

Foreword

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FASCISM AND DICTATORSHIP IN CONTEXT

Why would a Greek Communist (Poulantzas had joined the KKE as a student in Paris) write a long and difficult book about inter-war fascism in the heady days of the late sixties?¹ To answer this question requires placing the work at the intersection of two major ‘external’ historical events, and Poulantzas’s own intellectual development. *Fascism and Dictatorship* was written in the aftermath of the 1967 military coup in Greece, and the student uprising of May 1968 in Paris. While the coup prompted Poulantzas to carefully specify a typology of authoritarian regimes in reaction to what he saw as the erroneous but widely held view on the Greek Left that the regime was fascist, the May events brought home the urgency of an explicit treatment of revolutionary strategy.²

Fascism and Dictatorship, in addition to its connection to the conjuncture of the late sixties, must also be understood in relationship to its author’s intellectual biography. Following his legal training, Poulantzas’s initial project was to blend existentialism with the philosophy of law. It was only in the later sixties that he emerged as a theorist of the State, with the publication of *Political Power and Social Classes*. In this text, Poulantzas dealt with fascism in the context of some extremely interesting, but highly abstract, remarks on the concept of ‘totalitarianism’. However, its main thrust was to establish the ‘Fundamental Characteristics of the Capitalist State’, which Poulantzas treated in an openly functionalist way, arguing that all capitalist States had the dual task of preventing the political organization of the dominated classes, and of organizing the dominant class.³ In part because of his ambition to identify the common features of all these States, Poulantzas neglected the problem of the different forms of capitalist State. In particular, he never posed the question of the conditions under which capitalist

1. I would like to thank David Abraham, Perry Anderson, Sebastian Budgen, Michael Burawoy, and Cihan Tugal for helpful comments.

2. Bob Jessop, *Nicos Poulantzas*, London, 1985, p. 264.

3. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, London, 1978, pp. 188–9.

societies might be ruled through dictatorship or democracy, to paraphrase Barrington Moore. *Fascism and Dictatorship* attempted to address part of this problem: to explain the conditions under which capitalist classes might abandon parliamentary procedures and embrace dictatorship.

FASCISM AND DICTATORSHIP: THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL
AND THE PROBLEM OF FASCISM (THE ARGUMENT)

Poulantzas's book has three foci. It seeks to establish the causes and consequences of fascism in Italy and Germany; it seeks to locate fascism as a type of capitalist State, and finally it seeks to analyse the relationship between the rise of fascism and Comintern policy in the twenties and thirties.⁴ These issues are linked, since, for Poulantzas, the Comintern's incorrect *economistic* understanding of fascism underlay a series of strategic errors, which were in turn part of the causal process by which fascism came to power. Accordingly, *Fascism and Dictatorship* continually shifts between two levels of analysis: it is both a political sociology of the rise of fascism, and a running critique of Marxist theories of it.

Fascism and Dictatorship unfolds in seven parts. The text opens with two introductory studies: 'The Period of Fascism', situating the phenomenon in relationship to the geopolitics of inter-war Europe, and 'Fascism and the Class Struggle' which identifies, within the international context, the specific pattern of class struggle that produced fascist regimes. Following these relatively brief sections are four longer analyses devoted to the connection between fascism and social classes: 'Fascism and the Dominant Classes', 'Fascism and the Working Class', 'Fascism and the Petty Bourgeoisie' and 'Fascism and the Countryside'. The book ends with 'The Fascist State', which offers a typology of the exceptional capitalist State and locates fascist regimes within it.

What is the central argument? Poulantzas claims that fascist regimes arose in inter-war Europe from the political disintegration of the German and Italian dominant classes, combined with a failed revolutionary breakthrough by the working class. In short, the two principle classes of capitalism – the major owners of means of production and industrial workers – failed in their respective bids to establish hegemony over German and Italian society. This double failure set free small producers, traders and salaried employees (the petty bourgeoisie) to act as an autonomous social force in

4. The present volume, pp. 11–12.

the fascist parties. (Small agrarian producers and the agricultural proletariat played a similar, but less important, role for Poulantzas.) Fascism then carried the petty bourgeoisie to power, allowing it to act as the 'class in charge of the State', in which capacity it established the hegemony of big monopoly capital before retreating from the scene as the fascist party itself became increasingly subordinated by both the State and capital. If this is the general claim, how is it developed in Poulantzas's book?

The Period of Fascism

Poulantzas, in a modification of Horkheimer's famous dictum, writes that 'he who does not wish to discuss imperialism ... should stay silent on the subject of fascism'.⁵ The rise of imperialism, which Poulantzas sees as rooted in the emergence of large monopoly enterprises (monopoly capital) whose productive capacities outstrip the domestic market, requires an interventionist rather than liberal State and produces a new 'dominant ideology' shot through with Social Darwinism.⁶ This transition to the imperialist stage of capitalism forms the general context within which fascist regimes arise.

While this transformation from liberal to imperialist capitalism was general, fascist regimes emerged only in Italy and Germany, defined as the next two weakest links of the 'imperialist chain' after Russia.⁷ Because Bismarck, and therefore the landed aristocracy, unified Germany, the bourgeoisie, although economically strong, remained politically weak.⁸ Furthermore, agriculture remained backward; after the war, productivity in this sector reattained 1913 levels only in 1929. These internal problems made access to world markets particularly important for German industry. And yet, again as a consequence of its 'lateness', Germany was 'prevented from carving out a colonial empire for herself'.⁹ In sum, Germany needed colonies but faced seemingly insuperable obstacles to securing them. 'Germany's advanced "economic" development was one of the basic elements of this weakness',¹⁰ because, given its limited home market, German industry's hothouse development only exacerbated the country's economic disequilibrium. In Italy the bourgeoisie was economically weak but politically strong.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Unlike Germany, where the landed aristocracy unified the country, in Italy the bourgeoisie did so. However, unification ‘could only be accomplished if the bourgeoisie had *decisive political weight* over the Southern landowners’.¹¹ Thus, the Italian bourgeoisie paid for its precocious hegemony by maintaining ‘feudalism’ in the south. The southern *agrari* allowed the northern bourgeoisie to run the State as long as it did not pursue agrarian reform. In any case, the economic consequences of this different political configuration were the same as in Germany: a restricted home market, together with a highly State-dependent industrial sector.

The two cases, to summarize Poulantzas’s argument, are similar in their position within the imperialist chain of States. Both were latecomers to the imperial game, and their leaderships pursued strategies of development that tended to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the disequilibrium between industrial production and domestic demand.

Poulantzas then turns to an analysis of Comintern theories of fascism. His main point is that these shifting interpretations all tried to explain fascism in terms of a linear conception of economic development; as a result, they failed to specify the similarity between Italy and Germany that consisted in their *unevenness*, not their strikingly different levels of economic development. (This point is much the same as Trotsky’s, a similarity that Poulantzas downplays for political reasons.) Thus, initially, the Third International attributed the rise of fascism in Italy to economic backwardness, and the Comintern confidently concluded that fascism would not come to Germany.¹² When this prediction proved false, the Comintern argued, in flat contradiction to its previous analysis of Italy, that national socialism was an expression of the ‘rotten-ripe’ character of German capitalism.¹³ These incompatible explanations (fascism growing out of both backwardness and rotten ripeness) expressed an underlying economism that tried to link fascism directly to a particular stage of capitalist development.

Economism vitiated Communist Party strategy throughout the inter-war period. In the early twenties the economic interpretation of imperialism led to the conclusion that ‘revolution was on the agenda in the European imperialist countries’. But this analysis lacked any specific understanding of ‘the concrete conjuncture of the class struggle’.¹⁴ Economism continued

11. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

during the rightist period of ‘relative stabilization’ in the mid-twenties, but was used to make an opposite political argument. The Communist parties had shifted away from ‘ultra-leftism’ to an equally debilitating ‘ultra-rightism’. Finally, after the Sixth Congress of 1928, which canonized the notorious idea of equivalence between social democracy and fascism, the Comintern declared the opening of a ‘Third Period’, in which revolution was again held to be on the agenda everywhere.

These theoretical confusions led to a series of strategic misunderstandings: fascism appeared variously as a passing episode, a positive development indicating the weakness of the bourgeoisie, a counter-revolution against a proletarian advance or, finally, a necessary stage in the development of socialism.¹⁵ The correct approach to this problem, according to Poulantzas, was Lenin’s. He had emphasized that in the period of imperialism, both interstate and interclass conflicts would be heightened; from this starting point he drew the conclusion that class struggle would be particularly decisive in determining outcomes for all the countries in the ‘Imperialist chain’. Thus, Lenin developed a structural analysis of the conditions under which the contingency of class struggle would be of decisive importance. By thus inscribing a theory of the specific importance of class struggle within a particular stage of capitalist development, he could break with economism, lay the foundations for an adequate theoretical and strategic response to the challenge of fascism, and retain impeccably Marxist credentials.

Fascism and the Class Struggle

Accordingly, the second section of Poulantzas’s book focuses directly on class struggle. It contains two brief chapters defining the character of the political crisis to which fascism was a response, and sketching out a periodization.

The first of these chapters specifies the fascist State as a type of exceptional capitalist State. The author rejects both Thalheimer and Gramsci’s conceptions of fascism as Bonapartism or Caeserism respectively, because they incorrectly explain fascism as the result of a stalemate among the working class and the bourgeoisie. Poulantzas¹⁶ holds instead that ‘[t]he working class had already been thoroughly defeated by the time fascism came to power’. For Poulantzas, as for Trotsky, fascism does not correspond to a class ‘equilibrium’, but to a total defeat of the working class.

Finally, Poulantzas provides a schematic periodization through which all

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

fascist regimes pass: *The period from the start of the process to the point of 'no return', the period from the point of no return until fascism comes into power, the first period of fascism in power, and finally the period of fascist stabilization.* As I explain below, each of these periods is associated with a specific balance of power among the proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie and big monopoly capital.

Fascism and the Dominant Classes

The core of *Fascism and Dictatorship* consists of parts three through six, which are devoted to explaining the relationship between fascism and social classes. Each section begins with a general conceptual discussion, followed by two case studies. Poulantzas's general argument can be thought of as three superimposed curves of hegemonic development: a descending curve that describes the development of the working class as it retreats from its ambitious revolutionary goals of the immediate post-war period to increasingly economic demands, an ascending curve that describes the development of monopoly capital as it moves from an economic corporate phase to a more political one, and a parabola that describes the hegemonic rise and subsequent fall of the petty bourgeoisie. Intersecting the three curves are two key

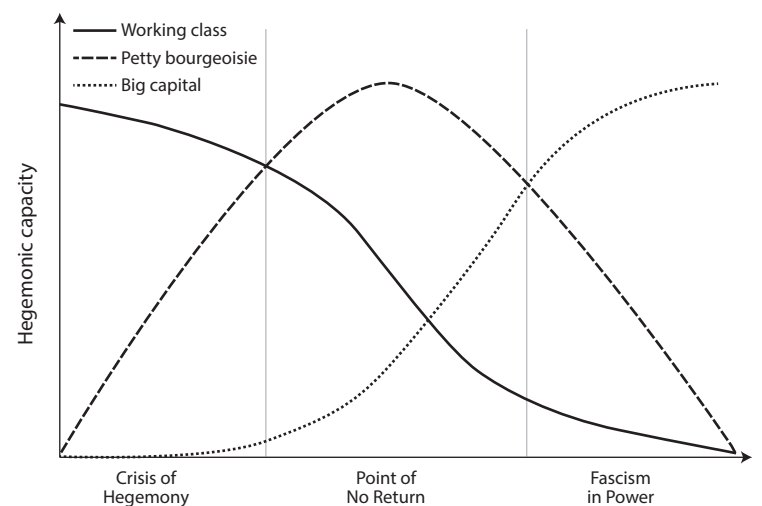


Figure 1. The Central Argument of *Fascism and Dictatorship*

turning points around which Poulantzas's narrative is organized: the point of no return and the seizure of power.

Poulantzas argues that fascism, in the first place, 'corresponds to' a crisis of hegemony within the dominant class. A functioning capitalist State requires a specific sector or fraction of the capitalist class to assume a dominant political position, which determines the character of the 'power bloc'. As he puts it, 'the power bloc, like every other alliance, does not generally consist of classes and fractions of "equal importance", sharing the crumbs of power among themselves. It can only function on a regular basis in so far as the dominant class or fraction of a class imposes *its own particular domination* on the other members of the alliance in power, in short in so far as it succeeds in imposing its *hegemony* and cementing them together under its leadership'.¹⁷ During the 'conjuncture of fascism' this process of bloc formation fails. Instead the dominant class's relationship to its erstwhile political representatives frays, while multiple informal channels of communication between the dominant class and the State proliferate, leading to a split between 'formal' and 'real' power.¹⁸ Eventually, under the aegis of fascism, a new hegemonic fraction of the dominant class emerges: 'big monopoly capital' or 'finance capital', around which a new power bloc forms.¹⁹

On this basis, Poulantzas attempts to more closely specify the relationship between fascism and the dominant class in different periods. In the first period, *from the start of the process to the point of no return*, fascism forms a loose alliance with some members of the dominant class; however, the dominant class as a whole prefers other parties to the fascist party. In the second period, *from the point of no return until fascism comes to power*, the party presides over an alliance of the petty bourgeoisie and big monopoly capital. In the third period, *the first period of fascism in power*, the petty bourgeoisie 'makes its debut as the class in charge of the State', but real power lies in the hands of monopoly capital. Finally, in the *period of the stabilization of fascism*, 'monopoly capital ... establishes its hegemony and achieves the status of ruling class'.²⁰ To summarize Poulantzas's general analysis here, fascism arises from a crisis of hegemony within the dominant class; furthermore, it fulfills the function of raising big monopoly capital to

17. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 73–5.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 72–3.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

the dominant position, around which the power bloc reforms through the conduit of a period of petty bourgeois leadership.

How does Poulantzas use this scheme to understand the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy? According to the author, there were three main conflicts between ‘the classes and fractions of classes in power’ in the period leading up to the collapse of the Brüning government in 1930.²¹ The first conflict was between ‘the bourgeoisie and the large scale landowners’.²² Here, there were three major sources of tension: the overall decline of agriculture as a share of Germany’s GDP; the government fixing of rent on land, which led to a transfer of surplus from agriculture to industry; and the growing indebtedness of big agriculturists to finance capital as mechanization proceeded.²³ A second conflict pitted big monopoly capital against ‘medium capital’.²⁴ A third economic conflict occurred within big monopoly capital between banking capital and industry.²⁵

Nazi economic policy, according to Poulantzas, was able to establish the hegemony of big monopoly capital while at the same time providing substantial benefits to medium capital through the general stimulus to the economy provided by re-armament, and through specific policies designed to protect smaller firms.²⁶ Breaking with the official Comintern definition of fascism as the ‘dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinist, and imperialist elements of finance capital’, Poulantzas argues that fascism in fact was based on a reconstituted power bloc, ‘an effective *reorganization* and redistribution of the balance of forces among the dominant classes and fractions’.²⁷ Indeed, as Poulantzas points out, this reorganization was made possible by the rapid tempo of economic development under the Nazis. Thus, as he writes,²⁸

[Nazism] represented industrial development, technological innovation, and an increase in the productivity of labour – but all while promoting the *expanded reproduction* of the conditions of capitalist production, that is reinforcing class exploitation and domination.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 93–4.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

28. *Ibid.*

German fascism, in a basic economic sense, was clearly a progressive development for Poulantzas.

Poulantzas then turns to discuss the political crisis that he sees as rooted in these intra-dominant class conflicts. During the early twenties, big monopoly capital established its economic domination but failed to secure political hegemony. Instead, each fraction of capital pursued its interests through different parties and ministries. The brief Cuno ministry was 'a direct emanation from big capital'; the Centre Party, the Democrats and the Bavarian Catholics represented light industry; the large landowners organized themselves in the German Nationalists.²⁹ Underneath this fragmented political scene, direct economic pressure groups and paramilitary organizations sought to influence the executive.³⁰

Poulantzas³¹ then turns to an analysis of 'the ideological crisis affecting the power alliance'. Germany's path to capitalism, running through Bismarck's 'revolution from above', blocked the German bourgeoisie 'from forming a specific ideology to dominate the German social formation'.³² In short, there was only a weak tradition of German liberalism. When the possibility to establish a liberal ideology appeared during the Weimar period 'it was already too late' for three reasons: the catastrophic humiliation of the Versailles treaty, the threat of revolution embodied in the November uprising, and the general transition away from liberalism accompanying the rise of monopoly capitalism.³³ As a result, an ideological crisis ensued within the dominant classes, pitting technocratic imperialist principles against feudal romantic philosophy. This ideological struggle within the power bloc became ever more acute during the first period of the rise of fascism.³⁴

Fascism resolved these various economic, political and ideological conflicts. As Poulantzas states,³⁵

With the coming to power of national socialism, the political hegemony of big capital was secured, the dislocation between political hegemony and

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–103.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 106–107.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

economic domination was resolved, and the growth of its [big capital's] economic domination accelerated.

This occurred in two periods: a first in which the petty bourgeoisie acted as the '*ruling class*', and a second in which the party was subordinated to the State and the petty bourgeoisie shifted to the position of a '*supporting class*'.³⁶

The economic conflicts within the power bloc in Italy were more severe than in Germany for two reasons. First, the split between big capital and the large landholders was deeper since Italian agriculture was truly semi-feudal, and regional divisions between the big agrarians and the industrialists were more pronounced.³⁷ Furthermore, the conflict between medium and big capital was sharper, primarily because medium capital was stronger in Italy than in Germany.³⁸ Finally, the conflict within 'big capital' between banks and industry was also more severe because banking retained a more speculative character in the Latin country and was more tightly linked to industry.³⁹

Due to this balance of forces, Poulantzas claims that resistance to the hegemony of big capital mounted by both medium capital and the landowners was stronger in Italy than in Germany. Accordingly, parliamentary government, here implicitly equated with the interests of small and medium capital, lasted longer, abolished definitively only in 1925.⁴⁰ Furthermore, there was no dramatic rupture between the political representatives of medium capital and their social base as in Germany. The rise of Italian fascism was much more continuous and gradual than national socialism, reflecting the generally weaker position of monopoly capital in Italy.⁴¹

Poulantzas also emphasizes Italy's distinctiveness in the realm of ideology. Mazzinian bourgeois liberals, not landowners, unified the Italian peninsula, meaning that liberalism was stronger throughout the twenties and thirties in Italy than in Germany. The ideological crisis of the 1920s in Italy thus pitted a transformed liberal ideology against a Catholic feudal ideology with very little input from the agrarians.⁴²

36. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 126–7.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Fascism, to summarize, arose in the context of a particularly fragmented dominant class in both Italy and Germany. During the period of stabilization it reconstituted the power bloc around big monopoly capital – but the precise nature of this transition was determined by the strength of big monopoly capital itself. Where it was strong, as in Germany, the transition was abrupt and radical. Where big monopoly capital was weaker, as in Italy, the transition was smoother.

Fascism and the Working Class

Part four of *Fascism and Dictatorship* traces the relationship between working class mobilization and fascism. This process follows the reverse course from the drive to hegemony that describes the arc of big monopoly capital. Thus, the rise of fascism corresponds to ‘a significant failure by the working class to achieve the political objectives imposed by and attainable in a situation of open crisis’.⁴³ This failure leads the working class to revert to a series of economic demands while abandoning broader political engagements; at the same time ‘the struggle of the bourgeoisie against the working class assumes an increasingly political nature’.⁴⁴

Poulantzas then traces the ‘ideological crisis’ within the revolutionary organizations of the working class. The rise of fascism ‘corresponds’ to a split between revolutionary organizations (tacitly equated with the Italian and German Communist parties) and the working class. Furthermore, defeat of the revolutionary movement creates an ideological crisis in which petty bourgeois ideologies come to inflect revolutionary organizations manifesting themselves in anarchism, spontaneism, putschist jacquerie and ‘left opportunism’.⁴⁵

The analysis then turns to a discussion of the role of social democracy in the rise of fascism. Poulantzas argues that the ‘rise of fascism characteristically saw the persistence and extension of the influence of social democracy on the working class’.⁴⁶

During its seizure of power, fascist groups repress working class organizations physically; but after the establishment of the regime, ‘repression is

43. Ibid., p. 140.

44. Ibid., p. 142.

45. Ibid., p. 147.

46. Ibid.

always governed by its ideological function'.⁴⁷ This ideology goes through two phases. In the first phase, 'the working class side of fascist ideology is very strong'.⁴⁸ In the second, this 'left wing of fascism' is defeated and the new authentically petty bourgeois ideology of corporatism replaces it.⁴⁹

The process of working class defeat in Germany begins with the crushing of the Spartacist uprising in 1918 and 1919 and continues through the early twenties until the 1923 Cuno strikes.⁵⁰ The defeat of this last action opened a period of stabilization with real, but not revolutionary, gains on the part of workers: universal suffrage, the eight-hour day, factory committees, rights of association for agricultural workers and basic democratic liberties.⁵¹ This period lasted until 1927, when fascism began to emerge as a mass movement. After this point, and with increasing intensity following the 1929 crisis, the working class itself underwent a two-fold ideological crisis. First, the KPD (Germany's Communist Party) began to behave like a social democratic party; at the same time, the working class was influenced by 'the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie in revolt'.⁵² The NSDAP (Germany's Nazi Party) exploited this degeneration by making seemingly radical appeals to the working class through the paramilitary SA and in the fascist unions.⁵³

Poulantzas's analysis then turns to a consideration of the policies of the SPD (Germany's Social Democratic Party) and the KPD. Both parties suffered, in different ways, from 'economism'. In the SPD this manifested in a shift toward a purely economic struggle, the refusal to use the *Reichsbanner*, and the party's obscene collaboration with the NSDAP during the Festival of Labour on 1 May 1933.⁵⁴

The KPD, in contrast, laboured under the shibboleth of 'social fascism': the idea that social democracy was the left wing of fascism. This prevented the party from establishing 'a rank and file united front' in which cooperation could have been built between the social democratic masses and the KPD.⁵⁵

47. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 171–2.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

Theoretically, Poulantzas argues that this strategic error was rooted in ‘economist catastrophism’, which, it was held, ‘would bring the “majority” of the working class into the ranks of the KPD’.⁵⁶

Poulantzas then turns to a more direct analysis of the relationship between national socialism and the working class. In the period before the Nazi seizure of power, the party had a weak foothold especially among organized workers.⁵⁷ Still, with its ‘left wing’ (the Strasser brothers) the NSDAP was able to neutralize working class militancy.⁵⁸ Furthermore, during their seizure of power, the Nazis concentrated on the political organizations of the Left but left the unions largely intact.

During the regime, Poulantzas argues, Nazism offered full employment to the working class and successfully pursued a strategy of internal differentiation by encouraging wage dispersion.⁵⁹ Importantly, the Nazis maintained a union apparatus indicating that ‘the bourgeois State can in principle do without an ideological apparatus of the ‘party’ type especially intended for the working class’, but ‘it is absolutely incapable of doing without a ‘trade-union’ type apparatus’.⁶⁰ (Had Poulantzas lived into the neoliberal era, one might wonder whether he would have retained this view.)

There was an ‘open crisis’ in Italy and perhaps ‘an objectively revolutionary situation’ in the immediate post-war period, with land and factory seizures and the flowering of soviet organizations across the country.⁶¹ Yet here the collapse of the revolutionary wave did not lead to a period of relative stabilization, as in Germany in the twenties, but directly to the rise of fascism.

Two distinctive features of Italy stand out. First, the ‘politico-ideological crisis’ of the working class did not really take the form of a reformist and bureaucratized social democratic party. Rather, in Italy the crisis manifested itself in revolutionary syndicalism and socialist ‘Maximalism’. Syndicalism tried to develop a political strategy resting directly on unions and circumventing the institution of the party. Poulantzas emphasizes the influence of Sorel’s ideas on a group of radical socialist intellectuals in the first decade of the twentieth century, and registers the trajectory of many of these figures

56. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 189–90.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 194–5.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 198–9.

from socialism to fascism.⁶² Maximalism, in contrast, was similar to the ‘economic catastrophism’ of the KPD: an expectant waiting for the revolutionary cataclysm, combined with a complete absence of concrete preparation.⁶³

Poulantzas then turns to the strategic errors of the PCI (Italy’s Communist Party), which he divides into two: the Bordiga group espoused *infantile leftism*, a less dire condition than the ‘sham ultra-leftism’ of the KPD. Still, like the KPD in the period after 1923, the Bordiga wing of the PCI failed to understand that after 1921, the Italian working class was on the defensive.⁶⁴ Poulantzas generally has a much more positive view of Gramsci, who ‘seems to have understood the correct relationship between economic and political struggle’.⁶⁵ Generally, however, the Comintern in the twenties was unable to clarify ‘the relationship between the economic and the political struggles’.⁶⁶ The key problem here is that it failed to emphasize the strategic importance of workers’ councils as the organizational link between economics and politics.⁶⁷

Poulantzas then provides a brief sketch of the working class under fascism, pointing out that the general strategy of Italian fascism was similar to its German counterpart: fragmentation. But the author also notes the relative failure of Italian fascism to penetrate the working class.⁶⁸ Poulantzas’s Italian chapter is then followed by a strange and opaque appendix devoted to the USSR and the Comintern, whose central claim is that ‘economism’ and the ‘abandonment of proletarian internationalism’ were a result of the consolidation of a ‘Soviet bourgeoisie’ during the late twenties.⁶⁹

Fascism and the Petty Bourgeoisie

The fifth section of Poulantzas’s book examines the relationship between fascism and the petty bourgeoisie: a notoriously thorny social category. Poulantzas begins his discussion by distinguishing between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ petty bourgeoisie. The old petty bourgeoisie consists of small-scale producers and traders: historical remainders that derive from pre-capitalist

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 203–204.

63. *Ibid.*, pp. 204–205.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 218–20.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 223–33.

modes of production. Alongside them is a 'new' petty bourgeoisie made up of 'non-productive salaried employees' and government workers.⁷⁰ The two groups form part of the same social class not because of their common position in the relations of production, but because 'their different economic positions generally have the same effects at the political and ideological level'.⁷¹ Since this class issues from different economic positions and becomes a political actor through ideological and political processes, it is strategically central because its political orientation depends on the organizations, strategies and ideological struggles of the two main social classes in capitalist society: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.⁷²

This does not mean that the petty bourgeoisie is, ideologically, a blank slate. It is attracted instead to three ideological elements: status quo anti-capitalism, which demands equal access to private property in the case of the old petty bourgeoisie, and income redistribution and 'social justice' in the case of the new petty bourgeoisie; the myth of the ladder, which takes the form of a demand for a renewal of the elites in the case of the old petty bourgeoisie, and of meritocracy in the new petty bourgeoisie; and, finally, power fetishism, a belief in a neutral and beneficent State which stands above social classes.⁷³

After this general discussion, Poulantzas locates the petty bourgeoisie more precisely in the historical context of the inter-war period. The period of monopoly capitalism produces an economic crisis in both the old and new petty bourgeoisie. The old petty bourgeoisie is threatened with pauperization as competition from larger, more competitive producers drives out small business; the new petty bourgeoisie, in contrast, expands because of the need for educated workers in both State and private enterprise – nonetheless, this group also suffers from increased unemployment.⁷⁴

In the political and ideological crisis immediately after the war, 'a large part of the petty bourgeoisie clearly swings over to the side of the working class'.⁷⁵ However, this alliance fails because of the defeat of the working class in the objectively revolutionary situation following the First World War, 'and the lack of a specific communist policy of alliance with the petty

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 237–40.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

72. *Ibid.*, pp. 244–6.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 240–3.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

bourgeoisie'. The petty bourgeoisie then shifts its support toward social democracy during the period of 'stabilization'.⁷⁶ Subsequently, the petty bourgeoisie becomes disillusioned with social democracy as well because 'it fails to defend its [the petty bourgeoisie's] interests'.⁷⁷

As the petty bourgeoisie detaches itself from the working class following the latter's descending hegemonic arc, it becomes available for a new alliance with big monopoly capital. However, initially this alliance fails because the political organizations of the dominant class are themselves undergoing a crisis of representation. The existing bourgeois parties thus, just like the working class parties, are unable to incorporate the petty bourgeoisie.

The fascist party emerges as the organizational vehicle of the petty bourgeoisie, a class isolated from both a working class that has lost its hegemonic impetus and from a dominant class that has yet to regain it. The party 'represents' the petty bourgeoisie in a particular way, however. Its ties to the class are organizational and ideological rather than based on 'real class interests'. The petty bourgeoisie constitutes the overwhelming majority of the staff of the fascist party. This, claims Poulantzas,⁷⁸ 'distinguishes them from the 'bourgeois' parties which traditionally represent the petty bourgeoisie'. The second way that the fascist parties represent the petty bourgeoisie is that they are 'petty bourgeois in the ideological sense',⁷⁹ meaning they espouse the status quo anti-capitalism and power fetishism.

The 'historical role of fascism' in any case is to 'achieve an alliance between big capital and the petty bourgeoisie'.⁸⁰ Fascism plays this role by replacing 'the dominant bourgeois ideology' with a 'petty bourgeois ideological sub-ensemble', which 'cement[s] back together the social formations in question'.⁸¹ This replacement is possible because of a deep compatibility between petty bourgeois ideology and the ideology of the dominant class in the period of imperialism. Poulantzas identifies eleven points of compatibility ranging from 'statolatry' based on the petty bourgeoisie's 'power fetishism' and the dominant class's need for an interventionist State in the age of imperialism, to a corporatism that is based on both the 'guild utopia' of the petty bourgeoisie and the subordination

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

of medium to large capital which reflects the interests of big monopoly capital.⁸²

Fascism has a two-fold economic effect on the petty bourgeoisie. By promoting the interests of big capital, fascism harms both the traditional and the new petty bourgeoisie because it exacerbates the crisis that was already underway after the war. However, one of the most important developments in the fascist period is the expansion of State employment, which partially compensates for the economic pressures created by concentration of capital. As Poulantzas⁸³ argues, ‘this was one of the reasons for the support the petty bourgeoisie gave to the fascist State’. Indeed, he suggests that there were even tendencies within fascism for the petty bourgeoisie to ‘develop as a *State bourgeoisie*’.⁸⁴

The historical material in this section is briefer, and more sketchily presented than for the other classes. The old petty bourgeoisie in Germany declines substantially in the early decades of the twentieth century, while the new petty bourgeoisie fluctuates between seventeen and fourteen percent of the population between 1907 and 1933.⁸⁵ During the Wilhelmine period a “‘transformed” feudal ideology’ dominates the petty bourgeoisie as a whole.⁸⁶ In the radical period from the war’s end until 1923, ‘many petty bourgeoisie ... went over to communism’, but thereafter they shifted first to social democracy, and then to national socialism.⁸⁷

The Italian petty bourgeoisie differs ideologically from its German counterpart because instead of a ‘transformed feudal ideology’, the petty bourgeoisie first rallies to a ‘Garibaldian’ ideology, then subsequently to communism after the war, followed by social democracy and fascism.⁸⁸ Due to the lack of feudal ideological residues in Italy, fascist ideology takes a different form than in Germany, with ‘the relative absence of the antisemitic and racist aspect’ and the greater importance of liberal nationalism.⁸⁹

The author also argues that the social makeup of the Italian fascist party diverges from national socialism. While ‘the medium and higher level *cadres*

82. *Ibid.*, pp. 254–6.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

87. *Ibid.*

88. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

of the party ... were overwhelmingly drawn from the petty bourgeoisie', because of its organizational links to the working class and because of its ideology, 'the fascist party had a higher proportion of members both of really bourgeois origin and of proletarian origin than the national socialist party'.⁹⁰

Fascism and the Countryside

The sixth section of Poulantzas's book addresses the connection between fascism and the rural class struggle. The analysis is broadly parallel to that of the petty bourgeoisie. In the period immediately after the war, the agricultural proletariats of both Germany and Italy shift to the Left; but as a consequence of the failure of either the socialists or the communists to strike an alliance with the agrarian lower classes on the basis of land reform, these groups subsequently move right. The fascist parties make demagogic appeals to rural direct producers on the basis of an ideology of the defence of the countryside against the cities.⁹¹

Fascism in power, however, does nothing for peasants or for the rural proletariat; the regimes subordinate the interests of small holders to those of large owners and monopoly capital, and the agrarian proletariat suffers wage cuts in both cases.⁹²

The Fascist State

The final section of Poulantzas's book locates the fascist State as a type of capitalist State. Fascist States are capitalist States because they retain 'the relative separation of the economic from the political, and the relative autonomy of the State from the dominant class and fractions'⁹³ characteristic of all such States. The fascist State, further, is an exceptional capitalist State because it acts to 'reorganize hegemony and the power bloc' through a suspension of the relative autonomy of the ideological State apparatus from the repressive State apparatuses, and the relative autonomy of different ideological apparatuses from one another.⁹⁴ Finally, the fascist State is a particular type of exceptional capitalist State; its specificity consists in the existence of a party formally outside the State that pressures the State apparatus proper, as well

90. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

91. *Ibid.*, pp. 279–280.

92. *Ibid.*, pp. 290, 295.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

as the emergence of a political police within the administration.⁹⁵ The party has the task of reconsolidating the hegemony of the dominant class, as well as reconsolidating a State apparatus weakened by the dislocation of formal and real power in the period prior to the rise of fascism.

The case studies in this section establish the decisive importance of the fascist parties in both Italy and Germany. Their role, according to Poulantzas, is to both reestablish the unity of the State apparatus, and organize the alliance between the petty bourgeoisie and big monopoly capital characteristic of fascism. Poulantzas then interprets the declining importance of the party as a result of the declining importance of the petty bourgeoisie within the fascist power bloc as big monopoly capital comes increasingly to the fore.

Such is the general argument of *Fascism and Dictatorship*. It places the rise of fascism in the context of three intersecting arcs of hegemonic development, and assigns these regimes the role of establishing the hegemony of big monopoly capital. Distinctively, Poulantzas explains fascism as the result of a political crisis affecting all classes of capitalist society, not as an expression or tool of monopoly capital.

How was this analysis received?

FASCISM AND DICTATORSHIP: IMMEDIATE RECEPTION

Initial reactions to Poulantzas's book were mixed. American social science proved utterly unable to grasp the book's arguments. In a snarky and silly review, A. James Gregor praised Poulantzas's recognition of high growth under fascism, but concluded that the author had failed to recognize that his analysis was incompatible with 'Marxism'.⁹⁶ A more good-natured reaction in *Contemporary Sociology* was equally intellectually empty.⁹⁷ Part of the problem is that these readers assumed that a 'Marxist' approach to fascism must attempt to establish a close personal link between fascist movements and parties and major industrialists. Thus, to the extent that Poulantzas rejected this framing, he must not really be Marxist. This reception is interesting in what it shows about the intellectual context of the late seventies.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

96. A. James Gregor, 'Fascism and Dictatorship by Nicos Poulantzas', *American Political Science Review* 71(4), 1977, p. 1650.

97. Marvin D. Koenigsberg, 'Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism', *Contemporary Sociology* 5(4), 1976, pp. 488–9.

For scholars of my generation it's tempting to regard this decade as a distant golden age of Marxist theorizing and debate. But competence in Marxist debates on the State was quite rare even at that time, and was mostly the purview of younger, less established scholars. As these reactions show, it was common for professional social scientists to demonstrate in published work total incompetence in dealing with such arguments.

Anson G. Rabinbach, one of the cofounders of *New German Critique*, offered a much more serious analysis, together with a precise encapsulation of Poulantzas's political project. Rabinbach claimed that Poulantzas's book was an unsuccessful combination of Marxified structural functionalism with Maoist voluntarism. He saw this as an intellectual reflection of the conditions of the seventies, in which '[t]he eclipse of the radical opposition in the West has forced the now somewhat jaded generation of the 1960s to seek its red star over China'.⁹⁸

Jane Caplan provided by far the most serious historical critique, however. After a precise and sympathetic exposition of Poulantzas's argument, Caplan pointed out that for Germany, Poulantzas had failed to establish his periodization – which, to recall, postulated a 'first period of fascism in power' characterized by 'instability and ambiguity' as the petty bourgeoisie and big capital jostled for position, and a 'period of fascist stabilization' in which 'fascism is purified of its class origins'.⁹⁹ Caplan's central point was that there was no 'period of fascist stabilization', at least not in Germany. Indeed, after 1938, German fascism became *less*, not more, stable. As she characterized the situation, 'research into the workings of the Nazi government has strongly suggested that it was characterized by an extreme diffusion and dislocation of authority, and a highly disordered proliferation of agencies and hierarchies'.¹⁰⁰ Poulantzas's failure to grasp the developmental character of the regime led him to completely neglect one of the most obvious features of it: its drive to unleash a European-wide war.¹⁰¹

The most intense theoretical engagement with Poulantzas's book came from Ernesto Laclau: an Argentinian historian and political theorist who later would win world renown for his text, coauthored with Chantal Mouffe,

98. Anson G. Rabinbach, 'Poulantzas and the Problem of Fascism', *New German Critique* 8, 1976, p. 170.

99. The present volume, pp. 66–7.

100. Jane Caplan, 'Nicos Poulantzas as Historian', *History Workshop* 3, 1977, p. 90.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Laclau agreed with much of Poulantzas's argument, but claimed that it suffered from a debilitating class reductionist (although not economicist) analysis of ideology. Poulantzas, Laclau argued, treated ideologies as ensembles of elements, each of which could be assigned to a particular social class. From this perspective 'liberalism' was the ideology of the bourgeoisie in the phase of competitive capitalism, whereas 'nationalism', 'racism', and 'statolatry' were elements of the bourgeoisie (and also the petty bourgeoisie) in the phase of imperialism.¹⁰²

Poulantzas's analytic procedure was exactly the reverse of the correct synthetic procedure, and led to a mistaken political strategy, argued Laclau. In fact, the 'elements' of ideology had no necessary class belonging, but the 'articulation of those elements in a concrete ideological discourse' was class determined.¹⁰³

Having failed to correctly specify the class character of ideologies, Poulantzas had drawn incomplete and partially incorrect strategic lessons from the fascist experience. The author was right, according to Laclau, to assign the failure of revolutionary socialism in the immediate post-war period to 'economism'. This undermined the Communist parties' ability to establish an alliance with the petty bourgeoisie, thereby throwing open the door to a petty bourgeoisie-big capital alliance. But, argued Laclau, Poulantzas had left economism itself unexplained. In fact, he argued, economism was rooted in class reductionism, the attempt to link every ideological element to a specific class. This, in turn, was 'linked to the class practices of the workers' movement before the First World War'.¹⁰⁴ At this early stage of development, it was natural for working class organizations to emphasize their separation from all aspects of bourgeois culture. However, this had the unfortunate consequence of ignoring the autonomy of 'popular-democratic interpellations' from class connotations.¹⁰⁵ By abandoning the terrain of popular democratic struggle, both the reformist socialists and the communists bore a heavy responsibility for the rise of fascism. In clear anticipation of Eurocommunism, Laclau argues that the strategic lesson of fascism was the need to combine the struggle for socialism with the struggle for democracy.¹⁰⁶

102. Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London, 1975, p. 94.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

106. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Laclau's emphasis on 'popular-democratic interpellations' led him to revise Poulantzas in a further way. For Poulantzas, the political line that communists should have pursued immediately after the war was to support the development of workers' councils that would link the political and economic dimensions of the class struggle.¹⁰⁷ For Laclau,¹⁰⁸ in contrast, the correct political line was to demand a 'Constituent Assembly', which would complete the process of democratic revolution that had been left unfinished by both Bismarck and Cavour.

These divergent reactions¹⁰⁹ all, however, agreed on one central point: that Poulantzas had correctly identified in 'economism' the central intellectual and strategic problem in both Comintern strategy and in previous studies of fascism. Thus, Rabinbach acknowledged 'the validity of this judgement' but chided Poulantzas for its 'restricted' character.¹¹⁰ Caplan praised Poulantzas for 'rejecting any crudely economic correlation of class and state'.¹¹¹ Laclau, finally, sought to extend Poulantzas's critique of economism to a broader assault on 'class reductionism'.¹¹² This raises a question to which I return below: is it plausible to attribute the failure of socialist strategy in the inter-war period to 'economism'?

FASCISM AND DICTATORSHIP: INFLUENCE ON LATER STUDIES

To gauge precisely the impact of Poulantzas' book on later studies, it is useful to compare its reception with that of Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, another broadly Marxist analysis of the rise of fascism, with many similarities to *Fascism and Dictatorship*. Moore's book had collected over 8,000 citations by 2017 and is an obligatory reference for any scholar wading into the political sociology of authoritarianism or democracy. Its intellectual progeny is accordingly numerous: Goldstone, Evans, Mahoney, Paige, Skocpol, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, and Zeitlin, just to name the most illustrious. *Fascism and Dictatorship*, in contrast, has garnered thus far a respectable but comparatively modest, 445

107. The present volume, p. 217.

108. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, pp. 132–2.

109. Rabinbach, 'Poulantzas and the Problem of Fascism'; Caplan, 'Nicos Poulantzas as Historian'; Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*.

110. Rabinbach, 'Poulantzas and the Problem of Fascism', p. 168.

111. Caplan, 'Nicos Poulantzas as Historian', p. 84.

112. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, pp. 124–5.

citations. More significantly, perhaps, within mainstream American political sociology, the book remains largely un-cited and unread.

Two reasons for this difference seem obvious. Poulantzas's Althusserian language has not worn well, and his approach to comparative analysis, a parallel demonstration of theory in which the empirical materials are used primarily to illustrate his arguments, is antiquated. Another major weakness of Poulantzas's analysis is his very cursory treatment of the agrarian dimension of fascism. In neither Italy nor Germany could these regimes have come to power without the aid of a reserve of impoverished agrarian direct producers, and highly conservative large landholders: the lords and peasants so masterfully brought out by Moore's analysis. But given the originality of Poulantzas's substantive arguments, these weaknesses, real as they are, fail to fully account for the relative neglect of the book compared with Moore's. A more political approach accordingly suggests itself.

It is good to begin by asking what made it possible for political sociology to absorb so fully *Social Origins*? Moore's book was acceptable to mainstream political sociology in part because he did not bring his Marxist analysis directly to bear on the central cases of European fascism (neither did he include Russia); Japan (a safely exotic case) functioned as a stand-in for fascism, while Germany and Italy remained spectral presences. This meant that Moore, in *Social Origins* itself, was not compelled to directly address the strategic alternatives open to the Left in the period after the October Revolution, nor the relationship between the rise of fascism and business and agricultural interests.¹¹³ Consequently, the explosive radicalism of Moore's thesis, the logic of which indicates that a socialist revolution in Germany in the twenties was the only means of avoiding a fascist outcome once the opportunity of bourgeois revolution had passed, could be left safely implicit. Moore's canonized interpretation then became, in violation of the author of *Social Origin's* own methodological strictures, a 'structuralist account' which stopped the causal path safely prior to 1914.

Paradoxically, Poulantzas's seemingly more structuralist argument focused on the central political issues much more clearly than Moore's. *Fascism and Dictatorship* states clearly that a revolutionary situation existed in 1918 and 1919 in both Germany and Italy, but that the working class failed

113. These questions were addressed in Moore's much less discussed, but extremely interesting book on the German November Revolution, *Injustice: The Social Basis of Obedience and Revolt*. It is not an accident that this work has had much less influence on scholarship than *Social Origins*.

to seize State power, and failed to achieve its objectives. This rehabilitation of the *biennio rosso* and the Spartacist uprising as something more than an outbreak of extremist hysteria is completely unacceptable in mainstream social science, and may have been one factor inhibiting a wider reception.

The other, more obvious, problem is Poulantzas's argument that fascism served the long-run interests of capital: a claim anathema to the Anglo-American historical establishment as is demonstrated by the reception accorded David Abraham's outstanding but highly controversial study, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis*. Abraham argued that the collapse of Weimar was due to the internal fragmentation of the capitalist class between a liberal and dynamic export-oriented sector, and reactionary heavy industrial and agrarian sectors – categories which echo, although do not exactly reproduce, Poulantzas's. During the consolidation of the Republic, the dynamic sector hammered out an alliance with the working class. This was the basis for the relative stability from 1924 to 1930. After the world economic crisis hit, though, this bloc broke apart, as the dynamic sector tried to offload the costs of the crisis onto labour. But lacking an appropriate political vehicle for establishing a mass basis, the industrialists, *faute de mieux*, had unenthusiastically supported the NSDAP.¹¹⁴¹⁵ The Poulantzian framework was obvious, although Abraham's range of influences was wider, stretching from Gramsci to Rosenberg. Like the author of *Fascism and Dictatorship*, Abraham interpreted the rise of fascism as the result of a double crisis of hegemony that opened a political vacuum occupied by a radicalized petty bourgeoisie, which had the historical function of reestablishing the rule of capital.

114. David Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis*, Princeton, 1981, pp. 3–11.

115. Although he does not use exactly the same categories, nor does he focus on the period of the seizure of power directly, Adam Tooze's widely celebrated *The Wages of Destruction*, London, 2006, offers a quite similar interpretation of the relationship between German industry and national socialism. As Tooze (p. 103) puts the point, 'the peacetime agenda of the more politically minded elements in German business consisted of at least two distinct elements, the one domestic, the other international. The domestic agenda was one of authoritarian conservatism, with a pronounced distaste for parliamentary politics, high taxes, welfare spending and trade unions. The international outlook of German business, on the other hand, was far more "liberal" in flavour.' This recalls Abraham's 'dynamic' and 'heavy industrial' fractions, although, importantly, Tooze sees these as different orientations within the same social group, rather than two distinct groups.

After an initially positive reaction, including over forty favourable reviews, condemnation of Abraham's book was swift and harsh. Led by Henry Turner, Gerald Feldman, Feldman's student Ulrich Nocken, and Turner's student Peter Hayes, the Anglo-American historiographical establishment hounded Abraham from the profession. Criticisms of Abraham's book ostensibly focused on its violation of professional standards of citation and note-taking, but the attack also had an obvious political dimension. As sampled below, none of these scholars attempted to provide any overall exposition and assessment of the argument in their engagement with Abraham's work, giving a sense of their intellectual quality.

Feldman: I do not ... intend to dignify this book with a systematic discussion of its theses. I think it is irresponsible to continue to treat it as a respectable work of scholarship.¹¹⁶

Feldman: By now it should be clear that the material in this book is sufficiently lacking in credibility as to make it not simply useless to scholars but dangerous if quoted or believed.¹¹⁷

Hayes: I must conclude that the *Collapse of the Weimar Republic* literally substracts from our knowledge of the subject it treats.¹¹⁸

Turner: Abraham's book will ... be of little use to future scholars.¹¹⁹

Whatever its causes, the Abraham affair undermined the reception of Poulantzas's book more broadly. Marxist theories of fascism have, subsequently, been equated mostly with Barrington Moore's focus on agrarian structures, leaving the sociology of the petty bourgeoisie, and the related question of the strategic mistakes made by the Left, largely neglected. What can be said about these issues today?

116. Gerald D. Feldman, 'A Collapse in Weimar Scholarship', *Central European History*

17(2/3), 1984, p. 161.

117. Feldman, 'A Collapse in Weimar Scholarship', p. 176.

118. Peter Hayes, 'History in an Off Key: David Abraham's Second "Collapse"', *Business*

History Review 61(3), 1987, p. 472.

119. Henry A. Turner, 'The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis', *Political Science Quarterly* 97(4), 1982–83, p. 740.

ECONOMISM AND SOCIALIST STRATEGY

The central political issue raised by *Fascism and Dictatorship* is the connection between ‘economism’ and socialist strategy. Poulantzas claims that by adopting ‘economism’, the Comintern ‘denied itself the means of successfully struggling *against* the resistible rise of fascism’.¹²⁰ There is no doubt that both communists and the Left more broadly made many serious strategic and tactical blunders over the course of the inter-war period, and in this way squandered important opportunities and left the door open to fascism. It is also quite common to explain these errors in terms of an underlying economism, which vitiated an adequate political analysis. But in Poulantzas’s use of the term at least, four crucial questions need to be asked:

- 1) What does economism mean?
- 2) Is economism an adequate description of Comintern – and, more generally, Left – strategy in the period of fascism?
- 3) What caused the adoption of economism?
- 4) What alternative strategy could the Left have adopted to prevent the rise of fascism?

The Meaning of Economism

One problem in grasping Poulantzas’s argument is that ‘economism’ refers to a very wide variety of positions that seem to have little in common with one another. A sampling of references shows at least seven meanings. The predominant sense is the idea that there is tight linkage between revolutionary opportunities and levels of economic development. This appears in passages such as: ‘It is well known that, on the other hand, the Second International, with its marked economism, was expecting a revolution in Germany, the most *economically* developed country’.¹²¹ A second related, but distinct, meaning is the idea that an economic crisis immediately yields opportunities for revolution, an error that Poulantzas attributes at various times to the Comintern, to Trotsky, to ‘left opportunism’, and to Maximalism.¹²² A third meaning concerns the reduction of the State to an instrument of the dominant classes.¹²³ A fourth meaning refers to the

120. The present volume, p. 52.

121. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

122. *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 146, 205.

123. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

reduction of different periods of capitalism to the development of the forces of production.¹²⁴ A fifth meaning refers to ‘the abandonment of a mass line’ and the establishment of ‘a basic separation between economic and political struggle’.¹²⁵ A sixth meaning links economism to ‘the abandonment of proletarian internationalism’.¹²⁶ A seventh meaning refers to the view that ‘relations of production alone ... are sufficient to determine the place a social class occupies in a mode of production and locate it within a social formation’.¹²⁷

These meanings do not imply one another. For example, Trotsky’s writings on fascism count as ‘economistic’ because of his idea that economic crises open revolutionary opportunities; but clearly Trotsky cannot be accused of abandoning proletarian internationalism. Furthermore, there is no obvious relationship between holding the view that social class should be defined in terms of positions in the relations of production and any of the various political strategies Poulantzas essays. This distension of the concept suggests that economism, rather than an explanation, is a catchphrase for any strategic error committed by the Left.

Is economism an adequate description of Comintern – and, more generally, Left, strategy in the period of fascism?

Turning to the second question, it is worth considering if economism is an adequate description of an actual strategic position. For the sake of clarity, let us take the term to mean the view that revolution is the inevitable result of economic processes and requires no active political intervention (something akin to the first meaning, above). It is difficult to see exactly what parts of the revolutionary – and, for that matter, non-revolutionary – Left were guilty of this position. The Italian case demonstrates the problems of this interpretation particularly clearly, for whatever their other differences, neither Bordiga nor Gramsci, nor Tasca, nor Togliatti espoused economism in this sense. In fact, the *Ordine Nuovo* group was stridently idealistic. In his famous article, ‘The Revolution Against Capital’ published in *Avanti!* in November 1917, Gramsci¹²⁸ wrote of the Bolsheviks:

124. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

125. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

126. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

127. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

128. Antonio Gramsci, *Scritti giovanili 1914–1918*, Turin, 1975, p. 150.

They are not Marxists, that is all; they have not compiled on the basis of the work of the master an external, dogmatic, and unquestionable doctrine. They live Marxist thought, which never dies, which is the continuation of German and Italian idealism, and which in Marx had been contaminated with positivistic and naturalistic incrustations.

A less economistic view is hard to imagine.

Poulantzas might respond by suggesting that economism was above all characteristic of the mainstream socialist parties, not the Left splinter groups that would constitute the Communist parties. But even this argument is not terribly persuasive. In the first place, in Italy evolutionary social democratic Marxism never had a very wide reach. The PSI (Italian Socialist Party) had opposed the war, had always been firmly anti-capitalist and was shot through with hyperactivist currents such as revolutionary syndicalism that were profoundly hostile to any sort of economic determinism. Furthermore, in the immediate post-war period, the Maximalist current of the PSI led by Serrati, crushed Turati's reformists at the 1919 Bologna conference, as Poulantzas himself points out.¹²⁹

Perhaps Poulantzas's accusation of economism applies better to Germany. Surely the SPD centre, *locus classicus* of orthodox Marxism, was drenched in economism? To assess this question, it is worth considering the strategic debate between Kautsky and Lenin between 1918 and 1920. If there is one place where one should see a struggle between a benighted Second International economism trapped in a stagist theory of development, and Lenin's concept of the imperialist chain, this should be it. But that is not at all the issue that separates the two in this famous exchange.

Kautsky's¹³⁰ central critique of Lenin was as follows:

The Bolshevik Revolution was based on the supposition that it would be the starting point of a general European Revolution, and that the bold initiative of Russia would summon the proletariat of all Europe to rise ... This was all very logically thought out, and quite well founded, provided the supposition was granted, that the Russian Revolution must inevitably unchain the European Revolution. But what if this did not happen?

129. The present volume, p. 205.

130. Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, Westport, CT, 1981, pp. 62–3.

Kautsky, in short, did not reject the *logic* of the Bolshevik argument. More particularly, he did not counterpose a stagist theory to it. Instead, he argued that the theory had been shown incorrect in historical reality.

Lenin's response was that Kautsky and his ilk were themselves the major obstacle to the revolutionary breakthrough. As he put it,¹³¹

When the proletarians of Europe are accused of treachery, Kautsky writes, it is an accusation against unknown persons. You are mistaken Mr. Kautsky. Look in the glass, and you will see these unknown persons against whom the accusation is leveled.

The issue that divided Kautsky and Lenin, in sum, had nothing to do with 'economism'. The disagreement instead concerned the relationship between national and international revolution. Furthermore, neither Kautsky nor Lenin's arguments are satisfactory. While Kautsky remains silent on the central question of why the Bolshevik revolution failed to unleash fraternal uprisings in the West, Lenin remains content to assign guilt to Kautsky: in the first case, there is no theory; in the second, there is a forensic one. But neither thinker suffers from economism *per se*. Thus, as a term for describing actual positions within the socialist Left during the inter-war period, it seems quite inadequate.

What caused the adoption of economism?

There is another feature of Poulantzas's invocation of economism as the source of the Left's strategic errors that is important to point out. As Laclau had noted, Poulantzas does not provide an adequate explanation for economism, however defined. In the appendix entitled 'The USSR and the Comintern', Poulantzas tries to explain economism as a consequence of the consolidation of a 'Soviet bourgeoisie' under Stalin.¹³² Even accepting this highly questionable interpretation of Soviet history, it clearly cannot account for the range of phenomena Poulantzas refers to with 'economism', which included many parties and movements outside the ambit of the Comintern. Laclau admirably tried to provide an explanation for economism by arguing that it grew out of the early experience of the working class movement in Germany and Italy, which was of necessity focused on the

131. Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, Detroit, MI, 1920, 79.

132. The present volume, p. 231.

construction of unions, and on separating the proletariat from the rest of society.¹³³ The problem with Laclau's reading, however, is that it retains the questionable notion that 'economism' accurately describes a dominant strategic position within the socialist Left in the period of the rise of fascism.

What alternative strategy could the Left have adopted to prevent the rise of fascism?

The weakness of Poulantzas's strategic diagnosis is best indicated in his prescriptive statements. Poulantzas identifies the main problem as a failure to clarify the relationship 'of economic and political struggle': the trade union and the party.¹³⁴ The lameness of this prescription can be best seen by turning it into a positive statement: a correct understanding of the need for a 'mass organization for economic struggle' and a 'specific vanguard organization for political struggle' would have overcome the strategic impasse of the workers' movement and blocked the fascist road to power.¹³⁵ Poulantzas provides no specific historical evidence to suggest that this might have been the case, and it is hard to see how these relatively minor organizational questions could have carried the weight that he places on them.

A more adequate approach might begin with a return to Kautsky's and Lenin's exchange since this provides a crucial clue to the real strategic problem that the Left faced in resisting fascism in the inter-war period. Both parties to that polemic lacked an adequate understanding of the social processes that concentrate and cage social relations in a national framework: the development of national bureaucracies, labour markets and social welfare. But it was precisely this issue – the inability to make effective political appeals simultaneously in both national and international terms – that scuttled effective resistance to fascism. This problem, however, was not a matter of mistaken doctrine, but of social relations. As Michael Mann¹³⁶ pointed out, 'the core constituency of fascism enjoyed particularly close relations to the sacred icon of fascism, the nation-state'. Thus, 'Fascism resonated especially among embittered refugees, "threatened border" regions, state employees (including especially the armed forces), state-owned or state-protected industries, and churches that saw themselves as "the soul of the nation" or

133. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, p. 126.

134. The present volume, p. 215.

135. *Ibid.*, 216.

136. Michael Mann, *Fascists!* New York, 2004, p. 3.

“the morality of the state”¹³⁷ It was the Left’s inability to penetrate this ‘nation-statist core’ that formed the crucial strategic problem of the Left in the inter-war period.

Schematically in inter-war Europe, internationalism and nationalism interacted in a particular way with class divisions. An internationally organized working class faced a nationally organized petty bourgeoisie, while capital remained split between an internationalist and a nationalist wing.¹³⁸ The key class alliance that could have stopped fascism – that between workers and at least part of the petty bourgeoisie – was blocked precisely by the national cage that trapped a significant part of the latter group, making it unavailable for the Left.

ANCIEN REGIMES, UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT AND WAR

Perhaps an even more glaring weakness than Poulantzas’s discussion of economism is his disregard of the expansionist dynamic of fascism, particularly in its German variant. Incredibly, neither the Second World War nor the Judeocide figure in Poulantzas’s account. One reason for this might be, as Caplan pointed out, that Poulantzas wanted to insist that the fascist regimes had successfully established the hegemony of monopoly capital – a story that would seem to be contradicted by the very irrational brutality of the war. A second reason for this absence might also be Poulantzas’s neglect of agrarian interests. For the fascist search for *lebensraum* or *spazio vitale* cannot be understood exclusively as an expression of the interests of ‘monopoly capitalism’; instead, fascist imperialism was closely linked to the uneven character of the social elite, what Arno Mayer terms ‘the persistent old regime’ in both countries.

Perhaps the best way to see this is to compare the geopolitical vision of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* with competing ideas in Germany in the 1930s. Hitler was obsessed with physical control over territory, especially in the east. As Alexander Anievas¹³⁹ shows, this was hardly an original idea since it grew out of a long tradition of thinking on the German far Right. He pursued this policy as an alternative to *Weltpolitik*, a position closely associated with

137. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

138. Perry Anderson, ‘Internationalism: A Breviary’, *New Left Review* 34, 2002, pp. 13–15.

139. Alexander Anievas, *Capital, the State, and War: Class Conflict and Geopolitics in the Thirty Years’ Crisis, 1914–1945*, Ann Arbor, MI, 2014, pp. 165–8.

Stresemann, and aimed at maritime dominance and challenging Britain.¹⁴⁰ This deliberate turn away from *Weltpolitik*, and toward a continental strategy, was at least facilitated by the social makeup of the German dominant class. The social background of Hitler's geopolitics was the army, and therefore the old agrarian elites – in contrast to *Weltpolitik*, which would have been based on the more bourgeois navy. The brutality of the *Vernichtungskrieg* was the outcome, therefore, of a peculiar combination of modern war-making technology and a basically premodern geopolitical vision.

Similar points could be made about the Italian colonial adventure in Ethiopia. Although there it is difficult to discern any objective economic imperative, it is clear that the desire to recreate a prestigious land empire was a driving force. Furthermore, this project found decisive social support in the Italian army, an institution heavily dominated by the Savoyard monarchy and the aristocracy.

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES TODAY

From the perspective of 2017 it is striking how relevant these discussions remain. One reason is that Poulantzas identified *the* key issues of alliance formation in the articulation of a viable Left strategy. Fascism was premised on the unification of the petty bourgeoisie around an alliance with big capital in the aftermath of failed proletarian uprisings. Socialism, instead, would be based on an alliance between the working class and at least some segments of the petty bourgeoisie against capital. Clearly, the basic strategic problem of the Left, linking working class demands with those of salaried employees and intellectuals, remains much the same as it was in the inter-war period. However, the terrain differs. As I suggested above, the conflict between internationalism and nationalism tended to undermine the possibility of an alliance between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie in the inter-war period, because the petty bourgeoisie was organized nationally (Mann's 'nation-statist core'), whereas the working class was organized in internationalist parties. In this context, revolutionary socialism proved unable to ally with returning war veterans, some of whom at least should have been available to the Left. 'National socialism' remained an empty slogan rather than a political reality.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 145; Arno Mayer, *Why did the Heavens Not Darken? The 'Final Solution' in History*, New York, 1989, p. 116.

The interaction between class alliances, nationalism and internationalism differs today. In the first instance, direct producers lack much international organization at all; their interests consequently are articulated in overwhelmingly national terms – as hostility to free trade agreements, and often immigrants. Furthermore, in sharp contrast to the inter-war period, the ‘new petty bourgeoisie’ (salaried employees and intellectuals) is internationalist in orientation, as are some segments of capital. If, in inter-war Europe, fascism depended on an alliance between the petty bourgeoisie as a whole and capital under the aegis of nationalism, in the contemporary period the radical Right is based on an alliance between parts of a ‘national’ working class and capital. What the contemporary Right lacks, and what inter-war fascism possessed, is a strong anchoring in the ‘new petty bourgeoisie’, which has now become internationalist. The basic strategic conundrum, however, remains. How to link anti-capitalism and internationalism together in an alliance with both working class and petty bourgeois support? While *Fascism and Dictatorship* certainly does not answer this question, it has the great merit of providing categories through which one dimension of the problem can be thought through. For this reason, Poulantzas’s book is more than a historical document, or a contribution to theories of inter-war fascism. It is also an example of how to link science and politics in a strategic discussion, one that is crucial in the current increasingly turbulent political context.