

STATE THEORY RECONSIDERED

PARADIGM

LOST

Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis, Editors

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State Theory Reconsidered

Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis, Editors



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This book is dedicated to the memory of Joseph Murphy

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State Power, Global Power

Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis

The ability to rise from the dead is unique to that which has been improperly buried. From Freud's *Totem and Taboo* to Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*, a lack of proper burying protocol results in the return of that which had been thought dead. Marxist state theory and, increasingly, the state as an analytical object have been the victims of an improper burial. They have been buried by a conservative shift inside and outside of the academy. They have been buried by an assumed decline of the state in the face of globalizing and localizing forces. They have been buried by a shift of emphasis, within the left, away from the study of "political power" to a more disaggregated vision of power as a dispersed and undifferentiated phenomenon (from Foucault and Habermas to Deleuze and Guattari).

The main goal of the essays collected here is to assist state theory in its resurrection from the dead. The essays are organized around three broad themes: to introduce readers to some foundational aspects of Marxist state theory, to evaluate the relevance of state theory in relation to contemporary political phenomena and theoretical tendencies, and to identify the limits to state theory that must be overcome for its continued development. All three themes are developed while focusing on the contributions of Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas. Focusing on Miliband and Poulantzas allows us to frame and understand state theory as a whole because they occupy the methodological extremes within the range of theorists particular to state theory and because their debate is more often than not the point of departure for subsequent attempts

to produce a Marxist theory of the state. To understand the utility and limits of Miliband and Poulantzas is thus to understand the utility and limits of state theory in a broader sense.

This introduction attempts to situate the issues examined in the subsequent essays to broader empirical and theoretical concerns. We will focus on identifying those aspects of state theory that distinguish it from competing theoretical tendencies and we will illustrate the utility of state theory in relation to questions about the changes of the state in the face of globalization and in relation to questions regarding the affects of state institutions.

The Specificity of State Theory

As many of the essays in this collection attest (especially Barrow and Panitch), state theory enjoyed a fair amount of attention in the 1970s not only from Marxist theorists but also from more mainstream sects within social science. State theory had in a few short years constituted itself as an important and viable alternative to the orthodoxy of pluralism and structural functionalism/systems theory within political science and political sociology. By 1985, *Bringing the State Back In*, the presumed benchmark for the return of the state as an object of inquiry to social science, had relegated theorists such as Miliband, Offe, Block, Therborn, and Poulantzas to a couple of paragraphs and footnotes. What is paradoxical about this startling loss of currency and popularity is its lack of justification. State theory was never the object of a rigorous and sustained critique that would properly “bury” it and clear the way for alternative approaches.¹ Slavoj Žižek’s comment on the peculiar decline of the Althusserian school fits well in this context: “It is more as if there were . . . a traumatic kernel which had to be quickly forgotten, ‘repressed’; it is an effective case of theoretical amnesia” (Žižek 1989, 1).

A related and equally paradoxical phenomenon is the initial attraction to the Miliband–Poulantzas debate. Within the Marxist commentaries on the debate we find two recurring and conflicting observations. It is noted that the debate received much attention and constituted the point of departure and frame of reference for most, if not all, subsequent attempts for a Marxist theory of the state; and, it is also noted that the debate was a caricature of Miliband’s and Poulantzas’s true positions, offering no substantive insight into a theory of the state (cf. Jessop 1985, xiv; Barrow in this volume; and Levine in this volume). The obvious ques-

tion is, how can this be? How can what we may assume to be informed and intelligent people spend so much time discussing and debating what is ultimately a vulgar and substance-lacking opposition? Our answer to this paradox is that though it may be the case that the debate was lacking in its explicit focus (as a debate about what constitutes the Marxist theory of the state), the real significance of the debate was its repetition of the Lenin–Luxemburg debate. After all, what is Miliband’s “instrumentalist” claim that the state has been captured by the capitalist class by way of its political organization other than a repetition of Lenin’s argument that the state is an instrument of the capitalist class and, necessarily, his defense of organization and the role of the revolutionary party (a result of the instrumentalist concept of power common to both)? What is Poulantzas’s “structuralist” claim that the state is capitalist by virtue of its functions and acts to disorganize the working class other than a repetition of Luxemburg’s argument that the state apparatuses are by function bourgeois and, necessarily, her defense of self-organized and autonomous working-class movements (that is, outside the formal and legal logic of “the state” and hierarchical organization)?

The “traumatic kernel” of state theory may well be its connection to political strategy. That which initially was the source of attraction to state theory may ultimately have served as the source of its rejection. On a superficial level, this connection can be seen by the attention given to state theory by various political movements; this is especially true of Eurocommunism (cf. Carrillo 1978). On a more substantive level, this connection is present in the strategic value of the questions state theory tends to pose. Whereas systems theory/behaviorism conformed to and supported the pluralist fiction of a fragmented society with more or less equal shares of political power among its factions, and whereas the state-centered/neo-institutionalist approach chooses to reject the question of the social foundations of political power in favor of the assumption that political power is autonomous from society, state theory of all denominations begins with the very strategic focus of explaining the social foundations and dominating effects of political power. Where political analysis once spoke the language of “domination” and “class antagonism,” it now speaks in the language of “state capacities” and “conflict resolution.”

Our contention is that although the popularity of state theory has declined, the importance of the questions specific to it has increased. As

Leo Panitch notes in his essay, the popularity and decline of state theory are directly related to the vicissitudes of class struggles and political conditions.² As radical movements from below ebbed in the past two decades or so, state theory and its protagonists became increasingly marginal to the shifting political climate and its corresponding academic fashions. The reflexive effect of this decline has been that alternative understandings of the present and their respective concepts, necessary weapons for a renewed and strategically informed class struggle, have all but disappeared from the intellectual scene. The resultant neutering of political analysis has accompanied an increasing technicalization of politics and the ways it presents itself. The increased importance assumed by the Federal Reserve, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Union has accompanied a transformation of what used to be overtly political questions of fiscal policy and social welfare into what are now technical questions associated with monetary policy—interest rate and debt management. The actions of political institutions increasingly appear as more or less inevitable and determined by the logic of the free market or as the outcome of legal mandates.³ In this context of politics appearing more and more separated from social agency, the problematic of state theory becomes more and more necessary for revealing the relation of the state to social interests and actors and for serving as a tool for the future manifestations of the political struggle of the dominated classes.

The decline of state theory not only has political ramifications, but also has led to a conceptual regression within social inquiry. We examine two related areas of inquiry in what follows—the study of institutions and the study of globalization—that we think can greatly benefit from a reapplication of state theory. Of course, these themes are central to many of the essays included in this collection in that the problematic of state theory has suffered at the hands of contemporary discussions of globalization and the assumed decline of state autonomy as well as at the hands of state-centered theories that assert that they have overcome the simple-mindedness of society-centered theories by taking institutions and their agency seriously. Beginning with an analysis of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's recent work *Empire* (2000), we attempt to show how Marxist state theory can assist contemporary efforts on the left to come to terms with current political changes and demonstrate that contemporary political theory, in spite of its "amnesia," needs to re-

think the potential analytical and strategic value of Miliband, Poulantzas, and state theory as a whole.

Globalization, Institutions, and the Vicissitudes of State Power

We are in the midst of a veritable avalanche of descriptive and theoretical writing on globalization. From William Greider's journalistic accounts of the spread of transnational corporate power to all corners of the globe to the dense theoretical work of Hardt and Negri, and almost everything in between, there is general agreement that world capitalism has entered a new era, marked by the partial or complete displacement of the old regulatory institutions and the sovereignty of the nation-state. Some, such as Claus Offe (1985) and Scott Lash and John Urry (1987), call attention to the end of regulation and foresee the possibility of new forms of interstate rivalries, but most of the significant works of the 1990s on globalization insist that the crucial characteristic of globalization is a radical reconfiguration of economic and, especially, political space. Since the mid-1970s, it is argued, transnational corporations based largely in the advanced capitalist states have taken economic and political power, undercutting the sovereignty of nation-states and subverting the very concept of citizenship. Although the old arrangements, based on the rivalry of capitals situated in, and supported by, sovereign nation-states, which seek raw materials and markets for the export of capital, survive in vestigial form, Hardt and Negri (2000), following Gilles Deleuze, adopt the thesis of "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization" to describe the changes; the concept corresponds to themes enunciated by the popular literature on globalization, left and right, as well as the more scholarly work.

The thesis goes something like this: States construct social space in the metaphor of "striated" space, an allusion to centralization of power and the organization of the social world in the model of hierarchy and domination. Thus, they conceive of the apparent decentralization of material production into the far reaches of the globe as a moment followed by reterritorialization, the return to centralization. In their rich, complex, and immensely influential book *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and his collaborator Félix Guattari elaborate these ideas in a theory of the state and of political agency. As they put it: "We are compelled to say there has always been a State, quite perfect, quite complete. . . . The state dates back to the most remote ages of humanity" (Deleuze and Guattari

1987, 360). Far from tracing the development of the state form within the evolution of human societies, between an earlier stage of so-called primitive communism and ancient societies, most often modes of production grounded in slave labor, Deleuze and Guattari insist on the *Urstate*, property of all human associations. In their conception, the state is not an efflux of classes and of class struggle; they conceive the state as the repository of self-reproducing power, as a form of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge based on the same centralizing assumptions of its unquestioned universality: “by right . . . [the state acquires] a consensus raised to the absolute” (375–76). The state and its science have always claimed the mantle of reason and, in their quest for power over social space and social thought, systematically suppress alternative social movements and knowledges. The characteristic form of state politics is molar; its centralization is immanent to its power. To this transhistorical power Deleuze and Guattari pose the alternative of smooth space, the molecular politics of the nomad in which deterritorialization is not followed by centralization; with the nomadic, the state’s power itself, not just a particular form of it, is contested. In political terms, this is a new anarchist manifesto.

Underlying this discourse is the view that territory, as the foundation of social power, is identical with the state. Thus, the object of political struggle is not, as some Marxists believe, to capture state power in order to dismantle it sometime in the future. Just as, following Lévi-Strauss and Pierre Clastres, they abjure the concept of the evolution of human societies, they also renounce the concept of a transitional state between capitalism and communism. Because the state is itself a form of tyranny, capturing state power will only reproduce that which the revolution is trying to overcome, tyranny.

Hardt and Negri introduce the concept of Empire as the latest form of reterritorialization. They argue that the nation-state is now largely displaced by a “network” of transnational corporations that lead the capitalist states, of which the only real superpower, the United States, holds pride of place and aggregates to itself significantly greater power than the others. The sinews of empire are an international legal system in which human rights, violations of national sovereignty, the interest of perpetual “peace,” and other traditional discourses of liberal democracy trump sovereignty. But the attempt to establish a new rule of law in international affairs is not merely a ruse for advancing the interests of

Empire; it is a genuine effort to reintroduce juridical regulation in order to ensure economic and political stability. Of course, this effort is directed by the combined military and police powers of the various states. If the question of control over these forces remains a serious obstacle because residual sovereignty claims are still in force among the major powers, Hardt and Negri have no doubt that these impediments to global empire are only temporary. A new international “metastate” is in the making and the old nation-state is in its death throes.

The nation-state lives chiefly as a repressive power, but also has some purchase on maintaining a degree of ideological hegemony over what they call “the multitude.” Because citizenship refers to states in full possession of national sovereignty, and the effectivity of old class movements such as trade unions and political parties presupposes this situation, under the new conditions of Empire, the labor and socialist movements, whose targets—national capital and the capitalist state—are disappearing, have lost their claim to power. Empirically, it is easy to document the decline of the opposition within the framework of the nation-state. Hardt and Negri repeat the familiar litany of defeats suffered by labor at the hands of globalization: sharp membership losses, the *de facto* defanging of the strike weapon, and, as a result, the capitulation of traditional working-class and socialist parties to neoliberal policies, if not to free-market doctrine (although the Labour government in the United Kingdom has gone a long way toward a full embrace). Even in power, these parties have proved all too willing supplicants of Empire. Moreover, perhaps the signal achievement of the labor and other social movements, the welfare state, is in the process of being dismantled (United States) or has been seriously eroded in erstwhile bastions of labor solidarity (Germany, France, Italy) (cf. Levine’s and Cloward and Piven’s essays in this volume). On the one hand, labor is reduced to a fungible commodity on the world scale; on the other hand, the new information economy has brought into being what Negri has termed a new “social” as opposed to “mass” worker, a type not dissimilar from Robert Reich’s symbolic analyst in which, according to their latest version, the functions of management and the coordination of intellectual labor need no longer be a separate occupational designation. Unlike the mass worker, whose labor has been segmented and degraded, the fully qualified worker must know the entire labor process and is often scientifically as well as technically trained. But, following André Gorz’s older concept, capital

deprives intellectual labor of power over its own work; whereas the mass worker's rebellion against her subordination takes the form of "refusal" to work in the new economy, the socialized worker's demands are for autonomy in the performance of her work. The revolt is no less filled with intensities but, like the 2000 Boeing engineers' strike in which sixteen thousand participated, the worker wants to be left to do his work at his own pace, a preference that disrupts capital's drive for increased productivity, and its incessant demand that qualified labor be reduced to mass labor.

According to Hardt and Negri, the Empire has completely destroyed the traditional opposition; the old politics is dead and we are facing the end of history, if by that term we signify the revolution to displace one form of centralized state power by another. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the force of molecular politics—the highly decentralized efforts of small groups to forge new social spaces at the local level—is counterposed to molar politics, the affairs of state. They point to the long-term challenges to state science as well. Their alternative sciences do not work in the solid, geometric mode but in the fluid mode: nature is not portrayed in terms of gravitas but in terms of flows. The figure of the nomad is posed against the state apparatus. Hardt and Negri take at least one step backward from these theses, which were crafted in the aftermath of the May 1968 events in France and the Italian "Hot Autumn" the following year. Deleuze and Guattari condemn the Marxist parties for failing to anticipate the May events, a failure they ascribe to Marxism's imprisonment in the politics of centralized state power. Rather than looking above, the Marxists should look below to the conditions not of formal statecraft, but of rhizomic discontent. But, echoing Foucault's notion that power is dispersed, is everywhere, Hardt and Negri posit concrete social groups as the new agents. According to them, the proletariat as political subject has disappeared. They assert the disappearance of the mediations between a severely crippled labor movement and global capital. The new agent of opposition is the "multitude"—the great mass of humanity who have been marginalized and otherwise repressed by the Empire. The characteristic form of social action is a "direct confrontation" between multitude and Empire.

In *State, Power, Socialism*, Poulantzas challenges the basic premise of this type of analysis by arguing that the true opposite of the territorial is

not the nomadic, but rather the ancient Western conception of space as a homogeneous field that has a center but has no limits:

The space of Western Antiquity is a space with a *centre*: the *polis* (which itself has a center: the *agora*). But it has no frontiers in the modern sense of the term. It is concentric, but, having no real outside, it is also open. This centre (the *polis* and *agora*) is inscribed in a space whose essential characteristics are homogeneity and symmetry, not differentiation and hierarchy. . . . In this space (which is the one represented by Euclid and the Pythagoreans) people do not change their position, they simply move around. They always go to the same place, because each point in space is an exact repetition of the previous point; when they found colonies, it is only to form replicas of Athens or Rome. (Poulantzas 1978, 101)

What is significant about this point is that modern territoriality is not opposed to the ancient conception of space based simply on logical deduction, but by looking to the historicity of political space and seeking its determinations. For Poulantzas, the mistake of Deleuze and Guattari (and thus Hardt and Negri as well) is that they fail to recognize the importance of the division of labor and everyday life to this historicity of space.⁴ The space of ancient, and even feudal, societies has no territorial boundaries because the hierarchies particular to these societies are not segmented spatial ones, but rather are based on the immobility of social position given the ascribed status of class. Before the capitalist division of labor, there is no escaping to the big city to “reinvent” yourself, there is no moving to “America” for the good life, no running away to join the circus. In this preterritorial space, “Delimitations are constantly intersecting and overlapping in a series of twists and turns; and subjects, while remaining on the spot, move around in accordance with the changes of the lords and sovereigns to whom they are personally tied” (Poulantzas 1978, 103). Here, the dream of the nomadic faces its mirror image, movement without change, smooth spaces from which there is no escape.

With the rise of capitalism, the limitation and segmentation of space and its (re)production by the state become paramount.

The direct producer, the worker, is now totally separated from the means of labour—a situation which is at the root of the social division of labour in machine production and large-scale industry. The latter involves as its precondition an entirely different spacial matrix: *the serial, fractured, parcelled, cellular, and irreversible* space which is peculiar to the Taylorist