owners of these means of production (Marx, n.d., p. 116).<sup>6</sup> This is transparently the ideology of the struggle of the bourgeoisie against the feudal privileges of the landowning class, which reached its most self-conscious expression in the struggles against the corn laws which marked the high point of classical political economy. It is an *ideology* because it postulates as eternal that which is historically specific. It is a *bourgeois* ideology because that which it postulates as eternal is the bourgeois production relation.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>This is essentially Althusser's definition of 'practice' on which he bases his reconstruction of Marxism (L. Althusser, 1969, p. 166). The literature on Althusser is considerable. I have argued at length elsewhere (1976) that Althusserianism rests on this same conception of production, with the theoretical consequences which I outline below. Most critical treatments of Althusser deliberately evade the question of Althusser's interpretation of Marx. A. Glucksmann (1972); J. Rancière (1974) provide by far the most penetrating critiques of Althusserianism. See also the devastating review of *Pour Marx*, written before his conversion by N. Poulantzas (1966).

<sup>5</sup>This is the basis of Balibar's discussion of the combination of the 'property relation' and the 'relation of real appropriation' (L. Althusser and E. Balibar, 1970).

<sup>6</sup>B. Hindess and P. Hirst (1975) try to develop a general theory on the basis of this ideology, seeking to give the various pre-capitalist forms of distribution a material foundation in the development of the forces of production. The result is to establish the incoherence of this ideology by *reductio ad absurdum*: if the ideology is correct, the past cannot have existed. Unfortunately Hindess and Hirst prefer to abandon the past rather than bourgeois ideology!

<sup>7</sup>In so far as political economy is bourgeois, i.e. in so far as it views the capitalist order as the absolute and ultimate form of social production, instead of as a historically transient stage of development ...' (K. Marx, 1976, p. 96; c.f. Marx, 1973, pp. 83-8). L. Colletti, in his excellent article 'Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International' (in Colletti, 1972) argues that it is its conception of the economy, common to all the thinkers of the Second International, rather than its fatalism, which defines revisionism. He also traces this conception to later Marxism and to bourgeois sociology. However he focusses on the question of the eternisation of the commodity form of the product of labour implicit in the neglect of the theory of value, and does not bring out sufficiently clearly the derivative, but even more important, eternisation of the capital relation as a development of the eternisation of commodity relations.

Marx devoted the ten years between 1857 and 1867 to the elaboration of the critique of the ideological conception of production which underpins the eternisation of bourgeois relations of production in classical political economy. In this critique he shows that the errors of political economy derive from its conception of production. Correspondingly the basis of Marx's own theory and of his dialectical method is to be found in his conception of production.

In the second section of the 1857 Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy* Marx outlined his project, insisting on the *historical* character of production and on the *domination* of the moment of production over those of distribution, consumption and exchange. In the *Grundrisse* of 1857–8 the critique of classical political economy, and the corresponding development of Marx's own theory, is partial and undeveloped. The reason for this is that Marx insists on the primacy of production, but has not fully transformed the bourgeois conception of production itself. Marx still tends to contrast capitalist relations of production with the technical process of production in an external relation of form to content, the capitalist form deriving from circulation and superimposing itself on an already-defined content. To this extent capitalist social relations are still fundamentally *relations of distribution* mapped onto production. The result is that Marx does not clearly distinguish production as the process of production of use-values from production as the process of production of value, and so tends to see the two processes as being consistent with one another, the latter being simply superimposed on the former. This means that he is unable clearly to make the fundamental distinction between labour and labour-power, and the derived distinction between constant and variable, as opposed to fixed and circulating, capital.<sup>8</sup> Since he is still not able to theorise adequately the contradictory foundation of the capitalist mode of production in production itself, he sees it instead in the relation between production and circulation, with the result that the *Grundrisse* is dominated by an overproduction theory of crisis. Finally, the separation of form and content makes it possible to discuss form without content, social relations in abstraction from their material foundation, and so makes it necessary to discuss the development of social relations in the abstract language of 'positing' and of 'presuppositions'.

The contrast between the *Grundrisse*, on the one hand, and *Theories of Surplus Value* and *Capital*, on the other, shows clearly that Marxism does not consist simply in the assertion of the primacy of production, nor in the use of phrases like 'relations of production', but consists above all in the transformation of the bourgeois conception of production itself. In *Capital* relations of production are no longer the social relations within which material production takes place, on the basis of a contrast between social relations of distribution and technical relations of production.

In Marx's developed thought *production is seen as a process which is itself both social and material*, as the *contradictory unity* of the production of value and the production of use-values. Capitalist relations of production are not

---

<sup>8</sup>The inability to distinguish clearly between labour and labour-power is closely associated with the failure to integrate form and content in the account in K. Marx, 1973, pp. 304–8.

contrasted with material production as an externally derived form imposed on a pre-existent content, for form and content are integrated in a contradictory unity.<sup>9</sup> The clear distinction between value and use-value makes it possible to develop the contrast between concrete useful labour and abstract value-creating labour, and so the concepts of labour-power, of constant and variable capital, and of surplus value. Surplus value is no longer seen as the revenue accruing to a distributive class, a share in the material product. Rather it is seen as the product of the labour process as a process of production of value, of the compulsion imposed on the worker by the capitalist to work beyond the time necessary to reproduce the value of his labour-power. Exploitation and class relations are therefore given a scientific foundation in production, and no longer have a moral foundation as relations of distribution. The contradictory foundation of production itself means that the law of motion of capitalism, expressed in the tendential law of the falling rate of profit, and the countervailing tendencies it calls forth, can be founded in production. Moreover, because production is now seen not simply as material production, but also as the production of social relations, the conditions of reproduction are themselves founded in production. Finally, because form and content can no longer be separated, the development of social relations cannot be discussed in an abstract way, in isolation from their material foundation. *The development of social relations is now a historical process driven by the contradiction inherent in capitalist production of being the production of value and the production of use values.*<sup>10</sup> It is in the development of this contradiction that relations of distribution, circulation and consumption are subsumed under the relations of production. It is therefore only with the Marxist concept of production as valorisation process that the primacy of production is itself put on a sound theoretical basis.

The contradiction between value and use-value is the specification of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production in the capitalist mode of production. Dogmatism tends to follow classical revisionism in identifying the latter contradiction with a contradiction between increasingly socialised production and private appropriation (i.e. between production and circulation), whose developed form becomes a contradiction between the economic and political, or between civil society and the state (c.f. Colletti, 1972, pp. 97–108). The contradiction between production and circulation must rather be seen as a *form* of the more fundamental contradiction between the production of value and the production of use-value.

The Marxist critique of political economy is not merely of historical interest, for it is a critique of the constitutive basis of all bourgeois ideology, whose defining feature is the conception of production as a technical process, a conception which underpins the eternalisation of capitalist relations of production. It

---

<sup>9</sup>This is why the starting point of *Capital* is the *commodity*, which is the simplest expression of the unity of form and content, of value and use-value. c.f. Mandel, Introduction to Marx (1976), pp. 20–21. On the relation of the *Grundrisse* to *Capital* see M. Nicolaus (1968, 1973); M. Itoh (1975); Rosdolsky (1968).

<sup>10</sup>The process is *historical* in the sense that it takes place in history. This does not imply that it expresses the self-development of some original contradictions.

is their adoption of this conception that enables us to characterise even certain self-proclaimed ‘Marxist’ theories as dominated by bourgeois ideology. This characterisation does not necessarily imply any judgement about the *intentions* of those propounding such theories, nor even about the ‘scientific’ or ‘unscientific’ character of their *procedures*. It is because of their common foundation in the bourgeois conception of production that bourgeois sociology and dogmatist Marxism are dominated by bourgeois ideology. It is correspondingly because of their common foundation that attempts to base a Marxist critique of dogmatist Marxism on bourgeois sociology are bound to fail, for they must fail to strike at the foundations of dogmatism. This explains the paradox that Marxist attempts to use bourgeois sociology as the basis of the critique of dogmatism are easily assimilated by the latter. Hence both neo-Gramscian and Althusserian Marxism have been used to bolster the revisionist politics of the orthodox Communist Parties. We are now in a position to look at these different currents as variants of the bourgeois ideological conception of society.

## 4 The Law of Value and the Critique of Bourgeois Ideology

Poulantzas presents his theory of the capitalist state as a development of the interpretation of Marx offered by Althusser and Balibar.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation emerged on the basis of an attempt to break, from within the orthodox Communist movement, with the theoretical positions of Stalinist dogmatism.

Dogmatism is based on the bourgeois conception of production which I have outlined above. This ‘technicist’ view of production was adopted by Stalin, through Plekhanov and Menshevism, from the classical revisionist theories of the Second International. On this basis Stalin constructed his theory of modes of production in which the technical structure of production is the ‘material foundation’ on which different modes of production arise. History is seen as a succession of modes of production, each mode being constituted as a specific form of *appropriation of the surplus* and a corresponding form of *exploitation of labour*. The mode of production is seen as the combination of a technical structure of production and what are in fact *social relations of distribution*. Developments in the forces of production produce a dislocation between forces of production and relations of distribution, precipitating a change in relations of distribution so that they correspond with the more developed forces of production.<sup>12</sup> In the current phase of capitalist development capitalist relations of distribution are preserved by the control over the institutions of political and ideological domination exercised by monopoly capital. The task of the proletariat is to break this domination so that new relations of distribution, appropriate to

---

<sup>11</sup>I shall concentrate on the theory expounded in *Political Power and Social Classes* (hereafter PPSC), to which Poulantzas remains committed (Poulantzas, 1976).

<sup>12</sup>J. Banaji (n.d.), offers an excellent critique of the Stalinist theory of modes of production, and some elements of a properly Marxist theory. The classic exposition of the theory is Stalin’s *Dialectical & Historical Materialism* (1938).



the developed forces of production, can appear.

The most obvious errors of this conception are its evolutionism and its economistic reductionism, as I have already noted in the case of the theory of State Monopoly Capitalism. These errors derive from the conception of production on which dogmatism is based. *It is because the 'forces and relations of production' are seen as technical relations of production and social relations of distribution that the relation between them is seen as a relation alternately of correspondence and dislocation, and not a relation of contradiction.* Hence the Marxist theory of history, which is based on the contradiction inherent in production in all class societies of being production of use values and production of relations of domination, is turned into a metaphysical philosophy of history in which the dialectic is an external law of history which governs the development of modes of production in a fixed succession by governing the progressive development of the forces of production which underlies it. Correspondingly, the separation of 'forces and relations of production', and consequent abolition of the dialectical relation between the two, dictates that the primacy of production takes the form of an economistic, or a technicist, reductionism.

This bourgeois conception of production is also the basis of the revisionist politics which dogmatism legitimates. The eternisation of bourgeois relations of production on which it is based dictates that political activity can only strike at the relations of *distribution* which arise on the basis of a technically determined structure of production. 'Trade Union' activity is confined to modification of the position of classes within given relations of distribution, 'political' activity to the use of state power to transform these relations of distribution. However revolutionary the rhetoric in which it is cloaked, a politics based on this distinction is bound to be reformist, for it eliminates resistance to the capital relation in production, where that relation is produced and reproduced, while directing political activity towards the forms of the bourgeois state, forms whose effectivity is subordinate to the domination of the capital relation. These political implications are not associated directly with the economism and evolutionism of dogmatism, which serve only to underpin the claimed inevitability of the revolution, but with the conception of production which underlies it. Any critique which fails to base itself on the critique of this conception of production is bound to remain a prisoner of the political implications of the latter, as I have already indicated in the case of neo-Gramscian theories of society.<sup>13</sup>

The bourgeois sociological critique of Marxist dogmatism, as of bourgeois technological determinism, continues to be based on the technologistic conception of production, and is itself reproduced both by Althusserian and by neo-Gramscian theories of society. All take as their starting point the distinction between relations of production,<sup>14</sup> seen as the technical relations combining fac-

---

<sup>13</sup>Hence Althusser believes that trade union struggle is necessarily defensive since it can only concern the rate of exploitation (L. Althusser, 1971, pp. 82-3). In the same way for Poulantzas the contrast between economic and political struggle is that between conflict over the 'realisation of profit and . . . the increase of wages' and conflict over the maintenance or transformation of social relations (PPSC, p. 86).

<sup>14</sup> Althusser and Balibar's 'real appropriation relation'.

tors in material production, and relations of distribution, seen as social relations constituted by ownership of the means of production.<sup>15</sup> Since rights to revenue depend on ‘ownership’ of factors, the relations of distribution are mapped onto the relations of production. The former cannot, however, be reduced to the latter, for they involve the relation of ‘ownership’ which is a relation defined politically and/or ideologically ( Althusser and Balibar, 1970, p. 177). Class relations cannot be defined purely ‘economically’. They are consequently social relations that express political and ideological determinations. The starting point of the theory of society cannot, therefore, be the asocial, purely ‘economic’ or ‘technical’ relations of production, as they are for dogmatism and for technological determinism. The starting point can only be the pre-given whole, called ‘society’ or ‘social structure’ in bourgeois sociology, ‘civil society’ or the ‘mode of production’ in Marxist sociology.

Interactionist sociology and neo-Gramscian Marxism interpose ‘civil society’ between material conditions of production, seen as the economic realm, and the state, seen as the political realm. The task of sociology is to study the interaction of individuals and groups in this world of ‘society’, these being social subjects acting in a framework of economic and political institutions, themselves studied by economists and political scientists, which can be modified by social actors. Structural-functionalism is based on the attempt to dissolve social groups as subjects into the structure which constitutes them as subjects and which structures their interaction. The relation between structural-functionalism and interactionism is summed up very succinctly in Poulantzas’s critique of Miliband. Structural-functionalism replaces the view of ‘individuals as the origin of social action’, in a ‘problematic of the subject’ with the view of social phenomena as ‘objective structures, and their relations as an objective system of regular connections.’ In following Althusser in basing his critique of dogmatist economism and evolutionism on the bourgeois conception of production, and in rejecting the ‘problematic of the subject’ for an ‘objectivist’ account, Poulantzas, no doubt quite unintentionally, also followed Althusser in reproducing the theory of society developed by structural-functionalism, and above all by Talcott Parsons.<sup>16</sup> In Althusser’s work the Marxist elements are purely rhetorical. The importance of Poulantzas is that he tries to give Althusserianism some substance by developing a theory of class.

The structural-functionalist/Althusserian view of society rejects the interactionist account of structures as the products of the action of social subjects. The subjective principle is replaced as the basis on which the structure is organised by the functional principle. A variety of different levels are defined according to

---

<sup>15</sup> Althusser and Balibar’s ‘property relation’. Althusserians on occasion insist that the relation of ownership is not simply a political or ideological relation, but has a material foundation. They have, however, been unable to show what this foundation is. More important, they insist that the relation cannot be reduced to such a foundation.

<sup>16</sup>I shan’t discuss structural-functionalism in any detail, since I am only concerned with its basic principles. The similarity of Althusser’s conception of theory to that of Parsons has been noted by P. Walton and A. Gamble (1972, p. 110). Poulantzas himself has compared Althusser’s conception of politics to Parsons’s (1966) (c.f. PPSC, p. 40). Rancière (1974, pp. 229–30) shows that they have a common conception of ideology.

the functions they fulfil in relation to the whole. The identity of the functions and levels and the relations between them vary according to the particular theory in question. The basic principle is, however, invariant. The differentiation of functions determines that each level should have its own specificity and its own autonomy relative to other levels. The different functions are hierarchically ordered, the technical requirements of material production normally being primary because of the supposed primary requisite of physical reproduction.<sup>17</sup> The hierarchy takes the form of limits imposed by one level on the variation of other levels (PPSC, p. 95): hence very varied normative systems, or ideological and political systems, may be compatible with the requirements of physical reproduction of a society or social formation at a given technical level. Within these limits of variation the different levels are themselves structured under the domination of their relative functions in the whole, and not under the domination of other levels. They are therefore determined as levels of the complex whole, and not as expressions of other levels.<sup>18</sup> For Althusser the various levels are defined as particular kinds of practices, the basic levels being the economic, political and ideological.

The economic level is that of material production, guaranteeing the physical survival of the whole. The political level assigns individual agents to means of production as owners or non-owners, the latter being residually owners of labour-power, and so as recipients of their respective revenues. The ideological level constitutes these individual ‘supports’ of the relations of distribution as social subjects able to fulfil their roles in society. The economic level is thus the technical realm of material production, the political and ideological levels are the social realm which establishes the social conditions of material reproduction. For this analysis, therefore, the autonomy of the political and ideological relative to the economic is the supposed autonomy of relations of distribution relative to relations of production which depends on the bourgeois conception of production. The consequence is the view of social relations as constituted not in production, but ‘politically and ideologically’, or ‘normatively’, which in turn underpins a reformist politics. The basic conceptions of society shared by dogmatism, neo-Gramscian Marxism and interactionist sociology are reproduced. The ‘planar’ conception of society characteristic of the latter has been replaced by a ‘structural’ conception, but the structure remains the ‘pre-given, complex, overdetermined whole structured in dominance determined, in the last instance,

---

<sup>17</sup>This need not be based on what Althusser calls an ‘anthropology of needs’, which bases the primacy of physical needs on the concept of human nature. In his case it is based on the observation that society would cease to exist if it did not reproduce itself physically. This observation is not sufficient to establish the primacy of physical reproduction. For Marx in the capitalist mode of production there is no doubt that the requirements of value production dominate those of physical production.

<sup>18</sup>Althusserians normally assert that one level is dominant, within the limits of the specific autonomy of the other levels, so that the whole is ‘structured-in-dominance’. This is supposed to distinguish the Althusserian whole from anybody else’s. However (i) it is never clear what dominance means in this context (ii) the ‘economic’, i.e. the functional requirements of material production, determines which level will be dominant, so the dominance is the expression of the functional principle, making the Althusserian totality no less ‘expressive’ than the Parsonian one.

by the economic' characteristic of structural-functionalist sociology.

The Marxist conception of production leads to a quite different idea of the structure of the whole from that offered by Althusserianism. For Marx, relations of production are inherently social 'naturally arisen . . . historically developed' ( Marx, 1973, p. 485) relations. The relations of production are not simply relations of the immediate labour process, but are the relations constituted by the valorisation process, relations of a total process of social production, whose development is governed by the law of value. The relations of production are not distinct from society, rather 'the relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society, and specifically, a society at a definite stage of historical development' ( Marx 1962a, p. 90). To take the relations of production as the starting point of analysis is not, therefore, to introduce a reductionism, for the relations of production are already social. Hence the determination of social relations as relations of production is not an abstract determination in the last instance of the social by the functional requirements of material production. It is rather *the specific and determinate historical process by which all social relations are subsumed under the dominant relation of production and so are determined as developed forms of that relation*. The basis of this process is the contradictory foundation of production itself as production of use-values and production of social relations. In the capitalist mode of production the social relations within which products are produced, distributed, circulated and consumed are subordinate to the production of value as moments of the process of self-expansion (Valorisation—*Verwertung*) of capital. They are not counterposed to production as the social framework within which production of use values take place. They are rather *moments of the total process of social production which is the process of valorisation, a production both in society and of society*. Correspondingly the economic, in the narrow sense, the political and the ideological are not defined abstractly as the framework within which relations of production are subsequently to be defined, as politically and ideologically constituted and reproduced relations within which material production takes place. Rather *the economic, political and ideological are forms which are taken by the relations of production*. Political and ideological relations are as much relations of production as are strictly economic relations, for they are specific forms of the social relations within which production takes place. The Marxist theory of ideology and the Marxist theory of the state have to show how and to what extent political and ideological relations are forms of the relations of production as moments of the total process of social production subordinate to the relation between capital and labour which is constituted in the immediate process of production. This must follow the method Marx has developed in *Capital* for the derivative economic relations of distribution, circulation and consumption. This is not achieved by formal deduction from a simple abstraction like 'society' in the language of functionalism, but, as Marx does in *Capital*, by showing the concrete historical process by which these relations are subsumed under the capital relation.<sup>19</sup> It is only such a historical

---

<sup>19</sup>Outlined already in the Introduction of the *Grundrisse* ( Marx, 1973, pp. 83–100).

materialist analysis which can establish concretely both the domination of all social relations by the capital relation and the limits of that domination.

For intellectuals trained in the bourgeois social sciences the specificity of Marx's theory is difficult to understand. The dialectical method of historical materialism even seems abstract and esoteric to those for whom the concepts of the bourgeois social sciences ('society', 'norms', 'equilibrium', 'legitimacy' etc.) are so familiar that their reality is almost tangible.<sup>20</sup> When Marx's theory, which is 'nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought' is encountered, the familiar points of reference are absent. In the absence of the mythical world which the bourgeois social scientist takes for reality, the world which Marx describes appears to be an abstract construction of theory. This is all the more the case because of the success with which Marx has managed 'to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development, to trace their inner connection'. The result is that the very concrete materialist dialectic is taken for an abstract metaphysical device. As Marx warned, 'if the life of the subject-matter is ideally reflected as in a mirror, then it may appear as if we had before us a mere *a priori* construction' (Marx, 1962b, p. 456). It is in this sense that my remarks above must be interpreted. However abstract they may appear to be, they refer to *concrete, specific, determinate historical* relations and not to abstract, 'speculative' connections.

## 5 Poulantzas's Theory of Social Structure

We are now ready to return to Poulantzas. The originality of Poulantzas's work lies in his attempt to transcend the integrationist perspective of functionalist sociology. He does this by trying to graft the Marxist proposition that the class struggle is the motor of history onto Althusser's structural-functionalist conception of society. The theory of class is inserted between the structure and the state, so that the state is subject to a double determination. In the first place, it is determined directly by the structure as a specific functional level of that structure. Secondly, its functioning in practice, within limits determined by its place in the structure, is subject to the conditions of the class struggle, which are in turn determined, at least partially, by the structure.

The focus of Poulantzas's attempt to integrate a theory of class into the framework of Althusserianism is the theory of the state. This focus is itself

---

<sup>20</sup>For example, many Marxist economists get very worried about the so-called 'transformation problem' because they believe that a theory of the economic should be evaluated in terms of the elegance and simplicity with which it derives an equilibrium price system, forgetting that such a price system is no more than a fiction created by vulgar economy to conceal the tautological character of its formulae. On Marx's theory of value see R. Hilferding, 1949; I. Rubin, 1972; E. Mandel, Introduction to Marx, 1976, pp. 38–46; L. Colletti, 1972, pp. 76–97. On Marx's method c.f. E. Mandel, Introduction to Marx, 1976, pp. 17–25; M. Nicolaus, 1973, pp. 24–44; V. Lenin, 1961; F. Engels, 1962. These works all bring out clearly the *specificity* of Marx's dialectic in relation to that of Hegel, and so the inadequacy of the characterisation of this position as neo-Hegelian, or the corresponding interpretation of Marx as a 'capital-logic' interpretation.

dictated by the structural theory which determines the function of the state. In this section I shall examine this structural theory, before turning to the theory of class. This structural theory describes the functions of the levels of the structure and the character of the relations between them.

The political is defined by Poulantzas as the ‘juridico-political superstructure of the state’ (PPSC, p. 37), but it should not be identified with the state as an institution, but rather with the function which is attributed to the state by the structure.<sup>21</sup> The function of the state is defined by its role as ‘factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation . . . and as the regulating factor of its global equilibrium as a system’ (PPSC, pp. 44–5).<sup>22</sup> This function has various ‘modalities’ according to the levels on which it is exercised (economic, ideological and ‘strictly political’), which are subordinate to the overall requirement of preserving the unity of the social formation, and so ‘over-determined’ by the ‘strictly political’ function. Within this overdetermination by the political function, however, other functions may be dominant, this dominance expressing in inverted form the dominance of levels within the social formation (PPSC, pp. 50–6).<sup>23</sup>

The specificity of the state’s functions determines that it has a specific autonomy in relation to other levels of the mode of production: its functions are specifically *political* functions, all subordinated to the need to maintain the unity of the whole. This specific autonomy of the political is characteristic of the capitalist mode of production.<sup>24</sup> Poulantzas argues that it has nothing to do with the dominance or non-dominance of the political among the levels of the social formation, nor with the intervention or non-intervention of the state in other levels. ‘This specific autonomy of the political and the economic . . . relates ultimately to the separation of the direct producer from his means of production . . . in the combination which governs and distributes the specific positions of the economic and political, and which sets the limits of intervention by one of the regional structures at another’ (PPSC, p. 127). Poulantzas does not actually specify how the particular combination of relations of ‘property’ and of ‘real appropriation’ in the capitalist mode of production determine the specific autonomy of the political. The implicit argument rests on the bourgeois conception of production and distribution. In Balibar’s terminology the relations of ‘property’ and of ‘real appropriation’ are ‘homologous’ in the capitalist mode of production. This in fact means that the social relations of distribution

---

<sup>21</sup> Poulantzas distinguishes an institution as ‘a system of norms or rules which is socially sanctioned’ from the structure as the ‘*organising matrix* of institutions’ (PPSC, p. 115n. 24).

<sup>22</sup> Poulantzas recognises that this, the most fundamental definition in his theory, derives from contemporary political science (PPSC, p. 47, n. 17) and is not found in any of the Marxist classics (PPSC, p. 50). Poulantzas makes quite explicit the foundation of his conception of the state in the contrast between material *production* and *social conditions of production* which rests on the bourgeois conception of production in his later *Fascism and Dictatorship* (hereafter FD) (1974, p. 302).

<sup>23</sup>This use of the concept of dominance is given no coherent content.

<sup>24</sup>In PPSC, p. 29, Poulantzas argues that it is in some form characteristic of all modes of production. However he has subsequently renounced this position (1965, p. 81; c.f. PPSC, p. 126).

*correspond* to the ‘natural’ relations of production.<sup>25</sup> The political level does not therefore intervene in distribution, which follows directly from the natural ascription of revenues to ‘factors of production’. The eternisation of capitalist relations of production in this theory implies that the economic dominance of the capitalist class is inscribed in the technical structure of production itself, and so this dominance does not exist at the level of the state. The state can therefore present itself as the state of the whole, as the unity of the individuals it has itself constituted as juridical subjects.

That this is indeed Poulantzas’s view emerges clearly in his specification of the functions of the state at the economic level. On the one hand, the state intervenes in the process of *material* production as ‘organiser of the labour process’ in order to increase the productivity of labour. On the other hand, the state is present at the economic level in the judicial system, ‘i.e. the set of rules which organises capitalist exchanges and provides the real framework of cohesion in which commercial encounters can take place’ (PPSC, p. 53). Hence the state intervenes technically in the material process of production, and establishes the social framework within which production takes place by constituting the agents of production who enter labour contracts and own means of production as individuals, as specific recipients of revenues (PPSC, p. 128). The state does not intervene in production directly as a class state to secure the position of the dominant class.

It is true that for a Marxist analysis, in the first instance at least, the dominance of the capitalist class does not require the intervention of the state in the immediate process of production. This is not, as Poulantzas implicitly and Balibar explicitly argue, because the dominance of the capitalist class is already inherent in the technical structure of production. It is rather because Marxism regards production in both social and physical terms. *The dominance of capital is a product of the valorisation process*, which takes place on the basis of a certain level of development of the forces of production. Hence in *Capital* Marx shows precisely that as a result of the valorisation process, not only production, but also circulation, distribution and even consumption are brought under the domination of the relations of immediate production. In other words it is not the state ‘which organises capitalist exchanges and provides the real framework of cohesion in which commercial encounters can take place’ or which serves ‘to *transform* and to *fix* the limits of the mode of production’ (PPSC, pp. 53, 161), but it is capital itself which achieves this. Consequently, for Marxism, the ‘relative autonomy’ of the capitalist state is not rooted in a supposed ‘homology’ or ‘correspondence’ between relations of production and distribution, for this ‘correspondence’ is itself a product of the relations of production. Instead it must be founded in the separation of economic and political domination which is in turn not inherent in the *concept* of the capitalist mode of production, to be deduced from that concept, but which is inherent in the historical development of the capitalist mode of production ( Pashukanis, 1951, section V).

---

<sup>25</sup> Poulantzas distinguishes between Balibar’s ‘homology’ and his ‘correspondence’ (PPSC, p. 27, n. 11) although it is not clear what the difference is.

The ideological level, like the political, is supposed to have its own specific autonomy. The function of ideology is to insert individuals ‘into their practical activities supporting this structure’, it ‘has the precise function of hiding the real contradictions and of *reconstituting* on an imaginary level a relatively coherent discourse which serves as the horizon of agents’ experience ... Ideology ... has the particular function of *cohesion*’ (PPSC, p. 207). This function determines the structure of ideology, since the ideology ‘offers an imaginary coherence to the unity governing the real contradictions of the ensemble of this formation. The structure of the ideological depends on the fact that it *reflects* the unity of a social formation’ (PPSC, p. 208).<sup>26</sup> Poulantzas is unable to establish the specific autonomy of the ideological level relative to the political. Firstly, the function of the ideological level is simply a specification of the function of the political level. In the second place, because the levels are given a functional and not an institutional definition, all institutions which embody ideological domination are thereby assimilated to the state, even if they have no institutional connection with the state, as ‘ideological state apparatuses’.<sup>27</sup>

Poulantzas’s conception of the social structure is essentially indistinguishable from that of structural functionalism. The definition of the structure, the specification of its levels and their functions, requires no reference to Marxist concepts of any kind. The Marxist claims of the theory depend entirely on the claims of the theory of class which is superimposed on the theory of social structure. The state, for example, is a specific institution which has specific functions to perform in relation to the whole. The state is not defined with reference either to the ‘economic’ level or to the dominant class. However, the state continues to be a class state because the social formation whose unity it maintains is a social formation in which a particular class is dominant (PPSC, pp. 51, 54, 115). In maintaining the unity of society, therefore, the state is at the same time maintaining the dominance of the dominant class. In the same way the dominant ideology is not the ideology of the dominant class, but the ideology of a social whole in which a certain class is dominant. ‘The dominant ideology, by assuring the practical insertion of agents in the social structure, aims at the maintenance (the cohesion) of this structure, and this means *above all* class domination and exploitation’ (PPSC, p. 209). Structural functionalism is not theoretically at fault, it has simply failed to point out that the structure whose functioning it theorises is characterised by exploitation and domination. If this argument is to amount to anything more than a moral protest, the theory of class exploitation and domination must be put on a scientific footing.

<sup>26</sup>This idea is strongly reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss’s conception of myth.

<sup>27</sup>E. Laclau (1975, pp. 100–101) makes a similar point. A. Cutler (1971) argues that Althusser avoids this reduction of the autonomy of ideology by having a ‘concept of the specificity of the ideological level’ (p. 12), but insofar as this is the case it is an idealist concept, for it is given no material foundation outside the Ideological State Apparatuses.



## 6 Poulantzas's Theory of Class

Poulantzas bases his theory of class on the distinction between the level of structures and the level of practices. The relations within the structure are not social relations, and so are not relations of domination or of exploitation (PPSC, pp. 62–6).<sup>28</sup> They are, on the one hand, the technical relations of material production, and, on the other hand, differential relations of ownership of agents to means of production. *The distinction between 'relations of production' and 'social relations of production', between 'structure' and 'practice', rigorously reproduces that between technical relations of production and social relations of distribution.*

The social classes of Poulantzas's theory are not constituted by the relations of production, in the Marxist sense, but are rather distributive classes defined by reference to the technical functions of their members in production as well as by political and ideological, 'social', factors. The theory of class is thus based on the same conception of production as the theory of structure. It is this subordination of the theory of class to the theory of structure that dictates that the classes be seen in *distributional* terms. As we have seen, the structure is not a structure of social relations, the economic level being defined in purely technical terms. Hence the inevitable result of the definition of classes as '*the result of an ensemble of structures and of their relations*' (PPSC, p. 63), is the view of classes as being constituted as distributional categories, related externally to production by assignment to technical functions.

The 'social relations of production' are relations between social groups constituted by the distribution of the product. These concrete groups are not defined simply by the size of their incomes, but more fundamentally by the source of that income. This 'source' is itself seen in purely technical terms as the relation to the technical function in production (CCC, p. 18).<sup>29</sup> However, for Poulantzas, the distribution of the social product is not simply determined by the relation to the technical function in production, by the 'technical division of labour'. On top of determination by the technical structure of production, ideological and political factors, which constitute the 'social division of labour', are important in defining class relations even at the economic, distributional, level. This is especially clear in pre-capitalist societies, in which the political level is supposedly dominant in the structure, and so in the definition of distributive groups at the economic level (PPSC, p. 70). However it is also true in

---

<sup>28</sup>The insistence that 'relations of production' are not social, but are rather a combination of 'agents of production' with the 'material-technical conditions of labour' is a clear expression of the bourgeois conception of production (PPSC, p. 65).

<sup>29</sup>The whole of *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (CCC) is based on this theory of class. For example, the distinction between productive and unproductive labour is based on the material character of the product and not on its subsumption under capital as productive of surplus value (ibid., p. 221). The division between mental and manual labour is founded on the technical division of labour, whereas Marx made it quite clear that this division expressed the appropriation of the creative powers of labour by capital. The distinction between sections of the petit-bourgeoisie is based on distinctive features of the labour process, and not on distinctive relations to capital. The unity of the petit-bourgeoisie is constituted ideologically, and not on the basis of a common relation to capital.

the capitalist mode of production that social classes cannot be defined in purely 'economic' terms (PPSC, pp. 62–4).

This is not a Marxist theory of class, but the theory of class of classical political economy, as modified and developed by contemporary bourgeois sociology. Distributive classes are precisely the 'interest groups' which have such a fundamental position in bourgeois sociology. The interests of these groups are defined within the limits of the given (eternal) structure. Because production is seen in purely material terms it is regarded as fixed in size, so that the distributive 'shares' of the various groups are shares of a fixed product. The interests of these various groups necessarily conflict with one another because the material advance of one can only be at the expense of another.

In order to achieve their collective economic interests these groups have to exist at the political and ideological levels, political and ideological conflict providing the means to advance or to defend their interests. Interest groups can have an effect on the political level even if they are not politically organised, so that classes can exist even without their being politically organised. On the other hand, just as there are interest groups which do not achieve the political status of pressure groups, so there are pressure groups which are not constituted on the basis of distributive interests (PPSC, pp. 77–85). In the relation between the different levels of conflict it is the political which is dominant because of the role of the state in the structure, the ability of the state to intervene in the economy to the benefit of one group or another. Therefore to have power, to become a genuine pressure group, it is necessary for interest groups to achieve a sufficient level of political organisation (PPSC, p. 107). In the conflict relations between these interest groups the ability of each group to achieve its interests is determined by its power, which in turn is dependent on its position in the structure (its bargaining position) and its level of organisation (PPSC, p. 112).

This pluralist theory of social conflict, as conflict between distributively defined interest groups organised into pressure groups and political parties which seek to achieve their ends by organising with state power as their objective, operating on a given and technically determined economic foundation, is the theory which Poulantzas offers as a Marxist theory of class. The specific claims of Poulantzas's formulation are firstly, that economic interests are dominant in determining the constitution of pressure groups and political parties, and, secondly, that the relations between these interest groups are in some way asymmetrical, relations between some groups or sets of groups being relations of 'exploitation' or 'domination', so that conflict is not the symmetrical interrelation of competing groups, but tends to fuse into the conflict between social classes.

The first claim appears to be specific to the capitalist mode of production, in which the economic is dominant. In pre-capitalist modes of production, where political intervention is supposedly required to secure revenue, the political is dominant, so that the constitution of interest groups is itself politically determined.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>Since the political is once again dominant in the present imperialist era one might expect

The second claim, that the relations between social groups are asymmetrical, is never explained by Poulantzas. This asymmetry is not a result of the political domination of the dominant class. Monopolisation of state power by the dominant class is not, in general, characteristic of the capitalist mode of production for Poulantzas. Hence ‘domination’ does not refer to the monopolisation of state power by the dominant class, nor indeed does it refer to dominance on the ‘political scene’ (PPSC, pp. 248–9). Hence ‘domination’ is not defined at the political level at all. It is therefore defined at the level of the structure, ‘domination’ being an effect of the structure at the level of social relations. The structure however is not itself a structure of social relations but is rather, as we have seen, a functional unity combining a technicist conception of the economic, together with political and ideological levels defined functionally in relation to the economic. *The dominance of the dominant class can, therefore, only be explained by reference to technical features of the process of production itself, and specifically to an implicit technically necessary dominance of the means of production over the labour process.*<sup>31</sup> The reproduction of the structure, which is the limit of the state’s function in the whole, is therefore also and necessarily the reproduction of the dominance of the dominant class. Finally, if this dominance is a technological necessity, dictated by the requirements of production, the class relation can only be characterised as exploitative within limits set by these technological requirements, and on the basis of an external and moralistic criterion of justice. Hence in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* Poulantzas is concerned with identifying these limits between which exploitation can be said to exist, with separating the supposedly technically necessary domination of means of production or of mental labour from the superimposed, ideologically or politically defined, domination of capital over labour.

The bourgeois theory of class adopted by Poulantzas is quite different from the Marxist theory. For the latter classes are not distributive groups, and so are not ‘interest groups’. This is because Marx sees relations of production as themselves social, as class relations. Under the capitalist mode of production material production is strictly subordinate to the production of value, and in the production of value the labourer is subject to the domination of capital. The revenues of labourer and capitalist do not represent distributive shares in a fixed product. The revenue of the labourer is limited by the value of labour-power, the revenue of the capitalist by the extent to which he is able to impose a certain productivity on this labour. The latter is not only determined by technical factors, but also by the extent to which he is able to increase the intensity of labour and extend the working day. *The revenues of capitalist and working classes are not therefore inversely related, because they are not shares of a fixed product.* The product is rather the *sum* of the necessary and surplus labour time expended. Hence at the level of *distribution* not only do we not have a relation of dominance, we do not even have a necessary conflict of interests.

In the early *Wage Labour and Capital* Marx follows Ricardo in seeing wages

---

that class would have given way to estates.

<sup>31</sup>This dominance is inscribed in the very definition of the concept of practice for Althusser (1969, p. 184).

and profits as inversely related (Marx, 1962a, p. 96). In the later *Wages, Price and Profit* he argues very strongly against Citizen Weston that this is not at all the case, using empirical examples to establish his argument that a rise in profits can perfectly well follow on a rise in wages (Marx, 1962c, pp. 401–8). It is this obvious fact that makes possible the ‘productivity bargaining’ that plays such a part in supporting the cooperative ideology which serves to justify capitalist relations of production.

If distributive relations are not the basis of relations of domination and conflict, relations of production most definitely are. This does not mean that relations of production are ‘overdetermined’ by political and ideological relations, *but that these relations are themselves relations of domination between social classes*. The social classes are defined not according to their relations in the immediate labour process, but in the total process of social production. The definition of these classes and of fractions of these classes does not involve reference to the political and ideological, although the intervention of the latter affects the *development* of the *relations between* classes and introduces differentiations within classes.

The relations of production dominate all social relations not because they define the most important ‘interests’ in play in social interactions, nor because all social relations are in some way functionally subordinated to the needs of material production. *The relations of production are dominant because the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production are rooted in production*, in the contradiction between the production of value and the production of use values, driven by the need of capital to expand itself. The contradictory requirements of the valorisation of capital drive capital beyond the immediate process of production, so that it *tends* to subsume other economic, and all other social, relations to itself, in such a way that even social relations in fields apparently distant from production come under the domination of the capital relation, and this all the more to the extent that capital encounters barriers to its self-expansion, in other words to the extent that the self-expansion of capital is itself a contradictory and crisis-ridden process. The laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production are not simply laws of the structure, they are the *tendential* laws which govern the development of the relations of production, in other words laws of the class struggle, and which, tendentially, subordinate all social relations to the fundamental class relations of the capitalist mode of production. *This subordination is a historical and not a functional process*.

The sociological approach to class, based on a view of production as a technical process, dissolves the basis of the Marxist theory of class. The distinction it introduces between the material process of production and the social framework within which it takes place, and the corresponding reconciliation of the two in a non-contradictory combination abolishes both the social character of production as production of social relations, and the material foundation of social relations constituted by the materiality of the commodity. This abolition of the contradictory foundation of the capitalist mode of production frees class relations from their foundation in production and so dissociates material production as

the realm of technically determined 'economic' laws from social relations as the realm of power (PPSC, p. 102). The laws of motion of capitalism are then assigned to the latter and simply express the development of the 'class struggle', which takes place on the basis of a given external material foundation,<sup>32</sup> but is itself determined by 'social', political and ideological facts, detached from the purely 'economic' foundation. Once the bourgeois alternative of 'reductionism' versus 'pluralism' is accepted, the rejection of dogmatism can only lead to the pluralism of bourgeois sociology.

---

<sup>32</sup>Hence the falling rate of profit for Poulantzas is the contingent result of the struggle over distributive shares (CCC, p. 107).

## 7 Poulantzas's Theory of the Capitalist State

The theory of class which Poulantzas seeks to integrate into the structural-functional theory of society is quite consistent with the latter. This becomes very clear when we consider the relation between class and structure in Poulantzas's theory, a relation in which class struggle appears to be condemned to reproduce the structure. The key is the relation of class to state.

The analysis of the relation between class and state is really conducted on two levels. On one level, the function of the state is to guarantee the reproduction of the social formation. Insofar as this formation is characterised by the dominance of one class (and Poulantzas does not found such dominance theoretically) the state is therefore always and tautologically the representative of this dominant class, whether or not the political or ideological representatives of this class predominate in political or ideological conflicts, and irrespective of whether this class has any kind of representation at the level of the state. At this level of analysis, therefore, the state is the 'unambiguous political power of the dominant classes or fractions' (PPSC, p. 274), since it is the power of the structure to ensure its own reproduction.

On the other level of analysis, which is that of the bulk of Poulantzas's work, the representation of classes through parties or other institutions at the level of the state, and their presence through 'pertinent effects' at that level is simply an aspect of the management by the state of its specific function in the whole. At this level of analysis the power and interests of classes are defined in the context of the constraints imposed by the given structure. The concept of 'conjuncture' expresses the limits of the possibilities open to the various classes engaged in a particular conflict (PPSC, pp. 42, 46, 76, 93–5, 102, 187).<sup>33</sup> In the last analysis political practice in a particular conjuncture determines how the structure will develop within limits which the structure itself defines. In principle the conjuncture may describe the transformation of the structure as a possibility defined by that structure. However it is not clear how this could be the case, for the structure is not built on a contradictory foundation, and so does not have the possibility of its own transformation inscribed within it. Hence practice is strictly subordinate to structure and inevitably condemned to maintain the latter.

This emerges clearly from Poulantzas's analysis of class relations in the conjuncture. These relations are power relations, power being an effect of the structure at the level of class relations and not a property of the structure itself. The power of a class is defined as its capacity to realise its objective interests, and its interests defined as the limit of what can be achieved by the class in the current situation. Finally, this limit is itself defined by the structure (PPSC, pp. 99, 104–12).<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Poulantzas does not even begin to attempt to specify these limits.

<sup>34</sup> Again the limits are unspecified. The only factor which might explain structural determination is the level of organisation of the class. However, insofar as this is admitted as an unconditioned factor it makes it possible for the class to transcend the structural limits and so to become a class subject. This is to reproduce the 'historicism' which Poulantzas con-

At this level of analysis the state is defined in relation to its function in the structure, and not in relation to the dominance of any particular class. In order to sustain this structure it is necessary for the state to intervene in the field of class political practices. The operation of the state does not express the power of the dominant class in relation to other classes and to the structure, but the ‘power’ of the structure in relation to all classes, for it can do nothing else but perpetuate the unity of the structure to which it is functionally adapted. It is not therefore necessary for the dominant class to have control of the state apparatus itself (PPSC, pp. 100, 115–6).

The state acts politically by taking in hand the disorganisation of the dominated classes and the organisation of the dominant (PPSC, pp. 53, 137, 187). On the one hand, ‘the juridical and ideological structures . . . which set up at their level agents of production distributed in social classes as juridico-ideological subjects, produce the . . . effect on the economic class struggle of concealing from these particular agents the fact that their relations are class relations’. Poulantzas calls this the ‘effect of isolation’,<sup>35</sup> which is the basis of competition. Because the state relates to economic relations ‘in the form in which they appear’ the state can appear as the unity which represents the general interest of a variety of private individual interests. The very mode of participation offered by the state is therefore a mode of class disorganisation (PPSC, pp. 130–7). On the other hand, the dominant classes are unified and their interests presented as the general interest by one of the dominant classes or ‘fractions’ assuming the ‘hegemonic role’ in the ‘power bloc’ (PPSC, pp. 137–41). This can only be achieved by the state taking in hand the organisation of the power bloc. The reason is that to present itself as representative of the general interest it is necessary for the hegemonic class or fraction to recognise and make concessions to the economic interests of the dominated classes, to the extent to which the latter have the power to enforce those interests in political class struggle. Purely economic concessions are possible under the capitalist mode of production because of the separation of levels characteristic of the structure of that mode (PPSC, pp. 191–4). In order to make them, however, the state has to dissociate itself from the economic interests of the dominant classes in order to guarantee their political interests, and so has to establish its autonomy relative to the dominant classes (PPSC, p. 282). Hence in order to preserve the structure it is necessary for the state to express not the power of the dominant class, but the power relations of all classes in the conjuncture (PPSC, pp. 256–7, 282–8, 299).<sup>36</sup>

---

demns. Since power relations exist at each level of struggle, it might seem that the notion of dominance is weakened. However the dominant class in the social formation is that which is dominant at the dominant level of the formation (PPSC, p. 113). We still do not know what ‘dominant’ means in either of these cases.

<sup>35</sup>The ‘effect of isolation’ is ultimately determined by the structure of the labour process (PPSC, 129), although the argument is extremely confused. In fact this isolation is characteristic not of the economic *per se*, but of circulation, where it depends on the relation of commodity exchange, which is a moment of the relations of total social production and not the effect of juridical or ideological structures. It is not characteristic of the moment of immediate production in which labour progressively loses its individual character. Ignoring the latter is typical of the bourgeois view of ‘social relations of production’ as relations of distribution.

<sup>36</sup>The dominant classes constitute a ruling bloc under the hegemony of one fraction, around

At the level of the analysis of the structure, of the relations of classes within that structure, and of the relations between classes and the state in that structure, Poulantzas simply reproduces the sociological formulations of structural-functionalism. The state is a class state only in the rhetorical sense that it is the state of a structure in which a class or classes are supposedly dominant, and so a state which reproduces that dominance. In its practical relation to classes in struggle, the state does not express the dominance of the dominant classes, but the existing relations of power between the classes in struggle, and so is the arbiter of conflicting interests. At this level of analysis the ‘political dominance’ of the dominant classes organised in the hegemonic block refers simply to the perpetuation of the structure and not to any specific institutionalised political relations between classes or between class and state. The ‘Marxism’ of Poulantzas’s political sociology is reduced to the claim, which can only be an arbitrary moral claim, that the structure is characterised by the dominance of one or a number of classes over other classes.

Poulantzas not only reproduces the substantive theoretical positions of bourgeois sociology. He also reproduces the conception the latter holds of the nature of theory and its relation to ‘empirical’ research. Poulantzas is very insistent on the distinction between general theory and the analysis of concrete situations, and on the limited possibilities of the former.<sup>37</sup> This distinction is based on the sterile bourgeois conception of theory as a pseudo-deductive system of general propositions which is the corollary of bourgeois theories that consist of a series of metaphysical abstractions. The theoretical framework provides general statements which attribute functions to levels, institutions, etc., but does not provide any account of the mechanisms which determine that these functions are actually fulfilled. The latter can only be demonstrated in the ‘analysis’ of concrete situations. The system of explanation then becomes tautological, for anything that happens in the concrete situation can be linked, *ex post facto*, to the functional requirements of the system. The system persists, so must have functioned. Any changes in the system must have been necessary in order to secure the persistence of the system. Because there is no theory of the functioning of the system there is no reference point in relation to which the functioning of the system can be assessed. The theory tells us that the system

---

which cluster ‘allied’ and ‘supporting’ classes, fractions, strata or categories (PPSC, pp. 243–4). These concepts do not apply to relations constituted on the ‘political scene’, hence the ruling class is quite distinct from the dominant class and the hegemonic class or fraction need not even appear on the political scene (PPSC, pp. 248–9). This is very mysterious, for it is difficult to know where politics occurs, and so where political dominance is founded, if it is not on the political scene. In fact these relations of political domination seem to be constituted in the structure and are prior to the constitution of classes or class struggle. In other words the class struggle is a phantom inserted between the structure and the institutional relations of the ‘political scene’ which has no reality of its own.

<sup>37</sup>Hence Poulantzas’s theoretical musings are purely formal in the sense that the theory has no substantive content, indicating only the *types* of relationship which must pertain between various aspects of the structure and the class struggle. The specific content can only be determined by the analysis of ‘concrete situations’. This is the only way to distinguish secondary factors from real causes’ (FD, p. 11). The formal elaboration is thus accompanied by a series of empirical examples, ‘analyses’ of ‘concrete situations’.



functions without telling us how, the analysis of the current situation shows us that the system has functioned. There is, however, no way of connecting the one with the other. The result is that the distance between the theoretical and empirical analyses enables them constantly to support one another, the theoretical account providing a rhetoric in which to cloak the empirical account and dignify the latter with the term 'analysis'. Every event becomes a victory for the system, another demonstration of the eternal character of bourgeois relations of production. The struggle of the working class against those relations of production is devalued, its achievements becoming simply bonds which tie the working class ever more tightly into the system, its substantive defeats having a retrospective inevitability. However the historical fact that bourgeois relations of production have persisted must not be confused with the ideological belief that this persistence is necessary.

## 8 The Political Implications of Poulantzas's Theory

Poulantzas's work consists of an attempt to get beyond the integrationism of structural-functionalism, to give the rhetorical Marxist declarations of Althusserianism some content, by superimposing on it a theory of class. However the theory of class is itself constructed on the basis of the structural-functionalist conception of society and is inserted into the latter. Hence, despite the Marxist rhetoric, Poulantzas is unable to get beyond a structural-functionalist theory. This can be well illustrated by looking at Poulantzas's attempts to evade the political implications of what is an extremely reactionary theory by introducing the possibility of revolutionary transformation. The latter has to be introduced from outside. In *Political Power and Social Classes* a new mode of production is introduced through the medium of the state.

In Poulantzas's functionalist theory, the course of the class struggle is determined by the function of the state, which is the preservation of the unity of the whole. Political practice which takes the existing state as its objective is necessarily condemned to perpetuate the dominance of the dominant class. Political practice which is to transform the structure, rather than maintaining it, must replace the state appropriate to the capitalist mode of production by a new state, that appropriate to a new mode of production and defined by its functions in relation to the new mode. The political practice of the dominated classes must be directed to the creation of new organs of political power if it is not to be contained by the structure. This is the significance of Lenin's analysis of dual power for Poulantzas,<sup>38</sup> although in *Political Power and Social Classes*

---

<sup>38</sup>This involves a gross distortion of Lenin's analysis. For Lenin the Soviets were not the means by which the revolution could be made. The period of 'dual power' was a period in which the Kerensky regime and the Menshevik-dominated Soviets competed with the ambition of being the seat of *bourgeois* state power. For Lenin the socialist revolution depended on a destruction of the bourgeois state which could free the Soviets as the basis of a new state power. That they did not become such is another story.

he confines his analysis to the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

The latter analysis, embodied in the account of the absolutist state, is extraordinarily contorted (PPSC, pp. 157–67). The problem Poulantzas faces is that he has defined a functional unity of dominant class, dominant mode of production and dominant form of the state expressed in his non-contradictory concept of structure. There seems no way in which a form of the state appropriate to a new mode of production, and so the possibility of a transformation of the structure, can emerge on the basis of the existing structure.

The customary solution to this problem in radical bourgeois theories is to introduce the class subject of history. The latter would create new political institutions appropriate to its ambition of creating the new mode of production which it has constituted theoretically on the basis of its moral critique of the existing mode. The revolution is therefore made by the will of the class-conscious subject of history. Such a solution is clearly appropriate to a theory in which the exploitative character of the existing mode of production is defined on the basis of a moral evaluation, for it appears to give the latter an objective foundation in the ‘true consciousness’ of the class subject.

In *Political Power and Social Classes* this solution is not acceptable to Poulantzas, for it expresses that ‘humanist historicism’ which makes men the subjects of history. If history is to have a subject, that subject must be the structure itself. The new form of the state does not express the will of the class subject of history, but expresses the structure of the mode of production whose dominance it anticipates. Hence the absolutist state represents the self-transformation of the feudal-type state into a capitalist-type state (in violation of the functional imperatives of the feudal mode of production) in anticipation of the task to be accomplished. The absolutist state has the specific autonomy and isolation effect characteristic of the capitalist state without the presuppositions of either yet existing (which is incomprehensible so long as the latter are *presuppositions*). In fact ‘the chronological dislocation between the absolutist state and the economic instance in the period of transition . . . can be explained by the function of the state during primary accumulation of capital’. The state suddenly assumes the capitalist form in order to create the dominance of the ‘*not-yet-given relations* of production (i.e. capitalist relations) and to put an end to feudal relations: its function is to *transform* and to *fix* the limits of the mode of production’ (PPSC, pp. 160–1).

Poulantzas has to resort to a metaphysical philosophy of history for the same reason as have Marxist dogmatism, ‘humanist historicism’ and bourgeois sociology. All these theories abolish the basis of the Marxist theory of history, which is the concept of production as a contradictory unity, and so eliminate any source of change internal to the structure they theorise. Insofar as historical change is not purely contingent, it has to be brought in from outside, expressing a metaphysical principle of development, whether that be reason, technology, the forces of production, class consciousness, culture or whatever. This principle has to be assigned a point of insertion into the structure, which can be at the level of the economy, of the state, or of ideology, and located in a particular institution or group or in a variety of different institutions and groups. If one

institution or group is selected this becomes the privileged integrative centre of the structure, which alone can ‘transform and fix the limits’ of the structure, but which can itself know no limits.

The problem with all such metaphysical philosophies of history is that they are unable to reconcile the effectiveness of the chosen principle of development with any limitations on that effectiveness. Because it is a transcendent principle, it cannot be limited by the given, which can only provide the raw material for its self-realisation. Hence the foundation is provided for a permanent and irresolvable debate between ‘objectivist’ and ‘subjectivist’ philosophies of history, the former locating the principle of development outside man, making human history into an extension of natural history, the latter locating it in human consciousness, making nature the means of man’s self-realisation.

Poulantzas implicitly relates to precisely this antinomy in his critique of ‘Marxist historicism’, to which he assimilates sociological functionalism.<sup>39</sup> Having rejected dogmatism for its economistic evolutionism, according to which history is made anonymously by the unfettered development of the forces of production operating with the force of natural law through the economy, Poulantzas turns on ‘historicism’, which he accuses of a complementary reductionism. Instead of reducing the political to the economic, it is reduced to the ideological, society being reduced to a value system or to the consciousness of a class subject. This leads to the ‘over-politicisation’ of ideologies and the abolition of the relative autonomy of the ideological and political. Such a reductionism makes it impossible to understand the limits imposed on social action by the structure itself, the political being seen as ‘the simple principle of social totality and the principle of its development’ through which ideology realises itself, instead of being seen as a ‘*specific level . . . in which the contradictions of a formation are reflected and condensed*’ (PPSC, pp. 38, 40, 60, 195–206, 208).

Poulantzas tries to get beyond these complementary reductionisms by refusing to privilege a particular level, instead making the structure itself into the developmental principle. That this represents simply the replacement of ‘normative’ functionalism by ‘structural’ functionalism becomes clear as soon as Poulantzas discusses transition. The structure which is the developmental principle cannot be identified with the concrete, actually existing, structure, but is rather the ‘not-yet-given’ structure, a principle as metaphysical as the ‘forces of production’ or ‘class consciousness’. The point at which this developmental principle is inserted into the concrete structure is the state, which becomes the privileged centre of integration of the structure, subject to no limits. The result is that Poulantzas reproduces the ‘historicist’ overpoliticisation, but this time to the advantage of the state, rather than of class consciousness. Instead of seeing structures as the product of practice, as ‘historicism’ does, Poulantzas cannot see practices as anything but expressions of the structure.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Poulantzas’s treatment of functionalism is rather inconsistent, largely because he identifies normative functionalism with structural functionalism (c.f. PPSC, p. 198). It is only the former which can be assimilated to ‘Marxist historicism’.

<sup>40</sup> In his early review of Althusser (1966) Poulantzas interprets Althusserianism as an attempt to reconcile Sartre’s reduction of structure to practice (‘historicist’) with Lévi-Strauss’s

The political implications of this theory are disastrous from the point of view of the critique of revisionism, for the revolution is to be made by the state (the appearance of a new form of state presaging the appearance of a new mode of production) and not by the activity of the exploited classes, so that the justification of revisionism is simply reproduced on a new basis. At the same time the inflated importance given to the state devalues all attempts at mobilisation within a social formation which continues to be dominated by the capitalist type of state in the face of the omnipotence of that state.

## 9 Poulantzas's Later Revisions

This is quite explicitly the conclusion which Althusser has drawn from his work, and is quite in accordance with his political position ( Althusser, 1973, pp. 48–9). Poulantzas is clearly uneasy about the political implications of his theory, and has subsequently attempted to revise the theory in order to eliminate them, without realising that they are inherent in the theory itself. Hence his revisions have not been fundamental, consisting in the abolition of the radical separation of structure and practice, to integrate class struggle back into the structure ( Poulantzas, 1973). This is based on a modification of the concept of production on which this distinction is founded, without breaking with the bourgeois concept of production.

Poulantzas has followed the Althusserians in altering the relation between the 'relation of real appropriation' and the 'property relation', but not the conception of these relations themselves. It is now recognised that the labour process 'exists only in its unity with certain relations of production' so that the relation of real appropriation is no longer an unmediated relation between man and nature, but becomes a social relation with political and ideological dimensions (CCC, pp. 18, 20, 21).<sup>41</sup> This does not represent a transformation of the concept of production itself. Rather it represents the observation that production only takes place within society, so that social relations constituted outside production, on the basis of relations of distribution, invade production itself. Hence the intervention of the social in production is conceptualised as the overdetermination of the relations of real appropriation by the political and ideological levels, production is not itself seen as the primary, and inherently social, relation. The basic theoretical framework is, therefore, unaffected by the change (CCC, p. 21, 227–8). The most significant effect is that the state now

---

reduction of practice to structure ('functionalist gestaltist'). In the review Poulantzas concludes that Althusser does not get beyond the latter functionalist reductionism. For some reason *Reading Capital* blunted Poulantzas's critical faculties.

<sup>41</sup>This reformulation of the relation between the property and real appropriation relations is closely associated with the work of Bettelheim. It was adopted by Balibar (1973). It leads to an examination of modes of production in terms of the 'consistency' of particular 'property relations' with particular 'real appropriation relations', which is in fact an examination of the technical conditions under which different relations of distribution are possible. Bettelheim has concentrated on the post-capitalist mode of production. Hindess and Hirst (1975) do exactly the same for pre-capitalist modes.

assumes functions in the reproduction of the relation of real appropriation, and especially in the reproduction of the labour force, in which the ‘ideological state apparatuses’ have an important part to play.

The result of the change is largely rhetorical. The level of practice is reintegrated with that of structure, so that the levels of the latter are all called levels of the ‘class struggle’, and the functioning of the structure is now the product of the class struggle. However, insofar as Poulantzas is not simply abandoning his structuralist theory in favour of a purely voluntarist theory of class struggle, the class struggle is still subordinate to the ‘hidden hand’ of the functional requirements of the structure which governs its course. The modifications to the theory in no way help to resolve its difficulties.

The juxtaposition of a structural theory and a class theory of the state in Poulantzas’s work is no doubt the basis of its appeal to Marxists. The concept of ‘conjuncture’, which marks the junction between the two, is also the most ambiguous concept in Poulantzas’s work. The concept expresses the impact of the structure on the field of the class struggle, and so the apparent possibility of reconciling the revolutionary potential of the latter with the limits of the former. Since Poulantzas never offers a serious analysis of a conjuncture, nor an account of the way in which one might conduct such an analysis, but rather concentrates on the relation between classes and the state in a conjuncture which he takes as given, his theory is open to many interpretations. In *Fascism and Dictatorship*, for example, a descriptive account of the conflicts which underlay the development of fascism is complemented by a very ambiguous rhetoric. On the one hand, it is not clear whether fascism was the creation of the dominant class or of the state as functional level of the mode of production. On the other hand, it is not clear whether the success of fascism was the product of the theoretical weakness of the proletariat or of the necessary functioning of the mode of production. This ambiguity enables Poulantzas’s work to be interpreted as a class-based instrumentalist theory of the state in which the conjuncture is simply the institutional *context* in which class struggle takes place,<sup>42</sup> or as a structural-functionalist theory in which the conjuncture describes the *limits* within which the class struggle is confined,<sup>43</sup> despite the fact that the two theories are quite inconsistent with one another. The result is that Poulantzas’s work can provide the authority for almost anything one wants to say about class, politics and the state. Hence we find ourselves in a situation in which almost all ‘Marxist’ discussion of the state is wrapped in a terminology derived from Poulantzas which is devoid of any clear theoretical content. Insofar as the terminology always has an allusive content, the latter derives from bourgeois sociology. The Marxist

---

<sup>42</sup>This is the interpretation of Althusserian purists who regard Poulantzas as an instrumentalist (A. Cutler, 1971 pp. 7–8; Hindess and Hirst, 1975, pp. 37–9). It is the way in which elements of Poulantzas’s work have been absorbed by many Marxists in Britain. For example, it is easily assimilated to neo-Weberian analyses in which the ‘conjuncture’ can be described in institutional-ideological terms.

<sup>43</sup>This is the interpretation of Poulantzas’s work which dominates neo-gramscian and neo-Weberian critiques, e.g. Miliband (1970, 1973); E. Wright et al (1975–6). This opposition of ‘structuralist’ to ‘instrumentalist’ theories reproduces that of ‘subjectivist’ to ‘objectivist’ bourgeois philosophies of history.

theory of the state thus becomes parasitic on debates in bourgeois sociology.

## 10 Conclusion — Poulantzas and the Crisis of Sociology

In conclusion I would like briefly to situate Poulantzas's work in relation to bourgeois sociology. This is important because many radical young intellectuals come to Marxism through sociology. Since Poulantzas has been integrated into courses in bourgeois sociology as the token Marxist, it is through his work, with that of Althusser, that many come to Marxism. In this paper I have argued that Poulantzas reproduces the theory of structural-functionalist sociology. From this point of view his work must be seen in relation to the 'radicalisation' of sociology, as offering a new rhetoric for a theory that has been politically discredited, but never subjected to a serious Marxist critique.

The 'radicalisation' of sociology has subjected structural-functionalism to a double criticism. On the one hand, its integrationist perspective made it unable to allow for the possibility of social change. On the other hand its 'structural determinism' left no room for the autonomy of the individual or social subject. The two criticisms were associated in the sense that the introduction of a subject also introduced the possibility of structural change. Hence the various radical currents which developed within sociology were all based on variants of the bourgeois philosophy of the subject, whether expressed in a return to 'normative' functionalism, to the work of Weber, to 'Hegelian' Marxism, and, in its extreme, to phenomenology. These critical sociologies deal with the political conservatism of structural-functionalism, while introducing theoretical problems of their own. Firstly, they are in turn unable coherently to theorise the structural limits of social action. Secondly, they eliminate any possibility of establishing sociology as a positive science.

The first criticism to which structural-functionalism was subjected was dealt with fairly easily by adding a functionalist theory of conflict according to which conflict and the associated social change are subordinate to the functioning of the structure ( Coser, 1956). The second criticism was rejected on the basis of the rejection of the metaphysical character of the bourgeois philosophy of the subject and of the argument that the category of the subject, as well as the consciousness of that subject, is socially constituted (PPSC, p. 208). These responses were not enough to save structural-functionalism, for its fundamental weakness was rhetorical and not theoretical. It continued to be burdened with a rhetoric which was transparently extremely conservative.

Althusserianism, and specifically the work of Poulantzas, rigorously reproduces the theory of structural-functionalism in the framework of a rhetoric which is apparently very much more radical.<sup>44</sup> It thus provides the means by which

---

<sup>44</sup>It is significant that all Poulantzas's criticisms of functionalism can be reduced to accusations of 'historicism' which are aimed at 'normative' rather than 'structural' functionalism, and of 'integrationism', which are disposed of with a theory of the functionality of conflict, such as is presented by Coser and reproduced by Poulantzas.

structural-functionalism can enjoy a renaissance, and most particularly by which it can attack its critics. By defending the subordination of social change and of the category of the subject to the functioning of the structure in the name of Marxism and of science, the philosophy of the subject can be routed by an attack which comes, apparently, from the left and from reason, despite the fact that the effect of its theory is actually to postpone the revolution into an indefinite future, and to explain the necessary failure of any political initiatives in the present. Hence it should not be surprising that under the banner of Poulantzas are assembled not only Marxists disillusioned after the immediate failures of the late 1960s and young intellectuals attracted by the radical rhetoric of a theoreticist and scientific formalism, but also former Parsonian luminaries who are able to communicate with their students once again.

In this paper I have been concerned with the theory within which Poulantzas is ensnared. It is this theory which prevents him from developing his many undoubted insights into significant contributions to the Marxist understanding of the state. It is only by identifying this theory, and subjecting it to a Marxist critique, that the positive elements of Poulantzas's work can be identified and put on a firm foundation. Marxism must be able to theorise the specificity of the political, and the structural limits within which the state is constrained, to theorise forms of state and of regime, the nature of political crises and the role of the state in the transition to socialism. The merit of Poulantzas's work is that he does raise, although in a distorted form, these questions. The weakness of his work is that he does not provide the means even to begin to resolve them.