

Late Poulantzas: Between Kautsky and Austro-Marxism

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Abstract

This article aims to explore late Poulantzas key positions regarding the transition to socialism, which share striking similarities with the theoretical foundations of Kautsky and Austro-Marxism. Initially, the commonalities between late Poulantzas and Kautsky are highlighted, focusing on the works *State, Power, Socialism* and *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. Subsequently, the nuanced connections between Austro-Marxism and Poulantzas, which require a thorough understanding of the fundamental tenets of Austro-Marxism, particularly concerning democracy, are examined.

Keywords: Poulantzas, Kautsky, Austro-Marxism, State, Socialism

I. Introduction

Nicos Poulantzas's essay, "Towards a Democratic Socialism," published in his final book *State, Power, Socialism*, generated significant interest well beyond the confines of France, raising essential questions that remain pertinent even today. Poulantzas aimed to reframe the discourse on the transition to socialism, striving to overcome the theoretical shortcomings of the past (Löwy, 2012: 301-305). Nevertheless, there are critics who contend that Poulantzas's proposal did not provide a fresh perspective on the intricate matter of the transition but, instead, echoed the outdated and ineffective stances of social democracy (Barker, 1979), entwined with elements of Austro-Marxism.

Our hypothesis posits that Poulantzas's conception of the democratic path is intricately linked to how the mainstream of the Second International addressed the interplay between parliamentary democracy and the transition to socialism. To be more specific, late Poulantzas regarded the institutional model of parliamentary democracy as the exclusive route to socialism, thus leading him to diverge from Marx's (1907: 70) pivotal stance on the necessity of dismantling the bourgeois state apparatus.

The chief proponent of this line of thought was Bernstein (2016: 132, 142-143), who argued that "democracy is only the political form of liberalism," asserting that "with respect to liberalism as a great historical movement, socialism is its legitimate heir." He further stressed that "the liberal organisations of modern society are distinguished from those exactly because they are flexible, and capable of change and development. They do not need to be destroyed, but only to be further developed. For that we need organisation and energetic action, but not necessarily a revolutionary dictatorship." Kautsky would align with this perspective, especially

following the eruption of the Russian Revolution, while Austro-Marxism would echo a similar sentiment.

It is crucial to emphasize that we must to some extent distinguish Kautsky's "revolutionary" phase – that is, the period leading up to 1914 and World War I – which predominantly characterized European social democracy. During this time, Kautsky, in his work *The Road to Power*, found himself in a contentious relationship with Bernstein's revisionism and outlined an "ambiguous" proposition for a revolutionary strategy. To some extent, the *Road to Power* could be considered to lie between two poles: Bernstein's revisionism, which was more applicable to Britain, where socialist electoral victory seemed improbable, and Luxemburg's radicalism, suited to Russia, where revolution appeared inevitable. Therefore, Kautsky's strategy appeared well-suited to the German context (Kautsky, 1994: 118), though this issue necessitates further exploration and falls outside the scope of this paper.

In any case, it was a well-established perception among the intellectuals of the Second International that capitalism and socialism share a relationship of continuity. Consequently, they failed to realize that parliamentarism was inextricably linked to the specific mode of integrating politics with the economy that characterizes capitalism.

Another pertinent issue to consider is that of civil legitimacy. According to the prevailing view within the Second International, this form of legitimacy is the sole basis for a transition to socialism. Consequently, any notion of employing force was considered inconceivable and destructive.

II. The connection with Kautsky

Indeed, upon a close examination of Poulantzas's final work, *State, Power, Socialism*, a remarkable echo of many of Kautsky's post-war stances, particularly from his work *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, becomes evident. In this analysis, we aim to highlight the parallels between Kautsky and Poulantzas's analyses, despite the fact that Poulantzas himself never explicitly references Kautsky. To shed more light on this connection, we will provide direct quotations from their respective works.

The first and most apparent similarity is the recurrence of a shared "slogan." In our perspective, this slogan is merely the tip of the iceberg, leading to a more profound alignment of ideas. Poulantzas's (2001: 265) proverbial phrase, "socialism will be democratic or it will not be at all," which concludes his final book, mirrors a sentiment articulated by Kautsky nearly fifty years earlier:

Socialism and democracy are therefore not distinguished by the one being the means and the other the end. Both are means to the same end. The distinction between them must be sought elsewhere. Socialism as a means to the emancipation of the proletariat, without democracy, is unthinkable. (Kautsky, 2018: 6)

Kautsky, rather than delving into a Marxist analysis of the intrinsic class character of democracy and socialism, confines his focus to legal and formal definitions. Democracy,

fundamentally the exercise of power and dictatorship by a particular class, is thus equated solely with its parliamentary variant. This approach inevitably leads to the self-evident conclusion that socialism cannot exist without democracy, specifically in the form of parliamentary democracy, which is expected to steadily expand as the working class secures a majority of votes. Kautsky's analyses unfolded during a period when revolutionary prospects in Germany were at their peak, while Soviet power had already been established in Russia.

Another significant point of convergence between Kautsky and Poulantzas is their endeavor to interpret Marx's statements in a manner that aligns their analyses as closely as possible with the legitimizing core of Marxism. In this context, Poulantzas writes:

For Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat was a notion of applied strategy, serving at most as a signpost. It referred to the class nature of the State and to the necessity of its transformation in the transition to socialism and the process of withering away of the State. Now, although the object to which it referred is still real, the notion has come to play a precise historical role: it obscures the fundamental problem of combining a transformed representative democracy with direct, rank-and-file democracy. It is for these reasons, and not because the notion eventually became identified with Stalinist totalitarianism, that its abandonment is, in my opinion, justified. (Poulantzas, 2001: 256)

Kautsky has repeatedly used the same argument:

Marx had unfortunately omitted to specify more exactly what he conceived this dictatorship to be. Taken literally, the word signifies the suspension of democracy. But taken literally it also means the sovereignty of a single person, who is bound by no laws. A sovereignty which is distinguished from a despotism by being regarded as a passing phase, required by the circumstances of the moment, and not a permanent institution of the State. The expression "Dictatorship of the Proletariat," that is the dictatorship not of a single person, but of a class, excludes the inference that Marx thought of dictatorship in the literal sense. (Kautsky, 2018: 33-34)

Both Kautsky and Poulantzas seem to imply that Marx's original intentions went beyond what he actually wrote. They suggest that the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" had a different, more nuanced connotation than what it received in later interpretations. According to their perspective, Lenin and others may have distorted its meaning, attributing a different semiotic content to it.

In addition, the viewpoints of these two thinkers regarding the interplay between parliamentary and direct democracy are of significant interest from distinct angles. Kautsky, as Weber (1979) emphasizes, advocated for the notion that popular sovereignty should primarily remain within the domain of the parliament. In this view, councils should complement parliamentary institutions by increasing the influence of wage earners, but their role is limited to suggesting, pressuring, and overseeing the elected parliaments. The ultimate decision-

making authority rests solely with the parliaments and places council institutions in an evidently subordinate position compared to bourgeois-democratic ones.

Kautsky's (1912) vehement critique of Pannekoek's and Lenin's ideas about direct and active democracy may not solely arise from a fear of straying away from pluralism and political liberties. It could also be seen as an attempt to preserve the privileged position of the leaders of the Second International, serving as mediators between the subordinate and ruling classes (Belantis, 2014: 112-113).

Conversely, Poulantzas's later work is marked by a profound skepticism about the complete replacement of representative democracy with direct democracy. This skepticism arises from the authoritarian tendencies observed in the Soviet experience and his anthropological position regarding revolutionary possibilities in mature capitalism. Poulantzas (2001: 255) raises the question of whether pure direct democracy can effectively safeguard political freedom. In this context, Poulantzas implicitly draws from the Austro-Marxist model and advocates for a combination of direct and representative democracy, striving to preserve elements of pluralism and consultation while integrating direct participation.

As summarized by Weber (1987), the fundamental disagreement centers around the type of articulation between these two forms of democracy. The Bolsheviks considered the soviets (councils) as the true form of power, with parliamentary assemblies serving as counterweights, while Social Democrats and Eurocommunists leaned toward the opposite perspective.

Ultimately, both late Poulantzas and Kautsky, albeit from different angles, appear to accept the framework of bourgeois democracy. Their shared goal is not the revolutionary overthrow of this system but rather its transformation into a more democratic and peaceful entity. This conviction is rooted in their common aversion to Bolshevism and its perceived authoritarian core:

Risks there are, although they are no longer quite where they used to be: at worst, we could be heading for camps and massacres as appointed victims. But to that I reply: if we weigh up the risks, that is in any case preferable to massacring other people only to end up ourselves beneath the blade of a Committee of Public Safety or some Dictator of the proletariat. (Poulantzas, 2001: 265)

Socialism as such is not our goal, which is the abolition of every kind of exploitation and oppression, be it directed against a class, a party, a sex, or a race. (Kautsky, 2018: 5)

Additionally, their alternative transition proposal is identical in many points, which has as its main features, the slowness of the process and an abstract reception of it, with a common pillar of an unclear transformation:

The democratic road to socialism is a long process, in which the struggle of the popular masses does not seek to create an effective dual power parallel and

external to the State, but brings itself to bear on the internal contradictions of the State. (Poulantzas, 2001: 257)

The social revolution is a profound transformation of the entire social structure brought about by the establishment of a new method of production. It is a protracted process, which may be spread over decades, and no definite boundaries can be drawn for its conclusion. It will be the more successful, according to the peaceful nature of the forms under which it is consummated. (Kautsky, 2018:43)

Finally, both Kautsky and Poulantzas presume that the attempt of radical transformation – exclusively through democratic, peaceful means – is possible, even though there has been no relevant historical precedent:

On these grounds, I anticipate that the social revolution of the proletariat will assume quite other forms than that of the bourgeoisie, and that it will be possible to carry it out by peaceful economic, legal and moral means, instead of by physical force, in all places where democracy has been established. (Kautsky, 2018: 30)

For certain European countries, these particularities constitute so many chances – probably unique in world history – for the success of a democratic socialist experience, articulating transformed representative democracy and direct, rank-and-file democracy. This entails the elaboration of a new strategy with respect both to the capture of state power by the popular masses and their organizations, and to the transformations of the State designated by the term “democratic road to socialism.” (Poulantzas, 2001: 257)

At this point, things are even more difficult for Poulantzas’s reasoning, because indeed at the time of Kautsky there was no relevant historical precedent. But in Poulantzas’s time there was the irrefutable historical example of Chile, which Poulantzas insists on bypassing.

But above all, the leading point of convergence between Kautsky and late Poulantzas concerns the rejection of Marx’s (1907: 70) fundamental thesis on the necessity of smashing the bourgeois state machine:

And the goal of our political struggle stays therewith what it was up until now: conquest of state power through the winning of the majority in parliament and elevation of parliament to mastery over the government. Not however destruction of state power. (Kautsky, 1912)

The expression “sweeping transformation of the state apparatus in the democratic road to socialism” suggests that there is no longer a place for what has traditionally been called smashing or destroying that apparatus. The fact remains, however, that the term smashing, which Marx too used for indicative purposes, came in the end to designate a very precise historical phenomenon: namely, the

eradication of any kind of representative democracy or “formal” liberties in favour purely of direct, rank-and-file democracy and so-called real liberties. (Poulantzas, 2001: 261)

While Kautsky’s stance indicates his inability to envision a path other than a parliamentary one, Poulantzas’s specific position is notably problematic as it blurs the essence of Marx’s theory of the state. Poulantzas mistakenly conflates the cornerstone of Marx’s theory, the imperative to dismantle the bourgeois state apparatus, with a “degenerate” version of Bolshevism, even going as far as to suggest that Marx’s position on the necessity of crushing the bourgeois state apparatus was merely “indicative.” However, this term, “indicative,” does not accurately characterize Marx’s perspective in any way.

Kautsky, in contrast, envisions the bureaucratic state apparatus continuing to exist, albeit under different leadership. His viewpoint regards the state not as a class instrument of the ruling class but rather as a neutral technical tool and mechanism for the exercise of class power. He extends the same perspective to the parliamentary system. Kautsky, therefore, advocates for a peaceful transition. In his vision, a socialist society will be constructed upon the rational accomplishments and the governance structure of bourgeois society and politics, maintaining the existing social division of labor in production, administration, and politics, with the bureaucracy playing a pivotal role.

While for Bernstein and later social democracy, the state is perceived as an impartial arbiter above the classes, Kautsky views the state as a neutral instrument, an object that will be “used differently” once the social democrats assume power. Kautsky’s views are distinctly presented in his essay “Parliamentarianism and Democracy,” where he articulates:

Today, only somebody who is politically blind can claim that the representative system ensures the rule of the bourgeoisie – even where there is universal suffrage – and that in order to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie, first of all the representative system must be eliminated. Now already, it is beginning to become apparent that a real parliamentary regime can be just as well an instrument for the dictatorship of the proletariat as it is an instrument for the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. One of the most important tasks of the working class in its struggle for the achievement of political power is not to eliminate the representative system, but to break the power of government vis-à-vis the parliament, and at the same time to pave the broadest possible path for the proletariat to parliament through the equality of suffrage, protecting the secret ballot, short parliamentary terms, complete freedom of the press, meetings and associations, but especially through the expansion of the franchise to all state citizens aged twenty or above. (Kautsky, 2020: 139)

As Colletti underlines, paralleling Kautsky with the later Eurocommunists:

For Kautsky, the State and its bureaucratic apparatus is not to be destroyed, because bureaucracy, i.e. the difference between governors and governed, cannot be suppressed and will always survive [...] The State that must not be destroyed

but which can be taken over and turned to one's own ends, the military-bureaucratic machine that is not to be dismantled but transferred "from one hand to other," is already embryonically a State "indifferent" in class nature: it is a technical or "neutral" instrument, a mere means that can do good or ill, according to who controls it and uses it. Hence the theory of the simple seizure, without at the same time the destruction-transformation of power, contains the germ of an interclass theory of state [...] Parliament – evidently – has existed hitherto, will continue to exist hereafter, indeed must always exist [...] This is the acme of inter-classism. Kautsky's formula (and that of his present-day imitators) does not suggest even as a hypothesis that the parliamentary regime might be linked in some way to the class structure of bourgeois society. (Colletti, 1973: 222-223)

From a consistent Marxist view, a revolution encompasses not only the acquisition of power but also the destruction of the old state apparatus. Believing that the proletariat's power can be wielded through the mechanisms of the bourgeoisie's state, and that radical transformations can be achieved without a revolutionary break from the existing state, is a fallacy (Balibar, 1977: 219-220). This criticism also significantly resonates with Poulantzas's later positions.

Kautsky, in contrast, regards the triumph of the revolution as an inevitability, portraying it as an objective event (Bensaid, 1987: 6), an occurrence that doesn't require preparation but will simply transpire. Kautsky's argument that "the Socialist party is a revolutionary party, but not a revolution-making party" (Kautsky, 2015: 47) illustrates that, for him, revolutionary rhetoric serves as a superficial connection to Marx, which he cannot disentangle. As aptly observed by Daniel Bensaid (1987: 6), Kautsky's revolutionaries neither prepare for revolution, nor revolt, nor capitulate; they simply wait. Their tactics revolve around wearing down the bourgeois state. In the subsequent phase, a parliamentary rupture, or occasionally a non-parliamentary one, is anticipated.

Kautsky refrains from launching a direct assault, fearing the potential loss of all the gains achieved by the labor movement up to that point. Instead, he opts for a strategy akin to besieging a fortress, commencing a war of attrition to weaken the fortress. Ultimately, it is expected to fall into the hands of the working class without significant losses. Kautsky's typical "orthodoxy" and its ideological dominance until the outbreak of World War I essentially embody a balanced and veiled form of reformism tinged with revolutionary language. In essence, he calls for the unattainable: social transformation without ruptures, unfolding in a linear and peaceful manner.

If Bernstein with his reformist logic, as it was developed mainly in the *The Preconditions of Socialism*, and Kautsky as a representative of the so-called "orthodox Marxism" with works such as *The Social Revolution* and *The Road to Power* traced the parliamentary democracy to fetish, on the contrary, for Marxists such as Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky or Gramsci the dialectic of the state and revolution is not understood in terms of taking over or occupying, but of crushing the bourgeois state apparatus in all its individual institutional and functional aspects. (Chrysis, 2009: 74)

In conclusion, while Kautsky's position is grounded in the perspective of the bourgeois state as a neutral tool whose use can be altered under the influence of social democracy, this convergence with Kautsky's logic raises questions for a modern analyst of Poulantzas's caliber. This alignment with Kautsky stands in stark contrast to all his previous influential analyses, where he frequently invoked the authority of Luxemburg, who consistently criticized Kautsky's positions.

Jessop (1985: 309-310) is certainly not off the mark in his argument that, in general, left Eurocommunism follows a path similar to that of social democracy in the pursuit of socialism. Both Eurocommunism and earlier social democracy share a commitment to a mainstream, non-violent, and democratic route to socialism. In such a context, significant strategic dilemmas emerge, dilemmas that Poulantzas is cognizant of but addresses only superficially, without clearly and thoroughly delineating the specific strategy to be pursued.

III: The tacit recall of Austro-Marxism

If the connection between Kautsky's and Poulantzas's positions has become clear, the link between Austro-Marxism and Poulantzas relies on subtle mediations. Contrary to Jessop's view (1985: 298-299), which argues that the similarities between Poulantzas and Austro-Marxism are coincidental and not the product of deliberate theoretical alignment, we contend that an inherent and substantial theoretical affinity exists. Nonetheless, we agree with Jessop that, ultimately, Poulantzas did not transcend the bounds of Austro-Marxist analyses, particularly concerning the combination of direct and representative democracy (Jessop, 1985: 299-300).

According to Otto Bauer and Max Adler the term "Austro-Marxism" was coined by socialist journalist Louis Budin before World War I to describe the scientifically active socialist group in Austria, primarily centered on the magazines "Marx-Studien" and "Blätter zur Theorie und Politik des wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus." Much like the German Social Democratic Party, the Austrian party was established in 1888 through a great compromise between the radical and conservative wings, with Viktor Adler as its architect. The party's program emphasized the need for the political struggle of the proletariat without rejecting reforms. Following the German social democrats' approach, the Austrians achieved significant pro-working class reform victories (Vranitsky, 2008: 369-370).

Four prominent figures of Austrian social democracy were Max Adler, Karl Renner, Rudolf Hilferding and Otto Bauer. Max Adler conducted a neo-Kantian revision of Marxism (Blum, 1985: 109-139), Bauer focused on the national question, Hilferding addressed economic issues, and Renner primarily explored law and the state (Blum & Smaldone, 2016: 56-65). As Leser (1976: 133) notes, "the meeting of such exceptionally talented minds gave Austro-Marxism its specific edge and flavor. It became an historically identifiable entity with the founding in 1903 of the Fabian-type society *Zukunft*. The impulses generated there exerted a lasting and widening influence on the entire structure and performance of Austrian socialism."

Trotsky (1920), in his work *Terrorism and Communism*, does not make a sharp distinction between them. He refers to each by name and describes their roles and personalities with strong irony. He criticizes them for representing a concealed opportunism, which is a

logical extension of Kautsky's analysis, while also accusing them of being averse to and fearful of revolutionary action. However, Trotsky's grouping is somewhat exaggerated, as we believe that mainly Adler and to some extent Bauer should be separated from the dominant center-right tendency within Austrian social democracy.

Historically, an important segment of Austrian social democracy, under Adler and Bauer's influence, positioned itself to the left of the international social democratic movement. This section aimed to explore the possibility of forging a "third way," distinct from both Bolshevism and classical reformism. In 1921, they established the "2½ International," a "centrist" tendency that sought to unify the fragmented revolutionary movement. However, this effort was short-lived, as it was assimilated by the Second International within two years, in 1923.

Austro-Marxism, as Bensaid (1983: 78) observes, is more indicative of a specific moment in the labor movement's history than a complex theory. This characteristic aligns closely with Eurocommunism, as it reflects the separation of the two currents into right and left poles. One could argue that Austro-Marxists emphasized the intrinsic links between socialism and democracy in a manner very akin to that of left Eurocommunism. Regarding revolution, the conquest of power, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and Bolshevism, the Austro-Marxists generally aligned themselves with the "centrist" line of German social democracy (Vranitsky, 2008: 370).

Of particular significance is Austro-Marxism's attempt to develop an alternative theory for revolution beyond Leninism and classical reformism: a "third way." This was achieved by emphasizing the importance of the ideological aspects of the class struggle while undervaluing other aspects such as violence and control of the state apparatus. This shared demarcation against both Leninist and social-democratic wings of the labor movement can be considered a key similarity between Austro-Marxism and Poulantzas's theory (Poulantzas, 2001: 251-254).

A fundamental position of the Austro-Marxists was their belief in synthesizing the organs of direct workers' democracy (councils/soviets) with elements of classical bourgeois democracy (representative and multi-party bodies). They opposed the complete abolition of representation, arguing that such a stance would impoverish democracy and foster authoritarian tendencies in the socialist state. Soviets needed to be supplemented with parliamentary democracy. In this way, political democracy could be combined with socio-economic democracy. In addition, they advocated for a slower, more extended revolutionary process that did not envision or rely on a form of dual power.

Poulantzas (2001: 264-265), in the final pages of *State, Power, Socialism*, echoes this motif and evaluates the Austro-Marxists' proposal as a fusion of representative democracy with direct democracy and the self-management movement. He does, however, astutely acknowledge the weaknesses and risks of this approach, although his suggestions for addressing them remain vague.

Neither the Austro-Marxists nor even Poulantzas were clear about the precise relationship between direct and representative democracy. Both emphasized the complementarity of direct and representative democracy and the need for their synthesis. However, neither provided a convincing answer to how conflicts and contradictions between these different forms of governance would be resolved.

At a time when Hans Kelsen, a prominent legal positivist, recommended that Marxists “return to Lassalle,” to treat the state as a tool for serving or even manipulating the working class and establish a socialist regime through elections, Max Adler, through his work *The Marxist Conception of the State*, engaged in direct confrontation with this view. He made a critical distinction between social and political democracy, with the former being the authentic democracy of a socialist society and the latter encompassing all other democratic variations (Vranitsky, 2008: 375).

Adler delved much deeper into the essence of bourgeois democracy than social democratic thinkers like Kautsky, arguing that political democracy cannot exist without dictatorship. He contended that as long as society remains class-divided, any form of power represents a type of dictatorship. Therefore, any invocation of him by Eurocommunism should be regarded as misleading. Furthermore, to overcome the dominance of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois state must be dismantled. Regarding the co-structuring of direct and representative democracy, Adler advocated a configuration that was less unfavorable to councils, with national and regional bodies possessing significant powers, participating in economic planning, and defining the government in close collaboration with the parliament, while retaining veto power over parliamentary decisions.

As Bensaid (1983: 80) summarizes, Max Adler clearly favored the dictatorship of the proletariat as a qualitatively different form of democracy from bourgeois democracy. He was deeply critical of bourgeois parliamentarism, distinguishing him even from early Kautsky. Therefore, Adler did not perceive a logical unity and continuity of democracy, a viewpoint that distinguishes him also from Poulantzas (2001: 261). Adler’s skepticism stemmed from his assessment of the maturity of the Russian Revolution. He was also opposed to socialists participating in bourgeois governments.

His differentiation from Leninism is not related to whether there should be a “workers’ dictatorship,” but in terms of when and under what conditions it would be imposed. This hesitation of Adler’s stems both from coup tendencies in Germany, and from the pressure of the fetishism of democracy, as it had consolidated within the European social democracy.

At the social-democratic conference in Linz in 1926, Max Adler opposed the mainstream center-right position and boldly proclaimed that every political democracy is fundamentally a dictatorship. He argued that the working class should not merely defend democracy but should strive to establish its own class power, a form of democratic socialism that represents a class dictatorship (Vranitsky, 2008: 376-377). At a time when the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat was a pivotal point of division within the international workers’ movement.

As Bensaid (1983: 80) observes, Adler’s primary concern was the majoritarian character of the dictatorship of the proletariat, distinguishing it from Kautsky’s apparent contradiction between dictatorship and democracy, as Kautsky couldn’t conceptualize a majoritarian dictatorship radically distinct from minority despotism. It is clear that Adler’s views on the transition to socialism significantly differ from Poulantzas’s later thinking, with the latter being more aligned with Kautsky’s reasoning, as the following quote indicates:

If we understand the democratic road to socialism and democratic socialism itself to involve, among other things, political (party) and ideological pluralism, recognition of the role of universal suffrage, and extension and deepening of all political freedoms including for opponents, then talk of smashing or destroying the state apparatus can be no more than a mere verbal trick. What is involved, through all the various transformations, is a real permanence and continuity of the institutions of representative democracy – not as unfortunate relics to be tolerated for as long as necessary, but as an essential condition of democratic socialism. (Poulantzas, 2001: 261)

Poulantzas, prior to the transformation in his thinking (Skavos, 2023), was a staunch advocate of direct democracy and vehemently criticized representative democracy, along with its legal and political norms and institutions. However, in his later work, he shifted his stance to promote the articulation of direct and representative democracy and strongly defended so-called “bourgeois” liberties. Poulantzas acknowledged that one pole of this democratic relationship would dominate, emphasizing the significance of extending and deepening representative democracy. Within this context, he also suggested that direct democracy necessitated “bourgeois” liberties to prevent bureaucratic degeneration.

On the other hand, Renner and Hilferding heeded Kelsen’s call, viewing the transition to socialism as a conscious political program achievable through the democratic state, which becomes the battleground between the bourgeoisie and the working class (Bercovici, 2010). The labor movement’s task, as they saw it, was to establish democratic control over the economy, through the state. The transition to socialism would entail the gradual liberation of the state from the socio-economic constraints of private-monopoly capitalism. Hilferding, in particular, believed that the relationship between the state and the proletariat would undergo a radical transformation, with the state transitioning from an instrument of domination to a representative of the social whole. Thus, they contended that socialism could be peacefully achieved with the aid of the democratic state (Gottschalch, 1962: 189-207).

Similarly, Renner (1929: 12-34) held a positive view of the bourgeois state, arguing that it could alter the legal and political structures that underpinned capitalist economic power. He posited that the proletariat had two tasks: to complete political democracy and introduce socialism. Consequently, the path to socialism lay in the peaceful seizure of state power. Renner also advocated for increased state control over the economy and greater working-class influence in the democratic political system, although he did reject revolutionary methods of struggle, emphasizing that the capitalist society of Marx’s time had fundamentally changed (Renner, 1929: 128-136). Renner advocated for the gradual merging of “economic socialism” and the state, with an emphasis on the primacy of the state. Rather than highlighting the class character of the state, he emphasized that its functions were increasingly neutral in relation to class, making it a lever for socialism. In his view, the abolition of the state was absurd, and instead, he advocated for bringing all cartels under state control.

Nevertheless, despite their deep insights into modern state capitalism, the Austro-Marxists, like most social-democratic theorists, arrived at questionable political conclusions. They favored cooperation with the bourgeoisie and a gradual path to winning the parliamentary majority. Their positions were marked by ambiguity, particularly regarding the mitigation of crises, the elimination of monopolistic competition, and their stance on the class struggle.

Finally, Otto Bauer exhibited sharp vacillations in his approach. Initially, he aligned with Kautsky's view of the Russian Revolution, but later transitioned to support the dictatorship of the proletariat, which he termed an "educational dictatorship" for the less advanced masses. In his view, this polity assumed a despotic character due to the extreme conditions in the East (Leser, 1973: 88-92). Bauer, even if unconsciously, would articulate the division between East and West, since in the West, due to economic development and the cultural cultivation of the proletariat, the transition to socialism can take place with democratic characteristics.

As Leser (1973: 86-87) vividly captures it, "if the theoretical positions of Lenin and Karl Kautsky rationalized the extreme positions [...], Otto Bauer's position towards Bolshevism expresses the desire to elevate the revolutionary flag, but to avoid in his own territory the revolutionary consequences."

Bauer's view was rooted in his interpretation of the "moment" of tension when the bourgeoisie could no longer dominate, yet the proletariat was not yet capable of crushing it. In this transitional phase, both forces had to share power, with workers representing the potential ruling class. However, since the means of production remained in the hands of capitalists, the workers remained bound to capitalist production to prevent disruption and disintegration of the transition. This contradiction could be resolved either by the expropriation of capitalist property or by the overthrow of the workers' government and the restoration of the bourgeoisie (Vranitsky, 2008: 397-400).

Bauer critically analyzed this "moment" of tension, which he believed would be resolved through a compromise, justifying coalition governments of the Austrian Social Democrats with bourgeois parties. This choice stood in stark contrast to the development of dual power and the collapse of the bourgeois state. In essence, the Austro-Marxists avoided raising the issue of seizing power, fearing civil war and nurturing electoral illusions.

Additionally, as Sassoon (2010: 70-71) observes, Bauer asserted that the "social revolution" could only occur after the "political revolution," indicating that capitalism and socialism were not strictly separated, with elements of socialism already present within capitalism. This theoretical and political working hypothesis was not coincidental but rooted in the initial reform successes of the ruling Austrian Social Democratic Party (Bottomore & Goode, 1978: 164). Sassoon (2010: 72) even argues that this reformist socialism laid the foundation for the welfare state but created a double impasse. It revealed an objective obstacle to the continuous reorganization of capitalism while entrapping the working class within the capitalist framework, emphasizing the struggle for betterment within the system.

In the same direction, Vranitsky (2008: 377) further contends that there was an overestimation of individual socialist initiatives thriving within a capitalist framework. Regardless, no successful reform should divert the revolutionary party from its fundamental task of revolution and the construction of socialism.

Bauer's "complete socialism" recognized the historical, social, and cultural significance of bourgeois democracy, as a product of decades of successful working-class struggles and a fertile ground for the economic, social, and intellectual development of the working class (Beetham, 1983: 300), aligning with Poulantzas's later theoretical elaborations.

Importantly, Bauer, in his influential work *The Road to Socialism*, described the alternative “smoldering” revolution as follows:

We must adopt quite a different course. We must construct socialist society gradually, by planned organizing activity, proceeding step by step toward a clearly conceived goal. Each one of the successive measures which are to lead us to socialist society needs to be carefully considered. It must not only achieve a more equitable distribution of goods, but also improve production; it should not destroy the capitalist system of production without establishing at the same time a socialist organization which can produce goods at least as effectively. (Bottomore & Goode, 1978: 150)

Thus, the Austro-Marxists, long before, fervently advocated a “smoldering” revolutionary process and opposed dual power tactics akin to Poulantzas, viewing dual power as a raiding strategy. Nevertheless, the ultimate judgment of these theoretical positions is made on the historical battlefield. The Austrian Social Democracy harbored electoral illusions and missed crucial opportunities, allowing the fascist Right to easily crush the party despite its 40% support. This outcome underscored the pitfalls of revolutionary waiting and the critical importance of correctly assessing the existence of a revolutionary situation.

In summary, Bauer carried out a courageous self-critique, critiquing Kautsky’s strategy of “passivity” and emphasizing that the experience of fascism had shattered the illusions of reformist socialism. He argued that the working class could not provide socialism within the framework of parliamentary democracy and transform the capitalist order into a socialist one without a revolutionary leap. Kautsky (1934) himself conducted a more hesitant self-critique, attributing the rise of Nazism to the diffidence of social democracy, but also, as always, to the rigid objective conditions.

IV. Conclusions

From the preceding analysis, it can be argued that Nicos Poulantzas’s later theoretical assumptions regarding the nature of the bourgeois state and the transition to socialism were influenced by both Karl Kautsky and the Austro-Marxist tradition.

In his work *State, Power, Socialism*, Poulantzas revisited and updated the rich heritage of the Second International. He followed a path that resonated with the classic ideas of figures like Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky, and the Austro-Marxists. His approach emphasized a gradual, quiet, and quantitative conception of power, wherein the working class could expand its political influence until it could “transform” even the core of the bourgeois state from within (Dimitoulis, 2000: 41).

It’s worth noting that Poulantzas’s shift in perspective from his earlier work, where he advocated for the smashing of the bourgeois state machine and the development of dual power, was largely a conscious political decision. He aligned himself with the Euro-communist current of his time and sought to propose a transition to socialism that appeared to be more feasible for the political leadership and the evolving cross-class movements. Poulantzas displayed theoretical boldness, as he was not fixed on a singular vision of overthrowing the existing order

but instead actively pursued practical proposals adapted to the needs of the moment, even if these occasionally led to theoretical contradictions.

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