

CRITIQUE

Theories of Fascism: Nicos Poulantzas as Historian*

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I

The work of the Marxist political theorist Nicos Poulantzas would perhaps be less well known in this country without the long debate that has been taking place between him and Ralph Miliband. Within a year of each other, in 1968-69, the two writers published deeply contrasting studies of the state under capitalism,¹ and thereby embarked on a project of mutual criticism which has had a wide airing among British Marxists.² This interest is hardly surprising. For one thing, the coincidence of the books' publication broke a relative silence on the theory of the state in Marxism, and a debate of some kind was long overdue. But secondly, the debate they provoked went straight to the heart of an already familiar conflict of political cultures, as a resumé will show.

Poulantzas and Miliband start from theoretical positions which could hardly be more dissimilar, and they have become progressively more critical of each other. Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society* is a work of dissenting radicalism, forceful, incisive and politically uncompromising. Yet, as a detailed exposure of the composition, mechanics and style of Western political systems, it stands firmly within the empirical tradition exemplified by the political sociologist to whom the book is dedicated, C. Wright Mills. In this sense, its structure, if not its political judgement, conforms to a version of orthodox political theory rooted in Western bourgeois thought. Poulantzas's *Political Power and Social Classes*, on the other hand, is the heir, through critical modification, of the newer and rather less accessible methodological school associated with the name of Louis Althusser. Its entire problematic and vocabulary are less familiar in this country, and correspond to a theoretical rigour quite absent from Miliband's work. The establishment of a strict Marxist theoretical framework is an integral part of Poulantzas's project, and is pursued by him with a special regard for conceptual precision and subtle differentiations.

The two authors themselves are a good deal less dispassionate than this in describing one another's method. In Miliband's eyes, Poulantzas suffers from 'an exaggerated fear of empiricist contamination', and is guilty of a 'structuralist abstractionism' so abstruse that 'it cuts him off from any possibility of achieving what he describes as "the political analysis of a concrete conjuncture"'.³ Conversely, Poulantzas accuses his critic of capitulating to 'the illusions of the evident', and of a neo-positivist empiricism which (returning Miliband's own charge of 'super-determinism') leads to the establishment of 'immutable dogmas'. In addition, some of Miliband's criticisms strike him as so 'utterly absurd' that he declines to respond.⁴ Hardly surprising, then, to find that the two writers have been characterised as working within utterly different systems of knowledge.⁵

If I have started my assessment of Poulantzas's work by posing the substance of his argument with Miliband, this is not because I wish to take sides in it, but because I find myself awkwardly poised between the two protagonists — a position of considerable epistemological impurity which will, I fear, commend my remarks to neither. My interest in Poulantzas arises, in fact, precisely from this midway position. In a recent defence of his work against Miliband's charge of crippling abstractionism, Poulantzas referred explicitly to his second book, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, which, he claimed, far from eschewing contamination by facts, constitutes 'a detailed historical analysis of German and Italian fascism'.⁶ It is this book, and the author's claim, that I want to discuss here; and the major issue is not the absence of 'facts', but their very concrete and provocative presence.

My reactions on reading *Fascism and Dictatorship* were mixed. On the one hand, its basic problematic was immediately absorbing: it constitutes an analysis of fascism set strictly within the terms of the class struggle, but insisting on the specificity of the political domain, and correspondingly rejecting any crudely economistic correlation of class and state. On the other hand, I was surprised, given the ostensible rigour of this methodology, by the carelessness with which Poulantzas treats historical data, and by the extent to which subsequent empirical research has tended to weaken the general analysis of fascism that he proposes. I have since been told that it was naive of me to suppose that a political theorist would have much sensitivity to 'real' history; but this dismissal of a genuine problem — the correlation of theory and concrete analysis — hardly seems adequate. Rather, it seems important to explore the paradox that, in Poulantzas, extreme theoretical precision is combined with crude empirical inaccuracy. Without such an attempt, the book might as well be ignored; but with it, there is at least a chance of illuminating the problem.

In this article, I want to consider *Fascism and Dictatorship* from the standpoint of a historian whose field is the structure of the National Socialist regime in Germany; but I do not want to act in the guise of the outraged specialist rescuing 'history' as such from the crude embrace of the political theorist. Thus, although my argument will not primarily be concerned with problems of epistemology, it is bound to bear strongly on them. In this sense, an examination — however preliminary and partial — of some of the historical limitations and errors of Poulantzas's study will, I hope, help to expand the discussion of method among historians, and assist the further articulation of Marxist political history.

II

My starting-point is Poulantzas's own statement of his intentions and method in the Introduction to *Fascism and Dictatorship*. The correct method for analysing fascism as a political phenomenon, he observes, is 'to concentrate on a thorough investigation of where fascism took root, and to analyse concrete situations'.⁷ He then points out that his book

is not a historiographical study of German and Italian fascism, but a study in political theory — which of course cannot be carried out without thorough historical research. But the treatment of the material, and in particular the order of exposition, are bound to be different in each case. This study concentrates on elucidating the essential features of fascism as a specific political phenomenon. Historical 'events' and concrete details are

used here only to the extent that they are relevant illustrations of the subject under discussion [i.e. the essential features of fascism].⁸

As a description of a conventional line of demarcation between history and political theory, this is perfectly clear and unexceptionable (indeed, the traditional invocation of history as the provider of events for pictorial purposes is perhaps somewhat surprising to find in this context, suggesting as it does a discrete object of knowledge defined by chronology). At any rate, although Poulantzas has elsewhere argued that '[concrete facts] can only be rigorously — that is, demonstrably — comprehended if they are explicitly analysed with the aid of a theoretical apparatus constantly employed throughout the length of the text',⁹ the previous quotation shows his clear acknowledgement that the need for theory does not in itself cancel out the need for soundly derived historical detail. In other words, Poulantzas's discourse explicitly combines the theoretical and the empirical, in an alliance in which the former takes primacy.¹⁰

The order of exposition in *Fascism and Dictatorship* reflects the terms of this alliance. In a series of chapters which analyse in turn the relationship of fascism with each of the classes and conclude with a general treatment of the fascist state, Poulantzas first states his theoretical propositions, and then illustrates them by reference to the Italian and German cases. However, it is not easy to do justice in a short summary to the various themes developed in this way by Poulantzas. His method leads to careful conceptual differentiation, and his propositions are generally stated with powerful clarity; but their exposition is characterised by subtle and exhaustive argumentation that does not lend itself readily to précis. I shall therefore offer only a highly compressed resumé of the main features of Poulantzas's theory of fascism, with a view primarily to making my particular criticisms intelligible.¹¹

The central theme of Poulantzas's study is the specificity of fascism as one form of 'exceptional capitalist state', i.e. of the regimes corresponding to various types or articulations of political crisis under capitalism: other examples would be military dictatorship and Bonapartism.¹² The framework in which its specificity can be established consists, according to him, of (a) the changes in the relations of production, and (b) the developments in the class struggle and their relation to the political crisis. Both these questions are subjected to concentrated theoretical and empirical examination. Only by this means, Poulantzas argues, can the *essential* elements of fascism be identified and distinguished from its secondary, contingent features, and a rigorous specification of the fascist state be accomplished. Thus Poulantzas begins by arguing that fascism cannot be dissociated from the imperialist stage of capitalism; more specifically, the period which saw its first rise was one of transition, in imperialist countries, towards the dominance of monopoly capital. This point alone, however, cannot explain the emergence of fascism, nor finally define its uniqueness in contrast to other types of exceptional state. These matters can only be elucidated by also examining the particular conjuncture of the class struggle, i.e. the specific sets of relations of class forces at the given time. Thus an analysis of the class struggle will expose the crisis of the political representation of monopoly capital, and its possible resolution; it will also make the crucial distinction (for working-class strategy) between a political crisis of this kind, and a true revolutionary situation.

Poulantzas is particularly concerned to confute a number of contemporary interpretations of fascism adopted on the Left: fascism as the direct agent of monopoly capital (the economist line of the Third International); fascism as a system of class equilibrium (a theory elaborated principally by the German right-communist August Thalheimer, and echoed by many Marxists in one form or another); and fascism as the dictatorship of the petty bourgeoisie (described by Poulantzas as a social democratic interpretation). These three rejected theories are not arbitrarily introduced by Poulantzas, for they correspond to crucial elements in fascism, torn out of context: the role of monopoly capital, the extreme degree of autonomy of the state, and the ties between the fascist party and the petty bourgeoisie. One might add that each of these important facets of the problem of fascism is vulnerable to misconception, especially in the sense that each may be mistaken as the whole, although they are all in fact only parts. Poulantzas's ambition is to correct the errors of emphasis, and reconstruct a relationship between these parts. He theorises fascism as follows:

Throughout the rise of fascism and after the conquest of power, fascism (the fascist party and the fascist State) *characteristically* has a relative autonomy from both the power bloc [i.e. the politically dominant classes and/or class fractions, conceived of as an unstable alliance — J.C.] and the fraction of big monopoly capital, whose hegemony [i.e. relative dominance within the alliance] it has established. This relative autonomy stems from two sets of factors:

(a) from the internal contradictions among the classes and fractions of the classes in the power alliance, i.e. from its internal political crisis: the relative autonomy necessary to reorganize this bloc and establish within it the hegemony of the fraction of big monopoly capital;

(b) from the contradictions between the dominant classes and fractions and the dominated classes, i.e. from the political crisis of the ensemble of the social formation, and from the complex relation between fascism and the dominated classes. This relation is precisely what makes fascism indispensable to mediate a re-establishment of political domination and hegemony.¹¹

'Relative autonomy' is a key concept here. For Poulantzas, the political — state power — is always relatively autonomous from capital itself; in fascism, this autonomy exists in an extreme, or an exceptional degree. Thus his formulation avoids both a simplistic association of fascism with a single class, and also the rather more subtle but still inappropriate proposition of class equilibrium. The concept of 'hegemony' adds extra definition to his picture of the political: by emphasising that the power bloc consists of more than one class or class fraction, related in an often problematic and contradictory alliance, Poulantzas disposes of the simplistic notion that capital is an indivisible entity and that 'the ruling class' exists as the coherent agent of this entity. Thus, if I may insert the determinant emphases into Poulantzas's own words, the historic achievement of fascism is 'to *mediate* a re-establishment of political domination *and* hegemony'. In essence, fascism acts as the instrument for the resolution of both of the political crises identified in the whole quotation. It is specified by the identification of those characteristics which fit it for this task.

This preliminary theoretical statement by Poulantzas is typical of the qualities of precision and clarity which make a decisive contribution to the book's value as a whole. In a general sense, theory as meticulous as this is indispensable. In the particular case here, Poulantzas's careful distinctions are extremely useful for analysing the political character of a phenomenon as complex and as

misunderstood as fascism, for they break up this congealed notion into conceptually functional pieces. But going on from this, the full character of such a set of propositions lies, as it were, in their historical intersections. It is precisely the analysis of a concrete historical conjuncture which authorises its appropriation to theory, for otherwise the theory remains locked within its own potential, its explanatory power unused.

It is here — in the analysis of the concrete historical conjuncture — that Poulantzas's book reveals its weaknesses, however. In other words, the 'thorough historical research' deemed an indispensable part of the project turns out in the end to be gravely inadequate, partly, as I have suggested, in the sense that it is carelessly done, and partly in the sense that it has since proved to be so easily contradicted. To illustrate this, I propose to examine three related aspects of the evidence tendered by Poulantzas in illustration of his theory of fascism, taken from the German case. The area of possible choice for such a critique is wide, for almost no part of Poulantzas's empirical information is free from suspicion. I have therefore made my selection with a view to attempting a progressive critique of some central elements of his theory as it relates to the structure of the fascist state. These are:

- (a) his periodisation and characterisation of the relations between the Nazi party and the state,
- (b) his handling of the term 'petty bourgeois' in connection with the personnel of the state apparatus,
- (c) his ascription to the Nazi regime of a unity of structure and motivation.

III

Poulantzas's periodisation of party-state relations after 1933 suffers from the general incapacity of his theory to accommodate the actual course of events. There are also numerous inaccuracies which, though often minor in themselves, cumulatively weaken his analysis.

In general terms, Poulantzas's object is to explain the process by which German fascism after 1933 became the means by which big capital established its hegemony within the power bloc, and achieved the status of 'ruling class' (the class whose political representatives occupy the dominant place on the political scene); at the same time he has to identify and explain the relative autonomy of the Nazi state. To do this, he must postulate a particular relationship between party and state, as well as a particular metamorphosis of the class relations of the party.

Poulantzas divides the period of Nazi rule after 1933 into two episodes, an initial and a stabilised stage. He argues that in the first stage the petty bourgeoisie was established as the ruling class in the above sense, i.e. that the Nazi party was acting as the effective representative of the petty bourgeoisie on the political scene. The political representatives of the (politically incapacitated) fractions of capital were evicted from the political scene: the bourgeois parties were abolished, and their politicians were expelled from power. At the same time, the upper ranks of the state apparatus¹⁴ were, he says, 'massively filled' with petty bourgeois members of the NSDAP. In this sense, the petty

bourgeoisie was also established as the 'class in charge of the state' — the class from which the personnel of the state is recruited and which subordinates the state apparatus to its own characteristic class ideology.¹⁵

At a later date, so Poulantzas argues, the first of these two forms of domination by the petty bourgeoisie was dissolved, i.e. it ceased to be the 'ruling class'. In other words, the Nazi party and state leaderships ceased to function as the political representatives of the petty bourgeoisie — what Poulantzas calls 'the representational tie' was broken. However, the petty bourgeoisie still continued to act as the 'class in charge of the state', in the sense that it still provided the personnel for the state apparatus. Concomitantly, the NSDAP itself was reduced to a diversionary or integrationist vehicle for the petty bourgeoisie, and was politically subordinated to the state. Together, these changes in the relationship between party and state, and in the class relations of the party, marked the re-establishment of the dominant roles of big capital. Thus Nazism and monopoly capital had grown closer, but the relationship of the party with the petty bourgeoisie continued to ensure the relative autonomy of the state from big capital. This, then, was the so-called stabilised stage of fascism.¹⁶

If the summary I have attempted of Poulantzas's analysis appears confusing, this is only partly due to the tendency of any process of compression to produce this effect. In some measure, that is to say, the confusion is inherent in the incorrectness of the analysis. Thus, for example, there is no exploration of the alleged rupture of the representational tie between party/state leaderships and the petty bourgeoisie as a class. The rupture is postulated as an unsubstantiated fact, even though the cause and consequence of this rupture — the re-establishment of the domination of big capital — is one of the crucial elements in Poulantzas's general theory and thus demands explanation. Equally, his account of the transition and difference between the initial and stabilised stages is almost impossible to follow in detail, owing to his failure to explain what he means by the terms 'party' and 'state', and to define their relationship with 'fascism' as he uses this term.

It is not surprising, then, that the evidence offered in illustration of this highly demanding and to some extent misleading analysis is inadequate to represent it.

To start with, the postulation of a two-stage periodisation of fascism in power is clearly crucial to Poulantzas's analysis, because it defines fascism's mediating role, and locates its relative autonomy. Yet in his account, Poulantzas commits elementary errors of dating that are bound to call his whole treatment into question. He writes that in 1933-34 'the last of the bourgeois politicians (von Papen, Hugenberg, von Neurath) were expelled from the government' — this is presented as an important illustration of the initial stage of fascism in power, i.e. the political eviction of the bourgeoisie. But the fact is that one of this trio, von Neurath (foreign minister), did not leave his ministry until 1938. Moreover, a significant group of other unmistakably bourgeois politicians survived up to this date, and even beyond it: Schwerin von Krosigk, Gürtner, von Eltz-Rübenach, Blomberg and Schacht. These men held, respectively, the ministries of finance, justice, transportation, armed forces, and economics/Reichsbank presidency — hardly a negligible list of political offices. It is as if Poulantzas has defined his bourgeois politicians solely by reference to their

party membership, and then assumed that they cease to be bourgeois politicians after 1934 because their parties have by then been abolished. This is an evident absurdity, yet it is the only way to make logical sense of his argument, unless (as is evidently the case) he is simply ignorant of the survival of a significant bourgeois element in the Nazi regime until the year 1938.

This initial error, though it might appear trivial, has far-reaching consequences. Not only does it obviously subvert the particular periodisation proposed, but it also threatens part of the general interpretation advanced by Poulantzas. For this reason, the issue is more than just a pedantic quibble about dates. In the first place, Poulantzas's supposition that 1934 marks the date of the defeat of the bourgeois power bloc hides from him the actual significance of one of the crucial political events of that year — the purge of the Nazi party's mass base, the SA, which had been intensifying its clamour for a second, populist revolution. The liquidation at Hitler's orders of the SA leadership (by the SS, with army connivance), and the elimination of the SA as an effective political force, must be seen primarily as a consequence of Hitler's early weakness vis-à-vis the old bourgeois power bloc (especially the army). The purge of the SA represented the terms of this initial compromise into which Hitler was forced, though the relationship was, to be sure, a complex one: a coup by Hitler against the fascist movement as such, in order to forestall a possible conservative-military coup against the new regime. In other words, Hitler was obliged initially to move his regime not against but *towards* the old power bloc, establishing an uneasy tactical compromise from which he did not fully emancipate the regime until 1938. Although Poulantzas evidently understands the populist character of the SA, he mistakes the full context of the 1934 purge: the result is a tangle in which 1934 is postulated as the date of defeat both of the radical petty bourgeoisie (the SA purge) and of the old bourgeois bloc (the alleged expulsion of bourgeois politicians).

If, however, we grasp the true significance of the SA purge, and also correct Poulantzas's dating errors, then we can appreciate an important fact that remains hidden from him: the existence of a considerable continuity of bourgeois representation on the political scene, throughout the *whole* decade of the 1930s. By missing this, Poulantzas reduces to invisibility a political tendency in the regime which ran to some extent counter to fascism, in that it maintained (if indirectly) a certain link with pre-1933 attempts to resolve the crisis without recourse to fascism. This bourgeois-conservative tendency progressively lost ground as the regime developed, through an extremely diffused and undirected process of political subversion, its full 'fascist' character, i.e. that of extreme political autonomy.¹⁷ In 1938 this process culminated in a visible change in the status of the bourgeois-conservative politicians in the regime. Either they were ousted from ministerial power; or, if they remained (as did ministers Krosigk and Gürtner, for instance), they were driven unmistakably onto the defensive in government and administration, forfeiting political initiative and 'clout'. A more far-reaching example of this same process was Hitler's purge of the military leadership early in 1938, and his assumption of direct personal command of the armed forces: here was the decisive break with the old-guard generals, leading ultimately to a war conceived and conducted in unprecedented defiance of conventional military strategy. Thus all the

evidence points to the period around 1938 as a major watershed in the political constitution of the Nazi regime — though not the last one, as what follows will suggest.

Poulantzas's proposition that the stabilised stage of fascism was marked by 'the subordination of the NSDAP to the Nazi state apparatus in the strict sense of the term [i.e. to the state bureaucracy]'¹⁸ is also open to serious challenge. The main objection to this formulation is that it rests upon a highly doubtful characterisation of the Third Reich as 'a monocratic administrative state'. Poulantzas quotes this phrase from the work of an author, K. D. Bracher, who has carried out pioneering research into the Nazi regime, but this judgement is not one of his more successful achievements.¹⁹ Subsequent research into the workings of Nazi government has strongly suggested that it was characterised by an extreme diffusion and dislocation of authority, and a highly disordered proliferation of agencies and hierarchies. In this context, it becomes extremely difficult to speak with any confidence of 'the subordination of the party to the state', for such a description must rely upon a secure definition of its two terms which is not empirically available. A concrete example will suggest the nature of the problem.

According to Poulantzas, 'the party's general secretary, Rudolf Hess, was allowed into the government for purely decorative purposes', all important political decisions being actually taken by the state apparatus. This misses an important point. It is true that Hess himself was not personally an outstandingly effective political figure. But the office he headed as Führer's Deputy and minister without portfolio (not 'general secretary') had powers, which it *did* use, to vet all government enactments in draft, to propose legislation itself, and also to vet senior civil service appointments. After Hess's flight to England in May 1941, he was replaced by his erstwhile deputy Martin Bormann, a far more determined figure who worked (with some success) towards a major concentration of political authority in his hands, and who based this evolving system of power on what could be seen, for the first time, as a genuinely definable party structure. To describe Hess as 'decorative', and then to leave out subsequent developments entirely, is therefore highly misleading — the analysis is broken off at an arbitrarily defined terminal point. Moreover, the structure and personnel of the Hess/Bormann office itself reflected the complex and shifting structural relationships and identity of the regime. It was in his capacity as minister without portfolio that Hess built up his office, though it was called the 'Staff of the Führer's Deputy'. After Bormann took over in 1941, it was renamed the 'Party Chancellery', and in 1943 he acquired the title 'Secretary of the Führer' — a sequence of names which demands to be pondered. Moreover, the staffing of the office was far from simple: finance seems to have come from unidentified NSDAP sources, while almost all the officials were trained civil servants as well as NSDAP stalwarts.

This dense web of connections represents only a partial reconstitution of a single aspect of the regime's political structure, yet it already suggests that Poulantzas's static analysis of this structure is highly suspect. He cannot, of course, be held responsible for those deficiencies of his approach which have been brought to light by later research; and indeed the main historical monographs supporting the alternative characterisation of the regime I have

proposed were not published when Poulantzas was writing *Fascism and Dictatorship*.²⁰ It is, nevertheless, striking that a central part of his analysis should so completely fail a later empirical test. Information of the kind needed to back a general analysis is, of course, assembled piecemeal, and its implications can be recovered only with some difficulty — a condition of historical research that Poulantzas, to his own cost, ignores.

IV

The role of the petty bourgeoisie in the fascist regime is a crucial one in Poulantzas's scheme, as is evident from the previous section. The petty bourgeoisie is, in a sense, the condition of mediation for fascism and big capital; it is also explicitly the condition of the fascist state's relative autonomy from big capital. At the same time, it is clearly the most difficult class to analyse and to place in a historical conjuncture, owing to its ambiguous position in the capitalist mode of production. Poulantzas insists that, in Marxist theory, economic relations alone are inadequate for a definition of the petty bourgeoisie, and that ideological and political relations are indispensable in determining a definition.²¹ Inescapable though this fact may be, it is also bound to be the source of much debate, since it so enlarges the scope for investigative interpretation. In particular, it must raise the question of the relationship between the theoretical and the empirical: for an understanding of the nature and status of the petty bourgeoisie is likely to depend upon a set of conceptual distinctions which will have to be carefully re-combined in any concrete analysis.

In the present case, the issue is the relationship between a number of concepts elaborated by Poulantzas, and their status with regard to empirical detail. Firstly, Poulantzas makes the distinction, mentioned already, between the ruling class, and the class in charge of the state — that is, between (a) the class whose representatives occupy the dominant place on the political scene, and (b) the class which provides the personnel of the state apparatus. Secondly, Poulantzas operates with a distinction between a class, and a social category. Class is defined primarily (though not exclusively) by reference to position in the mode of production. A social category, on the other hand, is a group defined primarily by politics and ideology. The components of a social category do not, of course, escape class status, but they are corporately recognisable as a particular group in the sense that they possess a degree of internal unity and autonomy and express this to visible social or political effect.²²

These two sets of definitions come into combination when the relationship of the petty bourgeoisie and the state is under discussion. Poulantzas defines the petty bourgeoisie as a class composed of two groups: (a) the traditional petty bourgeoisie of small-scale producers and owners, not exploiting wage labour, and (b) the 'new' petty bourgeoisie of non-productive salaried employees. This definition is familiar, and in general useful. Within group (b), as Poulantzas points out, are numbered the personnel of the state, or civil servants; these, as he correctly says, are 'non-productive employees whose function is to ensure, through the role of the State, the reproduction of the conditions of production of surplus value'.²³ At the same time, however, the civil service also stands as

a classic example of the social category (a fact which Poulantzas adduces as the source of the misconception that proposes the civil service itself as a 'new class'). In concrete terms, the common ideology of the civil service as a social category will include a degree of statolatry (idolisation of the state), and more specifically a tendency to see the state as the necessarily powerful, but still neutral, executant of 'the common good'. Civil servants may also appear (to themselves and to others) as a group uniquely poised 'above' conflicts of class or interest, and they may well be amenable to political invocations of this virtuous role. Beyond this, they may also see themselves as constituting a pseudo-class possessing a set of corporate interests.

The civil service is also subject to a third definitional system, in addition to its status within the petty bourgeoisie and its homogeneity as a social category. Poulantzas, following Marx, agrees that a civil service can also be viewed in terms of the class *origin* of its members. Thus Marx offered the example of a civil service whose upper ranks are recruited from the landed nobility and the bourgeoisie, with the middle and lower ranks petty bourgeois in origin.³⁴

How do these concepts, separately defined, operate together in practice in terms of an understanding of the relationship between the petty bourgeoisie and the personnel of the state? In the course of his discourse on the theory of state power in *Political Power and Social Classes*, Poulantzas used them effectively to invalidate any theory which seeks to locate a *source* of power in the civil service itself. Yet the sensitivity he showed when handling this initial case is not, unfortunately, reproduced in the historical passages of *Fascism and Dictatorship*. Here, where discussion ought to rest on a careful specification of the terminology in use, and the concepts to which it refers, Poulantzas actually shifts his discourse unstably through all four modes. In other words, there is no clarification of the actual relationships or overlaps on the civil service field between the concepts of (a) class in charge of the state, (b) petty bourgeoisie as class, (c) civil service as social category, and (d) class origins of civil servants.

For example, the actual significance of the petty bourgeoisie's alleged invasion of the 'upper ranks' of the German state apparatus after 1933³⁵ cannot be assessed without a prior knowledge of the class origin of those evicted. The practical relationship between class status and class origins must also be established for this purpose, as also the actual context in which the inherently subjective concept of the 'social category' is operative — and all this through rigorous reference to the concrete conjuncture under scrutiny. Yet Poulantzas, far from acknowledging the demands of his concepts, tends to employ them as if interchangeable, to confusing effect. Thus the initial acquisition of ruling class status by the petty bourgeoisie, and its subsequent demotion to acting as the class in charge of the state, are voided of meaning if the state personnel is, in another definitional system, regarded as part of the petty bourgeoisie in any case.³⁶ Furthermore, the persistence within the state apparatus of what Poulantzas describes as 'contradictions of the "corporative" type, between social categories'³⁷ becomes inexplicable. It is assigned, without discussion, to the level of a secondary and non-determining feature of the fascist regime. Thus the discourse threatens to remain a competition of categories, whose contradictions in historical combination are not forced into yielding up their political significance.

Here is a case where empirical research (of a banal kind, even) is indispensable in order to anchor the discussion. When Poulantzas speaks of a 'massive' filling of the 'top ranks' of the state apparatus by petty bourgeois members of the NSDAP, we need to know what 'massive' connotes, what the 'top ranks' are, whether the class origin of the party members is fully established. Of course, if Poulantzas were relying on a widely-known corpus of firm evidence, these matters would be less important. In fact, however, his assertions are highly controversial: they are not supported by evidence, and to the best of my knowledge would be hard to prove in any case. The necessary recovery of appropriate information on the class origin, party affiliation, and administrative rank of public service recruits as a whole from 1933 has not yet been carried out, not least owing to the difficulty of access to the relevant documentation. In the meantime, it seems to be the case that the 'top ranks' of the civil service (i.e. *Regierungsrat* upwards) were in general relatively successful in resisting the alleged invasion of the petty bourgeoisie — but at a fatal price of being progressively outflanked, as an external redistribution of political forces took place in the kaleidoscopic shifting of institutional structures and relationships. This is not to deny the force of Poulantzas's statement that 'Institutions do not determine social antagonisms: it is the class struggle which governs the modifications in the State apparatuses'.²⁸ I do not wish to imply that the primacy correctly established here should be reversed — far from it. My point is that Poulantzas's specific understanding of the class struggle is, in this context, incorrect, as adequate research might have demonstrated. In general terms, the class struggle in the Nazi state revealed itself in the relations within and between state institutions in the plural, as well as in a state system conceived of as a whole. Thus, for example, a sector of the bourgeoisie (that which had traditionally provided personnel for the upper civil service) continued in certain institutions to 'function as a social force' in the sense suggested by Poulantzas;²⁹ his exclusive consignment of the state apparatus to the petty bourgeoisie in its various manifestations is too crude.

As a final point, there is in any case an unexamined tension in Poulantzas's general presentation of the petty bourgeoisie, in virtue of his failure to consider the contradictory tendencies in petty bourgeois ideology towards both statolatry *and* violent individualism. This is important in the context of the civil service, for these tendencies find one of their most characteristic expressions in the tortured mental postures of the petty state official — the ideological tension between service and status.

Generally, then, Poulantzas's attempt to construct the role of the petty bourgeoisie in the Nazi state is broadly unsuccessful, and suggests an oversimplification of political and ideological currents. This is largely due to the absence of a (necessarily) empirical location for his typology — a location which would extract and expose the actual contradictions in this class's situation, rather than those visited upon it in the name of method.

V

My final criticism is that Poulantzas treats the Nazi regime implicitly as a unity, with its own firm line of determinate policy. In other words, he appears

to endow the regime with an unquestioned capacity for purpose and execution. I use the words 'appears to' deliberately, for I think that his treatment follows logically from a methodological position, and is not a conclusion drawn from a process of research. I will return to this problem below; but first I want to present a preliminary case against what is, in effect, Poulantzas's central thesis. that fascism's historic function is the performance of a service of mediation to monopoly capital, which it achieves partly by means of preserving its relative autonomy from capital. Manifestly, this endows fascism with an objective role in the resolution of the dual political crisis of the dominant class, a crisis whose initial establishment by Poulantzas is one of the most successful achievements of the book. However, it also appears that his version of the resolution of the crisis is at least partly based on an assumption about the Nazi regime's integrity which cannot historically be proven.

The substance of my doubts about the correctness of Poulantzas's interpretation is this: the degree of political dislocation in the structure of the state after 1933 was such that, even if it did not amount to a 'primacy of politics',³⁰ it constituted an extension of political autonomy to a degree that calls into question the alleged historic service of fascism to capital. In other words, the political developments after 1933 strongly suggest that *the fascist period in Germany was part of, rather than a resolution to, the political crisis of representation of the early 1930s*. It is Poulantzas's postulation of a *successful* mediation by fascism that, in this sense, lies at the root of the distortions, contradictions and confusions of his study. In fact, the correct conclusion seems at times to be forcing its way into his own discussion — hence, for instance, his unexplored and unexplained treatment of the fascist party and fascist state in Germany as, variously, correlates, synonyms, and opposites.³¹ Take also his pair of propositions that (a) 'big capital used the fascist party, the fascist State and fascist ideology to impose a general policy which unified the power bloc', and (b) 'the continuous contradictions between big capital and the Nazi party-state (were) part of the "game" [...] which national socialism was playing, juggling big capital with the other classes and fractions of the power bloc, and the power bloc with the masses'.³² These two propositions contain a clear contradiction, which can hardly be disguised by describing National Socialist policy as a 'game'. Contradictions of this kind are not in any case to be denied — it is only correct that they should make their existence felt in such passages. However, the only way they can be 'made sense of' is by acknowledging that the political tensions which Poulantzas continuously judges as 'secondary' after 1933 were, in fact, of primary and fundamental significance for assessing the nature of the fascist regime in Germany.

It seems in any case that any examination of exceptional states must always bear in mind the possibility that it is dealing with a stage of crisis in conjunctural terms, and not an end to it. This possibility is surely inherent in the concept of the exceptional state as such. An adequate examination of the 'concrete facts' of the fascist period in Germany would suggest the aptness of this conclusion in this case. But Poulantzas is not concerned to examine the full career of fascism in either Germany or Italy. In the German case, his research and exposition cease, broadly speaking, at the mid-1930s. Why? Because he is interested only in establishing fascism up to its so-called 'stabilised' stage, i.e.

up to about 1934 in Germany. Stabilisation is thus enthroned as a historical and analytic end-point beyond which nothing more need be said about the phenomenon of fascism. True, he occasionally lifts a corner of the veil that shrouds the later 1930s and the war years, with, for example, an observation on the displacement of the class struggle,³³ or on the nature of the contradictions found in the Nazi state.³⁴ But these hints are never followed up. Instead, their significance remains a shadow for us as readers, and we are left with a stronger memory of much blander assertions, such as 'the characteristic features of [petty bourgeois] ideology correspond completely to the interests of big capital'.³⁵

Clearly, a basic objection to such an unproblematic and half-finished exposition of fascism is that it rules out any explanation of its collapse, and is therefore bound to be inadequate. This objection cannot be dismissed as stemming from a teleology, i.e. it is not a bid to read the outcome back into the origin, and compress these as stages in a single process. Rather, the objection is founded on the more secure procedure of deriving fascism's collapse from fascism's contradictions, and not the contradictions from the collapse. This theoretical understanding of correct method then imposes on the student of the phenomenon the obligation to grasp fascism in its process as well as its structure, and thus to examine its full trajectory. In historical terms, the fascist *regime* must be independently specified, and not simply allowed to follow from an analysis — however acute — of fascism before it comes into political power. Though Poulantzas is partly aware of the significance of the transition, his basically structural approach prevents him from subjecting fascism-in-power to the same detailed examination he makes of fascism before it constitutes its regime. Consequently, his characterisation of fascism is incomplete. In addition, it would be enormously difficult to derive from his analysis an explanation of the collapse of fascism which did not contradict his account at crucial moments (e.g. the previous quotation). On the contrary, an entirely new system of explanation would — absurdly — have to be developed from scratch.

An interpretation of fascism developed from this method would, I think, have to run along the following lines. The starting-point could be Poulantzas's acute diagnosis of the crisis of representation of the power bloc, but fascism, as I have indicated, would have to be seen as a further stage in this crisis, not its resolution. For fascism is the most extreme form yet observed of the exceptional capitalist state: and if we ask what the essential contradiction of exceptional states is, then the answer is that it derives from their being a type of coercive structure in which the control of the extraction of surplus value is displaced from the labour process to the political process, in a vast enhancement of the state's political role. The fascist regime is the extreme form of the autonomisation of politics under capitalism. It is the product of an immense dislocation of the capitalist mode of production, and although it may appear to the economically and politically distressed power bloc as the only short-term solution, this fascist resolution can never persist in the long term, for it manifestly bristles with contradictions. As a system, it cannot be other than permanently fraught with its own downfall, for politically it has forfeited (by exceeding) the state's brief under capitalism: to act as the *guarantor of the conditions*

for the reproduction of the conditions of production of surplus value — the rest being up to capital. This delicately distanced relationship of the political and the economic is explosively compressed under fascism, and the political is enthroned in a threatening autonomy. (The only rational version of such an autonomy in the capitalist stage of production is, of course, the *deliberate* political subversion of capitalism — revolution.) This is not to deny, however, that there will be steps in the fascist process which will be beneficial to capital: but these will measure only a temporary masking of the fundamental contradiction, and not (as in a model of 'normal' capitalism) a strategic adaptation to the contradictions of the mode of production. The self-destruction of fascism is therefore inherent in its political status; and to the extent that it embodies the purely political, so it will bring down the social formation with it.

This line of interpretation follows logically from an understanding of the crucial significance of the labour process under capitalism, as the characteristic locus of capital's domination over labour. It underlines the need to concentrate more research specifically in this area, and to take this premise generally as the appropriate explanatory starting-point for the political history of capitalism. In the case of fascism, the characterisation I have outlined in these terms could be followed through historically in a great variety of ways, of which only a few can be suggested here. Under National Socialism, for example, one term of the fundamental contradiction in the role of the state is expressed in the tendency towards the ultimate autonomisation of the political police, with its disruptive implications for the process of production. Of course, we can also locate in National Socialism the alternative tendency towards disciplining the labour force through the labour process too, visible for example in the compulsory membership of workers in the Labour Front, the various forms of corporative organisation, the much publicised attention to working conditions etc. These tendencies are often seen as the 'rational' or 'modern' side of fascist regimes, whereas in fact they are developmental tendencies of *capitalism* at a certain stage of the class struggle. Their appearance is thus not generic to fascism, though under fascism they take a particular form (e.g. corporate rather than independent labour unions). This so-called 'rational' aspect of fascism must be assessed strictly by comparison with similar developments in other capitalist countries: and when this is done, the preponderance in fascist states of the machinery of *political* control will be found to be the determining characteristic, and the pace at which this machinery operates will be seen accelerating as the contradictions established in fascism become more acute. It is for this reason that the executions mount, the concentration camps fill, the police system takes off into total independence, and, at the most extreme and comprehensive level, war engulfs society, as the Nazi regime 'matures' into the full expression of its contradictions.

Other historical moments through which the characteristic political nature of fascism must be investigated and specified include, for example, in the German case the successive and fumbling attempts by capital to avoid recourse to the political after 1930 (the administrative autocracy of the Brüning and Papen governments); the actual process by which the NSDAP established itself as a political alternative; the enthronement of ideology after 1933; and, connected with this, the 'archaisms' of Nazism, such as its invocation of feudal and even

Germanic-tribal community models (tendencies often dismissed as simply absurd, but which might perhaps be logically related to the genuinely anachronistic political status claimed by a fascist regime in capitalism). The complicated and ambiguous sub-formations of the system need rigorous identification, e.g. the role of the SS in the system of production. The 'post-history' of fascism is another indispensable field of study: for example, the connection must be identified between the developments of the Nazi era and the extraordinary degree to which the struggle in West German capitalism since the later 1940s has been *de-politicized*. The Italian case must also be studied in similar detail, as an apparently 'weaker' instance of the model I have outlined. Finally, the value of such studies must not be vitiated by failing to specify fascism in deliberate relation with developments in those capitalist societies which have not undergone a fascist period, or which have experienced exceptional regimes of a non-fascist type.

The above forms an incomplete and partly speculative list of points thrown up by what I believe to be a fruitful approach to the analysis of fascism: both the list and my general propositions would have to be refined and modified by reference to the concrete. Only in this way, however, can we arrive at a genuine distinction between the essential and the secondary elements of fascism, and thus — which is the purpose of the enterprise — develop a strategic political grasp of the phenomenon.

VI

The common denominator of these three historical criticisms of Poulantzas's study is, therefore, that by failing to delve sufficiently deeply into his historical material, he has missed successive instances of contradiction; and these omissions have led cumulatively to a major misunderstanding of fascism. Poulantzas has failed, in effect, to act out his own stated commitment to concrete research.³⁶

I have not, however, wanted to launch a philistine attack on Poulantzas's work as such — as if, by bagging each school of theorists as it appeared, one could aim at exterminating the breed and making the world safe for history. On the contrary, it is precisely because of the constitutive relation between history and theory that I hope this article will be read as a critique and not as an attack. Any other position would rely wholly on a characteristically bourgeois idealism, and a refusal to transcend it constitutes, quite clearly, a refusal of Marxism in principle. In subjecting one of Poulantzas's ostensibly most historical texts to a deliberately historical critique, I hope to have indicated some of the problems of constructing an adequately based theorisation, without implying that the purpose as a whole is nugatory.

The generic historical weakness of *Fascism and Dictatorship* derives from a pervasive deficiency of method. There is an assumption, nowhere queried in the book, that at any given moment all the empirical knowledge required for the full expression of a theorised problem does, in fact, exist. But the only sense in which this can be true is a tautologous one, satisfactory only in terms of an involuted logic, and this does not appear to be the position adopted by Poulantzas. Yet that his writing implies a total confidence in facts as they stand is a failing

of some importance. It is not just a question of a superficial arrogance of style, but suggests a failure to grasp history as a refraction of current and past practice, a practice by which we in the present constitute the objects of our enquiry in the past.

On the simplest level, Poulantzas's theoretical constructions frequently make substantial promises which are then thrown away by a careless use of historical information. Moreover, if, as this critique has suggested, some significant information is likely to be unknown at any given time of writing, then what we write ought to respond to this absence — not in any sentimental sense of humility before history, but for the ordinary and concrete reason that we are always engaged in a progressive articulation of understanding.

A more serious objection to *Fascism and Dictatorship*, as both an interpretation of a phenomenon and an example of method, is that it seems able to offer only an analysis of a problem which is specifically given, i.e. established by a cursorily defined prior situation, and emptied of its relation to later conjunctures. The isolation of a concrete moment from the succession of moments in which it is buried is, of course, a constant methodological problem for historians, and Poulantzas is far from being the only writer to fail to meet this challenge. Yet an effective awareness of this problem and its implications seems to be absent from his work: hence his rather uncritical treatment of the pre-history of the era he discusses, and the virtual impossibility, as we have seen, of deducing the next steps from his study. For historical enquiry this form of quarantine is the reverse of healthy, for, in this case, it debars Poulantzas from establishing the relationship between contradiction and collapse.

Nevertheless, though Poulantzas's study of fascism ultimately reveals a combination of historical and methodological weakness, there would be no point in ending this article on a note of condemnation. On the contrary, I hope that what I have written will be read as an indication of the book's great richness and value. It is very important to welcome work of this provocative power and subtlety, and the welcome it deserves is a critique which tries to take the argument forward, rather than throwing it back. Anything less would be a disservice to Poulantzas's project — a political project which Marxists cannot ignore or brush aside. Not to take Poulantzas's history seriously would also merely confirm the bankruptcy of self-confessed historians, trained generally to a level of sophistication little more demanding than that represented by the supposed distinction between facts and ideas. If we must learn to elaborate a problematic which will not turn history into a prolonged tautology, we must also realise that history conceived unproblematically is reduced to the category of the factitious. Though the latter fate is often unthinkingly embraced by historians, no Marxist should be satisfied to be numbered in their company.

* For their advice in the preparation of this article, I would like to thank Geoff Eley, Jane Kenrick and Tim Mason.

¹ Nicos Poulantzas, *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales*, Paris 1968; trans. *Political Power and Social Classes*, London 1973; citations here are from the English edition. Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, London 1969.

¹ N. Poulantzas, 'The Problem of the Capitalist State', *New Left Review* 58, November/December 1969; R. Miliband, 'Reply to Nicos Poulantzas', *NLR* 59, January/February 1970. Both these articles are reprinted in Robin Blackburn (ed.), *Ideology in Social Science*, London 1972. Debate continued in R. Miliband, 'Poulantzas and the Capitalist State', *NLR* 82, November/December 1973; Ernesto Laclau, 'The Specificity of the Political: the Poulantzas-Miliband Debate', *Economy and Society*, vol. V no. 1, February 1975; N. Poulantzas, 'The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau', *NLR* 95, January/February 1976.

² *NLR* 82, pp. 84, 85-6.

³ *NLR* 95, pp. 65, 68, 72.

⁴ Laclau, 'Poulantzas-Miliband Debate', p. 94.

⁵ *Fascisme et dictature*, Paris 1970; trans. *Fascism and Dictatorship*, London 1974. Citations here are from the English edition. Cf. *NLR* 95, p. 67.

⁶ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 12.

⁷ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 13.

⁸ *NLR* 95, p. 65.

⁹ For Poulantzas's methodology, see the Introduction to *Political Power and Social Classes*, especially pp. 18-19 and 24-5, where he warns against the tendency to construct theory 'in the void, before proceeding to a sufficient amount of concrete research'.

¹⁰ Ultimately, Poulantzas's full texts as cited, with the addition of the recently translated *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, London 1975, are necessary to an understanding of any part of his theory, since they are constructed in deliberate relation to each other, with the later texts correcting the earlier. However, as a brief introduction, see Poulantzas's 'On Social Classes', *NLR* 78, March/April 1973; and Laclau, 'Poulantzas-Miliband Debate'.

¹¹ Poulantzas analyses 'non-exceptional' capitalist states in *Political Power and Social Classes*.

¹² *Fascism and Dictatorship*, pp. 85-6.

¹³ For a full exposition of the concept of the state apparatus(es), see initially *Fascism and Dictatorship*, pp. 299-309. Poulantzas distinguishes between 'repressive state apparatuses' (roughly, the conventional organs of government), and 'ideological state apparatuses', which include trade unions, political parties, the Church etc. In the context here, however, Poulantzas seems to be using the term in the former sense only, though this is not wholly clear; see pp. 111-12.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the terms 'ruling class' and 'class in charge of the state', see *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp. 249-251; also 'On Social Classes'.

¹⁵ This resumé is drawn principally from pp. 86-8, 108-13, and 336-49.

¹⁶ See below, pp. 94 ff.

¹⁷ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 112.

¹⁸ K. D. Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*, Harmondsworth 1971. Bracher's major researches were carried out in connection with his contribution to one of the first fully researched monographs on the early years of the regime, *Die nationalsozialistische Macht-ergreifung*, by K. D. Bracher, Wolfgang Sauer, and Gerhard Schulz, Cologne/Opladen 1960.

¹⁹ E.g. Martin Broszat, *Der Staat Hitlers*, Munich 1969; Peter Diehl-Thiele, *Partei und Staat im Dritten Reich*, Munich 1969; E. N. Peterson, *The Limits of Hitler's Power*, Princeton 1969. Some of the older writers on the regime, such as Hugh Trevor-Roper and Hannah Arendt, emphasised its extreme lack of coherence, though this view did not fully penetrate later writing. The assumption that terror depends upon a coherent and systematic structure of government would seem to be misconceived, though it is easily suggested by the ring of the word 'totalitarian' (and obviously encouraged by the political value in the Cold War period of assimilating fascist and communist regimes under one title). But as the German experience shows, a regime of terror may derive its effect precisely from the absence of structure and central political control, in that this leaves so many interstices open for the invasion of prerogative power, as well as radicalising the political process (though this is not to suggest that individual units within the general structure will not be organisationally 'rational').

²⁰ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, pp. 237 ff.

²¹ See *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp. 77-85.

²² *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 239.

²³ See *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp. 325-59.

²⁴ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 111.

²⁵ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 264.

²⁶ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 345.

²⁷ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 63.

²⁸ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 112.

²⁰ See T. W. Mason, 'The Primacy of Politics — Politics and Economics in National Socialist Germany', in S. J. Woolf, (ed.), *The Nature of Fascism*, London 1968 — an essay to which the present article owes a great deal. The term 'primacy of politics' may perhaps be slightly misleading, in that it implies a primacy *over* the economic sphere, as in a hierarchy. For this reason, the concept of 'autonomy' seems preferable, with its clear connotation of detachment rather than paramountcy.

²¹ See *Fascism and Dictatorship*, pp. 85 f., 111-13, and 340, where each of these definitions is implied, without clarification.

²² *Fascism and Dictatorship*, pp. 111-13.

²³ On pp. 344-5 Poulantzas notes the displacement of the class struggle into the state apparatuses, but then consigns it to the title of a 'secondary contradiction' between social categories — a term which, as we have seen, is not sufficiently specified in relation to class, in this concrete instance. The designation of this field as 'secondary' is thus precarious, and arbitrary.

²⁴ For example, on pp. 250 and 254 the contradictions between capital and the petty bourgeoisie are mentioned but not investigated.

²⁵ *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 252.

²⁶ See note 10 above.

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