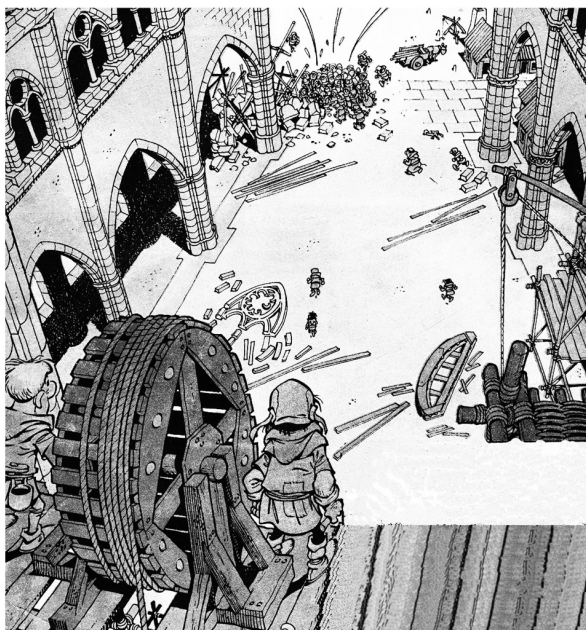


# Reclaim the ‘state debate’



## Introduction

After the shock of the recent crisis, and facing its long-term consequences, many of us who have been involved in recent campaigns and struggles feel the need for a renewed debate about the state, its nature and its relation to capital and the class struggle.

With so far no major challenge from the working class in Britain, the crisis and the response to it have taken objectified forms: economy versus the state, both playing undisputed protagonist roles – both ‘subjects’. The appearance of a state intervening in, and against, the freedom of the economy was one with its underlying substance: the ruling class acting in its self-interest and to the detriment of the working class. In fact, the consequences of the government’s decision to rescue major failing banks will result in massive attacks on the proletariat during the coming decade.

On the one hand, the crisis has put the neoliberal agenda and its underlying free market ideology under question, since the state had to ‘intervene’ and rescue the economy from the disastrous consequences of its freedom. However, the ruling class is dealing with a demoralised and fragmented working class, often resigned to working longer hours for a lower wage in order to retain their jobs. It is true that wage cuts have motivated some more organised sectors of the working class into taking action, and that we have seen isolated but combative wildcat strike actions and occupations of closing factories. These new struggles are a necessary step for building up confidence in our capacity to challenge capital and win; however, we are still far from seeing the confidence and the class solidarity that was taken for granted in the 70s.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The occupation of Vestas has shown how difficult it is currently to attain class solidarity – 25 workers out of about 600 have occupied a wind turbine factory in the Isle of Wight, while the remaining hundreds have dispersed. The weekly solidarity rally has been

The crisis has obliged the state to ‘nationalise’ financial institutions and provide financial bailouts to key businesses in order to prevent the collapse of the economy. In the aftermath of the first nationalisations, some Trotskyists such as the Socialist Party immediately proclaimed that ‘Marx was right’. However, these forms of state interventions differ in both content and form from the nationalisations of the 40s. The unprofitability of industries such as mining and the railways in the past could only be solved through nationalisation instead of restructuring. Despite the fact that these nationalisations were brought about in the interest of capital and in order to maintain the rule of the bourgeoisie over production, they reflected the power of organised labour. Today’s nationalisations, which do not reflect any counter-power of the working class, have already been cynically called ‘socialism for the rich’.

It is in fact clear that the attack on the working class is currently continuing along the same lines as before the crisis and that the crisis has resulted in hastening the government’s neoliberal agenda.

Benefit reforms proposed before the crisis, which were aiming at imposing the work ethic on single parents and disabled claimants in a prosperous ‘full-employment’ scenario, are stubbornly going ahead, although there are no jobs even for the fit. For example, a new and tougher test of incapacity for work has just been introduced which has served to rename ‘fit to work’ an army of sick claimants.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that it should be obvious, with the crisis, that the unemployed (and the unemployable) should not be blamed for not having a job, the working class lacks confidence to challenge this work ethic ideology in an organised way.

The government is adamant about pressing ahead with the privatisation of the National Health Service (NHS) and other public services despite the fact that the crisis has fully exposed the irrationality of their plans. The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) has allowed the private sector to own and control hospital buildings (but also school, police stations, etc.) and impose high rents on public trusts.<sup>3</sup> Millions of pounds are still poured into the hands of IT giants such as

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composed of families and friends of the occupiers but it is dominated mostly by leftist groups. A member of the Vestas support group in Brighton visited the industrial area and found out that in many factories adjacent to Vestas the workers were not even aware of the occupation. About this struggle see our article ‘The red shoots of resistance?’.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Financial Times* up to 90% of applicants for new benefits are tested ‘fit to work’ under the new rules: Alex Barker ‘New test raises bar for sickness benefits’, 13/7/09. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c3ae0762-6f43-11de-9109-00144feabdc0.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in Brighton, the Royal Alexandra Children’s Hospital has moved into a new £37m site, built as a PFI by a consortium led by the European branch of the Japanese multinational Kajima Corporation. Under the agreement, Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust will pay Kajima and their partners around £3.66m a year to build and maintain the Royal Alexandra over the next 30 years. In total, £163.3m of public money will be spent – about five times the £37 million capital cost. At the end of this period the building will belong to Kajima and will have to be hired from the corporation at a new cost.

British Telecom to pursue a mammoth database of medical records despite serious technical failures and inadequacies in services from the private providers, and despite vocal protests about patient confidentiality.<sup>4</sup> Large health companies such as the UK-based *Care UK* or South African *Netcare* are contracted for routine operations under a contract which pays them even if they reject the patient.<sup>5</sup> And now the government has just started a new wave of privatisations of drop-in healthcare centres which will be controlled by big multinationals, but, due to a strange inversion of meanings which is reminiscent of Orwell's *1984*, are called 'GP-led'.

A similar trend towards privatisation is sought for Royal Mail and key parts of the benefit system, while another giant database has been commissioned from the IT industry around the institution of the ID card – which will allow the state to keep track of main economic transactions, benefit claims, and even the travels, of every individual.

These government policies do have contradictions. The interests of competing sections of the bourgeoisie clash with the interests of the economy as a whole and the delicate balance which has kept these projects going can be easily undermined by the consequences of the crisis and can be exploited by future challenges of the class.

The crisis also puts into question the demarcation of 'public' and 'private', and thus the nature and role of the capitalist state and its relation to capital. During the last decade, and as a consequence of the retreat of working class struggle, state policies informed by a neoliberal agenda have slowly redefined those boundaries. The privatisations of the public sector have been accompanied by the decline of a generation of conservative high civil servants entrenched in their privileged control of state bureaucracy against social reform but also external interference including that of big businesses. With New Labour this old kind of aristocratic civil servant has gone and blurred boundaries between the state and big business became the norm. The so-called 'revolving doors' system describes a rotation of roles between the state and the private sector: ministers and top civil servants involved in privatisation would get top consultant jobs in IT, health, financial businesses at the end of their public mandate – and *vice versa*, top managers from the private sector would be granted top positions in government advisory bodies.

The state's attempt to make the public sector fit for privatisation has also led to a redefinition of the relation between public sector workers and their employers. Reforms after reforms have obliged the NHS and other public services to be increasingly run like businesses: targets and other formal measurements are now linked to funding in ways that attempted to mimic the constraints of the market. As a consequence, the internal spur of professionalism has been

replaced by the direct command of the clock.<sup>6</sup> This means more exploitation, but as state workers lose their traditional privileges, the state faces an increasingly proletarianised army of employees who are still capable of strong links of solidarity across services.



The crisis is shaking all the above demarcations and impositions which have been taken for granted, and potentially offers us the opportunity to challenge what is established. However, it is a mistake to hope that there will be any major change in capitalism only as a mechanical effect of the crisis: the crisis will not serve the end of the neoliberal agenda on a silver plate to the proletarians if we do not consciously fight it and win. In fact, as we said earlier, in the absence of any response from the class the state will only invest state money in order to re-establish the conditions for more privatisations and for the continuity of the established relations of power – and we will be asked to pay the bill.

Only if the class struggle re-emerges will the balances of power and interests, which currently appear to be issues of public versus private, privatisation against nationalisation, state control versus individual freedom, be exposed for what they really are, *a class issue*. With this in mind, far from being a purely theoretical need, our need for a debate about the state is a practical necessity. Those like us who depend on a wage or on the benefit system for our survival need to answer questions which are crucial for our opportunity of struggle.

Such a task must be the result of a collective effort and of a long-term project, and so in this article we will not propose any new theory. As a necessary preliminary work, we will only consider some theory which was produced in the past and which we consider still relevant. In particular, we will focus on *The State Debate*, edited by Simon Clarke, which we have already reviewed in *Aufheben* #2.<sup>7</sup> In this book Clarke summarises previous theories about the state in

<sup>4</sup> In 2003 the government claimed that this project would cost just a few billions and dismissed estimates from critical IT experts of a £50bn cost. After many years, and the withdrawal of a number of IT providers unable to deliver their pieces of work, the government has now admitted that the project will cost more than £20bn.

<sup>5</sup> Under this contract, the private provider is paid 'guaranteed revenues', whether or not the contracted operations are actually done. In Brighton the private contractor which runs the NHS Orthopaedic Centre in Haywards Heath is allowed to reject any patients who present even minor risks but is paid guaranteed revenues for their operation.

<sup>6</sup> Literally: nurses employed in hospitals run by provider Partnership Health Group complained through UNISON that they have been monitored by managers with stopwatches while they visited their patients.

<sup>7</sup> *The State Debate*, edited by Simon Clarke, St Martin's Press, New York.

capitalism and presents his own work and the work of authors close to him as the culmination of this debate.

Using this book as a point of departure, we will then consider the development of the state debate from the beginning of the 70s to Clarke and explain how this debate led to a clear understanding of the importance of the class struggle in the constitution of the relations of power, including state power. In particular, Clarke and other authors demolished the assumptions, popular in philosophical currents like structuralism, that class subjectivity is subsumed and determined by objectified relations of power in capital.

However, we will explain why we are dissatisfied by the way this debate has developed so far and why we think that today we need something different. We will show how the above battle of ideas was, since the beginning, grounded in academic debate, and that for this reason, although interesting and clever, its aims and interests were inherently detached from the aims and needs of those in struggle. We will also discuss why what increasingly became theory for theory's sake cannot help us with the many questions opened up by the crisis, and what kind of new theory we need to make.<sup>8</sup>

### **The beginning of the 70s: between reformism and Stalin**

*The State Debate* was published in 1991 and retrospectively highlighted some crucial moments in which the nature of the state was discussed in the past; in particular, the debate between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas at the end of the 60s and the work of members of the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE) reacting to Poulantzas's structuralism during the 70s. Before looking at the Miliband-Poulantzas debate, let us first consider its context.

At the end of the 60s, the two main opposed theories of the state in capitalism were the orthodox Marxist theory of state monopoly capitalism and the social democratic state theory, and they were both in crisis.

The issue of the state was a problem for Marxists, as Marx did not leave any coherent or developed theory. A clear but brief comment on the state in capitalism was in the *Communist Manifesto*, where Marx defined the state as 'a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie', but this comment did not amount to a fully developed theory.<sup>9</sup> The theory of state monopoly capitalism had been elaborated within the Leninist tradition to fill this gap and to reflect the development of capitalism since Marx's times. For Lenin and his followers, in fact, new theory was necessary as capitalism was going through its last stage: the contradictions between private property and the increasing socialisation of production changed the nature of the state as they obliged the state to increasingly take up economic functions belonging to capital. As a consequence, the state ceased to be just a political expression of capital and

became fused with it.<sup>10</sup> This theory was in crisis by the end of the 60s, as existing social democracies had shown that the state could somehow intervene in the economy and make important changes (like the institution of the welfare state), apparently in the interest of the working class and against the bourgeoisie.

While the theory of monopoly capitalism saw the state as functional to the interests of the bourgeoisie, social democratic state theory saw the state as a potentially neutral instrument. The state could be seized by democratic means by the working class and used in its interest. This theory was based on the apparent separation of production and distribution in capitalism: while, as long as the capitalist relations continued, production remained capitalist, a social democratic state could achieve the control of distribution through taxation and state expenditure. Like the theory of state monopoly capitalism, this theory was also in crisis, but for the opposite reason: the actual failures of existing social democratic governments in meeting the expectation of the class. In fact, from the 40s to the 70s the labour movement had brought social democratic parties to power, not only in Britain but in other countries in Europe; and none of them brought their countries closer to socialism – in fact, social democratic governments even tried to limit the power of organised workers and introduced austerity measures.

In Britain the Labour Party had been in government in the second half of the 40s and later in the second half of the 60s and 70s.<sup>11</sup> Attlee's government (1945-1951) somehow met the electorate's expectation for radical reforms by introducing a benefit system, the NHS, and by nationalising main British industries, the Bank of England, utility companies, and the railways. The Wilson government (1964-70 and 1974-79) introduced liberal social reforms such as the legalisation of abortion and applied Keynesianism by, for example, funding renovation of infrastructure.

Yet both governments could not go beyond a certain limit. Attlee's government had to restrain its reforms and even introduce spending cuts by its 'necessary' involvement in the Korean war and the consequent massive defence costs. The Wilson government's reformist plans were blown off course by the mistrust of the international markets: a consequent currency crisis and the devaluation of the pound in November 1967 'obliged' the government to introduce drastic austerity measures and try to curb the powers of trade unions. Despite great promises and expectations, the Labour party had been unable to make any change in the very nature of capitalist relations – the élite which was in power remained in power, the exploited remained exploited, and most of the reforms which were introduced by Attlee served to redefine the conditions for maintaining the status quo.

While British socialists reacted against the weaknesses of their social democracy, by the beginning of the 70s big communist parties in other countries like Italy and France saw a chance to go the electoral way. The Communist Party of Italy (PCI) had never been in the government and the Communist Party of France (PCF) had only participated in the provisional government of the Liberation (1944-1947). Both the PCF and PCI then had maintained a gloss of

<sup>8</sup> In our main article on the crisis in this same number of *Aufheben* we complain that Marxist crisis theory has also retreated into debates about methodology.

<sup>9</sup> It is true that in his early works Marx made a critique of Hegel's theory of the state, but this was before he developed his theory of capital. He planned to analyse the state in capital in one of his future volumes of *Capital*, which he never wrote. He also provided concrete analysis of the state for specific cases, for example in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

<sup>10</sup> We need to stress that for Leninism monopoly capitalism was a transitional stage to socialism, yet socialism needed a revolution to take over and reshape both production and the state.

<sup>11</sup> Under Clement Attlee in 1945-51; under Harold Wilson in 1964-70; under Wilson and James Callaghan in 1974-79.

revolutionariness which could still create great expectations among their electors. Following Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation and the emergence of a 'new left' critical of Stalinism, both the Communist Parties of France and Italy retracted their call for the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', proclaimed their commitment to democratic and liberal values and considered entering into political alliances with the main parties on the 'right'. This transformation would be called 'Eurocommunism' and created both expectations and disappointment among communists.



The British experience of disaffection with the Labour Party, which had never claimed to be revolutionary and which had shown the limits of reformism while in power, was not shared by French communists. It is true that, when in the 60s the PCF looked at humanist Marxism and considered possible alliances with liberals and Catholics as a reaction to Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, young Althusser's followers attacked the PCF as revisionist.<sup>12</sup> However, their mentor Louis Althusser remained loyal to the PCF throughout his life; and there still was great expectation among many communists that an electoral victory could lead to a drastic change in the balance of power among classes. This contradictory situation constituted Nicos Poulantzas's political background and explains his differences with

### Miliband and Poulantzas

In Britain, many of those who had been involved in the labour movement during the 60s and had witnessed this weakness of the Labour Party, felt the urge to oppose reformism. Ralph Miliband was one of them.<sup>13</sup> In his book

<sup>12</sup> Over six hundred young structuralist students followers of Althusser were eventually expelled from the PCF in the autumn of 1966. Meanwhile Althusser remained in the Party and in 1970 became the PCF's undisputed leading intellectual. See Arthur Hirsh, *The French Left*, Black Rose Books, Montreal, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> Ralph Miliband was a political theorist and sociologist. The son of a Jewish family who emigrated from Poland to escape the Nazis, Miliband changed his name from an unfortunate 'Adolphe' to Ralph

*The State in Capitalist Society*, Miliband argued that the limits of social democracy were not contingent but rooted in capitalist social relations themselves. In fact he rejected the idea that socialism could be brought about by electoral means alone and thought that any political changes needed to be supported by extra-parliamentary working class struggle.<sup>14</sup>

Miliband was not a working class militant, but derived his belief in the centrality of the class struggle from his academic background. The importance of class struggle and class subjectivity was an established tradition within academic Marxism in Britain, and had been pioneered by Marxist historians such as E. P. Thompson.

With regard to methodology, this was also basically in the Marxist empirical tradition. For this reason Miliband presented his arguments on the basis of detailed and solid empirical research. Looking at facts and figures about the UK, other European countries and the US, Miliband traced the limits of social democracy to the privileged position of the bourgeoisie in the access and control of all state apparatuses (as well as, for example, political parties, media, etc.). Importantly, he showed that this advantage was founded on the bourgeoisie's privileged access to wealth, resources, special connections, education, etc., so on its position in the capitalist relations of production.

Miliband's book was mainly directed at bourgeois liberal ideas which saw society as composed of 'free' individuals defined as such in the sphere of circulation and which saw the state as a democratic arena equally accessible to all individuals and pressure groups. With his book then Miliband sought to prove that it was possible to speak about classes, about the bourgeoisie as a class; and to vindicate Karl Marx's definition of the state as 'a committee' managing the bourgeoisie's affairs.

In France, in response to the crisis brought about by Khrushchev's attack on Stalinism, Poulantzas wrote a theory of the state and of capitalism as well, one intricately woven within his philosophical background, French structuralism. However, his spirit was very different from Miliband's theory: Poulantzas's work in fact contributed to the theoretical justification for Eurocommunism.<sup>15</sup>

Poulantzas's work was based on Althusser's view of capitalism. According to Althusser, capitalism was made up of three 'relatively autonomous' spheres (the political, the ideological and the economic) and their 'structures'. Human history was not made by the conscious actions or choices of individuals or groups but it was shaped by these 'structures', which determined to a large extent motivations, actions and their results. These structures were defined for given periods and in each period they determined a definite 'field of

when he arrived in Britain. He died in 1994, so he did not see the election of his sons, David and Ed, as Labour MPs (respectively, in 2001 and 2005). He also did not see his offsprings' careers as New Labour ministers. As his sons seem to precisely embody the worst kind of reformist politicians, which Ralph condemned in his book, *The State in Capitalist Society*, many suggest that he is currently spinning in his grave.

<sup>14</sup> Miliband had to reconcile his 'radical' socialism with the libertarian, democratic values, he shared with the 'New Left' and the pacifist anti-Vietnam War movement.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Hirsh says that Poulantzas's work developed the theoretical basis for the future Eurocommunism 'more than anyone else' and explains that his theory saw the state as a 'site' of class struggle that could be conquered through democratic, electoral, alliances (*The French Left*, pp. 189-90).



objectively possible' outcomes for the class struggle ('conjunctures').

This theory was applied by Poulantzas to theorise the nature and role of the state. For Poulantzas the state was not *the result* of a social relation: on the contrary, our relations were formed and shaped by the state apparatus. The structures that characterised the state also determined the results of choices and decisions made by those in power.

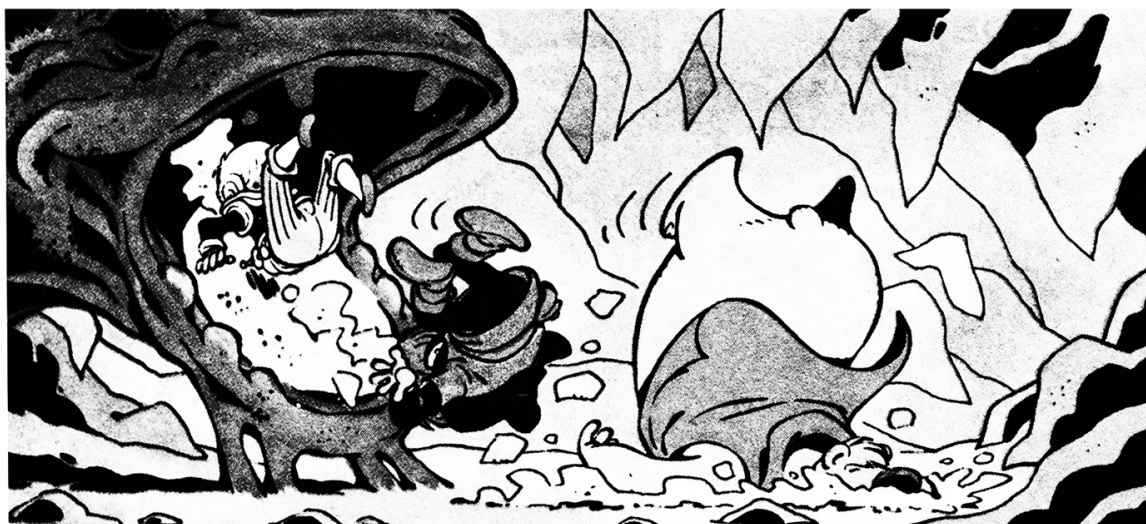
According to Poulantzas's view, the state had a specific function in its own specialised 'political sphere': it was functional to the stability of the social system as a whole and not necessarily bound to be functional to economic relations. This idea was in effect not very different from bourgeois or liberal ideas of the state, which saw the state as an institution independent from the relations of production in capitalism.

This quite liberal theory led Poulantzas to justify the bourgeois instruments of democracy and in particular to suggest that socialism could be sneaked in through the ballot box. For Poulantzas, in fact, a battle for power could be played out on a pure political level. It is true that the state had so far expressed the interests of the bourgeoisie, but this

journal, *New Left Review*, to which Miliband replied with a short article.<sup>17</sup> When, later, Poulantzas published the English translation of his book *Political Power and Social Classes* in 1973, Miliband immediately retaliated.<sup>18</sup>

Coherently with his structuralist view, Poulantzas could not accept Miliband's analysis, which focused on wealth, influence, the class position and motivations of those in power. For Poulantzas, the state was hardwired to function within its peculiar and objective 'structure' and motivations and actions of individuals were guided by objective necessities.<sup>19</sup> Coming from the British Marxist tradition which gave centrality to the class struggle, Miliband could not accept the determinism and objectivism inherent in Poulantzas's theory, which displaced the class struggle into a subsidiary role and wrote that in Poulantzas's theory 'class struggle makes a dutiful appearance; but in an exceedingly formalised ballet of evanescent shadow'.<sup>20</sup>

Miliband did not believe in 'free will' against 'determinism'; he thought that one should consider a dialectical relation of the objective and subjective elements of the concrete; and in his reply to Poulantzas's critique of



only happened because the bourgeoisie happened to be so far the dominant class in the 'political sphere'. But things could be, in principle, different. For Poulantzas, capitalism had just entered a novel 'conjuncture' which had marked a crisis for the political hegemony of the bourgeoisie. It had never happened before, but *now* the working class had an objectively good chance to be at the head of a new electoral alliance that could take control of the state. Eurocommunism could then be seen as the right way forward, blessed by the right conjuncture.<sup>16</sup>

Poulantzas and Miliband trampled over each other's area of study to say very different things and in a very different way, and clashed. When in 1969 Miliband published his book, Poulantzas immediately attacked it in Miliband's own

his book he accused Poulantzas of being one-sided, because of his exclusive stress on the objective.<sup>21</sup>

May 68 and its barricades created a new generation of more radical intellectuals, particularly in the UK, some of whom would reopen this debate and return to the dilemma of 'structures' or 'subjects'. As we will see in the next section, structuralism's inherent determinism would be under attack again at the end of the 70s for its one-sidedness. The new

<sup>16</sup> It is undoubtedly part of a structuralist tradition to prophesise the coming of new phases, which make possible, now, radical change – of course all this is the result of an objective dynamics. Among the authors that we have analysed in the past, a similar messianic fascination makes a star appearance in the theories of Theorie Communiste (who have read lots of Althusser) and of born-again Postmodernist, Toni Negri. Unfortunately, such prophecies are not very good in materialising, perhaps because we cannot expect that 'objective conditions' will do the trick for us.

<sup>17</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, 'The problem of the capitalist state', *New Left Review* 58, November-December 1969. Miliband replied with 'The capitalist state – a reply to Nicos Poulantzas', *New Left Review* 59, January-February 1970, pp. 53-60, re-published in Miliband's *Class Power and State Power*, pp. 26-35.

<sup>18</sup> 'Poulantzas and the capitalist state', *New Left Review* 82, November-December 1973, pp. 83-9, re-published in, Miliband, *Class Power and State Power* (1983), pp. 35-47.

<sup>19</sup> 'The relation between the bourgeois class and the state is an objective relation. This means that, if the function of the state in a determinate social formation and the interests of the dominant class in this formation coincide, it is by reason of the system itself' (Poulantzas, 'The problem of the capitalist state' p. 73).

<sup>20</sup> 'Poulantzas and the capitalist state' in *Class Power and State Power*, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> 'The capitalist state' in *Class Power and State Power*, p. 32.

radical intellectuals would focus on the role of the class struggle not only in future political change, but in defining the nature of the state at any moment.

### The end of the 70s: a reaction to structuralism

In January 1970 a group of socialist intellectuals organised the first Conference of Socialist Economists. The CSE would soon become a focus for many Marxist intellectuals from different disciplines who felt the need to exchange and confront ideas and to create a network of peers with broadly shared Marxist ideas and eventually launched the journal 'Capital and Class' in 1977.

A large number of participants in the CSE were socialists who had backgrounds in Trotskyism (such as Alex Callinicos or Chris Harman). However, the CSE also had a more broad range of intellectuals, many of who had rejected Leninism and traditional Marxism, and sought to stress the centrality of class subjectivity and the class struggle in an analysis of capitalism. Some of them, including Simon Clarke and John Holloway, felt the need to respond to Poulantzas's structuralism.

Indeed, by the end of the 70s, structuralism had become quite established in mainstream academia. With the increased interest in Marx beyond political and economic studies and into the arts, structuralism was bound to grow in popularity, as it offered refined tools for a Marxist analysis of the sphere of ideology (and so in media studies, literature, art, etc.) besides the spheres of politics and economics, and the possibility of studying intellectually stimulating connections across disciplines.

For the radical intellectuals in the CSE, the problem with structuralism was that this theory denied a role for class subjectivity in making history. Not only the state and other forms of domination of capitalism, but all human history and class struggle itself were in Poulantzas's theory determined by 'structures' and 'conjunctures'. In response to this, passive model, Holloway and others revived the state debate and presented a theory where the class struggle has an active role in defining and redefining the 'structures' of capital and the form of the state itself.

Between Poulantzas and the CSE there had been many works and writings about the state and capital – however, for their challenge to structuralism, the theorists of the CSE looked with great interest at a particular, extremely conceptual study from a small German group of academics: the so-called 'state derivation theory'.<sup>22</sup> These German theorists critiqued the bourgeois view of the state as separate and independent from capital and explained that this independence was a fetishised appearance of our social relations: the state in capital *must* take a form which is independent from production, but this independence is a consequence of, and is functional to, the relations of production. Holloway and his colleagues found that this view was a starting point to attack structuralism. After all, the

<sup>22</sup> 'The state derivation theory' reacted against political theorists such as Habermas and Offe, who were very popular in Germany. These liberal theorists accepted Weber's definition of the state as a rational form of domination, which ensured the stability of the social system as a whole. This meant to uncritically accept the separation of the state from the capitalist relations of production. The 'state derivation theory' aimed at critiquing this separation, and at 'deriving' the form of the state from capitalist social relations themselves.

structural rigidity and separation of the 'three spheres' could be seen as the acceptance of this fetishisation.

For the theorists of the CSE a problem with the state derivation theory, which it shared with structuralism, was that it did not give much of a role to the class struggle. As Clarke commented, in their work,

...the outcome of the struggle is presupposed, it will be a restructuring or any response which will serve to re-establish the rule of capital. The only issue is how much welfare or how much repression is needed to ensure the resolution of the conflict.

What the state derivation theory missed was the role of class struggle in challenging and shaping the fetishised forms of capital and the state form.

As Clarke tells us in his book, the response to structuralism from the CSE capitalised on recent experiences of struggle both inside and outside workplaces. In particular, he mentions a widespread struggle for housing in the UK. Those involved in those struggles, Clarke explains, had a first hand experience of the power of the working class to challenge and break down the apparently rigid 'spheres' of ideology, politics and economics in the course of their struggle:

There is no clear dividing line between the 'economic', 'political' and 'ideological' dimensions of class struggles over housing... The tenant experiences his or her exploitation not simply as economic, but as inseparably economic and political, with the threat of the bailiff and eviction standing behind the landlord. Correspondingly any working class challenge to the powers and rights of the landlords, even in pursuit of such 'economic' ends as resistance to rent increases, is inevitably and inseparably an ideological and political as well as an economic struggle, leading immediately to a challenge to the rights of property (*State debate*, p. 32).

Clarke explained that it was in the interest of capital to re-establish 'objective' separations, as these separations effectively fragment the class into individuals or interest groups (as citizens, pedestrians, motorists, consumers, workers, benefit claimants, tenants, etc.) and destroy class solidarity. This fragmentation is not, and cannot be, imposed simply through ideological indoctrination, as Poulantzas or Althusser would have it, but by re-establishing and re-defining the material conditions which make the separations real for us; for example, by modifying the forms of regulations governing the housing markets and grant concessions which can divide tenants into more or less privileged groups. This separation is thus material.

This was a devastating critique of structuralism. The theorists of the CSE had shown that the structures of capital were actually a real appearance based on the class struggle and had shown how the class struggle involved the defetishisation and refetishisation of such structures (economy, the law, etc.). In doing so they showed that the apparent objectivity of the 'structures' was a transient, historically defined, and continually challenged reality.

Crucially, Clarke also explained that the opposition of individual will or motivations and 'structure' is one-sided.<sup>23</sup>

The outcome of the class struggle is neither determined nor constrained by any historical or structural laws. But this does not mean that the outcome of the struggle is purely contingent, dependent only on the consciousness, will and determination of the contending forces. It means only that the material constraints on the class struggle are *not external* to that struggle... are not external presuppositions of the class struggle, they are at one and the same time the material foundations and the object of that struggle.<sup>24</sup>



The defetishisation that is brought to the fore by the class struggle exposes the real, living thing behind 'structures', which is the social relations of production, a relation among real individuals. Challenged by the class struggle, questions of law, ideological assumptions, economic 'necessities', and so on, turn out to be, in fact, a class issue, a tug-o'-war between us and those who control the means of production.<sup>25</sup> This understanding also vindicated Miliband's criticism of

<sup>23</sup> Clarke's comments should put an end to the sterile opposition of 'voluntarism' and 'structure' which structuralists often attempt to push their critics into.

<sup>24</sup> We fully agree with Clarke's attack on structuralism which is very similar to what we said when commenting on Postone in *Aufheben* #15, (2007), <http://libcom.org/library/aufheben/aufheben-15-2007>.

<sup>25</sup> Toni Negri made a stress on this defetishisation when he claimed that money is the face of the boss. However, Autonomia went to the other extreme – substituting pure subjectivism to pure objectivism.

Poulantzas that he substituted the notion of 'objective structures' and 'objective relations' for the notion of real classes.<sup>26</sup>

The understanding achieved with Holloway and Clarke reflected an important truth and, for this reason, we have considered Clarke's work with extreme interest. However, our sympathy with the outcome of this debate has a limit.

From Miliband to Clarke, the development of the state debate has led to a Marxist understanding which is intelligent and excitingly radical, but is also a one-way movement. The end product has been the derivation of 'the right' (and most radical) theory and 'the right' concepts, the ultimate proclamation of a final truth which is not *in need* of any further praxis.

Yet there is no point in pontificating on 'how much abstract' or 'how much concrete', how empirical or rationalistic, the ideal theory should be, or even how 'much' subjectivity or objectivity it should consider. The result of human understanding has both abstract and concrete elements and their balance depends on the actual aim of this understanding, and on the concrete context in which this understanding is realised.

For this reason, instead of dissecting these state theories theoretically or methodologically, we will consider their concrete context: who made them, for whom, and why. We will find out that their abstractedness and their closure into being 'theory for theory's sake' is a symptom of a more important problem: a fundamental detachment of theory from praxis.

### The concrete context of theory

The revolutionary writings that had an influence on the class struggle, including *Capital*, were written with the aim of clarifying experience (and also defining methodology and concepts) for those involved in the struggles. Their relevance and usefulness was one with the role as a moment of ongoing living activity.

However, very few people can afford to spend time sitting down, studying and thinking. The very fact of belonging to the exploited class gives us less time to make theory than the time given to those belonging to the bourgeoisie. In certain contexts, however, making theory was possible. Marx's studies were economically supported by Engels. Many Russian left communists had time for writing and discussions in the Stalinist 'political prison camps'. Other communists like Rosa Luxemburg had plenty of time for making theory within their roles as journalists or editors of political journals under the patronage of the SPD in Germany. Last, but, for us, not least, the dole in the UK has allowed many of us to devote time to radical publications...

However, it is a matter of fact that a large part of theoretical Marxist production has in recent times come out from under the generous wings of academia. After all, for a young radical student who has been involved in struggles and genuinely believes in communism, a university career is ideal – it would provide the possibility of attacking the system and be paid by the system itself to do so. Innumerable young radicals have created research niches around Marxist debates, historical movements, etc. The academic world generated interesting theorists, including those mentioned above: Miliband, Poulantzas, Hirsch, Blanke, Jurgens, Kantandestendiek, Holloway, Clarke. In addition it generated

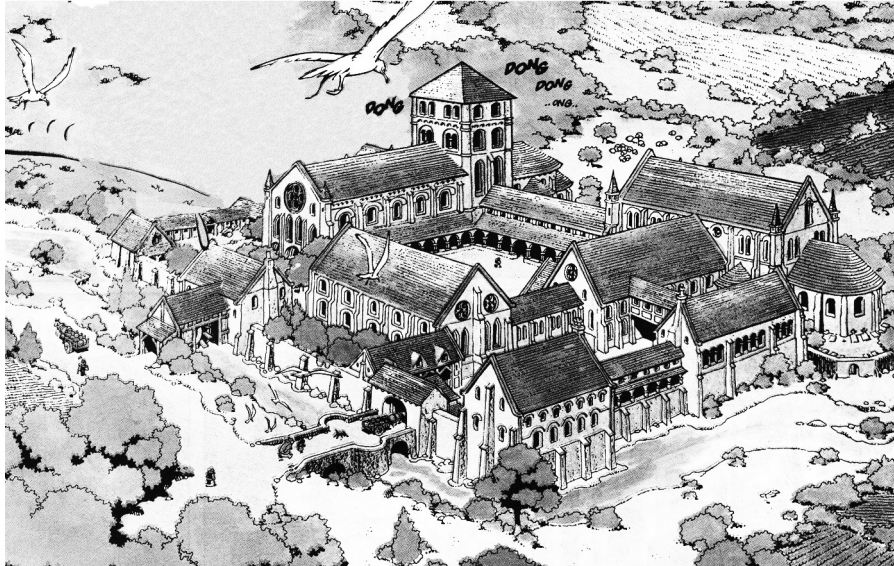
<sup>26</sup> 'The capitalist state' in *Class Power and State Power*, p. 32.

further theorists of interest we have come across in our previous analyses such as Cleaver, Negri, De Angelis, Postone, Fortunati...

But this separation of human activity, which is a real separation, cannot come without concrete consequences. By submitting itself within the scope of university research, the

'the implicit system which determines our most familiar behaviour without our knowing it' and 'show how one could escape'. Behind these noble intents, the structuralist production was in fact done within, and for, a special élite.

We have seen that structuralism emerged among university students who presented themselves as a new ideological and political force; and we have seen that,



activity of thinking was necessarily redefined as a specialist activity, done within the requirements and parameters of the academic world. However genuine the authors' inner feelings are, this concrete aim will inevitably affect both the form and the content of their work.

Professor Miliband did not write his books immediately for the workers or for Marxist militants after all – he wrote them with an eye to his Marxist as well as liberal colleagues. This shows in his book, in both content and form. The book's aim was to prove that bourgeois theories (democraticism, liberalism etc.) were wrong and that a Marxist theory of the state and of society was true. This is why the proof of the pudding of Miliband's ideas was not the moment of application to praxis at all, but the moment of application of his theory to empirical facts. This is the reason for Miliband's brilliant and careful empirical research about facts and figures, to the best standard requested by British academia in his era.

This is also why, although the assumption that society is based on class conflict is central in his theorisation, Miliband's book mainly deals with the power of the bourgeoisie and various aspects of domination rather than with the working class struggle.

Despite its detachment from the praxis of struggle, however, Miliband's book was accessible to the lay reader and contained a thorough study of certain aspects of state power and class domination which could be of interest to those involved in the labour movement. This is perhaps because Miliband, following the old Marxist tradition, still saw himself as an intellectual to be somehow 'at the service' of the labour movement and felt that his work had to be readable and interesting to readers outside the university.

Structuralist production was, at least in the words of authors such as Foucault, done to contribute to a collective understanding. As Foucault said, his role was to understand

although their mentor, Althusser, remained faithful to the PCF, he did so in order to maintain his role as its leading intellectual. Thus since the beginning it was clear that structuralism was centred on the interest of intellectuals to legitimise their political position and influence. Coherently, for structuralism the structuralist intellectual was a privileged member of a skilful élite capable of reading through society's structures and of knowing how to 'escape' their control.

As structuralism spread across French academia and acquired hundreds of enthusiastic followers, these new radical theorists did not even aspire to recognition from non-radical intellectuals, let alone seek any exchange with the non-intellectual working class. This self-referential attitude was reflected by the jargon and abstruse character of structuralist work in France. The implicit elitism of the Althusserian school was noticed by Miliband, who complained that not all readers had the opportunity to 'become familiar through painful initiation with its particular code and mode of exposition'.<sup>27</sup>

This detachment also explains the content of Poulantzas's work, in particular his dismissive attitude to concrete subject matter. For Poulantzas making theory had to be mainly this – an issue of methodology and a methodological critique of other theorists. His main attack on Miliband was that Miliband's book was 'vitiated by the absence of a "problematic"' and accused Miliband of adopting uncritically 'wrong words' such as 'élites' instead of the more 'scientific' expression 'fractions of the bourgeoisie'. As Miliband observed, Poulantzas was so much involved in methodology and 'problematic' that he had no time for fact at all:

<sup>27</sup> 'Poulantzas and the capitalist state' in *Class Power and State Power*, p. 36.



... His otherwise important book, *Pouvoir Politique et Classes Sociales*... errs in the opposite direction. To put the point plainly, I think it is possible... to be so profoundly concerned with the elaboration of an appropriate 'problematic' and with the avoidance of any contamination with opposed 'problematics', as to lose sight of the absolute necessity of empirical enquiry, and of the empirical demonstration of the falsity of these opposed and apologetic 'problematics.... After all, it was none other than Marx who stressed the importance of empirical validation (or invalidation) and who spent many years of his life in precisely such an undertaking.<sup>28</sup>

While structuralism arose as a movement in opposition to the communist party, thus in a political context, the 'state derivation' theory arose simply and solely in opposition to the intellectual work of other German theorists like Habermas. It was a purely academic work, with no pretension of having any extra social or revolutionary purpose.<sup>29</sup>

Coherently with its aims, the 'state derivation' work was just theory for theory's sake, which looked at facts only in order to test the correctness of theory. Even those in the CSE who looked at this work with interest, such as John Holloway, complained that 'the German academics... have been adept in theorising *in highly abstract form the concrete struggles of others*'.<sup>30</sup> Also consistently with their content, the German theorists' style is abstruse and wordy, and plainly useless to anyone concretely involved in real struggles. Let's enjoy a sample of Hirsch's abstruseness:

The tendency of stratification, that is, the penetration of society with state or quasi-state apparatuses, seems to be in contradiction with that structural necessity. However, this should not be seen as an inadequacy of theory, but as an expression of contradictory social tendencies that must manifest themselves in specific social conflicts, which in turn cannot be understood without this contradiction.<sup>31</sup>

Considering the above, it is not a surprise that the state derivation theorists, similarly to Poulantzas and structuralism, relegate the class struggle to a subsidiary role in the development of capital.<sup>32</sup>

Things seem to be different, and more refreshing, with the theorists of the CSE who sprouted from the struggles of the 70s. First, as we said earlier, perhaps also to be faithful to the Marxist academic tradition in Britain, their work focused on class struggle and class subjectivity. Second, at least in intention, their work was consciously aimed at contributing to the development of existing class struggles. For example, Holloway states that this new theory should aim to be significant 'for those in daily engagement with the state' and 'able to throw light on the developing class practices implicit in the state and on the possibilities to countering them'.<sup>33</sup>

However, this radicalism had a disappointing side: a wafer-thin substance.

As the radical struggles of the 70s had retreated, the radical theorists had retreated within academia. Since their political radicalism defined their research niche, this radicalism needed to be preserved, but it came into increasing conflict with the world out there and with the real struggles, which had embarrassingly non-radical aspects and limitations. It is not a surprise that most of these intellectuals do not actually participate in any struggles at all nowadays. Some others stand on the sidelines and cheerlead the concrete struggles of others, which they cannot share, because frankly, being involved in real struggles demands lots of time for unrewarding nitty gritty activity – leafleting, standing at stalls, dealing with boring lay people who know nothing about sophisticated theories...<sup>34</sup> As a result they cannot speak about concrete struggles and cannot answer their concrete questions, except for very intelligent, sophisticated and radical, truisms.

For example, in his article 'The state and everyday struggle', after a *very* long analysis of the work of the German academics about the state, and another very long explanation of the concept of fetishisation, John Holloway ends up with theory which is supposed to have 'significance for those in daily engagement with the state'. What is this? His discovery that all aspects of the state form, for example the law, representation and administration, are practices which tend to individualise and fragment the class. So he is now in the position to teach us what we 'must' do:

The struggle to build class organisation must be directed against the state as a form of social relations, must involve the development of material forms of counter-organisation which reassert the unity of that which the state pulls asunder.<sup>35</sup>

But this is precisely what we do! As Holloway and Clarke have theoretically 'discovered', our everyday struggles do reassert the unity of economic, political, and ideological aspects of society. As Holloway and Clarke have 'discovered', this happens because, if our struggles go far enough, we need to, and do, create 'forms of counter-organisations'. Holloway has simply distilled this daily realisation into a sophisticated theoretical form, which is then patronisingly presented to those in struggle as a prescription.

But how 'significant' for those in struggle is this prescription that we 'must' think the state as a 'form' and fight against it? Holloway has serious (and rather amusing) problems when, in the conclusions of his article, he tries to 'apply' his theory to real class struggle.

First and foremost, he cannot consider any concrete struggle at all: he can only mention a vague and rather unidentified case study of 'struggle of socialist state employees'. But even this imagined case study is far too concrete for his theory! Indeed, after having struggled to

<sup>28</sup> 'The capitalist state' in *Class Power and State Power*, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> And in this respect it was quite honest.

<sup>30</sup> John Holloway, 'The state and everyday struggle' (1980) in *The State Debate*, p. 228.

<sup>31</sup> Joachim Hirsch, 'The Fordist security state and new social movements' (1983) in *The State Debate*.

<sup>32</sup> And it's not a surprise that eventually Joachim Hirsch adopted structuralist ideas for his later works

<sup>33</sup> 'The state and everyday struggle' in *The State Debate*, p. 227.

<sup>34</sup> The radical theorists prefer to devote their time in making theory instead, and do some star appearances as intellectual observers at the biggest demos such as the anti-globalisation camps, perhaps with small campervans (see 'Value struggle or class struggle?', *Aufheben* #16 (2008), <http://libcom.org/files/massimo.pdf>).

<sup>35</sup> 'The state and everyday struggle' in *The State Debate*, p. 250-1; see also p. 227. Holloway does not mean with this to discourage the use of 'legal action or parliamentary elections as part of a campaign'; only that we 'should' keep his theory in mind and aim at opposing the state forms when we use them (p. 277).

oppose the structuralist concept of 'state apparatus' and having defined the state as a 'form of social relations', Holloway discovers that this concept is useless on its own – and Althusser's 'state apparatus' needs to be sneaked back in. So, Holloway teaches us, the state has a 'double dimension', 'form' and 'apparatus', and the 'socialist state employee' should fight against 'the state as form', but within his job in the 'state apparatus'. But, of course, he cannot even tell us *how*:

The problem is...to work within the state apparatus and yet against the state form. The extent to which this is possible will depend on the general constellation of class forces (p. 255)

Even more disappointing if we expect refined theory, Holloway does not clarify at all the relations between 'form' and 'apparatus'.<sup>36</sup> We are afraid that the analysis of such relations would just be impossible for Holloway, if he does not share any real experience with any real 'socialist state employees'. As a result, his theory is totally useless (and very patronising) for any NHS, council and Job Centre workers involved in any real action.

The problem, as we have already complained in the previous section, is that this radical work is a one-way theory which goes from the concrete to the abstract *and stops there* – it stops there because of its nature, that of theory which is not done for the working class, for the real struggles, but for getting the right radical credentials and approval by the right radical academic milieu.

This problem with both the form and the content of radical theory is even more urgent today. The crisis has presented concrete questions that need a detailed analysis of facts, and the inner knowledge of what really matters for us.

How would the ultimate truth that 'the class struggle redefines the state as form' help to clarify current government policies and their reason of being? How would it help the ongoing bin men's strike in Brighton, the victorious workers in Lindsey, or the workers who occupied the closing factory of Vestas? How would it help a struggle to defend what is left of our benefits?

No, this theory cannot.

## Conclusions

To conclude, it is true that this article, which attacks the making of 'theory about theory', can be accused of making 'theory about theory about theory'... But theory (and theory about theory) is not bad in itself as long as its final aim is understanding which can be fed back into praxis. As said in the introduction, we needed this preliminary comment as a starting point – if we do not want to rediscover the wheel, we needed to look at the past and what was said, and to understand what was missing and how to proceed. This article should in fact be considered together, as a whole project, with the other articles in the same number, which look at more concrete issues like the crisis itself and a few recent struggles.

To continue this project, in the next *Aufheben* we will give a new small contribution to the analysis of the relations of state and capitalism with an article about the privatisations of the National Health System in the UK, and of the connected relations of state and capital and, in this context, we will consider the concrete struggles of the NHS workers.



<sup>36</sup> Even his associate Simon Clarke is a bit sceptical about this theorisation.