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Giorgos Kalampokas

Tassos Betzelos

Panagiotis Sotiris

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State, Political Power and Revolution: Althusser, Poulantzas, Balibar and the “Debate on the State”

Cover Page Footnote

This paper, which was presented at the 2013 London Historical Materialism Conference, is part of a broader theoretical project for a rereading of some of the crucial theoretical debates of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, especially those related to the theoretical and philosophical interventions of Louis Althusser. Some of the positions sketched here had been initially presented as part of a seminar we coordinated in the Spring of 2013 in Athens. We have also discussed these issues as part of preparation the new edition of some of Louis Althusser’s major works in Greek. Moreover, this project also has to do with broader theoretical and political debates in the Greek Left and the challenges we are facing in the current conjuncture.

1. *Althusser and the search for a new practice of politics*

A crucial aspect of *On Reproduction*, Althusser's 1969 manuscript, from which the 1970 article on *Ideology and the Ideological Apparatuses of the State* was extracted, is that it represents Althusser's attempt to think of the materiality of the State and its apparatuses, as a way to rethink revolutionary politics and especially to rethink a new revolutionary *practice* of politics. Althusser stressed the need to avoid an *idealist - instrumentalist* theory of the State, and to elaborate on a *theory of the State* that would go beyond a *descriptive* theory of the State. He insisted on the distinction between *State Power*, which has to do with an alliance of classes or a fraction of classes that tries to conserve power within the class struggle, and *State Apparatus*.¹

This stresses Althusser's distancing from traditional communist politics, as a politics centred on the State. This distancing that is obvious in his critical references to Western European Communist Parties in the correspondence with Franca Madonia,² in his 1966 text on *Cultural Revolution*,³ in his acceptance of the importance of May 1968 as a youth insurrection – in sharp opposition to the positions of the French Communist Party. We must combine this with Althusser's insistence on the primacy of the relations of production over the productive forces, a crucial and often underestimated aspect of Althusser's theory of ideology. Also of importance is his new theorization of the Ideological Apparatuses (both public and private) which expands the scope of State intervention, but also stresses that it's not a "neutral instrument", since it is traversed and deeply marked by class struggle. All these call for a new *practice of revolutionary politics*.

On reproduction is also full of references to the need for a new conception of radical politics that should avoid the danger of treating ideological apparatuses of the state as socially and politically neutral institutions. This is more evident in those chapters dealing with the political and trade union Ideological Apparatuses of the State. For Althusser the existence within the Ideological Apparatuses of the State of proletarian parties and trade unions can only be explained in terms of a long history of class struggle that imposed the presence of the Party and its trade union within these apparatuses. However, the very choice of treating trade unions and left wing parties as parts of Ideological Apparatuses of the State is of particular political and theoretical

¹ Althusser 2014, p. 74. It is interesting that in this section Althusser quotes Poulantzas.

² "Speaking about politics today, means analyzing the political conjuncture and seeing that French and Italian Communist Parties, following the Soviet Communist Party, are objectively engaged in a reformist and revisionist politics and becoming social democratic parties." Althusser 1997, p. 693.

³ Althusser 2010.

significance. It draws a line of demarcation against any identification of proletarian politics with the limits set within bourgeois Ideological Apparatuses, making sure that proletarian politics does not limit itself to parliamentary procedures and traditional “legal” trade union operations. For Althusser proletarian politics should always go beyond these limits, exactly because proletarian organizations were born outside the ideological apparatuses of the State:

Created by a class struggle external to the ISAs, sustained by it, charged with furthering and sustaining it by all available legal means, the proletarian organizations that figure in the ISAs concerned would betray their mission if they reduced the external class struggle, which merely finds a reflection in very limited forms in the class struggle carried out in the ISAs, to this class struggle internal to the ISAs.⁴

Of particular interest is the section on the relation of proletarian parties to the political Ideological Apparatus of the State. Althusser insists that, in contrast to the prevailing strategy of European Communist Parties that there can be parliamentary road to socialism, since the important factor is mass action and not parliamentary action.

Since, today, everyone is thinking about the 'transition' to socialism, it must be recalled that there is no parliamentary road to socialism. Revolutions are made by the masses, not by parliamentary deputies, even if the communists and their allies should fleetingly, by some miracle, attain a majority in the parliament.⁵

Althusser does not deny the possibility or the necessity of an attempt towards gaining parliamentary majority, but he insists that it is “*the actions of the popular masses*, assuming that they are educated, mobilized and committed to a struggle based on a correct line, would determine the nature of the *transitional period* thus initiated”.⁶ Moreover, he insists that without a confrontation with State apparatuses, without smashing state apparatuses, it is not possible to have a revolutionary process. This calls for a different practice of politics based on the “*the deep, irreversible implantation of the political class struggle in the economic class struggle*”.⁷ This is also linked to the importance and primacy of the relations of production. For Althusser a proper revolution is one that in the end opens up the way, through a long class struggle, for the destruction of the State

⁴ Althusser 2014, p. 96.

⁵ Althusser 2014, p. 107.

⁶ Althusser 2014, p. 109.

⁷ Althusser 2014, p. 135.

Apparatuses that guaranty the prevailing relations of production and their replacement by new relations of production. This gives a particularly political and strategic tone the whole manuscript on *Reproduction*. In a way, the question of reproduction is no longer a purely theoretical question; since it is from the point of view of reproduction that questions of revolutionary strategy can be dealt with.

If our interpretation is on the mark, we have to rise to the standpoint of reproduction not only in order to grasp the function and functioning of the superstructure, but also so as to have the concepts that will allow us to understand the concrete history of revolutions a little better (so that we can at last found the science of their history, which is at present still much more like chronicle than science): the history of revolutions that have already been made and of others that must still be made. This will also enable us to understand a little better the conditions that must be realized if we are to establish, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Ideological State Apparatuses required concretely to prepare the transition to socialism - that is, the gradual disappearance of the state and all its apparatuses - instead of floundering around in 'contradictions' that are more or less successfully camouflaged under 'policed' designations, of which contemporary history offers us all too many examples.⁸

It is obvious that for Althusser the attempt to work upon a non-instrumentalist theory of the State and the attempt to rethink a new communist *practice* of politics are part of the same political and theoretical critique of the impasse of communist politics and strategy in the 1960s. Both theoretical endeavours target the right-wing reformist parliamentary conception of socialist transition that was becoming the norm in Western European communist parties along with their distance or even opposition to the new dynamics associated with the larger historical cycle of 1968 protests and movements.

2. Balibar and the rectification of the Communist Manifesto

Balibar takes up exactly this point in his “La rectification du Manifeste Communiste”, a 1972 text that was included in his 1974 *Cinq études du matérialisme historique*.⁹ Balibar uses his reading of the changes or additions brought to the *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels as a way to trace the emergence of a radically antagonistic form of revolutionary politics. For Balibar in the *Communist Manifesto* “the revolution is not conceived simply as an act, but

⁸ Althusser 2014, pp. 161-162.

⁹ Balibar 1974.

as an *objective* process”,¹⁰ a process which is based on class struggle, it is a series of class struggles. For Balibar the initial references of the *Communist Manifesto* to the State, the revolutionary process and the possibility of an “end of politics” after the victory of the revolution, are not deprived of contradictions, open questions and theoretical absences regarding the dictatorship of the proletariat, the revolutionary process, the actual process of dismantling the existing state apparatuses.¹¹ Marx came in terms with some of these contradictions after the experience of the Paris Commune, which can explain why Marx and Engels referred in their 1872 preface to the *Communist Manifesto* to changes they would have made in light of the experience of the Commune, especially regarding the inability of the working class to simply take up the existing state apparatus.¹² For Balibar, the measures taken by the Commune and its attempt to do away with parliamentary democracy and bureaucracy represented an actual process of dismantling the State Apparatus, which – in contrast to 20th Century communist reformism and its conception of “stages of the revolutionary process” – was not at the end but at the beginning of the revolutionary process. Moreover, according to Balibar there important changes in the definition of State power and the apparatuses of the State, which necessarily lead to the conclusion that the proletariat cannot simply conquer and then use the old bourgeois state apparatus.

[T]he exploiting classes and the exploited class, which for the first time in history and because of its role in production, is in the position to take power for itself, *cannot exercise their power* (and even their absolute power, their “dictatorship”) *with the same means and thus in the same forms*. They cannot, not

¹⁰ Balibar 1974, p. 79.

¹¹ Balibar 1974, p. 88-89.

¹² “However much the state of things may have altered during the last twenty-five years, the general principles laid down in this Manifesto are, on the whole, as correct today as ever. Here and there some detail might be improved. The practical application of the principles will depend, as the Manifesto itself states, everywhere and at all times, on the historical conditions for the time being existing, and, for that reason, no special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of Section II. That passage would, in many respects, be very differently worded today. In view of the gigantic strides of Modern Industry in the last twenty-five years, and of the accompanying improved and extended party organisation of the working class, in view of the practical experience gained, first in the February Revolution, and then, still more, in the Paris Commune, where the proletariat for the first time held political power for two whole months, this program has in some details become antiquated. One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.’ (See *The Civil War in France ; Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association*, London, Truelove, 1871, p. 15, where this point is further developed.) (Marx – Engels 1970, p. 2)

in the sense of a moral impossibility but in the sense of a material impossibility: the machine of the State does not function “for the sake of” the working class; either it does not function at all, or it does function, but for the sake of someone else, who can be no other than the class adversary. It is impossible for the proletariat, to conquer, safeguard and use political power by using an instrument analogous to the one used by the dominant classes; otherwise it will *lose* it, in one form or the other, “violent” or “peaceful”.¹³

This makes necessary a *new practice of proletarian politics*. This new practice of politics, this revolutionary transformation of politics includes: a) the emergence of new forms of mass political organization at the side of the State,¹⁴ b) the penetration of politics within the realm of production, putting an end to the bourgeois separation of economics and politics. That is why revolutionary transformation cannot have as an end the “end of politics” and its replacement by the “administration of things”, which for Balibar represents a bourgeois distinction between persons and things. What is needed is a new form, a new practice of proletarian politics. One can find in this intervention echoes of both the criticism of the Cultural Revolution, but also of the need for a new form of communist politics that would go beyond communist reformism and opportunism. The attempt to smash the state and transform social and political relations is a constant political battle that cannot wait for after the revolution. It must be at the beginning of any emancipatory and transformative politics.

3. Poulantzas: the relational theory of the State and its implications for revolutionary strategy.

Poulantzas’ relational conception of political power was also an important contribution to these debates. Usually we tend to associate Poulantzas with his later support of a version of Eurocommunism, but this does injustice to long attempt to articulate a highly original theory of the State, which was also an attempt to overcome the limitations of an instrumentalist theory of the State. This is obvious in *Political Power and Social Classes*, where one can already find a relational conception of the political as the level where all the contradictions of a social formation are condensed.

In the anti-historicist conception of the original problematic of Marxism, the political must be located in the structure of a social formation, not only as a specific level, but also as a crucial level in which the contradictions of a

¹³ Balibar 1974, pp. 95-96.

¹⁴ Balibar 1974, p. 76.

formation are reflected and condensed. This must be done in order to understand exactly the anti-historicist character of the proposition that it is the political class struggle which constitutes the motive force of history.¹⁵

The political character of Poulantzas interventions is also evident in *Fascism and Dictatorship* and his critique in many instances of the economism of the traditional communist movement. This economism was along with the absence of a mass line the reason for the inability of the Third International to answer the rise of Fascism, along with the all the oscillations regarding the strategy of the United Front. We would like to stress that regarding the theorization of the State Poulantzas offers here an emphasis on the complex role of the State in the reproduction of class domination in opposition to any instrumentalist conception.

The class State is the central instance with the role of preserving the unity and cohesion of a social formation, preserving the conditions of production and therefore the reproduction of the social conditions of production. In a system of class struggle it guarantees political class domination. This is precisely the role of the ideological apparatuses: in particular the dominant ideology is the “cement” of a social formation.¹⁶

For Poulantzas in *Fascism and Dictatorship* the repressive State apparatus is the “central nucleus”¹⁷ of the State power and mechanism, but this does not deny the relative autonomy of the other branches and especially the ideological State apparatuses. Of particular interest are Poulantzas references to how ideological State apparatuses condense the intense ideological contradictions coming from the class struggle resulting to the relative autonomy of the ideological State apparatuses, which “themselves are no more than the effects of the class struggle”.¹⁸ For Poulantzas this complexity of the ideological State apparatuses make it possible for the dominant ideology to outlive the transformation of the apparatuses. Moreover, it is exactly this complexity that makes imperative some form of revolutionary organization, since only “revolutionary organizations and organizations of the class struggle can in the end ‘escape’ the system of ideological State apparatuses”.¹⁹ All these account for a complex theory of State apparatuses and their role in class domination and social reproduction, a theory that is far from instrumentalist and, in contrast, is based upon the importance of condensed class contradictions.

¹⁵ Poulantzas 1978, p. 40.

¹⁶ Poulantzas 1979, p. 302.

¹⁷ Poulantzas 1979, p. 305.

¹⁸ Poulantzas 1979, p. 306.

¹⁹ Poulantzas 1979, p. 308.

The crucial theoretical innovation comes in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* where Poulantzas introduces his new relational conception of the State as the condensation of a class relation in sharp opposition to any instrumentalist conception of the State:

We can thus define both the relationship and the distinction between state power and state apparatuses. State apparatuses do not possess a “power” of their own, but materialize and concentrate class relations, relations which are precisely what is embraced by the concept “power”. The state is not an “entity” which an intrinsic instrumental essence, but it is itself a relation, more precisely the condensation of a class relation.²⁰

It is also worth noting that especially in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* this relational approach the State is not associated with his later insistence on the place of social struggles within the State. In contrast, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* is an attempt to theorize the importance of class struggles and the primacy of the relations of production. Therefore, it is a theoretical intervention that contrasts the economism especially of the Communist Party and in particular its theory of *State Monopoly Capitalism*. This is evident in Poulantzas’ theory of classes, in his insistence on the primacy of relations of production, in his conception of the primacy of the reproduction to positions in the social division of labour as opposed to the reproduction of the agents. It is also evident in Poulantzas’ theorization of the division between mental and intellectual labour as a crucial aspect of class formation. One might say that the book reflects aspects of the new radicalism within both the labour movements and the student rebellions in the aftermath of May 1968, the Italian Hot Autumn and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the aim of Poulantzas seems to be exactly to re-introduce class struggle and antagonism right at the centre of the very materiality of the State as a means to rethink the primacy of class struggle over the appearance of stability of the State. Even his theory of the new petty bourgeoisie seemed exactly as an attempt to warn against any conception of the “neutrality” of the supposedly “technical” aspects of the division of labour.

A crucial turn appears in Poulantzas’ intervention after 1975. This is evident in his reading of the fall of South Europe dictatorships in the *Crisis of Dictatorships*²¹. Of particular importance was both the evolution of the Portuguese Revolution – the last sequence of a potential “insurrectional” revolutionary sequence in Europe– from initial victory to later defeat and the

²⁰ Poulantzas 1975, p. 26.

²¹ Poulantzas 1976.

fact that despite strong popular movements in both Greece and Spain the bourgeoisie and its political representatives managed to maintain the initiative. So, politically Poulantzas moves toward an attempt to provide a left-wing version of the strategy of Western European Communist parties for a democratic, parliamentary transition to socialism. For example, this is obvious in his 1977 interview with Henri Weber on the State.²² Although he took distance from the positions of the Italian Communist Party, he was favourable to the strategy of the Common Program in France and to the possibility of the Left moving into governmental power along with a huge mobilization of the popular masses. Moreover, he insisted on the centrality of forms of democratic representation, insisting that it is only upon them that any formal guaranty of democratic freedoms can be based. Poulantzas does not deny the class character of the State and he criticizes the positions of Italian Marxists from the PCI such as Luciano Gruppi that by theorizing a “contradictory” nature of the State, as a distinction between “good” and “bad” aspects of the State, ended up with a version of a struggle situated only within the State. In contrast, Poulantzas insisted on both a struggle within the State and a parallel struggle “*a struggle outside the institutions and apparatuses, giving rise to a whole series of instruments, means of coordination, organs of popular power at the base, structures of direct democracy at the base*”.²³

Poulantzas tried to use the theoretical advances towards a relational theory of State Power as justification for his conception of democratic socialism. He insisted that the presence of the subaltern classes within the State made impossible a traditional “Leninist” attack on the State strategy. However, the conception of State power as condensation of class relations has much more to say than that. In our reading it has less to do with ability to transform the State from within, but it is an attempt to rethink both the materiality of State apparatuses and the constant effectivity of class struggle that traverses and conditions State apparatuses at all levels. This should be read along with Poulantzas invaluable insights on the role of the State in the encoding / decoding of discourses and ideologies, on the articulation of strategies, on the (re)production of social forms and social divisions, in particular the manual / intellectual labour divide. What emerges is a theory of both the efficacy of the State, its extended role in reproducing class domination and exploitation, in organizing the hegemony of the ruling class, in lines similar to Gramsci’s conception of the *integral State*. At the same time it is also of the possibility of radical transformation, of the possibility of revolutionary processes, of an actual

²² In Poulantzas 2008.

²³ Poulantzas 2008, p. 338.

“withering away of state” in the sense of the emergence of new social and political configurations.

Therefore, a political and theoretical tension runs between Poulantzas relational theorization of the State and the political conclusions he drew from it. In this sense however justified are the criticisms that can be raised against Poulantzas’s in placing, especially in the last chapter of *State, Power and Socialism*, of the autonomous movements and the popular struggles to a subordinate position vis-à-vis the electoral struggle for the conquest of governmental power, nevertheless the relational theorization of State power remains an indispensable theoretical reference.

These tensions of Poulantzas political conclusions are also evident in his confrontation with what he designated as authoritarian statism, combined with the first signs of the neoliberal turn and the shift of bourgeois ideology towards irrationalism, especially in his 1979 interview on the crisis of the Parties.²⁴ Andrea Cavazzini is therefore right to insist on the importance of this contradiction. Poulantzas’s conception of a parliamentary transition to socialism was based on the possibility of the political parties being in a position to play the mediating role between State and capital on the one hand and State and the subaltern classes on the other. This mediating role was seriously being undermined by exactly this neoliberal authoritarian turn that was shifting the centre of decision from legislative power to the administration, refusing compromises and changing the balance of forces in favour of capital.²⁵

4. Althusser 1976-78: the Crisis of Marxism and the search for new forms of political and philosophical existence

Coming now to Althusser’s intervention in these debates, especially in 1976-1978, we would like to insist that apart from Althusser’s interventions regarding the question of State theory, it was a crucial period in the evolution of Althusser’s (self)criticism of the limits and contradictions of Marxist theory. One might say that in that period Althusser was thinking the limits of Marxism and at the same time his thinking was *at the limits* of Marxism. On the one hand, this refers to the limits within which Marxism must be developed, if it is to avoid being turned into a philosophy of history. On the other hand, it refers to the limits Marxist theory must confront in the sense of problems and questions to which it has not managed to offer an answer. Of crucial importance was not only Althusser’s second definition of philosophy as *in the last instance class struggle*

²⁴ In Poulantzas 1979.

²⁵ Cavazzini 2009.

in theory,²⁶ but also his conception of historical materialism as *revolutionary science*, borne from *within* the working class movement. This is in sharp contrast to the position defended by Kautsky on the *importation* of Marxist theory into the working class movement from outside, a position that Althusser not only attacked in the late 1970s but also linked to the reproduction of the manual / intellectual division of labour within working class organizations.

However that may be, beneath the general conception, under the Second International of the early twentieth century, of a theory – that of a “science produced by bourgeois intellectuals” and “introduced from without into the workers' movement” - there clearly appeared the outlines of an idealist, voluntarist representation of the relation between theory and practice, between the Party and the mass movement, hence between the Party and the masses, and, finally, between the Party leaders (who were intellectuals; whether they were of working-class background is immaterial) [and rank-and-file activists]. In the last instance, this representation could not but reproduce bourgeois forms of knowledge, that is, forms of the production and possession of this knowledge on the one hand, and, on the other, bourgeois forms of the possession and exercise of power, all these forms being dominated by a separation between knowledge and non-knowledge, between the informed and the ignorant, between the leaders, the guardians of knowledge, and the led, reduced to receiving it from without and from on high because they were naturally ignorant of it.²⁷

In contrast, Althusser insists that Marxist theory was from the beginning developed *within* the working class movement. This was based upon the encounter of Marx within proletarian struggles and his commitment to this struggles, his organic relation to them: “*Marx's thought was formed and developed not outside the workers' movement, but within the existing workers' movement, on the political basis provided by that movement and its rectified theoretical positions.*”²⁸

However, this position also meant that Marxist theory was never immune to the class struggle and to the balance of forces in the class struggle, in particular the way the general balance of forces within society was internalized within the working class movement in the form of its various “deviations”. For Althusser, any science that represents a rupture with the dominant ideology is necessarily open to various forms of ideological counter-offensives. This is exemplified in Althusser’s insistence on the necessary *conflictual* and *scissionist* character of Marxist theory, a *conflictuality* that is “*constitutive of its scientificity, its objectivity*”²⁹ of Marxist theory.

²⁶ Althusser 1976, p. 58.

²⁷ Althusser 2006, pp. 25-26.

²⁸ Althusser 2006, pp. 32-33.

²⁹ Althusser 1999, p. 110

Therefore, the theme of the *Crisis of Marxism* is not an expression of disillusionment with Marxist theory and communist politics, but exactly the confrontation with exactly this conception of Marxist theory as a terrain determined by class struggle and the balance of forces. Therefore, it was necessary for Marxist theory to be from the beginning, from the “epistemological break”, full of contradictions, limits and influences from bourgeois ideology. This is evident in a series of crucial texts from that period: These include:

a) The 1976 lecture on the “Transformation of Philosophy” which is a crucial text in the evolutions of Althusser’s definition of philosophy. The important aspect here is Althusser’s insistence on the *non-symmetry* between idealist Philosophical Systems and a new *materialist practice of philosophy*, which is described in terms very similar to the conception of a new *communist practice of politics*. Moreover, this materialist practice of philosophy is described both as a “deconstruction” and undermining of idealist positions, but also as a way to produce new theoretical forms and discourses:

To support our argument by comparison with the revolutionary State, which ought to be a State that is a “non-State” - that is, a State tending to its own dissolution, to be replaced by forms of free association - one might equally say that the philosophy which obsessed Marx, Lenin and Gramsci ought to be a “non-philosophy” - that is, one which ceases to be produced in the form of a philosophy, whose function of theoretical hegemony will disappear in order to make way for new forms of philosophical existence. And just as the free association of workers ought, according to Marx, to replace the State so as to play a totally different role from that of the State (not one of violence and repression) so it can be said that the new forms of philosophical existence linked to the future of these free associations will cease to have as their essential function the constitution of the dominant ideology, with all the compromises and exploitation that accompany it, in order to promote the liberation and free exercise of social practices and human ideas. [...] This new practice of philosophy serves the proletarian class struggle without imposing upon it an oppressive ideological unity (we know where that oppression has its roots), but rather creating for it the ideological conditions for the liberation and free development of social practices.³⁰

b) The 1977 preface to Gerard Dumenil’s book on the concept of the economic law in *Capital*,³¹ offers the highly original proposition that the presence of the “exterior” in *Capital*, namely the chapters on concrete historical reality, are an indispensable theoretical aspect of the project of the critique of

³⁰ Althusser 1990, pp. 264-65.

³¹ In Althusser 1998.

political economy, in sharp contrast to a certain Hegelian conception of the logical order of exposition.

c) The 1978 article on *Marxism Today*, where we can see both the critique of the arithmetical conception of surplus value (a point also taken in the Dumenil preface) and of the latent Hegelianism in Marx's order of presentation of *Capital*.³²

d) The posthumously published 1978 manuscript *Marx in his limits*, which apart from the specific theorization of the State, also includes extensive elaborations on the questions having to do with the *Crisis of Marxism*.

At the same time, it is exactly in that period that Althusser dealt with the question of what a *new practice of communist politics* implies. Although most presentations of this debate centre upon the question of the *State* and whether the working class and its Party is (or should be) inside or outside the State, we think that the actual stake of the debate is mainly the question of a new form and new practice of politics in opposition to communist parties embracing a bourgeois practice and form of politics.

This is evident in the first of Althusser's major interventions, his lecture on the problems associated with the strategic turn of the French Communist Party in its 22nd Congress. Althusser's intervention is not simply a criticism of the abandonment of the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is also a call for new forms of autonomous organization of the subaltern class apart from traditional party forms. This is one of the first such interventions of Althusser on the need to go beyond the traditional Party-Form and use these new forms of organizations as exactly the means for a process of revolutionary "withering away" of the State.

[T]he slogan "union of the people of France", is not synonymous with the slogan of the Union of the Left. It is broader than it, and different in nature; for it does not designate just the union or united action of the political organizations of the Left, parties and trade unions. ... Why address the popular masses in this way? To tell them, even if still only as a hint, that they will have to *organize* themselves autonomously, in original forms, in firms, urban districts and villages, around the questions of labour and living conditions, the questions of housing, education, health, transport, the environment, etc.; in order to define and defend their demands, first to prepare for the establishment of a revolutionary state, then to maintain it, stimulate it and at the same time force it to "wither away". Such mass organizations, which no one can define in advance and on behalf of the masses, already exist or are being sought in Italy, Spain and Portugal, where they play an important part, despite all difficulties.³³

³² In Althusser 1990.

³³ Althusser 1977.

Moreover, Althusser insists on the necessary “*restoring their voice to the masses*” in the sense of “*opening one’s ears to hem*, studying and understanding their aspirations and their contradictions, learning how to be attentive to the masses’ imagination and inventiveness.”³⁴ This linked to rethink of socialism as the transition to communism, as a “real movement”, therefore as an attempt to *revolutionize* social forms and the State.³⁵ In opposition to the reformist turn of the French Communist Party and its strategy of “democratizing” the State, Althusser insists on the need for a *revolutionary approach*.

Truly, and I ask that these words be carefully weighed, to “destroy” the bourgeois state, in order to replace it with the state of the working class and its allies, is *not to add the adjective “democratic” to each existing state apparatus*. It is something quite other than a formal and potentially reformist operation, it is to revolutionize in their structures, practices and ideologies the existing state apparatuses; to suppress some of them, to create others; it is *to transform the forms of the division of labour* between the repressive, political and ideological apparatuses; it is *to revolutionize their methods of work* and *the bourgeois ideology* that dominates their practices; it is to assure them *new relations with the masses* in response to mass initiatives, on the basis of a new, *proletarian* ideology, in order to prepare for the “withering away of the state”, i.e. its replacement by mass organizations.³⁶

This same emphasis on the mass initiatives is also a cornerstone of Althusser November 1977 intervention on *The Crisis of Marxism* in the *II Manifesto* Venice Conference. For Althusser the crisis of Marxism is the result of an inability to come in terms with the theoretical and strategic question facing us, especially in light of the open crisis of the soviet social formations. And this means how to think the question of the Party and mass organizations and their relation to the State not just as theoretical questions but as a revolutionary practice and politics that start today. For Althusser the process

³⁴ Althusser 1977.

³⁵ “communism is not an ideal but ‘*the real movement unfolding beneath our eyes*’. Very concretely this means: the strategy of the workers’ movement must take this dialectic into account: *it cannot be merely the strategy of socialism*, it is necessarily the strategy of communism, or else the whole process is in danger of marking time and getting bogged down at one moment or another (and this must be foreseen). Only on the basis of the strategy of communism can socialism be conceived as a transitory and contradictory phase, and a strategy and forms of struggle be established from this moment that do not foster any illusions about socialism (such as ‘We’ve arrived: everybody out’ — Lenin’s ironic comment) but treat socialism as it is, without getting bogged down in the first ‘transition’ that happens to come along.” Althusser 1977.

³⁶ Althusser 1977.

that can lead us to an actual withering away of the State starts from now, must be a defining aspect of our political practice long before the revolutionary process. The question is: “*How can we grasp now, in order to spur on the process, the need for the ‘destruction’ of the bourgeois State, and prepare the ‘withering away’ of the revolutionary State?*”³⁷ Therefore, the open questions coming from the crisis of “actually existing socialism” along with the new dynamics of the movements become at the same time the potential explanation for the crisis of Western communism and Marxism and the testing ground for any proposition to exit this crisis. A new practice of mass politics is necessary both for the recomposition of the revolutionary movement but also for the transition process. That is why, noting the emergence of new mass popular movements that emerge outside the limits of the traditional party-form but also of the trade unions, Althusser insists that “*the most important of questions for past and future—how can relations be established with the mass movement which, transcending the traditional distinction between trade union and party, will permit the development of initiatives among the people, which usually fail to fit into the division between the economic and political spheres.*”³⁸

In the answers, that Althusser gave to Rossana Rossanda some months after the Venice Conference Althusser makes a reference to *communism* as material tendency emerging from the contradictions of capitalism and to the *virtual forms of communism* existing in the interstices of capitalist social forms.

Marx thinks of communism as a *tendency* of capitalist society. This tendency is not an abstract result. It already exists, in a concrete form in the “interstices of capitalist society” (a little bit like commodity relations existing “in the interstices” of slave or feudal society), virtual forms of communism, in the associations that manage [...] to avoid commodity relations.³⁹

For Althusser Marxist theory is finite but not closed. It is finite in the sense of being a theory of the capitalist mode of production and its contradictory tendencies, and not closed exactly based on being open to these contradictory tendencies as opposed to a closed philosophical system. Part of this new theoretical orientation was Althusser’s positive appreciation of proletarian ideology. The following passage exemplifies this position.

The conditions of existence, the (productive and political) practices and forms of the proletarian class struggle have nothing to do with the conditions of existence, the (economic and political) practices and forms of the capitalist and imperialist class struggle. This gives rise to antagonistic ideologies, which, like the (bourgeois and proletarian) class struggles themselves, are unequal.

³⁷ Althusser 1978, p. 220.

³⁸ Althusser 1978, p. 220.

³⁹ Althusser 1998, p. 285.

This means that proletarian ideology is not the direct opposite, inversion, or reversal of bourgeois ideology - but an altogether different ideology that is the bearer of different, 'critical and revolutionary' 'values'. It is because proletarian ideology is, all the vicissitudes of its history notwithstanding, already the bearer of such values, which are already realized in the organizations and practices of workers' struggle, that that ideology prefigures what the Ideological State Apparatuses of the transition to socialism will be and, for that very reason, also prefigures the abolition of the state and Ideological State Apparatuses under communism.⁴⁰

Therefore, we would like to insist that the crucial aspect of Althusser's intervention in the State debate is not his insistence on the necessary exteriority of the movement to the State but this emphasis on the necessity, possibility and actuality of these mass initiatives. These made imperative to elaborate a *new practice of politics* in sharp contrast to the State-centred politics of the Western European Communist Parties, a *new practice that requires new forms of popular organization and new initiatives*. Consequently, the main endeavour of Althusser is exactly to redefine this opposition between bourgeois politics and a new communist / proletarian *practice* of politics.

Part of this theoretical and political shift by Althusser, has to do with his increased emphasis on the effectivity of ideology within the Ideological Apparatuses of the State. If we look at the 1976 *Note on the ISA's* we can see Althusser insisting on the "*primacy of the class struggle over the functions and functioning of the state apparatus and Ideological State Apparatuses.*"⁴¹ and on the *of the primacy of the class struggle over the dominant ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses*⁴². Therefore, it is not that Althusser does not take into account how State apparatuses are traversed and in the last instance determined by class struggles. However, Althusser insists on the effectivity not of individual apparatus but of complexes of apparatuses. This means that communist parties cannot be "parties of the State". Of particular importance is his position that it is not a particular political party that acts as an Ideological Apparatus of the State but the whole political Ideological State Apparatus.⁴³ On the basis on this conception, he insists that a communist party even if it participates in a government, "*it cannot, on any grounds, be defined as a 'party of government'*".⁴⁴ It is obvious that is a position in sharp contrast to the prevailing at that time electoralism of the European Communist Parties. For Althusser communist

⁴⁰ Althusser 2014, p. 231.

⁴¹ Althusser 2014, p. 218.

⁴² Althusser 2014, p. 220.

⁴³ Althusser 2014, p. 221.

⁴⁴ Althusser 2014, p. 225.

parties must be parties “completely different”⁴⁵ from bourgeois ones, with a totally difference *practice of politics*. However, this is not easy, because of bourgeois and proletarian practices of politics being *unequal*. Moreover, Althusser offers in this text a more dialectical conception of “proletarian ideology”, which for Althusser must be distinguished from simple spontaneous proletarian elements. For Althusser, the proletarian ideology, as the ideology upon which communist parties base their functioning is not the spontaneous ideology of the proletariat. Instead it emerges through the combination of three elements. The first is the spontaneous proletarian ideology proper, where “proletarian ‘elements’ (Lenin) are combined with bourgeois elements, and most often are subsumed to them”.⁴⁶ The second element has to do with the actual experiences of the working class and its struggles and the third is represented by the objective knowledge supplied by Marxist theory. Therefore it is a “mass ideology”, but

It is therefore a very special kind of ideology. It is an ideology, because, at the level of the masses, it functions the way any ideology does (by interpellating individuals as subjects). It is, however, steeped in historical experiences illuminated by scientific principles of analysis.⁴⁷

This conception of the proletarian ideology is for Althusser the basis of the *interiority* of Marxist theory within the workers’ movement. Consequently there is no point in thinking in terms of “injecting revolutionary theory into the workers” movement. In reality, what is happening is the “*dissemination inside the workers’ movement of a theory conceived inside the workers’ movement*”⁴⁸. It is interesting to note that Althusser referred to proletarian ideology in similar terms in “The Transformation of Philosophy”, a text of the same period. For Althusser “[t]he ideology of the dominant class does not constitute itself as dominant except over and against the ideological elements of the dominated class.”⁴⁹ This reference to the ideological elements of the dominated class suggests that one of the constitutive aspects of dominant ideology is to be traversed by tensions and contradictions, since within it there evolving antagonistic tendencies. These tendencies are materialized into antagonistic practices of subjectification and potentially, under certain conditions, into revolutionary forms of

⁴⁵ Althusser 2014, p. 227.

⁴⁶ Althusser 2014, p. 228.

⁴⁷ Althusser 2014, p. 228.

⁴⁸ Althusser 2014, p. 229.

⁴⁹ Althusser 1990. p. 261.

subjectification (exemplified in the fusion between proletarian ideology and Marxist theory described above). Consequently, proletarian or revolutionary ideology is conceived mainly as a process that has already started upon the terrain of dominant ideology, through the tensions and contradictions that traverse it. That is why for Althusser “proletarian ideology’ is itself the stake of a class struggle”.⁵⁰ Consequently *autonomy* is the strategic exigency of the working class,⁵¹ by constructing its own organizations based upon proletarian ideology.

In light of the above we can go back to Althusser’s attempt to describe the State as a *machine* transforming social force into political (and legal) power, a theoretical schema elaborated in *Marx in his limits*.⁵² There Althusser makes a particular theoretical shift. Leaving aside his previous non-instrumentalist emphasis on Ideological Apparatuses of the State and the fact that there are constantly traversed and conditioned by class struggle, he turns to *repressive apparatuses of the State* and a conception of the State as an apparatus and even an instrument.

The state is separate from class struggle, since that is what it is made for, that is why it is an instrument. Can you imagine an instrument used by the dominant class that would not be “separate” from class struggle?⁵³

Althusser accepts the influence of class struggle and the existence of contradictions within the State because of the efficacy of class struggle, but he insists that “to leap from this to the conclusion that the state ‘is by definition traversed by class struggle’ is to engage in wishful thinking”.⁵⁴ *Per se* Althusser’s analysis of the specific meaning of the metaphor of machine and apparatus in the 19th century is really fascinating. In a way it brings class struggle back in, since a machine is a *process of transformation of energy* and not simply an instrument. Althusser admits this particular importance of the reference to the machine: “In the case of an apparatus, one kind of energy is sufficient; in the case of a machine, we have to do with at least two types of energy, and, above all, the transformation of one into the other.”⁵⁵ Therefore, despite Althusser’s polemic against theorists of a *relational* conception of the State, he is far from simply endorsing an instrumentalist approach to the state. Based upon a “mechanic” metaphor Althusser makes a distinction between the energy

⁵⁰ Althusser 2014, p. 228.

⁵¹ Althusser 2014, p. 230.

⁵² In Althusser 2006.

⁵³ Althusser 2006, p. 70.

⁵⁴ Althusser 2006, p. 80.

⁵⁵ Althusser 2006. p. 85.

transformed in the State-machine, namely social force of the class struggle, and the *body* of the State machine. He uses this distinction in order to refute the position that the “body of the State” is in crisis because it is traversed by class struggle. For Althusser although the “body of the State” and in particular the repressive apparatuses, is comprised by persons that come from the subaltern classes, it is difficult for this body to crack, and this can account for the persistent need to *destroy* the State Apparatus. Consequently, Althusser insists that the only kind of *energy* that enters the State as machine is that coming from the class struggle of the dominant classes not from that of the oppressed: “*only the Force of the dominant class enters into it and is recognized there.*”⁵⁶

Even if we could reformulate this conceptualization of the State as *machine* in a non-instrumentalist way by accepting that in the state machine enters both the energy coming from the class struggle of the dominant class but also the energy coming from the class struggle of the subaltern classes, we would still be facing the limitations of such a conception. It cannot account for the internal contradictions of the State apparatuses and in particular of the class contradictions traversing the Ideological Apparatuses of the State. This particular limitation is also obvious in Althusser’s reference to the ideological Apparatus of the State as being “tendentially linked to the state”,⁵⁷ a definition that is very close to identifying the State with basically the repressive apparatus of the State, a definition that is a theoretical retreat compared to the 1969-1970 texts. It is obvious that the complex and necessarily contradictory character of the Ideological Apparatuses of the State cannot be easily incorporated within this conception of the State as machine. Moreover, this conception of the State as machine cannot say much about the constitutive role the State plays in the formation of class and the reproduction of class positions and their agents, a point to which both Poulantzas and Balibar have insisted. And more generally it seems that this machine metaphor cannot account for the most *productive* effectiveness of State power and the State, in the sense defined by Foucault amongst others.⁵⁸

It is obvious that Althusser is driven here both by theoretical and political considerations. He was afraid that any relational conception of the State would lead to a reformist politics and illusions about the ability to “use” the bourgeois State for socialism. His theoretical target is not only the work of Poulantzas but also aspects of the Italian debate, where the left variants of the PCI debate, such as Ingrao, took the potentially positive role of existing State Apparatuses for granted.

⁵⁶ Althusser 2006, p. 109.

⁵⁷ Althusser 2006, p. 138.

⁵⁸ Foucault 1978.

Although Althusser never published *Marx in his limits*, nevertheless the insistence on the necessary *exteriority* of working class organizations towards the State was a basic tenet of his interventions. In his interview to Rossana Rossanda he insisted that “[w]ithout this autonomy of the party (*and not of politics*) in relation to the State, we will never get out of the bourgeois State however ‘reformed’ this might be.”⁵⁹ In the same line, in his July 1978 interview to Peter Schöttler that served as the prologue to the German edition of the *Crisis of Marxism* interventions Althusser insisted on the necessary extra-State and extra-parliamentary character of communist politics as the result of the extra-State area of activity being much broader than the State.⁶⁰ It is also interesting that in that interview Althusser also insists that along with the withering away of the State a withering away of the Party is also necessary,⁶¹ and suggests that in the future revolutions will be the result of a the confluence within a mass movement of various parties, not all them communist.⁶²

5. The interiority / exteriority debate

Althusser’s intervention was part of a broader debate regarding the role of the State and the relation of the proletarian party-form to the State. This debate, on the one hand, was an attempt to deal with the political questions (and trauma) originating from the evolution of soviet socialism and the identification of ruling communist parties in “people’s democracies” with the State in a very authoritarian version. On the other hand, the question of the State of its extended role, of the possibility for Communist Parties to find themselves to manage the State, through Left-wing governments, raised serious theoretical and political issues regarding the role of the State and the relation of communist parties to the State and led to conflicting positions. Either in the form of an attempt to rethink the potentially positive role of the State and the Party along to new forms of democracy in civil society and a effort towards the socialization of politics, a position evident for example in Pietro Ingrao’s interventions in the second half of the 1970s.⁶³ Alternatively, it took the form of an attempt to think of a politics beyond (and against) the State. Alain Badiou’s insistence from the 1970s on a communist politics openly antagonistic and external to the State, which evolved into his call for a politics at a distance

⁵⁹ Althusser 1998, p. 290.

⁶⁰ Althusser 1980, p. 16.

⁶¹ Althusser 1980, p. 21.

⁶² Althusser 1980, p. 22.

⁶³ Ingrao 1977; Ingrao 1978. Althusser makes many references to the Italian debates of that time in his texts in the second half of the 1970s.

from the State,⁶⁴ is an example of this tendency. And it is interesting that in the 1970s there are certain analogies between Althusser’s calls for the exteriority of the Party to the State and similar statements by Badiou.⁶⁵

However, apart from this polarization, other interventions in those debates attempted a more dialectical approach. Of particular interest are those interventions that came from people who, one way or the other had been theoretical interlocutors of Althusser. Poulantzas opposed the exteriority thesis on the basis of the fact that “the State is already *present* in the very *constitution* of production relations and not only in their reproduction”.⁶⁶ Moreover, for Poulantzas all the new movements that Althusser referred to as proof for the exteriority of popular movements “*are necessarily positioned on the strategic terrain of the State. A proletarian politics cannot be placed outside the State*”.⁶⁷ Theoretically, Poulantzas grounds his opposition to Althusser on his relational conception of the State. Consequently, for Poulantzas a revolutionary politics can be neither an attempt to destroy the institutions of representative democracy, nor its simple reform. It must be an attempt to deal with these contradictions in a combination between the transformation of the State and movements from below. Poulantzas also deals with these matters in *State, Power and Socialism*, where he offers an even more clear conception of a struggle both “inside” and “outside” the State:

The choice is not, as is often thought, between a struggle “within” the state apparatuses (that is, physically invested and inserted in their material space) and a struggle located at a certain distance from these apparatuses. *First*, because any struggle at a distance always has effects within the State: it is always there, even if only in a retracted manner and through intermediaries. *Secondly*, and most importantly, because struggle at a distance from state apparatuses whether within and beyond the limits of the physical space traced by the institutional *loci*, remains necessary at all times and in every case, since it affects the autonomy and the struggles and organizations of the popular classes. [...] The question of *who* is in power *to do what* cannot be isolated by these struggles for self-management and direct democracy. But if they are to modify the relations of power, such struggles and movement cannot tend towards centralization in a second power, they must rather seek to shift the relationship of forces on the terrain of the State itself.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Badiou 2005.

⁶⁵ It is interesting to read how in a 1978 text included in *Theory of the Subject* Badiou refers to “anticommunist fusion of the State and the masses, under a ‘proletarian’ class name that is henceforth absolutely imaginary. This entity has a name: the new bourgeoisie, born from within the party itself.” (Badiou 2009, p. 230).

⁶⁶ Poulantzas [1979] 1982, p. 142.

⁶⁷ Poulantzas [1979] 1982, p. 146.

⁶⁸ Poulantzas 1980, pp. 259-260.

However, the problem with Poulantzas' intervention was that in contrast to the early formulation of his relational theory of State and State power, had already shifted towards a thinking of the left-wing politics mainly as *parliamentary* politics, or, to be more precise, he thought in terms of the superiority of this kind of struggle for parliamentary representation and left-wing governance within the contours of a parliamentary democracy. In this perspective, mass struggles outside the State objectively took a secondary place in relation to electoral campaigns. Moreover, this shift by Poulantzas makes it impossible to rethink a new practice of politics. As Andrea Cavazzini notes Poulantzas's positions "make it impossible to pose the questions of regarding *a transformation of politics*, which will limit itself to modifying existing structures, but will dare question the place of its 'production', the status of its agents and which will finally propose a change even *at the level of its definition*".⁶⁹

Balibar's response to Althusser, initially pronounced during a conference in January 1979 and subsequently published as an article in *Dialectiques* is of particular interest and marks the beginning of a rich and profound confrontation with the question of the relation of class, politics and the State. Balibar begins by stressing the importance of Althusser's opposition to the position that was then dominant within communist Parties that they should be "parties of government". However, he stresses that in the "logic of Althusser's argument the idea of a 'party of opposition' will be equally erroneous as that of 'party of government'",⁷⁰ since both will be inscribed in the same form and practice of politics. Balibar also insists that this symmetry in political practice was a manifestation of the crisis of the historical communist movement.

For Balibar the problem lies exactly in Althusser's call for the party to be fundamentally out of the State returning to the masses and in autonomy to the State. Balibar thinks that this brings us back to an "*ideal (and idealist) conception of a party that would be nothing but the effect of the (revolutionary) will of its members, the product of the rules that it imposed itself as a function of the final end to which it tendentially moves (communism = the withering away of the State)*".⁷¹ For Balibar such a conception leads to contradictions that cannot be easily solved. The party is presented at the same time as the expression of the class conscience of the masses and as the centre of organization and education of the masses.

For Balibar Althusser's critique of communist parties being modelled on the State and its apparatuses did not offer *per se* a way to theorize the problem because the open question remained how to theorize the State. Moreover, he

⁶⁹ Cavazzini 2009, p. 92.

⁷⁰ Balibar 1979, p. 81.

⁷¹ Balibar 1979, p. 82.

thought that an opposition between a “good” democratic State and a “bad” corporatist State, and between a “good” party freeing the initiative of the masses and a “bad” party repressing this initiative, is “an abstract and moral opposition that shows [...] the incapacity to analyze the genesis and historical results of real contradictions that ‘work through’ workers’ parties today, thus, in the last instance, the working class itself”.⁷² That is why for Balibar there was no point in treating the masses as being outside the State, on the contrary they are conditioned in many aspects by their relation to State apparatuses.

The masses are not, in any case, “outside the State”. In contrast, they are always *already* taken within a network of state relations, namely institutional divisions (the code of professional “qualifications” along with national references) with a functioning of repression and ideological subjection which, within given historical conditions, are simply indispensable for their existence and form the material condition of all politics.⁷³

All these require a different approach: “[we must] not think in terms of interior / exterior of the State, namely the ‘purity’ of antagonistic positions (this old idealist temptation already denounced by Lenin), but in terms of *contradictions internal* to the system of State relations”.⁷⁴ For Balibar there was a problem with how the distinction between proletarian and bourgeois politics was conceived in the Marxist tradition. Initially, it was conceived as a “distinction between *politics* (bourgeois) and *non-politics* (proletarian)”.⁷⁵ With Lenin this distinction was displaced in an opposition between different institutional forms of politics, but it also had the cost of treating the Party as the locus where the contradiction between these different forms of politics was resolved (underestimating the extent that the Party internalizes this contradiction) and of thinking in terms of antagonistic *juridical* forms. For Balibar this led to “*new forms* of ‘parliamentary cretinism’ and ‘antiparliamentary cretinism’”.⁷⁶ Political domination should not be confused with the juridical form it takes (as modality of representation etc); on the contrary the juridical form “in reality draws its efficacy from the cumulative effect of all the underlying apparatuses of ideological and political domination (school, family, Law etc.)”.⁷⁷

⁷² Balibar 1979, p. 84.

⁷³ Balibar 1979, p. 84.

⁷⁴ Balibar 1979, p. 85.

⁷⁵ Balibar 1979, p. 86.

⁷⁶ Balibar 1979, p. 86.

⁷⁷ Balibar 1979, p. 87.

Balibar then turned his attention to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the way it stressed that class struggles continue throughout the “transition process” and the opportunity it offered to rethink the question of the Party. First by criticizing the “evolutionist and in fact apologetic kautskist motif, conserved by communist parties, according to which the *party* represents the ‘final’ form of the integration of struggles and of the theory / practice synthesis”,⁷⁸ and then by insisting that the party is itself a site of class struggle. That is why it is important to analyze the “*contradictory place of the revolutionary party itself* within this ‘play’ of the ISAs [...] and the transformations of the revolutionary party as antagonistic *tendency* within the ISAs”.⁷⁹ This is an important point because it calls for a rethinking of all the ideological constraints and effects that offer the material ground for the inherently contradictory character of revolutionary parties, beyond a schematic opposition within/outside the State. Moreover, this thinking of the Party as *antagonistic tendency* manages to capture the force of class antagonism and the fundamental opposition between potentially proletarian and bourgeois politics, without into a schematic conception of the Party as a political and organizational entity immune to the material constraints of the State, thus going beyond the inside/outside opposition. For Balibar this calls exactly for thinking the historical significance and the contradiction of the party form. Therefore, for Balibar the problem with Eurocommunism was that it believed that it could resolve the contradictions of the party-form without profoundly positing and confronting them.⁸⁰ This makes necessary a necessary break within this form, not in the sense of liquidating the organizational forms of the workers’ movement but in the sense of coming in terms with the limits and contradictions of the party-form. For Balibar:

It is a structural fact, that affects the interior of the “party-form” as an historical form, that Marxism is today a mass revolutionary ideology only within certain countries of Latin Europe, the Far-East and perhaps Cuba [...] in the end it has not permitted, under its current form, neither the concentration and the centralization of class struggles in the majority of “developed” imperialist countries (thus the dominant poles of imperialism), neither the continuation of the revolution in the countries of “realized socialism”, neither the real fusion of worker’s movement and national liberation movements (with some rare and “precious exceptions”), nor the proletarian answer to “multinational” enterprises). It is a structural fact that the “party-form”, such as it functions today, is not the form of *unity* of the international communist movement, but it has become the form of its crisis and division, within which what prevails is not the solidarity of struggles, but,

⁷⁸ Balibar 1979, pp. 87-88.

⁷⁹ Balibar 1979, p. 88.

⁸⁰ Balibar 1979, p. 88.

(especially after the end of the Vietnam War) of the opposition between national State interests, namely, in the last instance of the *subordination* to the tendencies of imperialism and its “rules of game”.⁸¹

For Balibar this called for a profound rethinking of the party-form, beyond the limits of the relation between party and trade union defined by both the Second and the Third International. For Balibar we must challenge the “*pluralism*’ of the Party but also of ‘*movements*’ – namely the organizations – of the masses” ... which by itself does not contribute to the undermining of the subjection of the masses to the forms of bourgeois politics”.⁸² What is needed is much more profound challenge and questioning of the party-form itself.

It is obvious that in the case of Balibar we are dealing with an important intervention, part of a series of interventions that would also continue into the 1980s in an attempt to rethink politics under a class perspective. The crucial aspect of Balibar’s intervention was the way it attempted to problematize the distinctions upon which Althusser’s intervention was based – exemplified in the inside / outside the State imagery – not in the sense of trying to negate its importance but of bringing forward the complexity of the question and the contradictory relation between class movement, party and the State. In a way, Balibar actually attempts to think the consequences of Althusser’s conception of the Ideological State Apparatuses, as a way to think the extent, depth and contradictions of the capitalist State, in a manner that Althusser himself did not dare to, trapped in a thinking of State Apparatus in terms of inside / outside. In Balibar’s reading the whole conception of the Ideological State Apparatuses goes beyond simply having a more complex theorization of State functions. It becomes a thinking of the State as a broader network and field of material practices, constraints and antagonisms that creates, in its complexity and unevenness – traversed as it is by class struggle –, the material ground and the possibility of politics, including proletarian politics as antagonistic politics.

This does not mean that Balibar denied the political significance of Althusser’s call for autonomy of the Party and movements from the State, as a line of demarcation with reformism and bourgeois politics. What he was attempting was to think of this necessary demarcation in its actual terms and the confrontation with both the complexity of State intervention and the limits of the historically determined relation between the party-form and other forms of proletarian mass politics. In this sense, Balibar went beyond the limits of the internal/external debate. What he tried to think was the asymmetry, the incommensurability between bourgeois politics and a potential communist

⁸¹ Balibar 1979, 90-91.

⁸² Balibar 1979, p. 91.

practice of politics, through a rethinking of the Party-form, in a way that transcends the question of the external / internal positioning of a given Party-form, a limitation shared by both Althusser and Poulantzas.

6. Balibar in the 1980s: the problematization of strategic questions

Political developments in the early 1980s, which included the rise of social-democratic parties in France and the European South along with the open crisis of communist parties along with the rise of the neoliberal offensive, changed the terrain of the debate. It was no longer question of how to incorporate the possibility of communist parties arriving at governmental power as a potential democratic road to politics. The retreat of the Left opened up the way for a more self-critical reflexion upon revolutionary politics. It was during that period that Balibar attempted to think of revolutionary politics beyond the limits of the party-form. In an entry to the 1982 *Critical Dictionary of Marxism*, on *The Right to Tendencies*, Balibar insists that the exigency is to think of an “original practice of politics that is *not less* but *more* ‘democratic’, than that incarnated by the pluralism of the representative institutions of the bourgeois State itself; to make the revolutionary party at the same time the means to take power and to exercise it in an new fashion; therefore to surpass progressively within its ranks the ‘division of manual and intellectual labour’, the opposition between ‘those who govern and those that are governed’”.⁸³

This critical reflection on the open questions facing any attempt to rethink class politics is also evident in his 1984 text “In Search of the Proletariat”.⁸⁴ Beginning by the scarce references to the proletariat in *Capital*, Balibar suggests that the notion of the proletariat has more to do with the “political sense”⁸⁵ of working class struggles and movements. However, this does not mean that Marx managed to come out of the antinomies of any potential proletarian politics, and especially the oscillation between an anarchist vision of an end to politics and a reformist centring of proletarian politics on the State. That is why Marx and Engels could produce *Anti-Dübring* but not an *Anti-Bakunin* or an *Anti-Lassalle*.⁸⁶ As with most texts from the 1980s, Balibar tended more to *problematize* than to actually answer or overcome these antinomies. Nevertheless, this problematization offers indeed a way to think of these problems. Of particular importance is, in our opinion, Balibar’s conception of the theoretical short-circuit that Marx performs on the relation

⁸³ Balibar (1982) 1999, p. 1139.

⁸⁴ In Balibar 1994.

⁸⁵ Balibar 1994, p. 130.

⁸⁶ Balibar 1994, p. 134.

between the labour process and the State,⁸⁷ in the sense of an immediate relation and correlation between economics and politics, between the labour process and the State, that is the cornerstone of Marx's *critique* of political economy. This refers not only to the insistence of the class *political* character of the relations of production, but also to the need for a new practice of proletarian politics as a "*politics of labor*".⁸⁸ At the same time this brings to the open questions facing exactly the relation between "classes" to "masses", which is the tension running through the concept of the *proletariat*. Marx himself oscillated between the possibility deducing a notion of class from the definition of the fundamental social relations of the capitalist mode of production and the difficulty of defining the *masses* as concrete historical condition and movement. For Balibar, this is the starting point for rethinking the non-subject of proletarian politics.

The fact that the proletariat, which is both a "class" and the "masses", is not a subject, does not mean that the proletariat never presents itself or acts *as a subject in history*. However, this revolutionary action is always tied to a conjuncture, lasting or not, and only exists within its limits.⁸⁹

However, this exactly the problem: how to rethink of new forms and practices of politics that enable and facilitate this passage from classes to masses and process of emancipation, without, falling back into a conception of the proletariat as a given subject, a representation not escaped by the classics of Marxism. This is the challenge of actually rethinking this process, and its political, ideological and organizational conditions.

Conclusion

The importance of this debate is obvious. It is one of the last major theoretical debates on revolutionary strategy that was based on actual historical possibilities and political challenges for the Left and not on simply theoretical exigencies. The basic challenge was what it means for the Left to fight for political power, in a period when there was both popular radicalization and obvious cracks in bourgeois hegemony. The basic question was how to combine the emphasis on a new *practice of politics*, which also means *new forms* of organization, coordination and democracy, emerging within the experiences of the movements, with possibility of the Left arriving in government. And this also implied rethinking the Party form. In this sense, Althusser's call to rethink

⁸⁷ Balibar 1994, p. 136.

⁸⁸ Balibar 1994, p. 141.

⁸⁹ Balibar 1994, p. 143.

of new forms of popular initiatives remains today as urgent as it was in 1977 and equally timely is his warning that we have no other to answer this than ourselves.

And above all—the most important of questions for past and future—how can relations be established with the mass movement which, transcending the traditional distinction between trade union and party, will permit the development of initiatives among the people, which usually fail to fit into the division between the economic and political spheres (even “added together”)? Because we are witnessing more and more mass movements of the people arising by themselves, outside of the trade unions and parties, bringing—or capable of bringing—something indispensable to the struggle. In short, how can we properly respond to the demands and expectations of the masses of the people? In different, negative or positive forms, in a hidden or open manner, objectively or subjectively, the same key questions face us: concerning the State, the trade unions, and those mass movements and initiatives. But as far as answers to these questions are concerned, we have essentially no-one to rely on but ourselves.⁹⁰

All of the participants, despite their different tactical options, are fully aware of the limits of Western European Communist Parties and their inability to get in touch with important aspects of the student and workplace radicalism and also fully aware of the dominance of more or less *reformist* positions within them. At the same time, they all shared the same limitations regarding the force of the movement. They all intervene in the 1970s as if the strength of movement should be taken for granted. This was a common position of both Althusser who opposed the strength of the movement to the crisis of Marxism and the communist movement and of Poulantzas who based the possibility of the democratic road to socialism on the existence of strong movements that could fuel the rise of the Left to governmental power. There is no discussion in the contradictions within the movement, the potentially undermining effects of capitalist restructuring, fragmentation, increased insecurity, or of the many forms the dominant ideology could affect the development of the movement. Only Balibar after the experience of the defeat of the Left in the 1980s takes up this point.

At the same time, none of the participants in this debate managed to offer a comprehensive solution. Althusser, despite all the invaluable references to the importance of mass popular initiatives and the need for new forms of political organization beyond the traditional party-form, attempted to avoid the question of the State by the whole “exteriority” thesis. This was more like a defensive line of demarcation than an actual confrontation with the question of

⁹⁰ Althusser 1978, p. 220.

the transformation of the State in a revolutionary process. That is why, instead of trying to answer this question through a further elaboration of the theoretical advances made around his conception of the Ideological Apparatuses of the State, he attempted to base the “exteriority” thesis upon his conception of the State as a *machine*. Poulantzas, on the other hand did not actually manage to combine the theoretical depth and importance of his relational theory of the State – which represented the sharpest opposition to any instrumentalist theorization of the State – with political strategy. We do not deny the importance and actuality of Poulantzas position on the possibility of a revolutionary strategy that could combine the electoral and parliamentary struggle for governmental power with the development of forms of popular power for below. The point of our criticism is that Poulantzas seemed to be more focused on the parliamentary and governmental side of the process than the side of mass practices and a potential new *proletarian / communist practice of politics*, and was underestimating the asymmetry and incommensurability between bourgeois and communist practice of politics. However, it is exactly Poulantzas relational conception of the State and of the constant efficacy of class antagonism and mass movements that could offer the theoretical ground for the need for new forms of political practice, collective struggle and – potentially – organization of everyday life. As for Balibar, despite the many critical and insightful lines of demarcation he drew and the usefulness of his *problematization* and articulation of the open questions for the Marxist theory of the State and of the forms of class struggles he nevertheless also refrained from offering concrete answers.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this debate was exactly the limitation of any attempt to think within the contour of the internal / external divide. The importance of a relational conception of power and State is exactly that it suggests that the State is neither an instrument nor an institutional or institutionalized locus. Therefore there is no point to think in terms of topographical metaphors. The subaltern classes are always already entangled within complex power relations, networks, institutionalized balances of class forces (the “inside” aspect). At the same time, their resistances, their struggles, their initiatives, their forms of organization are not just “struggles inside the State”; rather, they are antagonistic tendencies that bring the “exterior” within the “interior”, thus entailing a dynamic that goes beyond the simple transformation or democratization of state apparatuses.

Going back to this debate, its insights but also its limitations, is not a theoretical exigency. It is also a political imperative. Recent developments, the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, the eruption of mass movements and social explosions, the return of street of politics, the possibility of forming Left wing governments in countries with deep political crisis in countries such as Greece

have given new actuality to these debates. Simply thinking in terms of mass movements in terms of “pressure politics” misses the centrality of political power and the potential for major shifts in political representation that could initiate social and political sequences of radical socialist transformation. On the other hand, simply thinking in terms of electoral alliances and governmental strategies misses the importance exactly of a *new practice of politics* from the part of the subaltern class in the sense of new forms of popular organization, popular democracy from below, and extensive experimentation with forms of solidarity, self-managements and workers’ control that could represent exactly the necessary “short-circuit” between economics and politics that could be the basis of a radical anti-capitalist *politics of labour*.

Moreover, all of the writers discussed shared the same insistence on the ability of class struggles and popular movements to traverse state apparatuses, to change the balance of forces and to lead to sequences of social transformation. In this sense, if we combine Althusser reference to *virtual forms of communism* arising in popular initiatives at the interstices of capitalist society, with Poulantzas relational theory of the State as a theory of the constant effectivity of class struggle and with Balibar’s reference (in *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*) that the communist movement even inside the state machine can function like a grain of sand, we have a potential theorization not of the internal / external position, but of the possibility of a politics that goes beyond the State, that goes beyond managing the State in a “progressive direction”, that does not become “a prisoner of the State”,⁹¹ a politics of radical social and

⁹¹ “The point is that any political party of the working class is inevitably caught up within a contradiction which it may succeed in mastering, if it recognizes the contradiction, but from which it can never spontaneously escape. On the one hand, it represents a form (the only form) of access of the proletariat to political independence. It represents the form in which the proletariat can itself direct its own class struggle, with the support of its own social base, and on the basis of its own ideological class positions, breaking free from the hold of the dominant bourgeois ideology, instead of simply being the ‘workhorse’ of this or that variety of bourgeois politics. In this way, ‘the emancipation of the working class will be the task of the workers alone’ (Marx). But at the same time, because the class struggle of the proletariat is not fought out independently of existing social relations -- and in order to enable it to take on its full political dimensions, in the whole field of social activity -- the Party of the working class cannot remain outside of the bourgeois State ‘machine’: in particular of the political ideological State apparatus (the basis of the parliamentary system, the ‘party system’). Now, once it is inside that machine, it can function either like a cog, or like the grain of sand which causes it to seize up. At the level of the history of capitalism and of imperialism, at the level of the historical process of the constitution of the proletariat as a class, the party of the working class is not, at least tendentially, a simple element of the ideological State apparatus of bourgeois politics. But we must admit that there exists an opposite tendency, a permanent risk to which the party is subjected, and from which it cannot escape without a constantly

political transformation and experimentation with non-capitalist social forms, indeed a politics of the potential “withering away” of the State.

In a period when strategic questions return, not as abstract possibilities, but as concrete material exigencies and potentialities, the Left does not have the luxury to consider theoretical debates as a luxury. Reopening the theoretical debate on strategy, including revisiting crucial political and theoretical debates in the history of Marxism, must be the order of the day!

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repeated internal struggle -- the tendency for it to become the prisoner of the State apparatus against which it is fighting.” Balibar 1976, p. 92.

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