

In his article „Authoritarian Populism: A reply to Jessop et al“¹ Stuart Hall took issue with some aspects of the argument by Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley and Tom Ling in regard to „Authoritarian Populism“ and to the „phenomenon of Thatcherism“². Jessop et al had replied to „Policing the crisis. Mugging the State, the Law and the Order“³ and „The Politics of Thatcherism“⁴ by Hall et al.. For the discussion on our workshop some remarks and quotations from the reply by Hall to the reply by Jessop et al seem to be extremely helpful to clarify the problems of terms, of abstractions, of the analysis of „authoritarian populism“ and also of the deficits of the left.

„Authoritarian Populism“ (AP) used by Stuart Hall „addresses, directly, the question of the forms of hegemonic politics. In doing so, it deliberately and self-consciously foregrounds the political-ideological dimension. (116).“ The concept first emerged from the analysis of the political conjuncture, mid-1960s/mid 1970s, advanced by Stuart and others in „Policing The Crisis. “. Their analysis pointed, „to a shift taking place in the ‘balance of social and political forces’ (or what Gramsci calls the ‘relations of force’), pinpointed in the disintegration of the social-democratic consensus under Callaghan and the rise of the radical right under Thatcherite auspices. It argued that the corporatist consensus – the form of politics in which Labour had attempted to stabilize the crisis – was breaking up under internal and external pressures. However, the balance in the relations of force was moving – in that ‘unstable equilibrium’ between coercion and consent which characterizes all democratic class politics – decisively towards the ‘authoritarian’ pole.“ (116) The society was approaching „a moment of ‘closure’ in which the state played an increasingly central ‘educative’ role. We noted, however, the degree to which this shift ‘from above’ was pioneered by, harnessed to, and to some extent legitimated by a populist groundswell below. The form of this populist enlistment ... in the 1960s and 1970s often took the shape of a sequence of ‘moral panics’, around such apparently non-political issues as race, law-and-order, permissiveness and social anarchy. These served to win for the authoritarian closure the gloss of populist consent.“ (116).

But Stuart's actual term „authoritarian populism“ emerged only in 1978 after his reading „State, Power, Socialism“⁵. Here „Poulantzas attempted to characterize a new ‘moment’ in the conjuncture of the class democracies, formed by ‘intensive state control over every sphere of socio-economic life, combined with radical decline of the institutions of political democracy and with draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called ‘[formal]’ liberties, whose reality is being discovered now that they are going overboard.“ (116-117)

This moment was called by Poulantzas „authoritarian statism“ (AS) (117). He linked it with his „periodization of capitalism into distinct stages and phases“ (117). Poulantzas insisted this moment was „neither the birth pangs of fascism nor an ‘exceptional form of the capitalist state’ nor even ‘the fulfilment of the totalitarian buds inherent in every capitalist state’. Indeed, the importance of AS was that it represented a new combination of coercion/consent, tilted towards the coercive end of the spectrum, while maintaining the outer forms of democratic class rule intact. It did, he argued, relate to ‘considerable shifts in class relations’ (not, devotees of Class Politics please note, to the so-called ‘disappearance of class or the class struggle’, whatever that entirely fictional construction of theirs might mean). But also, that it coincided with the generalization of class conflict and other social struggles to ‘new fronts’. It thus represented a fundamental shift in the modalities through which ruling blocs attempt to construct hegemony in capitalist class democracies.“ (117)

While Hall appreciated Poulantzas' concept highly, he identified two major weaknesses:

¹ New Left Review 1/151, May-June 1985, pp. 115-124.

² Authoritarian Populism, Two Nations and Thatcherism“, in New Left Review 147, pp. 32-60
<https://bobjessop.org/2014/04/29/authoritarian-populism-two-nations-and-thatcherism/>

³ Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, Brian Roberts, 1978

⁴ The politics of Thatcherism, Ed Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques Lawrence Wishart in association with Marxism Today, 1983

⁵ Poulantzas, Nicos; State, Power, Socialism, London 1978

- 1) „It misread the emerging strategy, since one of the fundamental things ... was precisely the abandonment of the ‘corporatist’ strategy central to Labourism, and its replacement by an ‘anti-statist’ strategy of the ‘New Right’.“ (117) Stuart assumed that „this highly contradictory strategy – which we have in fact seen in operation under Thatcherism: simultaneously, dismantling the welfare state, ‘anti-statist’ in its ideological self-representation and highly state- centralist and dirigist in many of its strategic operations – would inflect politics in new ways and have real political effects.“ (117)
- 2) Stuart believed that Poulantzas had neglected „the one dimension which, above all others, has defeated the left ... in every advanced capitalist democracy since the First World War: namely, the ways in which popular consent can be so constructed, by a historical bloc seeking hegemony, as to harness to its support some popular discontents, neutralize the opposing forces, disaggregate the opposition and really incorporate some strategic elements of popular opinion into its own hegemonic project.“ (117-118)

Both arguments led Hall „to shift the characterization of the conjuncture from ‘authoritarian statism’ to ‘authoritarian’ populism’.“ (118) Hall hoped „to encapsulate the contradictory features of the emerging conjuncture: a movement towards a dominative and ‘authoritarian’ form of democratic class politics – paradoxically, apparently rooted in the ‘transformism’ (Gramsci’s term) of populist discontents.“ (118) But Hall distanced his „more delimited use of the term ‘populism’“ (118) from Poulantzas’ „more inclusive one, attempting thereby to distinguish the genuine mobilization of popular demands and discontents from a ‘populist’ mobilization which, at a certain point in its trajectory, flips over or is recuperated into a statist- led political leadership.“ (118)

Hall has regarded theoretical concepts on different levels of abstraction. He has only used AP “at the level of abstraction and with the outlined range of reference outlined above” (119). So he attempted to „characterize certain strategic shifts in the political/ ideological conjuncture.“ (119) The concept of AP „refers to changes in the ‘balance of forces’. It refers directly to the modalities of political and ideological relationships between the ruling bloc, the state and the dominated classes. It attempts to expand on and to begin to periodize the internal composition of hegemonic strategies in the politics of class democracies. Theoretically ... it is part of a wider project to develop and expand on the rich but too condensed concept of hegemony. It is a sort of footnote to Gramsci’s ‘Modern Prince’ and ‘State and Civil Society’. It references, but could neither characterize nor explain, changes in the more structural aspects of capitalist social formations.“ (119) Further, Hall stated very clearly: „What I have said is that ... Thatcherite politics are ‘hegemonic’ in their conception and project: the aim is to struggle on several fronts at once, not on the economic-corporate one alone; and this is based on the knowledge that, in order really to dominate and restructure a social formation, political, moral and intellectual leadership must be coupled to economic dominance. The Thatcherites know they must ‘win’ in civil society as well as in the state. They understand, as the left generally does not, the consequences of the generalization of the class struggle to new arenas and the need to have a strategy for them too. They mean, if possible, to reconstruct the terrain of what is ‘taken for granted’ in social and political thought – and so to form a new common sense.“ (119) Further, Hall concluded: As the authoritarian face of Thatcherism has become ... more and more pronounced, it seems to me self- evident that Thatcherism remains *dominant* but *not* hegemonic. It must impose – because it cannot lead.“ (119-120)

Hall has worked on the „political/ideological dimension (a) because I ... have some competence in that area, and (b) because it is often either neglected or reductively treated by the left generally and by some Marxists. But the idea that, because one works at that level, one therefore assumes economic questions to be residual or unimportant is absurd. I think the ideological dimension of Thatcherism to be critical. I am certain the left neither understands it nor knows how to conduct this level of struggle – and is constantly misled by misreading its importance. Hence I was determined to bring out this level of analysis – and AP in part served to do just that. But since AP was never

advanced as a general or global explanation, it entailed no prescriptions whatsoever as to the other levels of analysis. The fact is that until these other dimensions are in place alongside the concept of AP, the analysis of Thatcherism remains partial and incomplete. But the 'foregrounding' involved in AP was quite deliberate. 'Bending the twig' towards the most neglected dimension, against the drift of current discussion, Althusser once called it." (121)

Hall made clear, that, when he turned to describing the ideological mechanisms, he used the insights of "discourse theory". He believed that "discourse theory has much to tell us about how Thatcherism accomplishes the condensation of different discourses into its contradictory formation, and how it 'works' so as to recruit people to its different, often contradictory, subject positions: even though it has only had partial success in its project to construct a new kind of political 'subject'. But I have long ago definitively dissociated myself from the discourse theoretical approach to the analysis of whole social formations, or even from the idea that the production of new subjectivities provides, in itself, an adequate theory of ideology (as opposed to a critical aspect of its functioning)." (121) Hall stated that he had learned much from Ernesto Laclau, especially from his "Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory"⁶.

⁶ Laclau, Ernesto, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory, Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, NLB, London, 1977