THE POLITICAL SYSTEM BESIEGED BY THE STATE

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THE EDITOR has asked me to address myself to the future of *systems analysis* in political science over the next twenty years. I shall deal with this question in a particularistic way Instead of examining the whole conceptual framework called systems analysis and pointing up its successes, shortcomings, and future prospects, I shall focus only on the idea of the *political system* itself.

Central to the development of systems analysis as a theoretical approach is a serious commitment to the study of politics as a system of behavior and institutions. It is this idea that is being challenged today by the resurrection of an older concept, that of the *state.* Given the recent diffusion of the latter notion throughout the social sciences in the United States—it has had a continuing life in other parts of the world—we may well wonder whether the next couple of decades will witness a permanent return to this earlier theoretical approach. The state, a concept that many of us thought had been polished off a quarter of a century ago, has now risen from the grave to haunt us once again.

Until the 1950s, the state was one of the dominant gross orienting concepts in political science throughout the West, not only in Marxist thinking (with which it is today closely associated), but in conventional social science as well. The idea of a political system had been consciously developed in the 1950s as a way of avoiding the irresolvable ambiguities surrounding the term.[1] If today the state appears to be challenging the conceptual dominance of the political system, as it does, it is none too soon to raise the question as to where the state may be leading us.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The substance of this article draws on several chapters from a book in progress tentatively entitled The Analysis of Political Structure.

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I shall conclude that as a central concept for structuring political research, the idea of the state is no better today than it was over a quarter of a century ago when the political system was first explicitly introduced to help reorient our thinking about politics in a more researchable, empirical direction. I shall be talking therefore more about the state than about the political system. But that is only because today the older idea of the state is the conceptual challenger, and the newer idea of the political system the defender of an appropriate theoretical posture toward political analysis and empirical research.[2]

Rather than attempt a review of all and sundry meanings currently being attributed to the idea of the state, I shall analyze in some depth the most elaborate effort ever made to incorporate the idea of the state into a general theory of politics from a Marxist perspective. This focus is appropriate if only because in modern times the state has remained the central category for political analysis in Marxist literature. If anywhere, we might have thought that there the clarification of its meaning and implications might be found. Since Nicos Poulantzas is the only Marxist who has ever sought to elaborate a general theory of politics with distinct empirical relevance, an assessment of the extent of his successes will illustrate the continuing difficulties with the state as a concept even as it currently lays siege to the notion of the political system.

REVIVAL OF THE STATE CONCEPT

The state as a term has led a double life. It has never disappeared as a concept for identifying the unified actors in the international arena. Its use there has created little difficulty. We all recognize it as an abbreviation for the idea of the nation-state. We have found little difficulty in divorcing our practices there from our abandonment of it at one time with respect to internal politics. Even in the international sphere, however, we have also become accustomed to speaking of the international *political system* and its constitutive subsystems and we find this language extensively used in lay discourse as well. But until recently, outside of lay usage, the state had all but been extirpated from our professional vocabulary for reference to the internal affairs of the international units. The renaissance of the state as a concept, therefore, applies largely to its use in this area of domestic politics. Little more evidence need be presented than to refer to the fact that the program of the 1981 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association has been devoted explicitly to ringing the changes on the state as a central theme in our own day.

Whatever its merits, the resurgence of the state as a gross orienting concept in political science is not difficult to explain. But it can be understood only if we see this as part of its reemergence across the board in the social sciences.

To begin with, after the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s failed to achieve their most ambitious objectives in bringing about a better society, a period of disillusionment and retrenchment set in of which we are still part. The plums that Charles Reich[3] had promised would be ripe for the picking, once the younger generation had, through the mere process of aging, moved into the centers of social power, have rotted on the tree. In the later 1970s and beyond, what remained uppermost in the minds of many in the involved generations was the simple question: Why? The search began for explanations of the failure of earlier hopes and for new visions of future possibilities, much as the failure of the Russian Revolution to achieve the democratic ideals of socialism has brought about the most profound questioning and reconstruction of socialist theories.

For some in the United States, new understanding and hope has been offered in the third coming of Marxism as an intellectual tendency. The first coming occurred, of course, during the lifetime of Marx himself, and it had minimal impact in the United States. The second appeared in the 1930s and 1940s, and this influenced the development of contemporary social science more than is normally realized or acknowledged. Today we are in the midst of the third coming. Whatever its other effects may be in the long run, it has brought with it the notion of the state, a concept that has always and continues to be central to the social science of most variants of Marxism. What distinguishes this reemergence of Marxism in the United States is the general acknowledgment, among adherents, of the need to develop the idea of the state into a full-fledged theory of politics competitive with, if not superior to, that of conventional empirically oriented political science.

The revival of the concept has not been left to the Marxists alone, however, just as in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it had not been an exclusive possession of Marxism. In the aftermath of the turmoil and changes of the 1960s and 1970s, others have looked for some order and stability in social life either by seeking to return to traditional values tested, it is thought, through time and experience, or by looking for some formula to strengthen the centers of political authority.[4] For them the idea of the state has an appeal as a label for a firm, uncoercible locus of authority. It expresses a simple conservative longing to recapture the golden age of the nineteenth century when

sovereignty in society could be easily located, and authority automatically commanded respect, or so it is depicted in retrospect. But sovereignty is too old-fashioned a term; the idea of the state has become its modern reincarnation. The state, implying the truly sovereign state, evokes the very image of political authority that has seemed in danger of being destroyed beginning with the turmoil of the 1960s—stable, respected, strong, and trusted. How else can we account for the popularity, in some circles, when first published, of Lowi's *End of Liberalism,* with its ringing call for a new formalism in government that he labeled "juridical democracy"?[5]

If some have seen in the revival of the concept a way of arguing for the need for a firmer hand to bring greater stability and order to a turbulent period of change, others have found in the term a way of identifying the central locus of evil in society. For the economic liberal, the rediscovery of the state as a concept serves to locate an easily defined source to blame for many of our social woes. The old division of state and society, which in epochs close to feudalism had had a liberating effect, is revived today in the very discovery of the idea of the state. This time it is to serve to liberate society from the commanding hand of the state which is presumed to interfere with the efficient operations of the invisible hand of the marketplace.

Finally, until recently little seems to have been lost in using ordinary language to speak of "governmental" intervention and regulation and their effects. The policy analysis movement of the 1970s and 1980s has, however, found in the notion of the state a collective term for identifying, in a handy way, the source of political policy. The idea of the state has a clean-cut simplicity about it. It gives the appearance of a single, easily identified entity which makes and implements policies. It lends added legitimacy to these policies since the state seems to encompass more than just the agencies of government. Research workers could then get on with the job of understanding the determinants and outcomes of policies made by "the state" and prescribing preferred courses for state action.

All these four sources—Marxism revived, a longing for traditional, strong authority, economic liberalism, and policy analysis—have converged to reinvigorate the state as a concept for social research. Indeed it is well on its way to becoming a conceptual fad, if not buzz word, that gives a sense of legitimacy and in-ness but not necessarily much else to social research. When the term is not used mindlessly in this way, however, each of at least the first three sources just mentioned carries with it certain ideological overtones, as suggested. As has always been the case with the concept, a good part of the difficulties with its

empirical utility flows from this fact.[6] In effect, an ideologically laden term has been pressed into service as a presumably more "neutral" instrument of research.

For the moment, however, let us set aside the social origins and implications of the revival of the term as well as its faddist qualities and look at the concept of the state on its own merits. In principle, there is no reason why even an ideologically motivated tool of analysis may not prove fruitful for social inquiry Indeed, the social involvement implied in an ideological posture by the social investigator may on occasion be a condition for the invention of important and useful conceptual tools.[7]

A MARXIST USAGE OF THE STATE

In the short space permitted by the Editor, it would not be possible to address all or most of the major difficulties that the state as a concept raises—its inherent ambiguities through several hundred years of varying usage, the 140 or more definitions already associated with it,[8] its ideological overtones on the political right, left, and in the middle, the added confusion introduced through its extensive lay usage, and certain inherent difficulties of operationalizing it for empirical research. Instead I shall now turn to the most elaborate and serious effort, ever, in Marxist literature, to develop a theory of the state—and of politics, a somewhat broader enterprise—to see how successful it has been in concretizing the notion. I refer to the work of Nicos Poulantzas. Laclau, a sympathetic Marxist critic, has put it well. "The work of Nicos Poulantzas," he writes, "is of considerable theoretical importance because Marxist thought did not begin to develop, until the last decade, a systematic theory about the nature and the role of the State in various socioeconomic formations. We can only welcome a work which tries to establish on the theoretical level the specificity of the political and which systematically avoids purely impressionistic correlations."[9] And as he puts it elsewhere, Poulantzas's work has an "importance [for the development of Marxist political sociology that] can hardly be exaggerated."[10]

If anywhere, then, we might expect that in a work so explicitly devoted to the development of a theory of the state we would find a definitive statement about the nature and characteristics of the state. The astonishing discovery is that the state remains an "undecipherable mystery," to use one of Poulantzas's pet expressions. We learn about many of its characteristics, to be sure: How it originates, the forms it takes, the nature of its constituent parts, the functions it is supposed to

serve, and the consequences (policies and outcomes) to which it may give rise. Yet even though Poulantzas's central purpose is avowedly to formulate what he considers to be a badly needed Marxist theory of the state,[11] we are never let into the secret of what this object is that the theory is supposed to explain. The state is the eternally elusive Pimpernel of Poulantzas's theory.

What The State Is Not

If we were to ask, however, what the state is not, we would not want for answers. In the first place, for Poulantzas it is not equivalent to the governmental apparatuses through which it manifests itself. This was the very point of his celebrated debate with Miliband.[12] The concrete apparatuses of the state in both their repressive and ideological forms are not the state itself but merely the means through which it acts.[13] To conceive of the state in such concrete terms would lend credence to the notion that it is a "Thing,"[14] or object or piece of machinery over which the social classes can fight for control, an unacceptable "instrumentalist" conception of the state held by too many Marxists, in Poulantzas's view.[15] The dominant classes do not possess the state. Alternatively, the state does not act on their behalf just because they subjectively seek to and in fact may exercise control over it.

To see the state in such subjective and concrete terms would also be to mistake it for a "Subject" or collective actor "endowed with a rationalistic will" which can exercise control over various social classes or over society as a whole.[16] This attributes to it a degree of independence from civil society which would enable it to serve as an arbiter or conciliator among the social classes.[17] This view of the state as the great conciliator and accommodator standing above the fray represents for Poulantzas the ideological position of liberal democracy. For him it is based on a false separation of state from civil society. In its classic extreme it assumes that the state acts as the great harmonizer of differences by playing one class off against another and, thereby, in Bonapartist fashion, exercising power independent of all social classes.[18]

For Poulantzas, the state is a product of and integrally involved in society. It cannot be set in opposition to civil society. Rather it takes its character from the way the whole society is organized (the mode of production in a noneconomic sense). As part of a class divided society under capitalism, for example, the state is a functionally determined partisan of one set of class interests, something more than a liberal interpretation would allow.

This much is clear then. The state is not its empirical structure, nor is it an instrument in the hands of any class. Neither is it a "Subject" or actor which can control the various classes independent of all of them. Nor is it an entity above and apart from the rest of society, somehow hovering over it and regulating it.

The Functions of the State

What, then, is the state? For Poulantzas, the best first approximation to understanding its nature lies in clarifying the functions it serves. In place of an instrumentalist (state as Thing), or liberal (state as Subject) theory of the state, Poulantzas offers us a functionalist one.[19]

The functions of the state can be derived from its relationship not to a class, even the dominant ones, but to the whole of society. As Poulantzas puts it, the state is "the State [not of a particular class but] of a society divided into classes."[20] It originates in objective necessity, out of the very logic of a mode of production (a social system), that is, by the way in which a mode of production organizes society into social classes and class struggles. Contrary to other Marxist and to liberal interpretations of the state, for Poulantzas it arises not as a mechanism of control deliberately sought by the dominant classes nor as an historical instrument that has evolved to meet the needs of a people for welfare, security, justice and the like, as traditional liberal theories would have it. Conscious behavior of individual or group actors plays no role in Poulantzas's functional determinism. Rather the state originates out of the way a mode of production is constituted, out of objective relations. "*The political field of the State has always in different forms, been present in the constitution and reproduction of the relations of production.*"[21] It is a condensation, résumé, or fusion of the contradictions in this kind of society [22]

As such, the primary function of the state is to provide for the maintenance (reproduction) and integrity or cohesion of the capitalist social formation, to prevent it from "bursting apart."[23] Given the way a mode of production in class-divided societies works, the beneficiaries can only be the dominant classes. The state may often mask its political class character and parade as a popular-national state "incarnating" the will of the people and serving their welfare. But in a class-divided society, the state has no choice other than to serve the long-run interests of the dominant classes, however much it may appear to behave otherwise in the face of the class struggles. This is why Poulantzas argues, with Marx, that the transformation of capitalism, for example,

requires that the state be "smashed."[24] In this interpretation, the activities of the state are necessarily eufunctional to the reproduction of the mode of production and the interests of the dominant classes. There seems to be little room for ignorance, error, or historical accident, at least in the long run, and subjective interest or will plays no role in the ultimate outcome.

The State as Institutionalized Power

We know, then, what the state is not and what its primary function in society is. But we are still not informed about what this object called the state is, in itself, that does or does not do the things associated with it.

Here the answer is less than clear. At different times Poulantzas offers us only two positive sets of statements about the nature of the state: it is institutionalized power; it is a material condensation of the relationship of forces among classes. I shall examine each of these in turn.

In the first definition of the state, Poulantzas describes it explicitly as "institutionalized political power."[25] Or as he puts it in context, "The specific objective of political practice [political class struggle] is the State, i.e., institutionalized political power, which is the cohesive factor in a determinate social formation and the nodal points of its transformations."[26]

On the surface this definitional phrase, institutionalized political power, would seem to be straightforward enough. Power he defines somewhat narrowly as "the capacity of a social class to realize its specific objective interests."[27] We can gloss over the difficulties of conceptualizing power as a potential rather than as a relationship. Politics consists of "political practice," and this is a kind of activity that "has as its object the present moment and which either transforms (or else maintains) the unity of a formation. But this is the case only to the extent that political practice has the *political* structures of the state as its point of impact and specific strategic 'objective'."[28] If Poulantzas had restricted politics to action directed to maintaining or changing a society (social formation), he would have left us with a genuine, even if amorphous, definition of the term. But to escape the looseness of this part of his definition, it would appear, he then proceeds to undermine his own effort by limiting politics to the kind of activity that involves a struggle over control of the means (the *political* structure) for maintaining the integrity of a society or transforming it.

Here we immediately run into difficulty Poulantzas is in the process of defining just what he means by the state. It is a particular kind of power called political. But the *political* in this context is itself defined as a conflict over "the *political* structures of the state." The political, a central term of the explicandum, is used within the explicans itself. Clearly he fails to give us a conception of the political that is independent of and not already included in the very object he wishes to define, namely, the state. He leaves us as uninformed as ever about the *political* nature of power, and yet this is central to his conception of the state as institutionalized *political* power. Nowhere does he resolve this issue. Just what he means by politics remains a nagging uncertainty throughout his writings.

Worse is yet to come. Not only is the state just a potential for achieving class goals and a kind of power labeled by this undefined term, political; in addition the state seems to lose all "materiality," as Poulantzas himself might have put it. The state becomes a set of rules constraining behavior, and these seem to be what the struggle for power is all about. We are tempted to exclaim: shades of Hans Kelsen's juridical rules!

In defining the state as institutionalized political power, Poulantzas initially goes to some length to demonstrate that we ought not to mistake institutions for structures. These terms have different meanings in his lexicon. The reason for this is that he carefully wants to steer clear of equating the state with the concrete superstructures with which many Marxists have recurringly identified it. If for no other reason, the state cannot be described as the "juridico-political institutions"[29] or structures, since these represent only the repressive apparatuses. With Gramsci, Poulantzas includes within the state "ideological" (read: cultural) apparatuses or institutions, not necessarily provided for by law, such as churches, unions, and interest groups.[30] But even together, these repressive and ideological apparatuses do not constitute the state. These political superstructures are at most only "centers" or settings in which the drama of the power struggle among social classes is played out. These superstructures do not even hold "state power"; such power resides only in the hands of one or another social class or parts thereof.[31]

To make this position unmistakable, Poulantzas initially distinguishes the meaning of structure from institutions with the former becoming the broader term.[32] For Poulantzas, the term structure describes "the *organizing* matrix of institutions and such structures were

not the simple principle or organization which is exterior to the institution: the structure is present in an allusive and inverted form in the institution itself."[33] Clearly following Parsons in this respect, Poulantzas reserved the term institutions for "a system of norms or rules which is socially sanctioned."[34] They included legal as well as other social norms such as those found in ideology (or culture). The latter (accepting Gramsci in effect) Poulantzas saw as just as repressive as the juridical norms that are usually considered part of the state.[35] From this perspective, then, even though Poulantzas did not put it in these words, the state could be redefined as political power effected through a system of socially sanctioned (class repressive) rules.

If this interpretation of Poulantzas is acceptable, we have at least clarified the power aspect of his conception of the state. We now know that it involves power made possible through class enforced rules (institutionalized power). However loose this conception of power may be, it would have served as a first approximation to an adequate description of the state if only we had some idea about what Poulantzas meant by the political. But as we have just seen, the political is itself defined in its own terms, that is, as the struggle for control of the *political* structure. The result is that even though we have some idea about what power means for Poulantzas, since "the political" is undefined we are still left on our own to decide just what this object called the state might really be.

Still worse is yet to come however. After wavering in his terminology Poulantzas finally decided, two years after his extensive use of the term in this sense (in *Political Power and Social Class*), to abandon institutions as a concept referring to normative rules. Instead, he now argued that he had always really meant the idea of state apparatus to be equivalent to state institutions, and since there is no point in using two terms, he proposed to adopt apparatus as the preferred one. "I think that the term 'institution,'" he writes, "can therefore be abandoned, since at least for the moment, I do not see what it can add to the concept of apparatus."[36] He had apparently forgotten about his earlier definition of institutions in rule terms or had chosen to ignore the inconsistency

If Poulantzas had been willing to accept the consequences of this decision, we might possibly still have been able to make some sense of his notion of the state. We might take one of two tacks. In the first we could accept his new point of view as an indication that he really means apparatus (or structures in the sense of superstructures) to be identical with institutions. In that event, apparatus would just refer to socially sanctioned norms, and we would be back to the conceptual uncertainty from which we started. A second tack might be more useful, however.

Here we could assume that, despite his assertion that apparatus refers to institutions, Poulantzas now intends us to accept the meaning he normally gives to the term state apparatuses. That is to say, he intends to assimilate the meaning of institutions into that of apparatus. From all his writings, it is unambiguous that apparatus refers not to institutions as socially sanctioned norms but to what he has joined Gramsci in calling repressive and ideological apparatuses or (super-) structures. These evoke the imagery of courts, legislatures, armies, police, executives, and bureaucracies on the one side, and churches, trade unions, corporations, and the like (indoctrinating "private" organizations) on the other.[37] The state would be found in its structural "materiality and specificity," as Poulantzas himself might have put it.

Here we come straight up against a theoretical impasse. To identify the state as its apparatuses or superstructures would force Poulantzas to accept that very conceptualization of the state that he had been struggling to avoid. The apparatuses of the state are only the means through which the state acts and over which the social classes or their "fractions" (parts) compete for power. They are only the arena in which the power conflict for control of the state occurs; they are not the state itself.[38] This was the very point of acrimonious debate with Miliband in which Poulantzas repeatedly accused the latter of the cardinal sin of reducing the state to the state apparatus itself. In short, after decisively rejecting the concretization of the state in its apparatuses or structures and continuing to protest against those who do, Poulantzas has unwittingly and inadvertently, it would seem, boxed himself into the same interpretation. And yet even though the logic of his own analysis would thus lead him to associate the state with its apparatus, he is nowhere prepared to acknowledge or accept this outcome.

In the end, then, after having thought that after all we might have caught hold of some meaning for the state, it has turned to dust in our hands. Poulantzas refuses to accept the consequences of his own position. Both the idea of the political, as we saw, and of the state remain essentially undefined and unconcretized. Poulantzas feels free to speak of the state in terms of its existence in some way but has given us no firm idea about what the "it" is.

The State as Condensation of Class Conflict

As I indicated earlier, Poulantzas makes two positive statements about the nature of the state. We have examined the first, "institutionalized power." We can now turn to the second, and it can be dispatched more quickly Perhaps because of his own discomfort, following his

debate with Miliband, about the adequacy of his definition of the state in *Political Power and Social Classes* and the criticism from all sides of his excessive generality and formalism in that work, Poulantzas tried to pin down his meaning somewhat more firmly. In doing so he returns to Marx's view of one of the central functions of the state. In this new emphasis, the state serves as the locus or "condensation" for conflictual and unitary forces in society. It is where the struggle over the nature of the whole society takes place. This new stab at clarifying his meaning of the state does little better, however, than his previous attempt.

In *State, Power, Socialism,* his last book, Poulantzas rejects alternative conceptions of the state either as "a 'narrow' conception for which the State is in its essence an *apparatus,* [or] a 'broad' conception for which the State is simply the expression of a class *relationship,*" that is, of the class struggle.[39] Instead, he says he wishes to take the opportunity to make some of his "earlier formulations . . . more precise."[40] Therefore, apparently in response to the ambiguity of his first conception, he now offers a new definition, or at least one with a different emphasis. "The (capitalist) State should not be regarded as an intrinsic entity· like 'capital,' *it is rather a relationship of forces, or more precisely that material condensation of such a relationship among classes and class fractions, such as this is expressed within the State in a necessarily specific form.*"[41]

This new view of the state diverges more sharply from his earlier one than he is willing to allow. Now he sees the state at least as a relationship of forces, a thought that appeared on occasion in his past writings but which did not then seem to be central to his understanding of the state as institutionalized political power. In fact, his very position opposed the notion that the state arose out of the class struggles (relationship of forces); it was rather a function of the way a mode of production as a whole operates, just as were the class struggles themselves.

However, even if we grant him this attempt to show continuity in his idea of the state, in this conception, Poulantzas, with his characteristic disconcerting verbal facility, returns to us with one hand what he had already taken away with the other. In the first place, the state may be a "relationship of forces"; but apparently this is only if we do not speak precisely. Assuming we wish "precision" for so central a concept, we must take Poulantzas at his word, in the above quotation, and accept that he really means the state to be "that material condensation of such a relationship among classes and class fractions."

What can he mean by this qualification in his pursuit of precision? It appears that Poulantzas returns us after all to the very conception of the state as an apparatus, one that he has all along been desperately trying to avoid. For after rejecting as "narrow" the idea that "the state is in its essence an *apparatus*," as we have just noted, he tells us in effect that it is "a material condensation" and by this phrase we can only understand him to mean material apparatuses. Time and again he speaks of the state in this way, "as a material condensation of a contradictory relationship."[42] The only reservation is that we need to recognize that this material manifestation takes its character from the continuing play of class forces working through it. That is, the nature of the apparatus will change with the vagaries of the class struggles.

This explicitness does not settle the matter, however, as we might by now have come to realize from the characteristic lack of rigor in Poulantzas's method of analysis. With customary indifference or oblivion, Poulantzas promptly denies us the conclusion to which we would seem to have been entitled from the logic of his argument. First, he characterizes the state as a relationship of forces. Then for the sake of precision, he requires that we see the state as identifiable with its material condensation. But even this is not to be, after all. Poulantzas returns the state to some kind of essence over and beyond both class contradictions and their material expression. "The State," he warns, "is not reducible to the relationship of forces; it exhibits an opacity and resistance of its own. To be sure, change in the class relationship of forces always affects the State; but it does not find expression in the State in a direct and immediate fashion. It adapts itself exactly to the materiality of the various state apparatuses, only becoming crystallized in the State in a refracted form that varies according to the apparatus."[43]

If we can probe this imagery—and the evocation of images is a characteristic method used by Poulantzas to cope with the obscurity of his own thought—it would appear that not only is the state not reducible to class struggles, it is not after all even equivalent to the "materiality of the various state apparatuses," as the preceding quotation clearly indicates. Yet in the quotation above, his insistence on a *precise* formulation had led him to describe the state as a "material condensation" of the class struggles. Now he has clearly ruled this out. We are thrown back, once again, to the idea that behind these apparatuses there looms something called the state which is affected by changes in class conflicts. But the state itself, being different from its material represen-

tation as we are now told, becomes invisible. It is like some essence (a Platonic idea?) the presence of which we infer only from its material expression in the apparatuses and from the effects of the class struggles. If we thought we at last had a handle on the state, we are once again doomed to find it slipping from our grasp.

What then can the state be? It is not just political power, that is, class practices. It is not the class relationship of forces or class struggles. It is not an "intrinsic entity." It is not a Thing. It is not a Subject. It is not just a set of functions. It is not the governmental or ideological apparatuses, even if it manifests itself only through them.

Struggle as we may with Poulantzas' conception of the state, we must conclude that in the end, despite his continuing protests to the contrary, either the state is a vacuous term referring to some emergent, ineffable phenomenon which reveals itself only in the garb of its apparatuses, or it refers to nothing less than the apparatuses themselves, that is, to the governmental and nongovernmental institutions through which Poulantzas sees power being exercised, for example, in a capitalist society. In this event, the state is no more than a substitute term for the political authorities, or, if one wishes, for government together with its associated (private) institutions.

This analysis may seem like a long road to travel to arrive at so banal a conclusion. But the verbal sleight of hand with which Poulantzas typically deals with problems of the state leaves such confusion or doubt that he gives every appearance of offering us some alternative conception of the state which upon close scrutiny just does not seem to be there. Indeed, when Poulantzas finally turns his energies (in *Political Power and Social Classes* and later works) to explaining variations in types and forms of the capitalist states, he is compelled by the nature both of his topic and of the ambiguity of his concept of the state to talk almost exclusively of the state in terms of its "materiality," that is, of its organizational apparatuses. The state quickly becomes, in Poulantzas's practice, its observable structures. By that time, all refinements of language seem to have come to naught. State and apparatus are for all practical purposes fused into one, even though theoretically Poulantzas retains the notion that somewhere there lies the state as a condensation of the relations of class forces and that these forces are "inscribed in its [the state's] very structure."[44] In fact, however, either the state is the very instrumental "substance" or "site"[45] which Poulantzas persistently rejects, or it is some kind of undefined and undefinable essence, a "ghost in the machine,"[46] knowable only through its variable manifestations.

"FUNCTION" OF THE REVIVAL OF THE STATE CONCEPT

As I noted at the outset, there has been an unmistakable renaissance of the state as a central orienting concept in political discourse today, on all points of the political spectrum from left to right, whether self-conscious or not. Scholarly works that disclaim all partisanship are no less prone to revive the concept. It raises the question as to whether, in the decades ahead, the state may not seriously compete with, if not displace, the political system as a focal point of research. This possibility has suggested the utility of examining the implications of the state as a conceptual tool, at least when used not only by a sophisticated Marxist but by one, such as Poulantzas, who has set out to construct a full-fledged theory of the state as an alternative to conventional theories of politics. If the meticulous attention that the idea of the state receives there produces only a nebulous conceptual tool, we might well fear for the worst when it falls into more casual hands.

The semantic morass we find in Poulantzas's work unfortunately reflects only too faithfully the general condition in which the revived state terminology finds itself throughout political science, if not the social sciences as a whole, including Marxism itself. Where of course it is merely a substitute for government or political authorities or political elite, no great harm is done. In fact, though, it is seldom a mere substitute. The concept has picked up so much historical freight that only through a massive effort of self-restraint could the varied nuances of meaning be unloaded. In the many years that have passed since I published *The Political System* and argued there against the state in favor of the political system as a gross orienting concept for political research, little has happened to the concept of the state to cleanse it of its traditional ambiguities.

The best that can be said for the renewed use of the state—and the importance of this is not to be underestimated—is that it does signal a necessary challenge to the ideological presuppositions of conventional social research, presuppositions that had too long been denied. This denial led to the neglect of many kinds of substantive problems which are now, however, commonly recognized in the social sciences even if not so vigorously pursued as many of us would wish: problems of social, sexual, and racial equality; the concentration of social and political power; structural limits to change; ecological threats; nuclear warfare; and the like. But we must ask ourselves: Are the costs in conceptual

opacity and cumbersomeness of the state as a tool of analysis not too high? Cannot the theoretical benefits of the shift in conceptual focus brought about by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s be won or retained without so great a sacrifice in theoretical clarity?

THE STATE AND SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

We may go somewhat further and ask: Is the sacrifice even necessary? As a concept, the political system has the capacity to do precisely what may be intended by the adoption of the state, if not more. Not only conventional but class analysis as well, for example, may be undertaken in a systems conceptualization, and indeed has been the subject of such analyses.[47]

In fact, when we carefully examine the writings of such diverse Marxists as Miliband and Poulantzas, we find that despite their state vocabulary they themselves have not been able to resist the temptation to move in the direction of a systems conceptualization, even if of a truncated sort. Miliband, for example, uses the notion of political system as the most inclusive category to identify politics, much broader than that of the state. For Miliband, as Poulantzas had correctly pointed out, the state is equivalent to what Poulantzas calls the "state apparatus." Miliband is himself explicit about this, for he writes that "these are the institutions—the government, the administration, the military and the police, the judicial branch, sub-central government and parliamentary assemblies—which make up 'the state,' and whose interrelationship shapes the form of the state system."[48] He calls "the people who occupy the leading positions in each of these institutions the state elite."[49]

As with most definitions by denotation, we are left in doubt as to what other institutions might be included in the state, so that the term is by no means so clear as it may seem even here. Nonetheless whatever its conceptual boundaries may be, Miliband considers the state to be only a subsystem of a broader political system and he is explicit about this as well. "Of course," he explains, "the state system is not synonymous with the political system. The latter includes many institutions, for instance parties and pressure groups, which are of major importance in the political process, and which vitally affect the operation of the state system. And so do many other institutions which are not 'political' at all,

for instance, giant corporations, Churches, the mass media, etc."[50] Clearly Miliband rejects Gramsci's fusion of "public" and "private" institutions and visualizes political life as a system within which the state (which seems to be in many respects what I would call the political authorities) is a subsystem, and the system as a whole is imbedded in an environment of nonpolitical institutions. The conceptualization here is explicitly systems-oriented, although Miliband does not push his analysis as far as he might even within the terms of his own substantive interests in the class struggle.

Even Poulantzas himself, strangely enough, for all his commitment to the state concept, has not been able to resist flirting with systems terminology In his early work, *Political Power and Social Class,* we find only occasional usage of the idea of political system. But by the time he wrote *Fascism and Dictatorship* in 1970 and *State, Power, Socialism* in 1978, the term appears with increasing frequency.[51]

More than mere usage of political system as a term is at stake however. Even though Poulantzas asks to be considered on his own merits, in fact he is a clear disciple of Althusser and operates within the broad boundaries of the latter's original conceptualization, usually described as structural Marxism.[52] Although I shall not attempt the full argument here,[53] in a fundamental sense Althusser represents the way in which some contemporary Marxists have come to terms with the profound epistemological break during the twentieth century that has led to the adoption of a systems perspective. Just as the ideas of mechanism in the seventeenth century and evolution in the nineteenth century dominated modes of thinking in wide-ranging areas of knowledge, so in the present century a systems outlook has penetrated into almost every nook and cranny of thought, from physics through the social sciences to the arts and humanities.[54] And it has cut across ideological boundaries so that it has asserted itself prominently in the socialist bloc as well as the capitalist countries.

Following Althusser, Poulantzas accepts the conceptualization of society (the "social formation" in their terminology) as divided into a number of subsystems (called "instances" or "levels"). These are three or four in number depending on how we interpret what they say and do: the economic, political, ideological, and theoretical. In combination, these "instances" constitute the overall "mode of production," that is, the comprehensive system which in ordinary language we might simply call the social system. Mode of production is a technical term which refers to

more than the economy alone. It covers the whole combination of instances or subsystems since all together produce and reproduce each of the instances and the relationships among them. The state or condition of the overall system is a function of the particular way in which the four instances (or three in practice—the economic, political, and ideological) interrelate. In erasing the economy as *the* mode of production, however, the economy is put on a level with the other subsystems in terms of its effect on the total social system except that the subsystems have a certain hierarchical order in which the economy continues to play a special function, described as "determination in the last instance."[55]

Aside from this privileged position of the economic subsystem, this conceptualization clearly raises the image of Talcott Parsons with his division of the social system into four subsystems—the economic, political, cultural, and social structural. Here, too, the state of the overall social system represents the particular interaction among these elements. There are other similarities between the Poulantzasian and Parsonian modes of analysis that need not concern us, even though their substantive views and interpretations could scarcely be farther apart. The point is that both Althusser and Poulantzas on the one side and Parsons on the other are systems functionalists. Explanation is satisfied for both of them when the functions of each of the subsystems and their articulation or interrelationship are described.[56]

Historically we can only conclude that Althusser together with Poulantzas have in effect brought Marxism into some kind of uneasy theoretical accommodation with the new systems orientation so prevalent in this century. They have seen fit to retain the state terminology as a means of referring to a major aspect of the political system. Nothing need have been lost to Poulantzas's analysis if he had gone all the way and simply abandoned the state as a concept. Much would have been gained in conceptual clarity. Although they would not wish to admit it, other Marxists have effectively given up the concept insofar as they use it simply as a rough substitute for governmental apparatus, or what I would prefer to label the political authorities.

THE OVERDUE INTERMENT OF THE STATE

My analysis here of the state ought not to be construed or, rather, miscontrued as a commentary on the substantive validity of Marxism. I

have sought only to confine myself to the value of the state concept in general. If in recent years there had been other social scientists, of a non-Marxist persuasion, for whom the concept had become the subject of an as elaborate and sophisticated an analysis as we find in the work of Poulantzas, I could just as readily have used them to illustrate my point. Another way of putting this is that, shocking and unbelievable as it may appear to Marxists, Marxism without the state as a concept could remain Marxism and would be at least the clearer for it. There is nothing sacrosanct about the term even from an orthodox Marxist point of view, let alone from the view of many less orthodox variants available today. The central perspective of Marxism in its many forms depends less on the notion of the state than on that of modes of production, class struggle, and "contradictions." Criticism of the term's ambiguity, even vacuity, needs to be separated for the moment from an assault on the substance of Marx's thought.

If it is time for Marxism to inter the state as a concept, no less must be said about its use by non-Marxists. In recent years the state has slipped back into the vocabulary of conventional social science, unobtrusively The very casualness of its reception is particularly disturbing, if only because we have thereby skirted the meticulous scrutiny of new terms now becoming customary in social science. Unfortunately, perhaps because of its long tradition in political science, we are prone to take for granted that we know what the concept of the state means. In fact, the very history of the term throughout the ages, a history that led to its abandonment in the last quarter of a century, has testified to its obscure meaning and to its operational difficulties. My analysis of Poulantzas's explicit usage in his complex theoretical enterprise would seem to confirm the lessons of history

We must shudder at the thought of possibly returning in the next couple of decades to the vapid debates of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the meanings to be given to the term. It was abandoned in favor of the political system as political science sought to move into more rigorous empirical research. It was recognized as an historical ideological concept emerging with and reinforcing the growth of national political units. Today it is perhaps being coded in many different ways. It may signal an intention to adopt a class-struggle orientation; but it may as easily signal a commitment to consumer sovereignty in a free market. As a concept, the state today has lost any particular ideological fidelity that it might once have had. It has not become devoid of presuppositions, however, for it does adapt to the

particular ideological needs of any part of the political spectrum. It has been transformed into an infinitely malleable ideological term.

One thing is clear. The state has now laid siege to the political system. If over the next couple of decades it were to succeed in displacing the political system as a key orienting idea in analysis and research, this would threaten us with a return, not to a tried and true conceptual tradition of political research, but to a conceptual morass from which we thought we had but recently escaped. We can only hope that the historic pressures toward more rigorous analysis, together with the current imperatives of applied research, will force those who are today flirting with the idea of the state to pause long enough to question its theoretical adequacy and its operational potential for continued empirical and theoretical research of the highest quality.

NOTES

1. D. Easton, *The Political System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981: Published in 1953, 2nd ed. 1971).

2. It is no longer so fashionable as it once was to pursue an interest in empirically oriented theory at the general level. Applied research and urgent social issues have been on the ascendant for some time. As I expressed myself over a decade ago in "The New Revolution in Political Science" (*American Political Science Review* 63 [1969], pp. 1051-1061) this is as it should be as long as it is balanced by a continued effort of "reasonable" proportions in the area of fundamental research. Here, however, I shall remain a little old-fashioned and continue to assume that as our capital, in the form of basic knowledge, becomes exhausted, social science will one day be forced back again to those kinds of problems to which general theory addresses itself. The fires of fundamental inquiry may die down and may seem to be flickering out but because of its very nature history has demonstrated that they are not likely to be extinguished permanently.

3. C. Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970).

4. T. J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1969, 2nd ed., 1979).

5. Ibid., ch. 11.

6. D. Easton, *The Political System*, pp. 106-115. See also H. Eckstein, "On the 'Science' of the State," *Daedalus* 108 (1979), pp. 1-20.

7. For example, Marx's insights on social conflict and Edmund Burke's on the sources of social cohesion were in part dependent on their respective critical and conservative viewpoints.

8. C. H. Titus, "A Nomenclature in Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 25 (1931), pp. 45-60, on page 45 counted close to 150 definitions, and we can assume many have since been added.

9. E. Laclau, "The Specificity of the Political: The Poulantzas-Miliband Debate," *Economy and Society* 4 (1975), pp. 88-110.

10. E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 79. See also E. P Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), p. 4, where the author refers to Poulantzas as "a more formidable opponent" than other Marxists he mentions.

11. N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: New Left Books, 1973, first published 1968), ch. 1.

12. N. Poulantzas, "The Problem of the Capitalist State," *New Left Review* 58 (1969), pp. 67-78; R. Miliband, "The Capitalist State: Reply to Nicos Poulantzas," *New Left Review* 59 (1969), pp. 53-60; N. Poulantzas, "The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau," *New Left Review* 95 (1976), pp. 63-83.

13. Poulantzas shares Gramsci's view that the nominally "private" institutions of church, parties, unions, mass media, and so on which "embody" the dominant ideologies represent "the ideological state apparatuses," whereas those institutions such as police, army, courts, and government are the "repressive state apparatus." See N. Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship* (London: New Left Books, 1974, first published in 1970), esp. p. 301.

14. N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, p. 256.

15. Ibid., p. 117.

16. N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London: New Left Books, 1978), p. 131.

17. Ibid., p. 129.

18. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, p. 258ff.

19. See N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, p. 128ff.

20. Poulantzas, op. cit., p. 191.

21. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, p. 17, italics in original.

22. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp. 48-49.

23. Ibid., p. 50.

24. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, although in his concluding chapter he seems to modify his view on this matter substantially. See also *Political Power and Social Classes*, p. 44.

25. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, p. 42.

26. Ibid., p. 93.

27. Ibid., p. 104.

28. Ibid., p. 43, my italics.

29. Ibid., p. 115, footnote 24.

30. See footnote 13 above.

31. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, p. 116.

32. Poulantzas confuses us by using the term structure in two senses. Structure may refer to superstructures (apparatuses)—concrete organizations such as courts, legislature, armies, and the like. But the term may also identify one of the major elements or instances of a formation, what we might call a subsystem of a society (the economic, political, and ideological structures). As used here, Poulantzas is talking of a structure in the second sense. *Political* structure is therefore virtually a synonym for the state. See *Political Power and Social Class*, p. 42.

33. Ibid., p. 115, footnote, 24, italics in original.

34. Ibid.

35. N. Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 301, footnote 3.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., p. 301ff.

38. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, p. 115, footnote 24
39. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, p. 128, italics in original.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., pp. 128-129, italics in original.
42. Ibid., p. 133.
43. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, p. 130-131.
44. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, p. 132.
45. Ibid.
46. A. Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine* (London: Hutchison, 1967).
47. See for example, D. V Schwartz, "Recent Soviet Adaptations of Systems Theory to Administrative Theory," *Journal of Comparative Administration* 5 (1973), pp. 233-263; F Cortes, A. Przeworski, and J. Sprague, *Systems Analysis for Social Scientists* (New York: John Wiley, 1974); I. V Blauberg, V N. Sadovsky, and E. G. Yudin, *Systems Theory* (USSR: Progress, 1977) and the many articles and books cited there; T. Amburgey and D. McQuarie, "System Change in Karl Marx's Model of Socio-Economic Formation," *General Systems* 22 (1977), pp. 99-103.
48. R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Quartet Books, 1973, first published in 1969), p. 50.
49. Ibid.
50. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, pp. 50-51.
51. Compare the occasional use of the term in *Political Power and Social Classes* with its appearance in *Fascism and Dictatorship* on pages 305, 308, 314, 319, 320, 324, 325, and 327, and this is by no means an exhaustive count. See also its frequent use in "The Problem of the Capitalist State" in R. Blackburn (ed.) *Ideology in Social Science* (London: Fontana, 1972), pp. 238-264. In fact, the concept of subsystem often occurs in place of the Althusserian concept of "instance" or "level" revealing that Poulantzas is no more than a small linguistic step away from at least an elementary systems vocabulary. It was a step, however, that he could ill afford to take explicitly, given his political involvement in French politics. We must remember also that by the 1970s, the idea of the political system had become so common in political science, as well as among informed laymen, as to occasion little comment or special notice. This was especially true in the United States, and from his references it is clear that Poulantzas was an avid reader of American political science, including the literature explicitly presenting a systems analytic point of view.
52. Althusser has since modified his position but Poulantzas was influenced largely by Althusser's early formulations.
53. See my work in progress referred to in the author's note.
54. See, for example, E. Lazlo (ed.) *The Relevance of General Systems Theory* (New York: Braziller, 1972); L. Meyer, *Music, the Arts and Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) and his other writings.
55. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp. 13-14.
56. Whether they are "true" systems analysts depends on what we expect from a systems approach. If we expect attention to inputs and outputs of a system, conversion processes, and feedback, which make for a dynamic conception of the way a social system operates (see my *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; first published 1965]) then we would have to conclude that none of them represents more than a truncated form of systems analysis. And if we look for causal explanation rather than description and interpretive understanding, then systems functionalism would be far from satisfying our needs. But that is a different story of no immediate interest here.

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ERRATA

Please note the following corrections in the article by Michael James, "Public Interest and Majority Rule in Bentham's Democratic Theory" (*Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 1, February 1981).

On page 53 in line 12, the sentence should read:
"If the damage done by public offenses was indiscriminate and unnoticeable, while damage caused by private offenses was direct and immediate, then individuals would naturally attend to the latter at the expense of the former."

On page 61, the final sentence on that page should read: "The power of the representative assembly would not be merely absolute, in the sense of being subject to no legal limitation; it would also, in the absence of effective checks, be arbitrary, which would encourage coalitions to form for the purpose of obtaining benefits through the exercise of such power."