

Frieder Otto Wolf

## **Making Nicos Poulantzas's theory fruitful for a critical reflection on the current development of European integration**

There is a debate which going around in circles, within the established forces in Europe, as well as in the broad Left: a debate on a European „state“ emerging out of the present „state“ and development of European integration, as it has been realized in the EU. I want to defend the idea, that this debate is doomed to be circular, because it is based on what could be called very politely a „less than elaborate notion of statehood“ – and this can certainly be overcome by making full use of Poulantzas's conception of the modern bourgeois state as, on the one hand, permanently resulting from the relations of forces existing within modern bourgeois societies, while, on the other hand, also permanently working to autonomize itself (relatively) from the actually existing relations of forces („Verselbständigung“): After all, any modern bourgeois state has to defend some primary structures of domination. And, finally, that this needs some additional theoretical investment in re-thinking the relative autonomy of politics, as well of institutionalized state power within modern bourgeois states, and the kind of trans-national regulation structures (cf.the notion of 'global business management') that has become an integral part of their very constitutional structures in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (already clearly addressed by Poulantzas under the heading of the internationalization of the state).

I think it is a category mistake to think of Poulantzas's theoretical contributions by such notions as 'authoritarian statism' or 'authoritarian consensus democracy' in terms of uni-dimensional predictions of a regime change to be expected. It is not – in the main – a prognosis of the advent of a new generation of authoritarian regimes distinct from fascism, but based on authoritarian populism like in the 1930s (exemplified by Venizelos in Greece, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, or of Schuschnigg in Austria), probably in a more technocratic vein. And yet – if we rather read it in terms of the underlying power structure – it helps to avoid illusions about a shrinking role of states and of state based politics. The new wave of reaffirmations of capitalist hegemony emerging in the 1980s has in fact – in spite of some rhetoric of 'deconstruction' of the state apparatus – heavily relied on state power. And yet, it should not make us overlook the dynamics of privatization – going to the extreme of handing legislative, executive and judiciary powers of the state to private bodies – as they have been triggered off by regimes like the ones brought to power in the 1980s. Ronald

Reagan and Margaret Thatcher certainly have not defended an ideology of statism, but they certainly have made ample use of state power to impose their politics, Thatcher using police forces to put down the miners' strike and Reagan using the power competition in the military field to bring down the Soviet Union and to disaggregate the its system of hegemony. But using state power, in their perspective, was not a way out, just an unavoidable instrument for „liberating“ the ruling class(es) – especially the oligarchic networks within – from the class compromises incurred in the era of Western 'fordism'. Today, after the crisis of 2007-08, these neo-liberal politics are being pursued on a new level: On the one hand, they are defined and implemented by the effects of an authoritarian use of multi-level politics, as in the Merkel method of European politics, and the only apparently 'softer' conformism of her general model of political practice: In fact, instead of TINA, she is implementing an even harsher version of narrowing the limits of legitimate politics: There is NO way of even raising the Question of an Alternative (NOQA) Therefore, Poulantzas is right in insisting that the use of the authoritarian and hypostatized state power is a central element of bourgeois politics in all of its forms. Bourgeois politics will only be „liberal“ or even „democratic“, if and insofar this is forced upon the dominant capitalist groups by high class struggle. I think, however, that this does not justify speaking of neo-liberalism as fulfilling Poulantzas's predictions of authoritarian statism.

Coming back to the EU now: Re-thinking what the EU really is, in this conceptual and theoretical framework of rethinking the „domination side“ of the modern bourgeois state will then chase the delusionary ghosts of the problematics of the „statehood“ of the EU – and, therefore likewise, the red-herrings of the delusionary exit-debates, no less than the illusionary perspective of creating the „United States“ of Europe one day.

To put this issue in clear metaphorical terms: What I am defending here, is the idea that the EU is like a fox-trap which puts the fox before the dire alternative of either chewing off his leg or of waiting for the hunter to do to him whatever the hunter likes. All the member states of the EU find themselves now (at least to some degree) in the situation of the fox in the trap – they cannot really consider getting out without major damage to themselves, and they cannot expect, as long they are inside the EU, to escape the impositions coming from the dominant forces within the EU, either. But, fortunately, people and foxes differ in important respects, because human beings can revolt and organize common struggles and solidarity; and likewise, those in power differ decisively from the hunters in this metaphor – because they have no other source of power they can rely on than the very

people themselves they dominate. In contradistinction to the fox in the fox-trap, humans are therefore all capable (in varying degrees) of changing the relations of forces determining the actions of the hunter – the human foxes may even legislate upon the human hunters – provided that they do not fight their struggles alone, but become capable of synergetically building up sufficient weight by solidarity-based actions and alliances.

Therefore, among human beings there always exists an issue of the relation of forces, which may shift or might be fully shifted. And this is of course, in the last instance, determined specifically in each given conjuncture. But on the one hand, nobody meets these given conjunctures with a 'virgin mind' – which just mean amnesia –, but with concepts elaborated on the basis of past experience, i.e. with some degree of ideological preconception or of theoretical insight. On the other hand, theoretical reconstruction is always 'late' in relation to actually occurring conjunctures, so that some kind of 'leap' is always needed in order to take any practical initiative. I.e. the hour of a leninist 'concrete analysis of the concrete situation' never strikes.

In order to understand the present conjuncture of the EU properly, it is necessary to introduce an important theoretical distinction, adding a trans-national dimension to Poulantzas' reflection on the modern bourgeois state as a state of class domination (the realities of have, in fact, been created after Poulantzas had formulated his theory of the capitalist state. This theoretical distinction can be made fully clear – in the specific case of EU politics – by referring to the difference between the *nation state* and the *member state*: The *nation state* is conceived and legally structured as a relatively sovereign entity, determined only by its internal relations of forces and the relations of informal dependency it finds itself in, whereas the member state in a structure like the EU – while not in the UN or in the Council of Europe – is being formally bound by a legal structure which goes beyond it, while maintaining a kind of legal and ideological cohesion which makes it *one* state and not a collection of state apparatuses. It may be argued that we have such a kind of being bound in the WTO with its conflict regulation mechanism (and are threatened to find it in the TTIP), but in the EU this is not restricted to such a specific point, but has been extended over a number of key areas of economic, fiscal, and monetary policy, to the point of effectively and formally undermining the formal national sovereignty of the member states. It may also be said that within imperialist systems of dependency singular nation states are bound in a comparable manner so that their national sovereignty becomes, in the end, insubstantial. In the EU, however, relations between member states are institutionalized in legal and political procedures based on formal equality of the

participants (or at least approaching it, like in the weighting of votes in the council of ministers, very roughly referring to the number of inhabitants represented). In spite of the rhetorical efforts of most heads of state and government who – together – form the very centre of power within the EU, there are no independent, relatively sovereign nation states in the EU any more, they all have become member states, on the one hand, and this implies a certain degree of formally equal treatment of these states, on the other. I should, maybe, underline here that especially for smaller member states the idea of „regaining national sovereignty“ by leaving the EU is a dangerous illusion – because they may very well end up in brutal dependency, while losing the last possibilities of participating in common procedures of political control.

All this has changed deeply since Poulantzas theory of the capitalist state has been formulated. To address this new situation is the great challenge the Left has to face in Europe today. In so doing, it will be helpful, however, to remember Poulantzas's prognosis of authoritarian statism as a reply to the ‚crisis of fordism‘ in the 1970s. Only in a very formalized (and somewhat misleading) sense we can, in fact, conceive of this development on the basis of this historical prognosis: The neo-liberal turn, as it has been successfully pursued from the mid-eighties has in fact brutally relied on state violence (Pinochet in Chili, Thatcher against the British Miners' strike), but what has been far more successfully been propagated since its first steps of implementation in the 1990s, has been de-regulation – i.e. the state-induced reduction of state intervention in favour of the own ‚responsibility‘ of the main economic actors, thereby ‚liberating‘ the dominant classes from the fordist compromises they have had to accept. I think there is no real doubt that neo-liberalism has not led to *authoritarian statism* or to *authoritarian constitutionalism* as Poulantzas had anticipated them: Instead neo-liberalism has relied on a rather different kind of recombination of political power, automatic market mechanisms and hegemony over large masses of individuals – which has not led to an authoritarian replacement of democratic procedures of decision-making as such (not even to a further formal weakening of the European Parliament), but rather to their effective devaluation through deep processes of de-politicization – as well of the masses of isolated individuals as of the major issues of economic and social policy. Instead of reinforcing capitalist class domination directly by political state intervention to impose capitalist profit interests, recent constitutional politics in the EU have, rather successfully, concentrated upon making the ‚ordinary‘ mechanisms of class exploitation, i.e. those based upon a ‚free and equal‘ contractual basis, *de facto* inescapable in the life of wage-dependent individuals, thereby renewing ‚classical‘ forms of wage dependency and precarity the fordist class

compromises had claimed to have overcome. This operation has been facilitated in important ways by the internal biases vitiating the established fordist forms of regulated wage labour, the exclusion of women, of migrant workers, and, eventually, of workers from the young generation from access to socially regulated employment, as well as from equal pay. At the same time, at least since the outbreak of the Euro-crisis, a political regime has been created within the EU which makes special powers for emergency operations of the leading EU structures of governance a normal element of the workings of the EU.

There has effectively been no 'social dimension' to the EU single market (as Jacques Delors had promised to the EU trade unions who have been utterly unable incapable of effectively struggling for imposing it) – at least, if we do not accept the re-packaging as 'social' of measures exacerbating competition among wage-earners or intensifying control over 'the poor'. The same one-sidedness is even more true for the other two key projects of the neo-liberal restructuring which has transformed the EU since the 1980s – from a additional dimension of existing fordist nation states to a transformative force consistently pushing for neo-liberal reforms within member states: the Big Bang Eastern enlargement and the introduction of the Euro as a common currency. Instead so-called 'reforms' have been implemented which have all contributed to the setting free of the 'objective' necessities of the markets, i.e. of the capitalist oligarchies in power, while destroying existing regulations and while reducing the possibilities of building solidarity among wage earners. This has resulted in important reductions of the possibilities to act of member states' governments and legislatures in defining a social policy deviating from the dominant neo-liberal models, as well as in a weakening of solidarity and struggling capability among wage earners themselves.

In order to ask the question of future possibilities for action on the side of those dominated within the EU constellation and exploited by the dominant classes in a way which promises reliable answers, we shall have to look at things with a systematic, as well as with a historical perspective:

*Systematically*, we shall have to enquire, how class domination has been reorganized by the creation and by the ensuing intervention of the EU level of politics;

*historically*, we shall have to look at in retrospect at least four major moments of the emergence of the EU as it stands today:

Systematically, we shall have to understand how the neo-liberal model of politics (and later on its characteristic kind of crisis management) have contributed to restabilizing deep

structural changes of the dominant model of capitalist accumulation; and, more specifically, how the neo-liberal model of capitalist crisis management has referred back to the internal dynamics of capitalist crises: neither as a fully autonomous development driven by political ideas or by the 'will to power' of certain groups, nor as a simple reflection of the objective problems besetting capital accumulation. It will rather have to be conceived as a political articulation of such particular problems in their very specificity, but translated into the universal language of democratic politics.

Or, from a quite different angle, the angle of epistemology, such an analysis will raise the issue of a critique of politics (as my friend Étienne Balibar has found it in some of Marx's later writings), to be developed and elaborated alongside a reconstruction and further elaboration of the Critique of Political Economy we find in *Capital*. I have no doubt, that central notions discussed or introduced into the debate by Poulantzas – those of 'consensus', of 'authoritarianism' or of 'statism' should be read (and amplified) as critical contributions to such a debate: i.e. as attempts to come to grips, theoretically and in a critical perspective, with two main dimensions of the modern bourgeois state: with its tendency to totalize authority, on the one hand, and its tendency to become hypostatized, on the other.

Historically, we should at least remember and analyze four moments of European integration:

*First*, before the history of the EU began, there has been a pre-history of ideas of European integration and unification conceived as a way of preventing another occurrence of the great crisis of the 1930s which had brought fascism into power in Central Europe. In this perspective, Altiero Spinelli's original ideas for a socially progressive and democratic European federalism still deserve our retrospective Attention.

*Second*, however, the emergence of the EU, out of the EEC, the ECCS and Euratom, has to be analyzed retrospectively as a cold war project, aiming at providing an economic and social basis for a solid Western block in Europe (the military integration of which had been achieved via NATO).

Both developments have been much more than just contingent and *ad hoc* projects conceived by individual personalities: They have been relevant and – to some degree – even timely attempts to address the issues raised by the on-going trans-nationalization of capital in a way that would help to avoid the wastage of further inter-imperialist wars – without as, could be seen in the former Yugoslavia or in the Caucasus, and can now be

seen again in Ukraine, avoiding war at the margins of Europe.

*Third*, the processes, by which the new neo-liberal constellation ran into its crisis in 2007/08 – in the course of which the centre of the storm has somehow transferred from the global financial markets to the Euro area, and there especially to the economically more vulnerable countries - will have to be analyzed as such. With regard to them, it should be clearly understood, that exactly the points of mass attractiveness in the crisis management from above – the ‚casino‘ for all, or, at least, the promise of easy (credit-) money for all – have been those most directly challenged (and revoked), being replaced by the more austere promise of being spared 'the worst' .

*Fourth*, after some years of European crisis management, at least the following can be ascertained about the crisis management of the European governments who are dominating the handling of the Euro crisis alongside with the ECB: this crisis management has been sufficient, so far, to avoid a capitalist melt-down of EU finance (unlike the contra-productive crisis management of leading European governments in the 1930s), without however being capable of defining a sustainable path of capitalist recovery (as conceived programmatically e.g. in „green capitalism“). The leading constellation of capitalist oligarchies – still linked to the political context of their respective nation states, but operating on a European scale – has in fact been able to use the crisis to widen and to deepen its grasp of the real economies, without, however, finding a way for a renewal of capitalist accumulation. The resulting industrial cycle of slump and slow acceleration therefore continues to be extremely shallow, even within the most solid sectors and regions.

The present conjuncture of the EU – after the Euro-crisis had broken out in 2007/08 – is determined by a number of unresolved contradictions of which we are not yet capable to foresee the courses towards more durable solutions they will, eventually, take. Very provisionally, I should propose to distinguish the following:

- the growing contradiction between a highly selective centralization of competences in the EU (which is, e.g. not including taxation, thereby making tax avoidance an easy game) and the remaining (and still comprehensive/totalizing) national responsibilities for overall politico-economic results;
- the growing contradiction between strategic political decisions taken by the European Council and the a-political, technocratic mode of their implementation by the Commission;

- the growing contradiction between an expansionary tendency of the EU administration and its insurmountable incapacity to effectively controlling the administrations of member states;
- the growing contradiction between the democratic claims made by the member states (and the EP) and the reality of extra-ordinary powers effectively wielded by leading EU institutions without a 'traditional' legal base;
- the growing contradiction between world market dictates articulated by capitalist oligarchies within the EU, and the demands originating from public debates and supported by democratic majorities.

This present situation of the EU could, in fact, raise the central and most productive question of Poulantzas in a new vein – i.e. the question of the historical alternative between a new (trans-national and 'second order) type of authoritarian securitization of capitalist accumulation, politically relying on new kinds of mass mobilization (with the crisis making passive consensus more important than active consensus, i.e. making the Promise of avoiding catastrophic outcomes more prominent than the promise of participating in material advantages) while economically installing a regime of unfettered competition based upon fear of exclusion. This is compatible with neo-liberal socio-economic policies, *on the one hand*, and a new democratic and social alternative of transformation, *on the other*. In order to really emerge, however, such a historical alternative presupposes one element from which we seem to be even further away than the historical left in Poulantzas's time: the construction of an alliance of all the popular forces capable of uniting in order to prevent a capitalist solution of the present crisis, and capable, while they engage in these struggles, of at least beginning to create alternative ways of life.

This has now long ceased to be just a question of overcoming the crippling divisions between the old and the new left: It has become a question of inventing new ways of doing politics, while finding a new unity between the forces struggling against all the different aspects of the present constellation of domination – not just against its capitalist dimension. Only by integrating the manifold concerns of the struggles of the subalterns, the dominated forces of all of its dimensions – mainly, or at least, against capitalist exploitation, against gender and age group privileges, against racist discrimination, against ecological destruction – will it be possible to build a trans-national alliance of social and political forces solidly anchored in the national, regional, and local arenas of politics, and therefore capable of making the very question of such an alternative a historical reality again.

The depth of the crisis of the constellation of domination in place gives us, in abstract principle, good reasons for hope – but the insufficient state of the political development of left wing forces, as well as the growing popular strength of right wing pseudo-alternatives in Europe and in many of the EU member states should also give us a strong sense of urgency: If we do not act effectively, the dangers already unfolding in the present conjuncture of crises will continue to grow – and our efforts of preventing or countering them will become ever more difficult. If we do our duty as political intellectuals to elaborate the theoretical instruments needed for understanding the structures underlying our present conjuncture, this will, of course, not guarantee anything – but it will provide the help we are obliged to provide.