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# AUTHORITARIAN LIBERALISM AND THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF NICOS POULANTZAS: RESTRUCTURING THE FORM OF THE STATE AS THE CHALLENGE OF AUTHORITARIAN STATISM\*

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## EL LIBERALISMO AUTORITARIO Y EL PENSAMIENTO POLÍTICO DE NICOS POULANTZAS: LA REESTRUCTURACIÓN DE LA FORMA DEL ESTADO COMO DESAFÍO DEL ESTATISMO AUTORITARIO

### Abstract

The conceptual focus of our paper is the role and contours of the theoretical category of the state in relation to authoritarianism and the articulation of democracy and liberalism under a capitalist economy. In particular, we refer to Nicos Poulantzas' conceptualisation of "authoritarian statism" and the "decline of democracy." In his last book, *State, Power, Socialism*, published in 1978, Poulantzas argues for a shift in the form of statehood in

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Western Europe and the United States of America, one that is going towards authoritarian statism. The transnationalisation of the economy and the state form entails changes in the labour process, the deterioration of working-class conditions, and a de-linking between democratisation and labour. At the same time, there is a growing instability of the elites and their reconfiguration at all scales. The decline of the state does not entail a structural crisis but rather a sharpening of elements of the political crisis that calls for the transformation of the role of the state itself.

## Keywords

authoritarian liberalism; authoritarian statism; Nicos Poulantzas; class; democracy

## Resumen

El enfoque conceptual de nuestro artículo es el papel y los contornos de la categoría teórica del Estado en relación con el autoritarismo y con la articulación de la democracia y el liberalismo en la economía capitalista. En particular, nos referimos a la conceptualización de Nicos Poulantzas del “estatismo autoritario” y el “declive de la democracia”. En su último libro, *Estado, poder, socialismo*, publicado en 1978, Poulantzas defiende un cambio en la forma de Estado en Europa Occidental y Estados Unidos de América, que se orienta hacia el estatismo autoritario. La transnacionalización de la economía y de la forma del Estado conlleva cambios en el proceso laboral y el deterioro de las condiciones de la clase trabajadora, así como una desvinculación entre la democratización y el trabajo. Al mismo tiempo, se produce una creciente inestabilidad de las élites y de su reconfiguración en todos los niveles. El declive del Estado no implica una crisis estructural, sino más bien una agudización de los elementos de la crisis política que exige la transformación del papel del propio Estado.

## Palabras clave

liberalismo autoritario; estatismo autoritario; Nicos Poulantzas; clase; democracia

The work of Nicos Poulantzas is identified as one of the sources of contemporary debates on authoritarian liberalism (Bruff, 2012, 2014; Bruff & Tansel, 2019, 2020). Bruff and Tansel explicitly recognise the work of Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, and Nicos Poulantzas as the three sources of inspiration for their work on authoritarian neoliberalism. The expression has been used to qualify the “disciplinary, coercive and anti-democratic governance practices that political actors have used in the wake of the global and European financial crises to curtail opposition and close down alternatives” (Beck & Germann, 2019). The term, though, is either used to refer to the growing authority of private actors, especially corporations, in contemporary capitalist societies or to articulate the state and the role of markets, such as in ordoliberal debates. In this article, I focus on the second one, that is, the relation between the concept of the state, its articulation with contemporary liberalism and the deepening tensions between “embedded liberalism,” or capitalism and democracy. Debate on “authoritarian liberalisms” encompasses and goes beyond the diagnosis of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Still, authoritarian liberalism goes back to debates on the relationship between liberalism and democracy in late Weimar (Heller, 2015; Wilkinson, 2021).

The conceptual focus of our paper is the role and contours of the state’s theoretical category in relation to authoritarianism and the articulation of democracy and liberalism under a capitalist economy. In particular, we refer to Nicos Poulantzas’ conceptualisation of “authoritarian statism” and the “decline of democracy.” Authoritarianism needs to be understood here in opposition to democracy.

In his last book, *State, Power, Socialism* (hereinafter *SPS*), originally published in French in 1978, Poulantzas (2014) argues for a shift in the form of statehood in Western Europe and the United States of America, one that is going towards authoritarian statism. Poulantzas’ work is marked by controversies around the state internal to Marxist theory, as well as by the political conjuncture of his time (Ducange & Keucheyan, 2018; Jessop, 1985; Keucheyan, 2013). Still, he writes in a peculiar time: the neoliberal shift did not begin yet, Poulantzas could not witness the fall of the Berlin Wall, and still, *SPS* stands out for an extremely original and even untimely since, in the late seventies, it was still difficult to see the decline of liberalism and democracy. We witness the drifting away of the “national-popular” political body composed of individuals-citizens and the division between the public and the private sphere. What distinguishes Poulantzas’ understanding of the new, individual, and collective subject of power is the material nature of these transformations and the centrality of state power. Authoritarian statism reflects a deeply problematic relationship between liberalism and politics. It can only be resolved through the democracy-working class relation, even

though it is always mediated by the dimension of government and the specific modes of representative democracy.

## 1. Authoritarian statism

Authoritarian statism, as defined by Poulantzas (2014), indicates “important changes in democracy.” They are manifested by:

- the greater distance between the centres of decision-making and the masses, which are excluded from them;
- the widening of the distance between citizens and the administration of the state;
- the expansion of the state in the life of society;
- the creation of plebiscitary and manipulatory circuits, such as through the media, and the attempt to direct the masses through participatory schemes;
- the sharpening of the authoritarian character of political mechanisms and the rise of new power techniques;
- finally, the production of a new materiality of the social body upon which power is exercised.

These dimensions of authoritarian statism may seem paradoxical. One of the main features of the transformation of democracy is the alteration of two main dimensions of liberal and republic understandings. As it is in the case of the form of the type of state, Poulantzas employs the category of “matrix” for the shifts within democratic forms of power. As he writes:

Rooted in the very processes that govern the new role of the state administration-bureaucracy, and lodged in the main exemplary center of the administration, the new matrix of the exercise of power radiates through every sphere of social life. (Poulantzas, 2014)

Unlike Foucauldian interpretations of the expansion of governmentality beyond the institutional spheres of politics, for Poulantzas (2014), “in the last analysis, the matrix refers to a new form of the social division of labour,” which articulates social relations into the state administrative structure.

Authoritarian statism can be understood according to the dual, or triple, structure of the theory/practice nexus: it responds to how power steers and condenses, through the state, relations of production and the social division of labour and, finally, class relations; as well as to the political dimension of democracy as rooted in the materiality of

class relations. Authoritarian statism speaks of the fundamentally political dimension of the economy and not the other way around. Better, the state as a set of social relations articulates class relations with the dimension of power, which includes the dimension of work relations and relations of production (or capitalist regime). The state is not thus completely reducible to the political dimension, which nevertheless is at the heart of it. We will get back to the question of the crisis in its relation to authoritarian statism. In very dense passages, Poulantzas sets out the specificity of statism with respect to totalitarianism. Authoritarian statism reflects a deeply problematic relationship between liberalism and politics, which can only be resolved through the democracy-working class relation, even though it is always mediated by the dimension of government and the specific modes of representative democracy. We will also return to this essential question of the inside/outside relation between popular movements and the state. Poulantzas (2014) sketches this point in a somehow enigmatic manner: “Political crisis is never reducible to the economic crisis, nor a crisis of the State to political crisis.”

According to Poulantzas (2014), in Western Europe and the USA at the end of the Seventies, a “new form of State” emerged.<sup>1</sup> The change implies an extension of state control over “every sphere of socio-economic life,” thus, a blurring of the distinction between a public sphere and a private one, together with a “radical decline of the institutions of political democracy” and a reduction of “formal” liberties (Poulantzas, 2014).

What are the causes of this transformation of the form of the state? Poulantzas can be understood as a theorist of globalisation: the transnationalisation of capital relations of production and the division of labour is a central element in structural changes to the state form, both at the national and global levels. This last point is extremely important: changes in the stages of capitalism are transversal to national and world labour and capital relations, they invest the state form at its different scales. At the global level, Poulantzas recognises the creation of dependent states, which is other (dissimilar) with respect to “the new form of State in the dominant countries.” Authoritarian statism is thus a phenomenon of advanced, liberal countries that hold a prominent position in the uneven world economy. For Keucheyan, in his introduction to the new French edition of *L'Etat, le pouvoir, le socialisme*, Poulantzas’ main intuition against Lenin is the divergences between capitalism and democracy. In *L'Etat et la révolution* (Lenin, 2012), Lenin, writes Keucheyan (2013), argues that democracy is the best political form for capitalism, one that gives it stability. Capitalism would thus be inscribed within democratic institutions. We need

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<sup>1</sup> “In western capitalist societies, the State is undergoing considerable modification. A new form of State is currently being imposed (...). For lack of a better term, I shall refer to this state form as *authoritarian statism*” (Poulantzas, 2014)

to understand Poulantzas' claim that socialism will be democratic or will not be against this thesis. At the end of the 20th century, "democracy becomes a handicap for capitalism" (Keucheyan, 2013). Still, Poulantzas has a more complex vision: the problem of the state form and its national/international articulation is central to the renewed confrontation between the plurality of both democratic demands and institutions and the fragmented capitalist elite.

Let us now look in detail at these two points, which are indeed three.

## **1. The role of the state in the changing relationship between capitalism and democracy: political crisis and the crisis of the state**

The internationalisation of production relations and the division of labour is a political problem, thus affecting the structure of the state itself, or, better yet, its form, which is transnational. Still, we are very distant from international cosmopolitanism, *à la* Kant, or theories of the withering away of the state living its place to the global reign of the economy and the free market. The state is, for Poulantzas, already the expression of economic relations, and authoritarian statism is strictly connected to the economic role of the state. Still, the state's economic role is a question of its political content. Authoritarian statism concerns the political content of the state in mediating the transformation of social classes, political struggles and relations of forces at the national and international scales. The decline of democracy in Europe and the USA is, thus, for Poulantzas, a political issue pertaining to the changing form of the state and not a matter of the political dimension being eroded by the economic one. Only in the last years the issue of European integration has started to be analysed in terms of transformations of statehood rather than as the obsolescence of the problem of the state. Poulantzas' work has been used to reflect upon the contemporary transformation of the state and the state system and the supranationalisation of political and economic integration.

Hirsch and Kannankulam (2011) discuss the centrality of the political form of capitalism in relation to the state's institutional structure and apparatus and the transformation of the state system at the international level. For the two authors, structural constraints on the concrete institutional shape of the state derive from structural constraints (form) concerning relations of production and exploitation. Different institutional configurations, depending on social and political struggles, class relations and historical paths, can be determined by the political form of capitalism.

The relation between institutions, what Hirsch and Kannankulam (2011) name the political form of capitalism and the social form, entails the question of the possible divergence between capitalist relations of production and existing social and institutional

forms. This is, I claim, the problem posed by Poulantzas when discussing the decline of democracy and the conflict between democracy and capitalist relations. The problem is how we theorise the role of the state within it and the issue of the “form” of the state itself.

Hirsch and Kannankulam (2011, p. 17) locate the theoretical question of the “form” on the side of capitalist and social relations, and the state, more precisely the nation-state, is “one possible mode of institutionalisation of the capitalist political form.” Following a Weberian line of argumentation, then Hirsch and Kannankulam (2011) argue that the modern state needs to be defined “not by any historically changing means (function) but through its ends (form) alone.” Thus, the form constitutes the function, and the function problematises the form. Still, here it is unclear if “form” refers to the political form of capitalism or to the dimension of the institutions. How shall we understand the Weberian “form” of the state and its difference with its function? I would suggest naming it the question of the “form of the State” as theoretically different from the political form of capitalism. I propose to define the political form of capitalism as referring to how relations of production and the division of labour influence and condense in the state’s institutions (function). Meanwhile, by “the form of the state,” I would refer to the specific form the condensation of power takes in a given state’s form and in the configuration of the system of states. This is also what Hirsch and Kannankulam (2011) refer to as “the way in which the apparatus of force has become centralized and autonomous makes it a central element of the capitalist political form.” The form of the state refers to the condensation of a “dynamic of power and conflict” that rests on a relational understanding of power. The power dimension, its asymmetries and dynamics, as well as the relative autonomy of power dynamics from relations of production, constitutes the problem of the form of the state and the issue of the crisis of the state’s form as a central element of authoritarian statism. As Poulantzas (2014) writes:

While the economic role of the State, which is inseparable from its political content, has to constitute the guiding thread of an analysis of authoritarian statism, it is very far from providing a sufficient explanation: for we are talking now of an institutional reality that can only be examined in its own right. Authoritarian statism hinges upon those transformations in social classes, political struggles and the relationship of forces which mark the present phase at both the world and national level. (p. 232)

Representative political democracy is declining and leaving place to authoritarian forms, and the form of the state is a central element for transforming this dynamic:

Unless real changes are made to the factors which have induced this new form



of State it scarcely seems possible to realize the Left's aim to challenging authoritarian statism though not only defense but also development and extension of democratic liberties. (Poulantzas, 2014)

The contemporary decline of democracy is not just a crisis of the state but also a political crisis, and I interpret this point as one of the relation among democratic politics, the form of the state, and the political form of capitalism. This is the point at which the issue of authoritarian liberalism comes in.

Authoritarian statism "refers us to the *political crisis and the crisis of the State*" (Poulantzas, 2014).

## 2. State's transformation

The state's role in managing economic relations and its relation to the different stages of capitalism is central to authoritarian statism. The stages of the liberal and the interventionist state are beyond us, and in the late 1970s, Poulantzas saw European and American countries in the stage of monopoly capitalism. The liberal state has a role of "strict *non-intervention*" in the economic sphere. Thus, the liberal state does not partake in the organisation of the division of labour. This is regulated through economic class struggles between the working class and the market forces (Jessop, 1985). The state becomes interventionist to cover for market losses in productivity. The state, with public services such as education, training, health, and scientific research, helps reproduce the labour power and redistributes profits. The interventionist state largely corresponds to a state applying social policies and to the welfare state. It not only intervenes in economic class relations but also aims at building hegemony with respect to the "popular masses" (Jessop, 1985). As Jessop (1985) convincingly argues, the shift of Poulantzas in *SPS* to theories of monopoly capitalism, which he contested in his previous work, does nevertheless not go in the direction of seeing the state as an instrument in the hands of monopoly capital.

The sphere of the state is never external to the economic one, but the specific issue of the form of the state also concerns the articulation of these two spaces, economic and political, as a political demarcation, thus one pertaining precisely to the theorisation and regulation of the role of the state in the relations of production. The changing role of the state is concerned with precisely how it shifts the boundaries between the space of politics and the economy. Sectors that pertained to the social dimensions, such as education, training, but also transport, planning, and health, "are directly integrated, in an expanded and modified form, into the very space-process of the reproduction and

valorization of capital” (Poulantzas, 2014). He continues: “It is this transformation of the economic space-process which shifts the targets of the state activity and brings the state increasingly to bear on the heart of the reproduction of capital”(Poulantzas, 2014). Valorisation of capital and reproduction of labour power constitute new areas that are “directly inserted in the State.”

Poulantzas’ observations go in the direction of an increased role of the state in economic activities and the sphere of social relations. My reading is that the process of authoritarian statism entails a stronger role of the state in sustaining an economic action that blurs the boundaries between the economy and society. Indeed, “The totality of operations of the State are currently being reorganized in relation to its economic role” (Poulantzas, 2014). Still, this does not entail a subordination of the state’s role to its economic functions; rather, I would read it as a political transformation of the economic space through the state’s strategies. Monopoly capitalism is characterised precisely by increasing state intervention (Jessop, 1985). This poses a problem of hegemony:

Every state economic measure therefore has a political content - not only in the general sense that it is necessarily adapted to the political strategy of the hegemonic fraction. Not only are the State’s politico-ideological functions now subordinated to its economic role, but its economic functions directly involve reproduction of the dominant ideology. (Poulantzas, 2014, p. 169)

It is the permanent crisis of hegemony of the phase of monopoly capitalism that leads to the dismantling of traditional democratic forms. Poulantzas sees one central transformation of the state’s form as the reshaping of the national state, which does not dissolve but rather undergoes a process of transnationalisation. The changing global form of the state entails the changing role of individual states in the global structure of the system of states and the crisis of hegemony of monopoly capitalism linked to the latest phase of capitalism. Thus, the state’s role within economic and political globalisation is transformed, as is the form of the state beyond the national scale.

What does the transnationalisation of the state in relation to the globalisation of the economy but more interestingly for our argument in relation to a shift in the state form and the scale of the state (Brenner, 2004) entail for the decoupling of statism and democracy?

The transnationalisation of the economy and the state form to be connected to changes in class relations and within classes. Authoritarian statism is characterised by growing inequalities between the working classes and the dominant classes and by a

growing number of categories of people within the working class, such as old people, youth, and women, who are “left out” of economic growth and social progress, thus threatening popular consensus to representative democracy (Poulantzas, 2014). Changes in the labour process thus imply the deterioration of working-class conditions and a de-linking between democratisation and labour.

Another central shift produced by the internationalisation of the economy and the state is the “sharpening of contradictions within the dominant classes” (Poulantzas, 2014). There are divisions between economic elites that are domestic and those who are more involved with international capital. Struggles, tensions and conflicts arise within the elites at various scales, and these conflicts concern, I add, the form of the state itself and the restructuring of the current state system.

Moreover, the rise of authoritarian tendencies is linked to the instability effect over elite classes in relation to the transnationalisation of the economy and the state. Poulantzas (2014, p. 212) writes: “Taken as a whole. These factors define a structural characteristic of the present phase: namely, *the hidden but permanent instability of the bourgeoisie’s hegemony in the dominant countries.*” Very interestingly, Poulantzas (2014) clearly contests the hypothesis that rising inequalities within the nation-state are to be connected with the formation of a supranational superstate; they rather develop into the opposite, that is, the “awakening of ethnic and national minorities” that fuels the crisis.

Authoritarian statism, in its connection to the transnationalisation of the two regions of the economic and the political, is characterised by a destabilisation and instability of the state itself. The process of the shifting boundaries of the state is central to its development in authoritarian forms in contemporary Western states, and it is linked to its own instability:

In fact, the State’s economic role only assumes the present authoritarian forms because of a paradoxical circumstance. Incompressible beyond certain limits, that role no longer acts as a stabilizing force; on the contrary, it is itself an important factor of destabilization. The paradox lies in the fact that authoritarian statism is not simply the means with which the State equips itself to tackle the crisis, but the response to a crisis which it itself helps to produce. (Poulantzas, 2014)

Political instability and conflicts within the various groups making up the elite are strengthened by successive economic crises and a crisis of hegemony of the elite itself and its project. The universal nature of the law, which is central, according to Poulantzas (2014), to legitimate democratic state power, is undermined by “particularist regulation.” He writes:

I am referring here (...) to the present-day hegemony of monopoly capital, and even to the hidden instability which characterizes that hegemony in the context of structural economic crisis. (...) However, the growing contradictions within the power bloc actually determine the *instability* of monopoly hegemony. (Poulantzas, 2014)

Education and the judicial system, among other institutions, are central arenas of the crisis of hegemony and, at the same time, institutions in which new forms of power and domination emerge (Poulantzas, 2014). The internationalisation of the state system is to be compared to the instability of the elites and their reconfiguration at all scales, including the transnational one. This is a central point for understanding the crisis of hegemony of the parliamentary democratic state.

Authoritarian statism is linked to a specific political crisis and a crisis of the state, and thus, it has the paradoxical configuration of what Poulantzas describes as a strengthening but, at the same time, a weakening of the state itself. The dual movement of strengthening and weakening of the state is related, and, he adds, “it develops in an uneven manner” (Poulantzas, 2014). The decline of the state does not entail a structural crisis; rather, it involves a sharpening of elements of the political crisis that calls for the transformation of the state’s role itself.

Together with the instability of the dominant classes and the strengthening-weakening of the state, there is another trait that Poulantzas attributes to the authoritarian transformation of the Western democratic state, which is original and interesting. It is the category of the “duplication of the state” (*dédoublement* is the original French word):

Probably, for the first time in the history of democratic States, the present form not only contains scattered elements of totalitarianism, but crystallizes their organic disposition in a permanent structure running parallel to the official State. Indeed, this duplication of the State seems to be a structural feature of authoritarian statism, involving not a watertight dissociation between the official State and the structures in question, but their functional overlapping and constant symbiosis. As a result, any fascist-type process that may be unleashed will undoubtedly not take the form that it did it in the past. (Poulantzas, 2014)

The transformation of the democratic state will not come from the outside of it but through it “as a break within the State following lines that have already been traced in its present configuration” (Poulantzas, 2014). The weakening of the state is characterised by the growing role of the state’s administration, with respect to both the parliament and the government, and this produces a crisis of legitimacy.

We shall retain at least three elements from these theoretical considerations:

1. The form of the state is a central site and object of struggles, and it structures political cleavages and the relation between groups, or classes, and power within the democratic state;
2. The form of authoritarian statism Poulantzas reflects upon constantly shifts the border between the inside and the outside of the state. This is true for the national/inter- or transnational dichotomy and the one between the political and the economic sphere. The contemporary state is not only moving across these boundaries, but it is transforming its role and power precisely through shifting these frontiers between the inside and the outside of the state itself;
3. A central feature of what Poulantzas names authoritarian statism and one element that connects it to contemporary debates on authoritarian liberalism is the fact that authoritarian forms that entail an erosion of democracy do not come from forces that are outside of the political sphere of the institutions, but from their internal transformation. This is a central point to make sense of the expression “authoritarian liberalism,” which otherwise would rather seem the union of contradictory terms.

The duplication of the state structure allows for a bifurcation of the institutions of the state from the ones of democracy. Given the weakening of the state as an institution and its universalist character, the duplication of the state serves the purpose of preventing “a rise in popular struggles” (Poulantzas, 2014). Such function is not evident *prima facie*; it becomes visible only in specific moments, exceptional ones, “through sudden jolts” to the functioning of the state’s institutions.

Authoritarian statism is thus radically different from fascism, totalitarianism, or the state of exception, although it can contain elements of these theoretical formations and although there can be historical continuity among them.

Totalitarianism is seen as a radical break in the structure of the state and liberalism. Poulantzas distinguishes authoritarian statism from totalitarianism at the theoretical and political levels. Theoretically, Poulantzas refers to the Frankfurt school, for which totalitarianism is an “all-powerful Moloch-State” breaking up separations between the subjects and the political community itself. Thus, the totalitarian state conceptually differs from authoritarian statism, separating and foreclosing the institutional sphere from citizens. From a political perspective, Poulantzas sees a relation between possibly totalitarian power techniques of the modern state, including the individualisation process, and the spatial and temporal matrices of the nation and the state, still, totalitarianism is not a gradual process, but a radical break with liberalism, characterised

by individualism as well as by Law. Indeed, “Authoritarian statism does not constitute the fulfillment of the totalitarian buds inherent in every capitalist State” (Poulantzas, 2014). Fascism is identified by Poulantzas with the exceptional state, and in this case, too, there is the need for a break in terms of temporal relation as well as in terms of political structures between the democratic state and the exceptional state or fascism, which “is never established in cold blood” and “involves a real *break* in the State.” Another central condition for the outburst of fascism is the defeat of the working class and of popular movements. The growing distance between the popular masses and the state’s structural elements is instead a feature of authoritarian statism: the decline of democracy is also produced by the fact that popular struggles locate themselves against and outside the state rather than within it. This creates what Poulantzas names as “major dislocatory effects within the State itself,” pushing for direct democratic measures rather than for integrating popular democratic demands within the state’s dynamic itself.

In 1933, Hermann Heller published a text entitled *Authoritarian Liberalism?* as a critical response to Carl Schmitt’s conference on *Strong State and Sound Economy* (Cristi, 1998). According to Schmitt, liberalism and fascism can coexist, since the state, being the expression of interests and struggles, is not neutral and can extend in the social sphere beyond the specificity of the political state. The state thus becomes an auto-organisation of society (Da Silva, 2021). The state is thus the interventionist state, assigning to the political the task of regulating the social, through social interventions, for example. Against this “total state,” Schmitt calls for a stronger state capable of diminishing its interferences in the economic, social and cultural spheres. This is how Hermann Heller (2015) summarizes Schmitt’s vision of authoritarian liberalism:

Through these references, a rough estimate of the substance of authoritarian liberalism appears to have been more or less adequately characterised: retreat of the ‘authoritarian’ state from social policy, liberalisation (*Entstaatlichung*) of the economy and dictatorial control by the state of politico-intellectual functions. According to Schmitt’s quite credible reassurances, such a state has to be strong and ‘authoritarian’, for only a state of this type is able to sever the ‘excessive’ connections between the state and the economy. Of course, the German people would not tolerate for long this neoliberal state if it ruled in democratic forms. (p. 299)

Among the spheres of social intervention in the state, education is key for both Heller and Poulantzas. For Heller (2015), public compulsory schooling is precisely one of the key fields from which authoritarian statism would retreat:

Today we hear from Mr. von Papen that one will have to examine the tendencies of cultural policy from the standpoint of downsizing state activity. Indeed, the state was 'not obliged to offer general education as a "handout"; those entitled to it should make sacrifices on their own. That the expenses for elementary school education have tripled since the time prior to the War is, I believe, an untenable situation. (p. 300)

Heller (2015) also refers most of the time in his text to the authoritarian "state" versus the democratic state, and it is only towards the end of the text that he employs the expression of authoritarian "liberalism." I will not discuss Schmitt's position here, and I only retain that the total state to which he refers is a completely different category from Poulantzas' authoritarian statism. Still, Heller's understanding of authoritarian liberalism has some elements in common with Poulantzas' analysis, the most salient of which concerns the tendency of the state to retreat from social policies. The fracture between the social conditions of the working classes and the popular masses and democratic legitimacy is one of the structural causes of authoritarian statism.

The term "liberal state" is used by Poulantzas as the first stage of capitalism, and it signals a non-interventionist state. Poulantzas defines liberalism as a political ideology in *SPS*'s part on the institutional materiality of the state, and more precisely, on individualisation. The representative state is the one that associates the exercise of power with the atomisation of the body politics in individuals, upon whom the institutional material structure of the state, and thus the political space, is exercised. This division of the political body is directly related to the social and material division of labour and the creation of the figure of the citizen-worker. The political form of the state, which translates into the unity of the modern people-nation, and its organisation structure in the shape of bureaucratic and hierarchical centralism translate the matrix of the state and of the corresponding relations of production (Poulantzas, 2014). The process of individualisation related to the division of labour is not only material but also related to ideas and their hegemonic role. This is the point at which liberalism, as a political philosophy, enters into the analysis of Poulantzas (2014) in *SPS* (p. 66). The role of knowledge is central in shaping the state, especially in forging the relations among institutions, social relations and the division of labour. Here, Poulantzas refers to the work of Michel Foucault. Knowledge, ideas and their hegemonic role (or ideology) "find expression in a materiality consubstantial with its (the State) own structure: namely, the materiality of the techniques for exercising power which shape even the corporality of the subjects over whom this power is exercised" (Poulantzas,

2014). Poulantzas identifies two classical traits of political liberalism. One of them is the limitation of power and the need for its legitimation by citizens. The second point, original and counter-intuitive, understands the liberal principle of the separation between public and private power as the specific liberal “dialectic of the state,” understanding the individual and the private sphere as the blind spot and the effect of state power itself. Indeed,

(...) the private individual’s freedom suddenly appears to vanish before the authority of the state which embodies the general will. Indeed, for bourgeois political ideology *there can be no limit based on law or principle to the activity and encroachment of the state* in the so-called sphere of the individual/private. In the last analysis, this sphere appears to have no other function but that of providing a reference point, which is also a *vanishing point*, for the omnipresence and omniscience of the political instance. (Poulantzas, 2014, p. 70)

Poulantzas refers here to “liberal political ideology” and, in particular, to Hobbes’s influence on Locke, Bentham, and John Stuart Mill, among others. Thus, the state is a central structure for political liberalism, and its *locus* is the political construction of the private and the individual.

Poulantzas then closely connects the role of the state, democracy and the question of the limits to power as present in understandings of representative democracy. Indeed, if the individual-private is “the very conduit of the power of the modern State,” the proper limit of power derives from democracy, that is, from

popular struggle and the class relationship of forces. The individual-private (...) limits that power (of the State) through being one of the privileged modern representations of the class relationship *within* the State. The nature of this limit is well known: it is called *representative democracy*. (Poulantzas, 2014, p. 72)

In recent times, Wolfgang Streeck analysed the Schmitt-Heller debate dating back to the Weimar Republic in terms that echo the later analysis of Poulantzas. For Streeck (2015), “the depoliticised condition of a liberal economy is itself an outcome of politics, in the sense of a specific use of the authority of the state for a specific political purpose.” Schmitt argues against representative democracy and its social penchants precisely because it risks giving the working class too much leverage and space.

I propose to understand Poulantzas’ analysis of authoritarian statism and the decline of democracy within Western Europe and the United States as a precious contribution



to contemporary political theory and political philosophy elaborations of authoritarian liberalism according to these possible interpretations:

- A. Authoritarian statism, as defined by Poulantzas, points to the tension between representative democracy and political liberalism: if the power of the state is insulated from the working class and democratic demands, there can be an authoritarian torsion within political liberal nation-states that separates the political space and institutions of the state from democratic struggles;
- B. Understanding the role of the state in relation to the “vanishing point” of politics in liberalism as a political ideology is key to building the relation between authoritarian statism and authoritarian liberalism;
- C. There is an empirical connection between authoritarian liberalism and authoritarian statism, and it can be found in the changing role of the liberal elite (here, we understand “liberal” in a class-related sense and not as a political philosophy) within the state structure. The instability of the liberal elites, their internal conflicts, and the weakening of the state itself that is linked to the crisis of the state as a crisis of the leading class translates into shifts in the state’s structure, precisely in what Poulantzas names the “duplication” (*dédoublement*) of the state apparatuses. Authoritarian liberalism stems thus from the political crisis of the liberal elites and from the changing role of class relations within the material structure of the state itself;
- D. Authoritarian statism, as elaborated by Poulantzas and as it can be related to past (Schmitt-Heller) and recent debates on authoritarian liberalism, describes a transformation that is internal to the representative democracy, at the difference of fascism or totalitarianism, which always requires a radical break with it;
- E. As Poulantzas’s two questions of the inside/outside relation to the state and of its transnationalisation show, authoritarian statism contributes to the role that restructuring the form of the state plays within authoritarian liberalism; and
- F. The decline of democracy within authoritarian statism concerns the political role of the state and its transformation in the articulation between the political and social dimensions of democracy. The role of class struggles and class relations within the matrix of the state is a central feature of representative democracy, and the relationship between the changing stages of capitalism and the form of the state should be read, keeping this issue in mind.

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