
THE CAPITALIST STATE: A REPLY TO MILIBAND AND LACLAU

Six years ago, the publication of Ralph Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society* gave rise to a debate between the author and myself in the columns of *New Left Review*.¹ I reviewed the book and Miliband responded, presenting in the process a critique of my own *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales*.² I did not reply to this critique at the time; nor did I do so when Miliband subsequently published a full-length review of my book, on the occasion of its appearance in English.³ However, now that English-speaking readers are in a position to refer to both my second book, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, and my more recent *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, I feel that the moment has come to continue the debate.⁴ For if discussion is to be useful and not run in circles, it should draw its strength from new evidence; this new evidence in my case being the writings I have published since *Political Power*.

Before entering into the discussion proper, I feel I should make a number of preliminary remarks. Although the discussion involves primarily Miliband and myself, it does not stop there. A good many others, in Europe, the United States, Latin America and elsewhere, have joined in, in articles and books. I cannot hope to take into consideration all these contributions to the discussion. I shall attempt, however, to show that the way in which the differences between Miliband and myself have sometimes been perceived, especially in England and in the United States, as a controversy between 'instrumentalism' and 'structuralism', is an utterly mistaken way of situating the discussion, at least with respect to the application of the latter term to *Political Power*. Moreover, I shall be taking into consideration one

* First published in *New Left Review* 95 (1976), pp. 63–83. Translated by Rupert Swyer.

of the more recent contributions to the debate, namely Ernesto Laclau's 'The Specificity of the Political: Around the Poulantzas-Miliband Debate'.⁵ Though far from sharing all of Laclau's views, I believe his article helps to place the debate on its true terrain, and especially it touches upon some of the real questions to which *Political Power* gave rise.

The following text will thus be more of a contribution to the general discussion than a reply to Miliband's articles, for two fundamental reasons. In the first place, one can only hope to carry on a far-reaching debate with the aid of a precise language, and one that is also, necessarily, situated on a specific theoretical terrain, in the sense that the participants in this debate manage, from within their respective problematics, to attach precise definitions to the concepts, terms or notions they are using. Miliband's writings, however, are marked by the absence of any theoretical problematic. It is this absence above all that lies behind his repeated criticisms of my work for its lack of 'concrete analyses'. This reference to concrete analyses is *certainly valid*, but only when made from within another theoretical problematic, one showing that it is capable of providing a better explanation of historical facts. Thus I do not at all say that Miliband is wrong to discuss 'facts' with me or to quote them against me. All I am saying is that one can only begin to counter a theory by citing the 'proof' of facts, the proof of 'practice', when this approach – which is a perfectly valid one – can be said to flow from a different theoretical position. This is an elementary principle of epistemology. Such a position is lacking in Miliband's writings. As a result, as Laclau has correctly observed, our respective texts are situated on disparate terrains, i.e. they often deal with different matters. Furthermore, this means that the critical terms Miliband uses with reference to me, such as 'abstractionism', 'structuralism' or 'superdeterminism', remain extremely vague and imprecise in his usage.

In the second place, on the subject of Miliband's own work, I have nothing to add to what I wrote in my original review of his book. And while I do have something to say about the evolution of my own positions and analyses since the publication of *Political Power*, in particular concerning a series of rectifications I have felt it necessary to make (I embarked on this process in *Fascism and Dictatorship*, and the rectifications have now crystallized in *Classes in Contemporary Society*), this aspect of the present article can in no way be seen as a reply to Miliband. For Miliband has failed to see the real problems, the real lacunae, ambiguities and debatable points in my first book – the shortcomings which have in fact led me to make the rectifications

in question. A large part of the following text is, therefore, a reply to Laclau and a clarification of the criticisms I myself am now in a position to make concerning *Political Power*, rather than a reply to Miliband.

On the Question of Abstractionism

I shall nevertheless begin by returning to the above-mentioned reproach, made repeatedly by Miliband, concerning the characteristic absence in my writings of concrete analyses or reference to concrete historical and empirical facts. This is the chief meaning, as I understand it, of the term 'abstractionism' which he employs when writing about my work.

First of all, I do not think this reproach is in any way justified. Constant and precise references to the state of the class struggle and to the historical transformations of the state are abundantly present in *Political Power*, ranging from analyses of the absolutist state to others which concern the historical models of the bourgeois revolution, the transformations of blocs in power and of the bourgeoisie, the forms of the capitalist state and of capitalist regimes, etc. I could easily go on citing examples. But I doubt whether this would be worthwhile, for I think that the real reason why Miliband makes this criticism of my work lies in the difference in our respective approaches to 'concrete facts'. For me, as against any empiricist or neo-positivist approach such as that of Miliband, these facts can only be rigorously – that is, demonstrably – comprehended if they are explicitly analyzed with the aid of a theoretical apparatus constantly employed throughout the length of the text. This presupposes, as Durkheim already pointed out in his time, that one resolutely eschews the demagogy of the 'palpitating fact', of 'common sense' and the 'illusions of the evident'. Failing this, one can pile up as many concrete analyses as one likes, they will prove nothing whatsoever. I fear that Miliband has confused my eschewal of the illusion of the evident with what he calls 'total lack' of concrete analyses in my work. Miliband himself certainly does not reject, as I have already shown in my first article, the demagogy of common sense – in which, moreover, he is assisted by the dominant 'Anglo-Saxon culture' as a whole. As Perry Anderson clearly demonstrated some time ago, this dominant Anglo-Saxon culture is constitutively imbued, and not by accident, with a prodigious degree of empiricism.⁶

That said, I nonetheless think that the first criticism one can make of *Political Power* concerns not the absence of concrete analyses, but

the way they operate within the text, involving a certain *theoreticism*. To some extent this is attributable to an over-rigid epistemological position, one that I shared with Althusser at the time. By concentrating the main weight of our attack against empiricism and neo-positivism, whose condensates, in the Marxist tradition, are economism and historicism, we rightly insisted on the specificity of the theoretical process, that of the production of knowledge which, with its own specific structures, occurs in the thought process. In our view, the 'real fact' or 'practice' was situated both *prior* to the engaging of the thought process (*prior* to Generalities I, which already constituted a 'thought fact', upon which Generalities II would get to work, the latter being concepts which in turn produced 'concrete knowledge', Generalities III) and *after* the conclusion of the thought process, i.e. Generalities III, at which point the question of 'experimentation' and of the adequacy of the theory to the facts and of theory to practice would arise.⁷ In Althusser's case, this even created the highly dubious impression that the theoretical process, or 'discourse', would itself contain the criteria for its own validation or 'scientificity': this much is clear in the term he used, with Balibar, and which he has since abandoned, namely *theoretical practice*. This term conjured away the problem of the 'theory-practice' relation by situating this relation entirely *within theory* itself. What we failed to see at the time was that, while firmly upholding the specificity of the theoretical process in relation to the 'concrete real', we should have perceived the particular way in which this 'real' intervenes, and the way in which the theory-practice relation functions throughout the entire theoretical process.

Most of us have since rectified this state of affairs. I must say, for my own part, that I was highly critical of the more extreme forms of this epistemological schema right from the beginning. One can see this in the various warnings I gave in my Introduction to *Political Power*, and in the fact that the term 'theoretical practice' is virtually non-existent in my book. Even so, in the form it took at the time, this epistemological schema had certain specific consequences upon my thinking.

A Necessary Distinction

In the first place, it led to an excessively sharp differentiation between what I called the 'order of exposition' and the 'order of research' (the famous problem of the *Darstellung*). Let me make myself clear: in view of the specificity of the theoretical process, we need to establish a distinction between the order of exposition of a theoretical text, which

is supposed to take into account the specific way in which concepts link up, and the order of research, which by dealing with real facts gives rise to the creation of these concepts. As we can see with Marx's *Capital*, the exposition of a theoretical text is more than just a retracing of the steps taken by the underlying research or an account of the history of its production (see the difference, among others, between the *Grundrisse* . . . and *Capital*). I have to admit, however, that by making this distinction rather too sharply in *Political Power* I frequently found myself, in the *order of exposition*, presenting concrete analyses as mere examples or illustrations of the theoretical process. This gave rise to a certain amount of confusion on Miliband's part, for which I am partly responsible: having utterly neglected the distinction between the order of exposition and the order of research (which I had nevertheless analyzed in the Introduction to my book) in his own empirical and neo-positivist approach, Miliband thinks that because the concrete analyses contained in my book were *expounded* in this way, my research itself was not founded upon these concrete-real analyses but merely grew out of abstract concepts. Because I frequently expounded these concrete analyses as examples or illustrations of my theory, Miliband hastily – and naïvely – concluded that that was how I had thought of them within the context of my research, which itself thus became 'abstract'. To convince him of the contrary, I would have had to make a laughing stock of myself by publishing my drafts and notes for *Political Power*!

Formalism

Nonetheless, this theoreticism not only led me to a relatively 'improper' presentation of concrete analyses but also, as Laclau has correctly noted (and I shall be coming back to this), to a second fault: a certain formalism in my research itself – and ultimately a certain neglect of concrete analyses. But I think I can say that I have made the necessary corrections on all these points, both in *Fascism and Dictatorship*, which is a detailed historical analysis of German and Italian fascism, and in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, which deals very concretely with contemporary capitalist society, explicitly referring to a whole range of so-called 'empirical' material. In both these books, however, I naturally maintain my essential difference with Miliband, one that is irreducible, namely the absolute necessity, in my view, of handling 'concrete facts' theoretically. For, to stretch my point further still, this is the only way to conduct genuinely concrete analyses in the full sense of the term, the 'concrete' being,

as Marx pointed out, 'the unity of a multiplicity of determinations'. Indeed, one consequence of the absence of any theoretical problematic in Miliband's writings is that, in spite of all appearances, it is hard to find any concrete analyses in his texts. What we find, mainly, are narrative descriptions, along the lines of 'that is the way it is', recalling powerfully to mind the kind of 'abstractionist empiricism' that Wright Mills spoke of. One cannot emphasize too heavily the fact that in neglecting theory one ends up failing to notice the concrete.

But before I say any more about the consequences of this theoreticism in my work, I feel I ought to say a few words in order to help the reader to grasp this phenomenon more clearly. To begin with, one should bear in mind that this can only be understood as a reaction against a certain theoretico-political situation – leaving aside a few exceptions – of Marxism (at least European Marxism) prior to 1968, this situation being characterized by a neo-positivist mechanism and empiricism, and by a pronounced economism. This was of particular importance for me, as I was dealing with problems of the state, a sphere in which the poverty of Marxist thought (for a number of complex reasons, of which Stalinism is not the least) is only too well-known. In my reaction to this state of affairs, I certainly 'bent the stick too far in the other direction', as Lenin would have put it. Nor should it be forgotten, moreover, that the nature of the 'concrete analyses' in *Political Power* stemmed also (aside from my own 'individual' problem) from a precise situation obtaining in the European workers' movement prior to 1968; at that time, it will be recalled, in the absence of a massive development of the movement, the prevailing analyses of the day were those of Gorz and Mallet on 'structural reforms', with all their reformist potential. Many of us in France and elsewhere, taking our cue from various advance signs of the growing popular movement (*Political Power* was published in France in May 1968), criticized these analyses. But there were relatively few significant facts available concerning the class struggle that would have enabled us to base our thinking upon constructive concrete analyses. I think a good many European comrades, of various tendencies, would have little difficulty agreeing with this observation. Confining myself to my own personal case, evidently (and how could it have been otherwise?) the development of class struggles in Europe since 1968 has not been without influence upon my changes in position and rectifications mentioned earlier. In Miliband's case, however, to judge from his published work, what has happened since 1968 has had no effect at all. But this is only an apparent paradox for a fervent advocate of the palpitating real; for in fact nothing could be more academic than the demagoguery of

the 'empirical real'. Real history can only have an impact upon theoretical positions (and not only upon mine). It can never do so upon positivist empirical positions because, for the latter, facts 'signify' nothing very much: they prove nothing, for the simple reason that they can be reinterpreted *ad infinitum* in any way one chooses. It is this noisy illusion of the evident that gives rise to immutable dogmas.

Difficult Language

Finally, to return to *Political Power*, the theoreticism of which I have spoken undoubtedly led me also to fall prey to a third failing. It led me to employ a sometimes needlessly difficult language, which I have tried to remedy in my subsequent writings. However, in the first place, there is no royal road in science, and the theoretical handling of my object itself called, to some extent, for a language that breaks with customary descriptive discourse. Secondly, my text requires a certain sensitivity to the political problems of the class struggle on the part of the reader, since it is entirely determined by the theoretico-political conjuncture. It is above all to a lack of this political sensitivity, in other words to academism, that I am obliged to attribute Miliband's failure to comprehend some of the analyses in my book. I shall quote only one symptomatic example of this.

'A class', Poulantzas says, 'can be considered as a distinct and autonomous class, as a social force, inside a social formation, only when its connection with the relations of production, its economic existence, is reflected on the other levels by a specific presence' . . . One must ask what is a 'specific presence'? The answer is that 'this presence exists when the relation to the relations of production, the place in the process of production, is reflected on the other levels by *pertinent effects*'. What then are 'pertinent effects'? The answer is that 'we shall designate by 'pertinent effects' the fact that the reflection of the place in the process of production on the other levels constitutes a *new element* which cannot be inserted in the typical framework which these levels would present without these elements'. This might be interpreted to mean that a class assumes major significance when it makes a major impact upon affairs – which can hardly be said to get us very far. But Poulantzas does not mean even that. For he also tells us, 'the dominance of the economic struggle' (i.e. 'economism' as a form of working-class struggle – RM) does *not* mean 'an absence of *pertinent effects*' at the level of the political struggle' – it only means 'a certain form of political

struggle, which Lenin criticizes by considering it as *ineffectual*'. So, at one moment a class can only be considered as distinctive and autonomous if it exercises 'pertinent effects', i.e. a decisive impact; next moment, the 'pertinent effects' may be ineffectual. Poulantzas never ceases to insist on the need for 'rigorous' and 'scientific' analysis. But what kind of 'rigorous' and 'scientific' analysis is this? Indeed, what kind of analysis at all?⁸

What kind of analysis? Miliband seems to have some difficulty understanding so I shall explain right away. My analysis, which incidentally offered the relation between the peasantry and Bonapartism as a concrete example of 'pertinent effects', was chiefly concerned with the nonfundamental classes in a capitalist society (peasantry, petty bourgeoisie), in which cases its usefulness strikes me as evident.⁹ But, in the remainder of the text, it also concerned the working class and had two precise political objectives. The first was to attack directly those conceptions according to which the working class has become either integrated or dissolved in contemporary capitalism ('neo-capitalism'); English readers will certainly have heard of these conceptions. My aim was to show that even when the working class has no revolutionary political organization and ideology (the famous 'class consciousness' of the historicists), it still continues to exist as an autonomous and distinct class, since even in this case its 'existence' has pertinent effects on the politico-ideological plane. What effects? Well, we know that social democracy and reformism have often amounted to quite considerable ones, and I should have thought it evident that one cannot analyze the state structures of a good many European countries (including England), without taking into account social democracy in all its forms. But even in these cases, the working class is neither integrated nor diluted in the 'system'. It continues to exist as a distinct class, which is precisely what social democracy demonstrates (pertinent effects), since it too is a working-class phenomenon (as Lenin knew only too well), with its own special links with the working class. Were this not the case, we would be hard put to explain why the bourgeoisie should feel the need to rely upon social democracy (which, after all, is not just any institution) from time to time. So the working class continues to be a distinct class, which also (and chiefly) means we can reasonably hope that it will not eternally continue – where it still does – to be social-democratic and that socialism's prospects therefore remain intact in Europe.

However, this brings us to my second objective. For if – and here I refer directly to Lenin – I have insisted upon the fact that economism/

reformism does not amount to a political absence of the working class, and that this economism/reformism therefore does have pertinent effects on the political and ideological plane in the capitalist system, I have also said that this economist/reformist policy is ineffectual from the point of view of the long-term strategic interests of the working class, from the class viewpoint of the working class: in other words, that this policy cannot lead to socialism. At the same time, no analysis of the capitalist system should ever, as Marx himself said, neglect the class viewpoint of the working class. Miliband has failed to understand this. For him, it is just a quibble over words, or a question of pure 'scientificity'. This would not matter greatly if Miliband at least agreed with me about the fundamental questions. However, I am inclined to doubt this in view of the highly academic style of political discretion which he observes in his own book, for which I reproached him in my article triggering off this controversy.

On the Question of Structuralism

I come now to Miliband's second fundamental criticism of my book, concerning its 'structuralism' ('structural super-determinism' in his first article, 'structural abstractionism' in the second). But what is this structuralism of mine as seen by Miliband? I confess, in all simplicity, that I can find no precise definition of the term in his reviews. Consequently, I feel I ought to attempt a definition myself in order to be able to reply.

One meaning we can attribute to this term falls within the humanist and historicist problematic, indeed within a traditional problematic of bourgeois subjectivist idealism such as has frequently influenced Marxism, namely the problematic of the subject. In this view, I am a Marxist structuralist because I do not grant sufficient importance to the role of concrete individuals and creative persons; to human freedom and action; to free will and to Man's capacity for choice; to the 'project' as against 'necessity' (hence Miliband's term, 'super-determinism'); and so on and so forth. I would like to state quite clearly that I have no intention of replying to this. I consider that everything there is to say on this subject has already been said, and that all those who have not yet understood, or who have yet to be convinced, that we are not here concerned with any genuine alternative of humanist Marxism against structuralist Marxism, but simply with an alternative of idealism against materialism – including as this crops up even within Marxism itself, due to the force of the dominant ideology – are certainly not going to be convinced by the few lines I could possibly

add here on this subject. I shall, therefore, merely repeat that the term structuralism applied in this sense to *Political Power* is nothing more, in the final analysis, than a reiteration in modern terms of the kind of objections that bourgeois idealism has always opposed to Marxism of whatever stripe. I may be exaggerating in attributing, even partially, this use of the term structuralism to Miliband; nevertheless, in view of the astonishing vagueness of the term as he employs it, it is essential to clear up this ambiguity.

There is a second, far more serious, meaning of the term structuralism. We may, descriptively (conforming with fashion, but how are we to do otherwise?), designate as structuralism a theoretical conception that neglects the importance and the weight of the class struggle in history, i.e. in the production, reproduction and transformation of 'forms', as Marx put it. Certainly, this is a very summary and negative-diacritical definition; but it is the only one, aside from the first given above, that I can discover in Miliband's use of the term. This meaning cannot be identified with the former one, for one may very well be against humanism and historicism and still fall, or not fall, into structuralism in the second sense. As I have said, this is a far more serious sense of the term structuralism; but as applied to *Political Power*, it is utterly inappropriate. To show this more concretely, I shall deal briefly with the three cases Miliband cites to justify this last use of the term structuralism with references to my book.

The Relative Autonomy of the State

Case One: according to Miliband, my structuralism – in the sense of the absence of reference to the class struggle in my book – prevents me from understanding and analyzing the relative autonomy of the state.

Now, when I examined the relative autonomy of the capitalist state, I established its foundations in two directions, which in fact were merely two aspects of a single approach. The first lay in the precise type of 'separation' between the economic and the political, between the relations of production-consumption-circulation and the state which, according to Marx, define the capitalist mode of production.¹⁰ The second direction lay in the specificity of the constitution of classes and of the class struggle in the capitalist mode of production and social formations. I am thinking here of all my analyses on the specificity of classes in capitalism, on the power bloc and the different fractions of the bourgeoisie, on hegemony within the power bloc, on supporting classes, on the forms of struggle adopted by the working class, etc. All these being reasons that attribute to the capitalist state a precise role as

political organizer and unifier, and as a factor for the establishment of the 'unstable equilibrium of compromises', which role is constitutively connected with its relative autonomy.¹¹

Two directions that are nothing more than two aspects of a single approach. The separation of the economic and the political provides the general framework, depending upon the different stages and phases of capitalism (this separation is itself liable to transformation), for an examination of the relative autonomy of the capitalist state – with the concrete form taken by this autonomy depending upon the precise conjuncture of the class struggle at any one time. For this separation of the economic and the political is itself nothing more than the form taken by the constitution of the classes, and hence it too is a consequence of their struggles under capitalism.

The fact that certain readers, including Miliband, have chiefly fastened upon the first direction followed in my book and have neglected the second is, if I may say so, primarily the outcome of the 'structuralist' way in which they have read it; it is the outcome of the structuralism lingering in their own minds. Let us now return, following this elucidation, to Miliband's shock-question concerning the relative autonomy of the state, to which my own text is allegedly incapable of replying because of its structuralism: 'How relative is this autonomy?'

All I can say here is that, indeed, I cannot reply to this question, since in this form it is utterly absurd. I could only have answered this question, couched in these general terms, if I really had been guilty of structuralism. I can give no *general answer* – not, as Miliband believes, because I take no account of concrete individuals or of the role of social classes, but precisely because the term 'relative' in the expression 'relative autonomy' of the state (relative in relation to what or to whom?) *here* refers to the relationship between state and dominant classes (i.e. relatively autonomous in relation to the dominant classes). In other words, it refers to the class struggle within each social formation and to its corresponding state forms. True, the very principles of the Marxist theory of the state lay down the general negative limits of this autonomy. The (capitalist) state, in the long run, can only correspond to the political interests of the dominant class or classes. But I do not think that this can be the reply which Miliband expects of me. For since he is not some incorrigible Fabian, he of course knows this already. Yet, within these limits, the degree, the extent, the forms, etc. (*how* relative, and *how is it* relative) of the relative autonomy of the state can only be examined (as I constantly underline throughout my book) with reference to a given capitalist

state, and to the precise *conjuncture* of the corresponding class struggle (the specific configuration of the power bloc, the degree of hegemony within this bloc, the relations between the bourgeoisie and its different fractions on the one hand and the working classes and supporting classes on the other, etc.). I cannot, therefore, answer this question in its general form precisely on account of the conjuncture of the class struggle. That said, both in *Political Power* and in my subsequent writings I have amply examined the relative autonomy of precise state forms (absolutist state, Bismarckism, Bonapartism, forms of state under competitive capitalism, the German and Italian fascisms, forms of state in the present phase of monopoly capitalism and, finally, in *La Crise des dictatures*,¹² the military dictatorships in Greece, Portugal and Spain).

Class Power or State Power?

Case Two: Miliband appears to have been particularly shocked¹³ by the fact that I have distinguished between *state power* and *state apparatus* and that I have refused to apply the concept of power to the state and to its specific structures. What I have tried to do is to establish that by state power one can only mean the power of certain classes to whose interests the state corresponds. Miliband thinks that, by refusing to speak of the power *of* the state, one cannot, *inter alia*, establish its relative autonomy: only 'something' that possesses power can be relatively autonomous. Here too, the appeal to common sense is blatant.

I think Miliband's incomprehension on this point is highly significant. For he explicitly contradicts himself as regards my 'structuralism', and my analyses on this point (which he rejects) would in fact suffice, if that were necessary, to wipe out all suspicion of structuralism on my part. According to an old and persistent conception of bourgeois social science and politics – 'institutionalism-functionalism', of which true structuralism is merely a variant, and which harks back to Max Weber (though if we scrape off a few more layers, it is always Hegel that we find at the bottom) – it is the structures/institutions which hold/wield power, with the relations of power between 'social groups' flowing from this institutional power. One sees this tendency currently not only in the theory of the state, but also in a range of other spheres: in the present trend of the sociology of work, which grants pride of place to the business enterprise/institution/power as against classes (cf. Lockwood, Goldthorpe); in the present, highly fashionable, trend of the sociology of organizations

(including Galbraith); and so on. What disappears, when one acritically allows this tendency to contaminate Marxism, is the primordial role of classes and the class struggle by comparison with structures – institutions and organs, including the state organs. To attribute specific power to the state, or to designate structures/institutions as the field of application of the concept of power, would be to fall into structuralism, by attributing the principal role in the reproduction/transformation of social formations to these organs. Conversely, by comprehending the relations of power as class relations, I have attempted to break definitely with structuralism, which is the modern form of this bourgeois idealism.

Does this mean that by not applying the concept of power to the state apparatus we prevent ourselves from situating its relative autonomy? Not at all – provided, of course, that we break with a certain naturalist/positivist, or even psycho-sociological conception of power ('A brings pressure to bear on B to make the latter do something he would not have done without pressure from A'). All this means is that the relative autonomy of the capitalist state stems precisely from the contradictory relations of power between the different social classes. That it is, in the final analysis, a 'resultant' of the relations of power between classes within a capitalist formation – it being perfectly clear that the capitalist state has its own institutional specificity (separation of the political and the economic) which renders it irreducible to an immediate and direct expression of the strict 'economic-corporate' interests (Gramsci) of this or that class or fraction of the power bloc, and that it must represent the political unity of this bloc under the hegemony of a class or fraction of a class. But it does not end there. By refusing to apply the concept of power to the state apparatus and to its institutions, one also refuses to account for the relative autonomy of the state in terms of the group made up of the agents of the state and in terms of the specific power of this group, as those conceptions which apply the concept of power to the state invariably do: the bureaucratic class (from Hegel via Weber to Rizzi and Burnham); the political élites (this is Miliband's conception, as I pointed out in my review of his book); the techno-structure (power of the 'business machine' and the state apparatus, etc).

The problem is not a simple one, and this is not the place in which to go into it at length. I should point out that, since *Political Power*, I have had occasion to modify and rectify certain of my analyses, not in the direction of Miliband but, on the contrary, in the opposite direction, i.e. in the direction already inherent in *Political Power*. I am inclined to think, in effect, that I did not sufficiently emphasize the

primacy of the class struggle as compared with the state apparatus. I was thus led to refine my conceptions, in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, by examining the form and the role of the state in the current phase of capitalism/imperialism, and its specifically relative autonomy, depending on the existing social formations. Still taking the separation of the political and the economic under capitalism, even in its present phase, as our point of departure, the state should be seen (as should capital, according to Marx) as a relation, or more precisely as the condensate of a relation of power between struggling classes. In this way we escape the false dilemma entailed by the present discussion on the state, between the state comprehended as a thing/instrument and the state comprehended as subject. As a thing: this refers to the instrumentalist conception of the state, as a passive tool in the hands of a class or fraction, in which case the state is seen as having no autonomy whatever. As subject: the autonomy of the state, conceived here in terms of its specific power, ends up by being considered as absolute, by being reduced to its 'own will', in the form of the rationalizing instance of civil society (cf. Keynes), and is incarnated in the power of the group that concretely represents this rationality/power (bureaucracy, élites).

In either case (the state as thing or as subject), the relation state/social classes is comprehended as a relation of externality: either the social classes, subdue the state (thing) to themselves through the interplay of 'influences' and 'pressure groups', or else the state (subject) subdues or controls the classes. In this relation of externality, the state and the dominant classes are thus seen as two entities confronting each other, with the one possessing the power the other does not have, according to the traditional conception of 'zero-sum power'. Either the dominant classes absorb the state by emptying it of its own specific power (the state as thing in the thesis of the merger of the state and the monopolies upheld in the orthodox Communist conception of 'state monopoly capitalism'); or else the state 'resists', and deprives the dominant class of power to its own advantage (the state as subject and 'referee' between the contending classes, a conception dear to social democracy).

But, I repeat, the relative autonomy of the state, founded on the separation (constantly being transformed) of the economic and the political, is inherent in its very structure (the state is a relation) in so far as it is the resultant of contradictions and of the class struggle as expressed, always in their own specific manner, within the state itself – this state which is both shot through and constituted with and by these class contradictions. It is precisely this that enables us exactly to

pinpoint the specific role of the bureaucracy which, although it constitutes a specific social category, is not a group standing above, outside or to one side of classes: an élite, but one whose members also have a class situation or membership. To my mind, the implications of this analysis are of great importance. Starting from this analysis, I have attempted to examine the precise role of existing state machines in the reproduction of capitalism/imperialism (*Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*), and to examine certain state forms, such as the Greek, Portuguese and Spanish military dictatorships (*La Crise des dictatures*).

I cannot pursue this analysis here, but suffice it to say that, in my view, this is the approach that will enable us to establish theoretically, and to examine concretely, the way in which the relative autonomy of the capitalist state develops and functions with respect to the particular economic-corporate interests of this or that fraction of the power bloc, in such a way that the state always guards the general political interests of this bloc – which certainly does not occur merely as a result of the state's and the bureaucracy's own 'rationalizing will'. Indeed, conceiving of the capitalist state as a *relation*, as being structurally shot through and constituted with and by class contradictions, means firmly grasping the fact that an institution (the state) that is destined to reproduce class divisions cannot really be a monolithic, fissureless bloc, but is itself, by virtue of its very structure (the state is a relation), divided. The various organs and branches of the state (ministries and government offices, executive and parliament, central administration and local and regional authorities, army, judiciary, etc.) reveal major contradictions among themselves, each of them frequently constituting the seat and the representative – in short, the crystallization – of this or that fraction of the power bloc, this or that specific and competing interest. In this context, the process whereby the general political interest of the power bloc is established, and whereby the state intervenes to ensure the reproduction of the overall system, may well, at a certain level, appear chaotic and contradictory, as a 'resultant' of these inter-organ and inter-branch contradictions. What is involved is a process of structural selectivity by one of the organs from the information provided and measures taken by the others: a contradictory process of decision and also of partial non-decision (consider the problems surrounding capitalist planning); of structural determination of priorities and counter-priorities (with one organ obstructing and short-circuiting the others); of immediate and mutually conflicting 'compensating' institutional reactions in the face of the falling rate of profit; of 'filtering' by each organ of the measures taken by other organs, etc. In short, the relative autonomy of the state with respect to

this or that fraction of the power bloc, which is essential to its role as political unifier of this bloc under the hegemony of a class or fraction (at present the monopoly capitalist fraction), thus appears, in the process of constitution and functioning of the state, as a resultant of inter-organ and inter-branch contradictions (the state being divided). These inter-organ contradictions, moreover, are themselves inherent in the very structure of the capitalist state seen as the condensate of a class relation, founded on the separation of the political and the economic. This is a fundamental theoretical approach, as can be seen not only in my own work, but also in that of a number of other researchers, notably M. Castells in France and J. Hirsch in Germany.¹⁴

Fascisms and Parliamentary-Democratic State

Case Three: According to Miliband, my abstractionist or super-determinist structuralism prevents me from situating precisely the differences between different forms of bourgeois state. In particular, it leads me, as happened with the Comintern in its notorious Third Period (1928–35), to more or less identify fascist forms with the parliamentary-democratic forms of the capitalist state. However, this charge is pure mythology. It is simply not true in so far as *Political Power* is concerned; in attacking the concept of totalitarianism, I precisely pointed to the direction that an analysis of the differences between the fascist state and the parliamentary-democratic forms of the bourgeois state would have to take. In *Fascism and Dictatorship* I then applied and further defined this direction, attempting to establish the specificity of the capitalist state in its exceptional form, and within this exceptional capitalist state the specificity of fascism as compared with Bonapartism, military dictatorship etc. I did so by attacking the theoretico-political principles that had led the Comintern to those identifications which Miliband rightly points to – the very principles which I had already passed under critical review in *Political Power*. What is amazing is that Miliband makes the above criticism of me not only in his first article in 1970, at a time when *Fascism and Dictatorship* had not yet appeared, but again in his latest article, in 1973. Such methods make any constructive dialogue impossible.

Now that these points have all been examined, does there remain any serious substance in Miliband's charge of structuralism? None, I think. All that remains is a polemical catch-phrase pure and simple, masking a factual and empirical critique – which itself turns out to be inconsistent – of my positions. The reason why I am labouring this point a little is that certain authors, especially in the United States,

have perceived the debate between Miliband and myself as a supposed debate between instrumentalism and structuralism, thus posing a false dilemma, or even an ideological alternative, from which some thought it would be possible to escape by inventing a 'third way' which like all third ways would be the true one and which like all truths would lie somewhere 'in between'.¹⁵ Doubtless the academic and ideologico-political conjuncture in the United States is substantially responsible for this, but that is beside the point. I have tried to show why it is that the second term of this debate, as conceived here, is wrong, and why it thus resulted in a false dilemma.

Does this mean I have no criticisms to make of *Political Power* other than those I have already made? Or that my writings have not evolved in any way other than the ones I have already mentioned? By no means. But if we are to make real progress, the impasse represented by Miliband's positions will not help us. Let us now, therefore, try out a detour via Laclau.

On the Question of Formalism

While I am far from agreeing with all of Laclau's criticisms of *Political Power*, he does nevertheless raise several crucial questions to which my position gave rise at the time. Very briefly, I shall try to summarize what I believe to be the most interesting aspect of Laclau's criticism of this position as 'formalist'.

Laclau starts by criticizing our (the Althusserians') conception of 'instances' (economic, political, ideological) which are both specific and autonomous with respect to each other, and whose interaction produces the mode of production – determined by the economic in the last resort, but in which another instance may play the dominant role. But, Laclau says, this inevitably leads to formalism and taxinomism in establishing the relations between the various instances, the content of their concepts and the construction of their object. For we begin by assuming, *a priori*, that these 'elements/instances' are quasi-Aristotelian notions existing as such in the various modes of production, these modes themselves being merely the outcome of the *a posteriori* combination of these elements. Laclau further charges that we treat the economic instance as unequivocal, in other words as having the same meaning and the same content in all modes of production; and furthermore that the relative autonomy of these different instances (economic, political, ideological) with respect to each other does not, as our formalism had led us to believe, characterize other modes of production, but is specific to capitalism.

I think that, to some extent, Laclau is right in his criticisms.¹⁶ However, it is incorrect to hold that these criticisms concern all of us to the same degree. For, although the writings of a whole number of us were perceived, and in many ways functioned, as if they all arose from an identical problematic, in fact essential differences existed among certain of these writings right from the outset. In the field of historical materialism, for example, there were already essential differences between *Political Power* (as well as Bettelheim's writings, but here I shall speak only for myself), on the one hand, and Balibar's essay 'The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism' in *Reading 'Capital'*, on the other. These differences have now come out into the open, with Balibar publishing a self-criticism which is correct on certain points.¹⁷ Laclau, however, does not take these differences into account in his article.

Briefly, then, I would say that Balibar's essay was characterized not only by a pronounced formalism, but also by economism and by an almost systematic underestimation of the role of the class struggle, the two latter elements being in fact the principal causes of the former. For, in the first place, as Balibar himself now recognizes, his writings did contain the idea of an economic instance in-itself, made up of elements that remained invariant in all modes of production. This entailed a self-reproducible and self-regulating economic instance, serving as the basis of the historical process. It was precisely this that led him to try to construct a general theory of 'modes of economic production'. It should be pointed out here that, in Balibar's view, the concept of the mode of production was limited exclusively to the economic sphere. This conception then led him to comprehend, by analogy, the other instances (political, ideological) in the same way, i.e. as made up of elements which do not vary from one mode of production to another and which only combine *afterwards*: all these instances were seen as autonomous in relation to each other by virtue of their essence, by virtue of their pre-existing intrinsic nature as predetermined elements. As with the economic, the political and ideology were seen as having the same meaning in all the various modes of production.

In the second place, all this went hand in hand with a considerable underestimation in Balibar's essay of the role of the class struggle. This can be seen in the fact that nowhere did he make the rigorous distinction between mode of production and social formation that would have enabled him to grasp the precise role, in the reproduction/transformation of social relations, of the class struggle – that class struggle which, in point of fact, operates within concrete

social formations. As Balibar himself admits, he 'did not conceive of the *two* concepts, social formation, on the one hand, and mode of production on the other, as distinct from each other'.¹⁸ The same underestimation can be seen in the absence, in Balibar's essay, of the concept of historical conjuncture, the strategic condensation point of the class struggle: '[My analyses] applied what should have served to deal with the historical conjuncture to a comparison of modes of production'.¹⁹

On all these points, and on others, there were already a number of essential differences between Balibar's text and *Political Power*. First, on the fundamental and decisive concept of the mode of production. For Balibar, in *Reading 'Capital'*: 'The terms production and mode of production will be taken in their restricted sense, that which defines, within any social complex, the partial object of political economy, that is, in the sense of the economic practice of production.'²⁰ In *Political Power*, on the other hand:

By *mode of production* we shall designate not what is generally marked out as the economic (i.e. relations of production in the strict sense), but a specific combination of various structures and practices (economic, political, ideological) which, in combination, appear as so many instances or levels . . . of this mode.²¹

In any case, Balibar has now criticized himself on this point:

And this is why, as against all economism, the concept of the mode of production designates, for Marx, even on an abstract level, the complex unity of determinations arising out of both the base and the superstructure.²²

The difference is fundamental. Concerning the crucial, nodal concept of the mode of production, it clearly shows that I was trying to break with the conception of a self-regulating and inherently unchangeable economic level/instance whose intrinsic nature remains the same in any given mode of production, and that I attributed the highest importance to the class struggle. Furthermore, I need hardly remind the reader of the central rôle played in *Political Power* both by the difference between mode of production and social formation,²³ and by the concept of conjuncture, whose absence from Balibar's work I expressly criticized.²⁴ That said, I nevertheless think that *Political Power* did suffer from this formalism to some degree. This can be seen more concretely if we return to Laclau's criticisms.

'General Theory'

1. As compared with Balibar's concept of the mode of production, mine had the advantage of considering the relation between the various instances, their unity, as primary, i.e. as defining their specificity itself: it was the mode of production (whichever it might be) that determined, in my view, the specificity, the dimensions and the specific structure of each instance, and hence of the political, in each mode. As a result, I was able to avoid conceiving of the different instances (in particular the political, the state) as being by nature immutable and pre-existing, in essence, their meeting together within a precise mode of production. In particular, this helped me to avoid trying to elaborate a 'general theory' of the political/state through the various modes of production, as Balibar tried to do for the economic. In *Political Power* I constantly repeat that the only theory I shall be attempting to construct is that of the capitalist state, and that the very meaning of the state under capitalism is different from the meanings it can take on in other – pre-capitalist – modes of production. In addition, my distinction between mode of production and social formation, the role that I attributed to the concept of conjuncture, and hence the attention I paid to the class struggle, more often than not helped me to avoid confining myself to a taxinomic typology of the different forms of the capitalist state itself – i.e. a conception that sees these forms as simple differential 'combinatory concretizations' of some essence/nature of the capitalist state as such, in itself.

But this formalism nonetheless had its effects upon my own analyses. For example, while stating that all I intended was to construct a theory of the capitalist state, I also said: 'In the circumstances, it seems to me particularly illusory and dangerous (theoretically of course) to proceed further towards systematizing the political in the general theory, inasmuch as we do not yet have enough systematic regional theories of the political in the different modes of production, nor enough systematic theories of the different modes of production.'²⁵ Which shows that, even if I did not attempt the same undertaking on behalf of the political/state as Balibar had for the economic, I did nevertheless consider this undertaking to be both possible and legitimate. The reason why I did not, in fact, set about constructing this general theory of the political was not, as I thought and suggested, because of any shortage of information, but because, apart from a few indications given by Marx and Engels, by Lenin in *State and Revolution* and by Gramsci, this theory is impossible to construct. The dimensions, the extent and the content of the very

concept of the political/state, as indeed those of the economic, and the form taken by their relation (the relation between the economic and the extra-economic, as Laclau puts it), differ considerably from one mode of production to another. I have explained this in somewhat greater detail in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, and indeed have also attempted to show the transformations of the respective spaces of the political/state and the economic in the different stages and phases of capitalism itself – particularly its current phase.

2. Despite my clear differentiation between mode of production and social formation, and the fact that I focused my analyses upon social formations, this formalism nevertheless on occasion led me to consider social formations as being the ‘concretization/spatialization’ of modes of production existing and reproducing themselves as such, in the abstract; hence sometimes to see the concrete forms of the capitalist state as the concretization/spatialization of elements of the type of capitalist state existing in the abstract. This, as Perry Anderson correctly noted in his recent major work, emerges clearly in my analyses of the absolutist state.²⁶ I have corrected this point of view in *Fascism and Dictatorship* and, above all, in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, where I consider social formations, wherever the class struggle is at work, as the effective locus of the existence and reproduction of modes of production; hence the concrete forms of the capitalist state as the effective locus of the existence, reproduction and transformation of the specific characteristics of the capitalist state.

3. Let us now turn to the ‘relative autonomy’ of the instances (economic, political, ideological) of which I spoke earlier. In Balibar’s writings, but also sometimes with Althusser himself, this was seen as an invariable characteristic related to the intrinsic nature or essence of each instance and cutting across the different modes of production. In Althusser’s writings, this can be seen in certain formulations concerning the ‘ideological instance’, and even in his article ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, which I criticized on this point in *Fascism and Dictatorship*.²⁷

The problem was entirely different in my case. I was dealing with a precise and crucial problem, that of the separation of the political and the economic which, according to Marx, defines the capitalist mode of production underlying the relative autonomy of the capitalist state. At no time does Balibar deal with this phenomenon as such, for in his view this capitalist ‘separation’ was nothing more than the form assumed, under capitalism, by an autonomy – in nature and essence

– of instances in all modes of production. My own mistake here was of a completely different order. It was, as Laclau correctly observes, that I rather hurriedly (after all, this was not my problem) suggested that this separation/autonomy specific to capitalism might also make its appearance, though in different forms, in pre-capitalist modes of production. This was a classic error of historical hindsight. Emmanuel Terray, in *Marxism and Primitive Society*,²⁸ Laclau in his various articles and others too have since put matters straight on this point.

4. The formalism from which *Political Power* suffers led me to convey, within the separation of the political and the economic specific to capitalism, a certain view of instances as being to some extent partitioned from and impermeable to each other. Even though, unlike Balibar (for whom the economic is a self-reproducing and self-regulating instance in itself), I substantially analyzed the decisive role of the political/state as compared with the economic in the reproduction of capitalism, I did not manage to situate with precision the status and functioning of economic ‘interventions’ by the state, implying that under capitalism the instances might well be ‘external’ to each other, their relations being defined precisely by the ambiguity of the term ‘intervention’. One of the most important and difficult problems I tried to resolve in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* – one already outlined in *Fascism and Dictatorship* and which is crucial in the current phase of monopoly capitalism, given the specific economic role which the state assumes in this phase – is that of comprehending the capitalist separation of the political/state and the economic as the form taken by a specific presence of the political ‘within’ the economic’s reproductive space under capitalism. In other words, this problem was one of grasping the precise status and functioning of the current economic role of the state, without at the same time abandoning the separation of the political and the economic (as do the ‘state monopoly capitalism’ theoreticians in the final analysis, for whom this separation has been abolished in the present state monopoly phase). This, moreover, is one of the fundamental questions now dominating Marxist work on the state in Germany, where Marxist discussion of the economic role of the state is probably the most advanced in Europe. These considerations also led me, in my last book, to develop and elaborate a concrete basis for the analyses in *Political Power* according to which social classes cannot be determined solely on the economic level. I showed, in particular, that politico-ideological class determinations are also present ‘within’ economic class determinations right at the heart of the relations of production.

5. One last point should be made, which brings us back to something I mentioned earlier concerning my supposed 'structuralism'. In *Political Power*, I made a distinction between structures and practices, or rather between structures and class practices, with the concept of social classes covering the entire 'field' of practices.²⁹ This distinction has sometimes been criticized as containing a structuralist deviation. In fact, however, the purpose of this distinction was the very opposite; in other words, my objectives were patently anti-structuralist. The fact is, this distinction enabled me, while still retaining the class foundation and objective class determination (structures) – which are simply Marxist materialism – to advance a fundamental proposition with considerable political implications. I argued that social classes, although objectively determined (structures), are not ontological and nominalist entities, but only exist within and through the class struggle (practices). The class division of society necessarily means class struggle, for we cannot speak of classes without speaking of the class struggle. This runs counter to official modern sociology, which is prepared to speak about classes, but never about the class struggle.

Even so, this distinction was marked by a certain degree of formalism. Through my own fault, for example, certain readers may have been led to think that structures and practices constituted, as it were, two ontologically distinct domains. A distinction designed to demonstrate the importance of the class struggle in the very process of the definition of classes (which can also be seen in the fact, mentioned above, that I refused to apply the concept of power to the state/structure/institution) was perceived as according pride of place to 'structures' that were said to be external to or outside the class struggle. Consequently, in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, and particularly in the Introduction, I seek to rectify this position. With respect to social classes, I speak only of class practices, as a single field covering the entire range of the social division of labour, but within which I distinguish between structural class determination and class position in a given conjuncture. This makes it possible to retain all that was positive in *Political Power* while dispelling its ambiguities. One simple example will show what I mean. As against historicist conceptions of the 'class consciousness' type, even if the working-class aristocracy has a bourgeois class position in the present conjuncture: 1. it remains, in its structural class determination, a part of the working class – a 'layer' of the working class, as Lenin put it; 2. this structural class determination of the working-class aristocracy is necessarily reflected in working-class practices ('class instinct' as Lenin used to say) – practices that can always be discerned beneath its bourgeois

'discourse', etc. This conception, moreover, also has considerable implications for the analysis of the petty bourgeoisie put forward in the same book.

I have already taken up a good deal of space, but I would like to make one last remark before concluding. While discussions such as this one do help to elucidate problems, they suffer from a twin disadvantage. In the first place, any debate of this kind necessarily entails, on both sides, a high degree of schematization, whereas in reality things are often a good deal more complex. In the second place, such a debate is only too easily personalized (Poulantzas versus Miliband and vice versa), even though it is quite clear that if the discussion has been fruitful, as I happen to think it has, this is because a lot of people have become involved in it and helped to propel it forward. Their comments have often been very useful to me, and have contributed to the evolution of my positions mentioned above. I especially want to draw attention to this point, even though it has not been possible here to refer to all these comments directly.