

State, Power, and Democratic Socialism: An Introduction to Nicos Poulantzas



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Mondays 6:30-9:30 pm (EST)

“One thing is certain, socialism will be democratic or it will not be at all.” So wrote the Greek-French Marxist theoretician Nicos Poulantzas, just a year before his untimely death. Poulantzas’ work, today rediscovered by sections of the U.S. left, constitutes a highly original set of writings on the nature of political power in both liberal-democratic and authoritarian regimes, the formation and reproduction of class struggles, and the problems and challenges of socialist organizing and strategy in capitalist societies. As Western institutions slide more deeply into crisis, the questions Poulantzas dealt with in the 1960s and 1970s have taken on a renewed urgency: How can we understand the nature and functions of the modern state? Is the state autonomous from capital, or under its control? Can the state be reformed, and emancipatory politics advanced, through parliamentary means? What does it mean to be a “democratic socialist”?

In this class, we will engage with these and other themes in Poulantzas’ work. Much of our attention will be devoted to his final book, *State, Power, Socialism*, a rich and provocative analysis of class struggles, the capitalist state, and the meaning and possibility of a democratic socialist politics. Combined with selections from other works, we will examine topics like the structure and role of the state in reproducing capitalist social relations; the importance of law, violence, nationalism, and hegemony for the maintenance of political power; the rise of authoritarian statism (an early diagnosis of contemporary neoliberalism); and possible strategies for transitions to socialism given these realities of developed Western states. In this way, we will attempt to think with Poulantzas not only in the context of his time, but in light of our present problems.

Format: This course is a seminar! The only expectations are completing the reading assignments, attending our meetings, and participating in our discussion. In each of our meetings, I will provide an overarching summary of that evening’s class topic and its relation to the theme of the course. I will

facilitate the discussion and do my best to clarify passages and answer questions that arise. But this class is best thought of as a common, collaborative inquiry—the most important thing is how you read these texts and what you get out of them. In other words, our discussions will be largely guided by *your* interests and reasons for taking this class. Naturally, this depends on your ongoing attendance, participation, and engagement!

Communication: You are strongly encouraged to use our shared Google Doc to post interesting or unclear selections from the reading, to raise broader questions, and to suggest topics for our upcoming class discussions. You are also encouraged to reply to each other's posts. These notes and conversations will be launching points for our weekly in-person discussion. I will also provide opportunities for interested volunteers to give a short summary presentation on a reading of your choice. Please feel free to email me if you would like to share any thoughts, comments, or questions individually outside of this format.

Readings: I have tried to assign a manageable set of weekly readings of approximately one hundred pages per week (not including the strictly optional supplemental readings.) I reserve the right to alter the syllabus after the start of the class.

You do not have to purchase any books for this class—all course readings will be available either as PDFs in the Dropbox folder (please let me know if you have trouble accessing the readings) or linked to in the syllabus. However, if you would like to purchase any of the course texts, I suggest helping support independent bookstores by using www.bookshop.org.

Session 1: What is the (Capitalist) State?

Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, pp. 49-67
Poulantzas, "The Problem of the Capitalist State"
Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp. 187-194
Poulantzas, *State, Power Socialism*. Preface and Introduction, pp. 7-46

Optional:

Bob Jessop, "Nicos Poulantzas" (from the *Routledge Handbook of Marxism and Post-Marxism*)
Rafael Khachaturian, "[Key Concepts: State](#)"
David Sessions, [Nicos Poulantzas: Philosopher of Democratic Socialism](#)
Ralph Miliband, "Reply to Nicos Poulantzas" and "Poulantzas and the Capitalist State"

Session 2: The State as Social Relation

State, Power, Socialism, pp. 54-62, 86-120, 123-145, 154-160
Etienne Balibar, "Communism and Citizenship"
Panagiotis Sotiris, "[Poulantzas Revisited: State, Classes and Socialist Transition](#)"
Jörg Nowak, "Nicos Poulantzas's Analysis of Gender Relations and the Concept of Individualisation"

Session 3: State Crisis and Regimes of Exception

State, Power, Socialism, pp. 203-247

[Fascism and Dictatorship](#), pp. 71-89, 313-335

Alberto Toscano, “Incipient Fascism: Black Radical Perspectives”

Ian Bruff, “The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism”

Optional:

[Crisis of the Dictatorships](#), pp. 90-126

Rhonda Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal*, pp. 1-19

Theda Skocpol, “Political Responses to Capitalist Crisis”

Session 4: From Mass Struggles to Socialist Transition

Poulantzas, “Towards a Democratic Socialism” (in *State, Power, Socialism*, pp. 251-265)

Marxism Today, “Interview with Nicos Poulantzas”

[The State, Social Movements, Party: Interview with Nicos Poulantzas](#)”

Alvaro García Linera, “The State and the Democratic Road to Socialism”

Robert Cavorris, “[From Subaltern to State: Toward a Left Critique of the Pink Tide](#)”

Optional:

Poulantzas and Henri Weber, “The State and the Transition to Socialism”

[The Loss of Nicos Poulantzas: The Elusive Answer](#)”

Ben Tarnoff, “[Building Socialism from Below: Popular Power and the State](#)”

Supplemental Bibliography

Biographical:

- Bob Jessop, *Nicos Poulantzas: Marxist Theory and Political Strategy*
- Michael Löwy, “[The Nicos Poulantzas I Knew](#)”
- Documentary (Greek and Spanish):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CC5qZhMuTBo&t=306s&ab_channel=DobleCienciaEditorial

Contextual:

- Clyde Barrow, *Toward a Critical Theory of States*
- Bob Jessop, “[Dialogue of the Deaf: Some Reflections on the Poulantzas-Miliband Debate](#)”
- Stuart Hall, “*State, Power, Socialism*”
- Asad Haider, “[Bernstein in Seattle: Representative Democracy and the Revolutionary Subject](#)” (Part I) and [Part II](#)

Critiques

- Colin Barker, “[A ‘New’ Reformism?](#)”
- Simon Clarke, “Marxism, Sociology, and Poulantzas’ Theory of the State” *Capital & Class* (1977)
- Ernesto Laclau, “[The Specificity of the Political](#)” and “[Fascism and Ideology](#)”