

## THE CUL-DE-SAC OF STRUCTURALIST MARXISM: A REPLY TO KOULA MELLOS

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To know what questions may reasonably be asked is already a great and necessary proof of sagacity and insight. For if a question is absurd in itself and calls for an answer where none is required, it not only brings shame on the propounder of the question, but may betray an incautious listener into absurd answers, thus presenting, as the ancients said, the ludicrous spectacle of one man milking a he-goat and the other holding a sieve underneath.<sup>1</sup>

As the Kuhnian history of science has taught us, even in the uncontestably cumulative natural sciences theoretical progress may depend as much upon the demise of a generation of scientists as the persuasiveness of evidence and rational argumentation. In the case of the social sciences, the passing from the scene of the two leading theorists of neo-Marxist structuralism — Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas — may have mercifully speeded the decline of a paradigm. In the case of Althusser silence was occasioned by mental breakdown and the murder of his spouse — circumstances which ironically paralleled certain symptomatic silences in his own thoughts. As for Poulantzas, one might plausibly argue that his suicide implied a kind of repentance already evident in his last writings, i.e. a kind of last-ditch Sartrean existential leap (“I jump, therefore I am not merely a bearer of structures.”) Regrettably, however, Poulantzas *might* have been able to lead his followers in new directions, thus renewing the capacity of structuralist Marxism to provide important contributions to contemporary debates.

## MARXISM AND IDEOLOGY

Instead, as the case at hand suggests, we may be confronted with epigones still working within the framework of "normal" structuralist science, thus unable or unwilling to take the courageous step with Poulantzas of unloosening the Althusserian epistemological and political straightjacket. Hence Mellos' revision of Poulantzas early theory of the state through the introduction of the concept of a "group effect" understands itself simply as an extension and refinement of an otherwise adequate theoretical paradigm. At the same time it provides a means for ostensibly deepening the critique of pluralist and group theories of politics, a task of great strategic importance. On the one hand, the predominance of "minority" groups in contemporary political conflicts and the emergence of new non-class based social movements creates practical problems for a class-based revolutionary strategy of the type envisioned by this theoretical program. Furthermore, as the author concedes — partly as a reflection of the North American context — the dominance of the group at the ideological and political levels is an accurate "empirical" description of advanced liberal democratic capitalism.

The ingenious solution to this dilemma for this form of neo-Marxist theory is to introduce a means of incorporating the concept of "group" into the analysis of modes of production, rather than viewing it merely as an empirical concept, hence an epiphenomenon from the perspective of the higher realities of modes of production and concrete social formations. This is achieved by acknowledging the need to draw out the implications of the shift from the competitive to the monopolistic phases of capitalism. As a result of this transition, there has been a fundamental transformation of the "juridico-politico effect" which follows from the double concentration of capital: monopolies and oligopolies on the one hand and the organization of labour in trade unions on the other. In other words, the manner in which the political and ideological effects re-integrate class members shifts from the mystification of formally equal, freely competing individuals to one of formally equal, freely competing groups. Hence labour and capital confront one another as juridical equals, a fiction which sustains the new means of preserving class dominance — the "ideological group subject" and the "juridico-politico political group action."

Accordingly, what appears from the empirical point of view to be "egalitarian and libertarian" competition is revealed as the new form of the reproduction of domination through the modality of "conflictual cooperation" or "compromise" between groups. Since compromise is the ultimate foundation for securing power in the context of political coalition formation, such a structure necessarily excludes more radical demands such as worker reappropriation of surplus value. In short, "the majority principle and rules of conciliation constitute the structure in which issues are filtered such that contradictory demands and even milder incompatibilities with the dominant class

## RAYMOND MORROW

interests are asserted." (p. 26) And this applies not only to class-based politics, but also to the variety of new social movements, a process reinforced by the co-optive opportunities created by their internal diversity.

Surprisingly, however, it is concluded that this account of the role of class dominance in pluralist politics is not a "fatalistic" argument because within the "group effect" is still preserved the explosive capital-labour contradiction: "The realization of working class interest cannot be achieved within a context of compromise with the capitalist class, for the contradictory nature of class interests cannot lend itself to class compromise. Class compromise can only mean the subordination of working class interests to those of the bourgeoisie." (p. 32) A similar process operates in the case of cultural minorities which attempt to achieve greater autonomy through compromise. In the case of Quebec the failure of a compromise strategy culminated in an independence movement (which in any case would only reproduce new constellations of fractions of the bourgeoisie in a new power bloc). Even where there is overtly voluntary compromise, in short, consensus is achieved under conditions of class domination and thus remains "ideological" and "false."

Despite a certain internal consistency of argumentation, Mellos has not succeeded, however, in making a persuasive case, even for those with considerable sympathy for a critique of pluralist theory based on some version of the political economy of the state. For the purpose at hand, therefore, I will assume that this is the intended audience; the kinds of objections that might be forthcoming from other perspectives would require rather different considerations. Accordingly, Mellos would have to address at least five fundamental issues to satisfy otherwise sympathetic readers: (1) provide at least a cursory defence against the scathing critiques which have been directed against Althusser's Marxism and Poulantzas' relation to it; further, this would have to include an interpretation of the widespread disillusionment with structuralist Marxism of this type in France and elsewhere; (2) explain why no recourse is made to Poulantzas' writings shortly before his death where he makes an abrupt political about face, advocating that the only road to socialism is democratic; (3) give some indication why the "group effect" critique of pluralist theory is superior to the longstanding existing critical analyses; (4) come to terms with the limitations of any critique of the democratic politics of compromise which oversimplifies the logic of democratic competition and remains silent about the alternatives; and (5) confront the latent fatalistic consequences of the "group effect" theory of democratic politics proposed.

As for the first point, I will make no attempt to summarize the massive and diverse literature which has called into question the foundations of the Althusserian version of structuralist Marxism.<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, this is beyond the scope of the author's project, but at least some consideration should be given to defending this stance through some other means than labeling all potential

## MARXISM AND IDEOLOGY

criticisms as derived from an “historicist” and/or “empiricist” problematic. Crucial here would be to take a position with respect to the debates *within* the structuralist tradition, e.g. in relation to people such as Hindess and Hirst, Therborn or those working in the francophone context.

Closely related to this is the question of Poulantzas’ later work, especially his *State, Power, Socialism*,<sup>3</sup> as well as that of those once associated with structuralist Marxism who have moved in rather different directions. For example, though Maurice Godelier is still mentioned by many in this context, his more recent work has increasingly distanced himself from Althusser.<sup>4</sup> Even closer to home it would be necessary to deal with Poulantzas’ rejection of the Leninist type of “dual power” strategy of state seizure which he previously advocated in favour of a “democratic road to socialism” despite the fact that “reformism is an ever-latent danger.”<sup>5</sup> The crucial shift here is that Poulantzas came to realize — here confronted with the diverse challenge of people such as Miliband, Foucault, the Frankfurt tradition, etc. — that the state was not merely a “class state” and there was no credible alternative to a democratic strategy of radical change. Further, the outcome of the military dictatorship in Spain, Portugal and Greece had confronted him with an “empirical” refutation of a number of assumptions which he was honest enough to abandon in moving closer to, if not fully embracing, a Eurocommunist position.

Hence this forced him to acknowledge — unlike Mellos — the strategic importance of new social movements:

If we consider the widespread character of the phenomenon — which stretches from citizens’ committees through various structures of popular control and self-defence to neighborhood committees — it becomes clear that we are talking of something quite without precedent. Even though the movement is located ‘at a distance’ from the State, it sets up major dislocatory effects within the state itself. It is a phenomenon which marks both more traditional political struggles and, above all, such new struggles as those associated with the women’s and ecological movements and the campaign to improve the quality of life.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, though the analysis of the “group effect” claims to be based upon an extension of Poulantzas work, it actually contradicts the implications of his final political stance:

It is necessary to take sides. If we understand the democratic road to socialism and democratic socialism itself to involve, among other things, political (party) and ideological pluralism, recognition of the

## RAYMOND MORROW

role of universal suffrage, and extension and deepening of all political freedoms including for opponents, then talk of smashing or destroying the state apparatus can be no more than a verbal trick. What is involved, through all the various transformations, is a real permanence and continuity of the institutions of representative democracy — not as unfortunate relics to be tolerated as long as necessary, but as an essential condition of democratic socialism... socialism will be democratic or it will not be at all.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, it is necessary to respond to the question of what the “group effect” analysis adds to existing criticisms of pluralist theory. It is striking that Mellos makes no attempt to explain why this approach is superior to the many rival efforts to demystify the formal claims of representative democracy, especially those which go beyond elitist assumptions.<sup>8</sup> It is simply not true that such critics deal with merely “empirical” issues in that they work with an understanding of the latent interests of subordinate groups. But where they do differ, however, is a reluctance to assume that these interests can be derived theoretically and objectively. Hence the resulting agnosticism opens the way to forms of empirical research which seek to reveal such suppressed interests, as well as to develop conceptions of political mobilization and participation which might create conditions for their more adequate expression. Curiously, this kind of research converges in many respects with Poulantzas’ final position, but it completely contradicts the objectivist stance proposed by Mellos.

A fourth set of difficulties arise from the effort to construe the constraining effects of democratic compromise under conditions of class domination in a very rigid manner. As a consequence, by definition it is excluded at the outset that compromise can result in anything other than the reproduction of class domination. Authentic consensus formation only becomes possible (Habermas is cited in this context) under conditions where class rule has been abolished and the producers of the surplus product are the appropriators. This “all or nothing” logic has little to do with Habermas’ position and has obviously pernicious political implications: democracy cannot be tolerated until the revolution is won. What this type of argument also conceals is that *any form* of unequal power constrains democratic dialogue. Furthermore, to lump all forms of potential democratic compromise and competition together serves to obscure the way in which the differences between them do indeed make a fundamental difference. Finally, it is evasive to imply that there is an alternative which would not suffer from even more crucial weaknesses. As Poulantzas suggests, it is a question of taking sides: “Risks there are...at worst, we could be heading for camps and massacres as appointed victims. But to that I reply: if we weigh up the risks, that is in any case preferable to massacring other people only to end up ourselves beneath the blade of a

## MARXISM AND IDEOLOGY

committee of Public Safety or some Dictator of the proletariat.”<sup>9</sup> What is lost in an “all or nothing” logic is that compromise is a two-way process and that over time it may become possible to re-structure politics in a manner which substantially modifies the role of the state as the agency for reproducing class domination (as already in the case of the emergence of the welfare state).<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the political consequences of the “group effect” argument should be faced without the flinching of wish-fulfillment. Paradoxically, in its resolute orthodoxy this type of conclusion resembles in certain respects that of Adorno’s account of “total administration” under state capitalism and Marcuse’s notion of a “one-dimensional society.” Of course they put much greater stress on the role of instrumental rationality in suppressing class politics, but there was a similar critique of the politics of democratic compromise, culminating in Marcuse’s concept of “repressive tolerance”. But aside from important differences in the underlying assumptions of their arguments, two features of this phase of Frankfurt Critical Theory stand out. First, it was advanced in another era: to question pluralist democracy in the immediate postwar period was a novel and progressive step amidst the celebrations of the “end of ideology.” Now, especially in the context of the re-emergence of neo-conservatism and the possibilities of authoritarian statism, the strategic context has shifted, a point clearly recognized by Poulantzas before his death. Secondly, the Frankfurt theorists in this period were realistic enough to come to terms with the pessimism of their own diagnosis; and in the case of Adorno this culminated in the “negative dialectics” of a tragic philosophy of history. A similar honesty can be found in writers such as Baudrillard who follow indirectly in their footsteps. By continuing, however, to persist in giving lip-service to revolutionary contradictions and denying the “fatalistic” consequences of structuralist Marxism, Mellos and others cannot even begin to confront the reality of contemporary politics in all its “nitty gritty” empiricism. Fortunately, unlike much of Mediterranean Europe, in North America such theoretical considerations have no practical or political importance; hence, they remain simply academic exercises in concept spinning. And in responding to such forms of questioning, one runs the risk of falling prey to holding the sieve underneath Kant’s he-goat. So if there is a residual justification for such a polemical exercise, it is to be reminded of Goethe’s dictum: “There is nothing more illogical than absolute logic; it gives rise to unnatural phenomena, which finally collapse.”<sup>11</sup>

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## RAYMOND MORROW

### Notes

1. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K. Smith, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965, p. 97.
2. See, however, the brief, sympathetic but forceful critique in Bob Jessop, *The Capitalist State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 181-191.
3. N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. P. Camiller, London: Verso, 1978.
4. As Godelier concludes his most recent book: "Ces réflexions nous amènent à réaffirmer qu'il est stratégiquement prioritaire, en histoire et en anthropologie, de chercher *ailleurs* que dans la violence physique ou dans une prétendue 'plus grande importance du juridique' les raisons, économiques ou non économiques, qui ont permis d'engendrer distinctions et hiérarchies avec le consentement des membres de la société." (*L'idéel et le matériel*, Paris: Fayard, 1984, p. 311.)
5. N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, p. 258.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 261, 265.
8. See, for example, C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, London: Oxford University press, 1974, Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, and Steven Lukes, *Power*, London: Macmillan, 1974.
9. N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, p. 265.
10. See Claus Offe, *Contradiction of the Welfare State*, London: Hutchinson, 1984.
11. Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, No. 899; cited in Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, trans. D.E. Green, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1964, p. 63.