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Working with Poulantzas in International Relations

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Abstract

I argue that Poulantzas offers several useful contributions to historical materialism's (HM) research program in international relations. The first part of the paper indicates briefly the reading of Poulantzas' oeuvre that informs what follows, focusing on continuity, development and change. Part two presents key features of his partly Althusser inspired understanding of HM's general theory: the totality perspective on social formations, co-existing modes of production, the relative autonomy of the economic, political, and ideational levels, the possibility of non-synchronicity between the levels, and the two- (or three) dimensional take on structure-agency. Also in part two I present Poulantzas' metaphor *the imperialist chain and its links*, arguing that it points to an important methodological principle of complementarity between analyses of individual societies and the international and global context.

In part three I turn to some of Poulantzas' more specific contributions to state and class theory, discussing their application to the international realm. The key points are:

- His understanding of the state's overall function of cohesion for a social formation and its modalities is relevant to the analysis of global governance and international organizations, i.e. in the context of a global social formation where several modes of production are articulated with each other.
- The notion of the relative autonomy of the political opens for recognition of the military power play among states as a structuring factor in world society.
- The distinction between bureaucratism as an organizational form with associated patterns of thought and practices and the bureaucracy as a social category with potential political agency points on one hand to the rationalization and legalization of world society, and on the other hand to the semi-independent role of international bureaucracies in world politics.
- In class theory, the concepts of the power block and hegemony or leadership within the power block are particularly important. So are the distinctions between the dominant class (or classes or class fractions), the governing class, and the class that staffs the state, as well as the distinction between different types of political crises. These notions, I argue, allow a nuanced analysis of global relations of power, for instance the current crisis of global leadership which does not involve a crisis for the power of the dominant classes in world society.

In conclusion I argue that some of these themes are also addressed by contemporary non-Marxist IR research while others are shared by HM in general and some are unique

to Poulantzas. But what is particularly valuable in Poulantzas, in addition to the unique specific contributions, is that he brings all these themes together in an internally coherent overarching framework.