

Nicos Poulantzas

The suicide of Nicos Poulantzas has received scant, if any, attention in the United States. This is not so much because Poulantzas committed an unthinkable act by jumping out a window, an act which is not easily confronted by anyone. The reason for the silence is instead more forthright than that: though his work was emblematically known here, it never had the enormous theoretical and political impact it did in Europe.

It is indeed hard to make clear for an American audience the overpowering impact of Poulantzas' first mature book (*Political Power and Social Classes*, 1968) on a Marxist political theory which had gone manifestly stale at the time. Older positions, whether of Soviet or Chinese orientation, were widely felt to be drastically inadequate for the purpose of understanding the capitalist state in the West. By offering what may be called a structuralist approach, inspired by Louis Althusser, whose importance he equalled, Poulantzas recast the categorical arsenal of Marxist theorization in this field. His book raised to a remarkable degree the general level of debate by becoming the normal, if controversial, point of reference for others. The idea of the State as a structure in its own right enjoying 'relative autonomy' from other instances within the social formation, is now somewhat of a commonplace in Marxist thought, but emphatically it was not in 1968. A much needed conceptual clarity was thus brought into the multitude of sharp internal contradictions which characterized the Left in the wake of that year. So, for instance, the CP Swedish Youth Party split in a confrontation between rightwing Maoism and an entirely novel tendency very much based on the analyses of Althusser and Poulantzas, leaving some badly confused traditional revisionists behind.

In 1962 Poulantzas had moved, as is the practice among many Greek intellectuals, to Paris, which became his main home for the rest of his life. He differed from most other Parisian thinkers by being

aware of debates outside the French capital, and by engaging himself directly in politics. He worked with unions in France on their internal political education, while he remained a member of the anti-Moscow Greek CP, for which he stood as an unsuccessful candidate in the latest election. All his theoretical work in fact raised immediate questions of socialist strategy; it was always consciously political in character. In no case was this more evident than in his last book (*State, Power, Socialism*, 1978) which was a straightforward intervention in the French election of that year. Besides being a justification of sorts for the united Left, it was, too, an attempt to rethink his previous positions; to provide new ways of seeing socialist revolution; to go beyond Leninism, partially by reaching back to Rosa Luxemburg.

Poulantzas identified with what has been named "Left Eurocommunism," a position not without harrowing problems. As a Communist he was immensely disappointed by the obstructive role, as he saw it, played by the French CP in the electoral alliance with the Socialists, an alliance which of course ended in defeat in March 1978. Reportedly he never joined the French Party because of its rigidity; most likely he was more sympathetic to the leftwing socialists for that reason. It is clear, however, that his depression began with the disintegration of the united Left and the surging climate of intellectual anti-Marxism in Paris. As the single-most prominent Marxist philosopher of politics in France—which he was—Poulantzas became a target of much rubbish from various "new" ideologues of the right. Likewise the university authorities treated him shabbily by never giving him a professorship. Political and personal despair followed.

Alain Touraine, a well-known Socialist intellectual, pronounced Poulantzas' death the symbolic death of Marxism. Such triumphant claims are surely erroneous. But his suicide is not something we can shrug off. We would all do well if we did more than just register a desperate act, if we gave Poulantzas' legacy the close attention it so richly deserves. For his problems and questions are ours. So his agonies.

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