

**BOOK REVIEW**

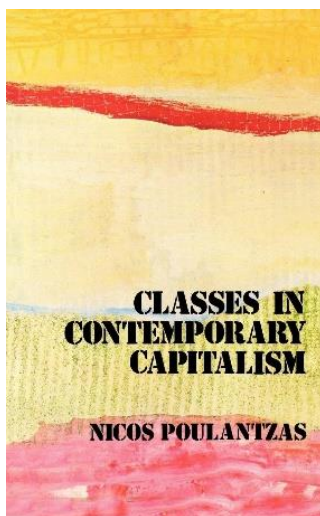
*The Essence of the Middle Class: A Review of Poulantzas's  
Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*

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**Extract**



**Author** : Nicos Poulantzas  
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This review examines Nicos Poulantzas's *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* as an important work for understanding the relationship between social class, state apparatuses, and the dynamics of modern capitalism. Poulantzas argues that social class cannot be understood solely in economic terms, but must also be analysed through political, ideological, and class struggle dimensions. He further shows that state apparatuses, especially ideological apparatuses such as education, religion, and the media, play a central role in maintaining and reproducing class positions within capitalist society. Through his discussion of the bourgeoisie, the contradictions of monopoly capitalism, and the dilemma of the *new petty bourgeoisie*, the book offers a sharp framework for interpreting the middle class as a significant buffer group that lacks full political and ideological autonomy. In the Indonesian context, Poulantzas's ideas are particularly relevant for understanding the Muslim middle class, which has developed through Islamic education, pesantren, digital media, religious lifestyles, and the commodification of religion. The book is therefore valuable not only for reading European capitalism, but also for providing a theoretical foundation for interpreting contemporary socio religious phenomena in Indonesia.

## **Background**

Poulantzas was one of the many prominent French thinkers. He became well known through several of highly influential works. His first book, *Political Power and Social Classes*, and his second, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, laid the intellectual and theoretical foundation for the arguments later developed in his third book, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*. This book seeks to explore the structures of class in advanced capitalist societies of that period. With notable precision, Poulantzas distinguishes between agents and positions within capitalist relations of production while also attempting to avoid the typical errors of functionalism and historicism. The book presents a series of analyses on social classes and the state apparatus in the phase of monopoly capitalism, particularly in Europe.

In the first part of the book, he attempts to discuss and identify the general features of the contemporary situation and their impact on social formations. In the second part, Poulantzas offers a more precise analysis of what the bourgeoisie means. Then, in the third part, he elaborates his analysis of what he calls the petty bourgeoisie in both its old and new forms, known as the “new middle strata,” especially in relation to the ongoing development of capitalism.

## **Social Class**

In the Introduction, Poulantzas explains that he grounds his subsequent discussion by linking theoretical analysis with concrete analysis. He then begins by clarifying what is meant by social class. In his view, social class cannot be understood solely through the economic sphere, the production process, or social formation. However, it must also include the political and ideological dimensions known as the superstructure. Social class is always bound up with contradiction and class struggle. The notion of class used here differs from the Hegelian schema of *class in itself* which

refers to an economic class situation determined purely by the process of production and *class for itself* which refers to a class that becomes automatically class conscious and forms an autonomous political organization. The implication is that every class within a mode of production is generally marked by the effects of structural determination, including the political and ideological relations embedded in the division of labour. Furthermore, class consciousness and autonomous political organization, especially as recognized in the case of the working class, are ideological forms that refer to class position and indicate the existence of a tradition that makes class intervention possible as a social force (Poulantzas and Fernbach 1979).

The main principle for analysing social class is to examine its existence within class struggle, which must be distinguished from its origins. Thus, social class refers to its position in the workplace, which is usually marked by its role within economic relations. What is meant by economic space is determined by the process of production, while the relations of production determine the position or place of workers. The process of production concerns the relationship between human beings and nature in general, whereas relations of production in a class divided society point to two things. First, they refer to the relationship between workers and the objects and instruments of their labour. Second, they refer to the relationships among human beings themselves, understood as class relations.

If social class is viewed purely in terms of the mode of production, then there would be two classes determined by political, economic, and ideological aspects: the exploiting class, which is politically and ideologically dominant, and the exploited class, which is likewise politically and ideologically dominated by the former. These include master and slave in the slave mode of production, lord and servant in the feudal mode of production, and bourgeoisie and workers in the capitalist mode of

production. Even so, in social reality, existing social formations do not consist of a single class relation alone, but rather of a mixture of several social relations shaped by different modes and forms of production. For that reason, class analysis cannot be carried out through an overly simplistic division of classes.

If, according to Poulantzas, the determination of social class involves political and ideological relations rather than merely economic space, then the Muslim middle class in Indonesia today cannot be defined solely by income level, but also by religious ideology and lifestyle. For example, Raharjo Jati's (2015) findings show that popular Islam has become a site for this middle class to seek identity. They express their class consciousness through Islamic lifestyles and the commodification of religion, as discussed by Elanda (2019) in relation to the shift in business practices that has given rise to the Muslim middle class. The interplay of globalization, modernity, and middle class religiosity, as shown by Aeni and Nuriyanto (2020), demonstrates that religion has become an ideological superstructure that further affirms the existence of their class position.

### **State Apparatuses and Radical Transformation**

In the following discussion, Poulantzas examines state apparatuses and their relationship to social class, arguing that the state apparatus plays a significant role in the existence and development of social classes. He states that the primary function of the state apparatus is to preserve and maintain social unity and cohesion by centralizing and sanctioning the conditions through which class domination is exercised. Through this process, class relations are reproduced. Political and ideological relations are, in his terms, materialized or objectified through the state apparatus (Poulantzas and Fernbach 1979).

Poulantzas argues that the state apparatus includes, among other things, the repressive state apparatus such as the army, police, prisons, the

judiciary, and civil servants; the ideological state apparatus such as education, religion, and information media including radio, television, and newspapers; cultural apparatuses such as cinema, theatre, and publishing; as well as trade union apparatuses that collaborate with bourgeois parties in certain situations. It is important to note, however, that these apparatuses do not possess power in their own right. Rather, they embody and centralize class relations.

The state, meanwhile, is not a separate entity whose nature is intrinsically instrumental. It is better understood as the institutional consolidation of class relations. This has important implications, namely that the various functions of the state apparatus, whether political, economic, or ideological, are not neutral when they operate within social relations, and that political domination itself is limited by the existence and function of the apparatus as a state apparatus. This means that a radical transformation of social relations cannot be confined merely to a change in state power, but must also involve transforming the state apparatus itself from serving one class to serving another.

In general, then, it can be said that any analysis of a social formation must carefully take into account the relationship between class struggle, power relations, and the state apparatuses that embody, centralize, and reflect those relations. Here, the state apparatus, particularly the ideological apparatus, plays a decisive role in the development of social class. Schools, for example, may not create class divisions on their own, yet they significantly contribute to the development of social classes.

Likewise, Poulantzas's view that the Ideological State Apparatus, including educational, religious, and media institutions, plays a crucial role in centralizing, materializing, and sustaining the development or reproduction of social class is highly relevant. In Indonesia, religious education within Muslim society has in many ways become a means of socialization, with integrated Islamic schools functioning as a key

instrument through which the Muslim middle class reproduces its class values and ideology across generations. This phenomenon can be seen in the strong preference of the Muslim middle class for Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu or Integrated Islamic Primary Schools in both Bandar Lampung (Asiah and Isnaeni 2018) and Yogyakarta (Azizah and Machali 1970). In addition, pesantren have become spaces for the expression of middle class Islamic enthusiasm (Fithri 2019), while also serving as sites for the socialization and internalization of exclusive Islamic values in Surabaya (Djazilan 2019). These institutions function effectively as ideological apparatuses that reinforce the cultural position of the Muslim middle class

### **The World Situation**

In the following discussion, Poulantzas attempts to identify the global situation of his time by raising several key questions: what new relations were actually emerging among countries with imperialist social formations, and what effects did these relations have on the state apparatus? Was it still possible to speak of the national state within an imperialist metropolis? What was the relationship between the state and the internationalization of capital or multinational corporations? Was there a new form of super state institution replacing the national state, or were there instead modifications of the state in order to fulfil its new functions amid the expansion of capital accumulation at the international level?

In this regard, he points to two major tendencies. First, writers such as Paul Sweezy, Harry Magdoff, Martin Nicolaus, Pierre Jalée, and others, who were associated with the left wing version of Kautsky's theory of ultra imperialism, argued that the United States exercised a dominant role among capitalist countries, and that relations among them were marked by pacification and integration under the unmatched dominance of American capital. Second, although their arguments differed in emphasis, a number of writers working from a broadly similar basis, including Ernest Mandel,

Michael Kidron, Bill Warren, Bob Rowthorn, and J. Valier, maintained that in the phase of imperialism, the cooperative relations among imperialist states did not appear to undergo any fundamental structural change. Despite these differing tendencies, Poulantzas concludes that American hegemony had been in decline since Europe rebuilt itself from the ruins of the Second World War. In other words, this decline must be understood within the broader trajectory of American hegemony as a whole. It points to a crisis across the imperialist states, marked by increasingly sharp contradictions among them. Accordingly, the bourgeoisie in imperialist countries can only be analysed within the context of the internationalization of capitalist relations that characterizes the new phase of imperialism (Poulantzas and Fernbach 1979).

### **Contradictions**

The discussion of the bourgeoisie begins with what Poulantzas's concept of contradiction and its relationship to the state. During the transition to capitalism, there was an imbalance between the feudal mode and forms of production and its forms and the capitalist mode of production. Relations of production still retained a manufacturing character, in which the owner was at the same time the producer. Then, with the expansion of capitalism, what came to be known as competitive capitalism emerged, which later developed into monopoly capitalism.

This stage of monopoly capitalism passed through three phases: the transitional phase from competitive capitalism to monopoly capitalism, the phase of the consolidation of monopoly capitalism, and the phase of new monopoly capitalism. In this stage, the capitalist mode of production became increasingly established and dominant, although in its early phase there was still some protection for other modes of production, especially commodities produced through small scale industrial forms. In the following phase, an imbalance arose between competitive capitalism and

monopoly capitalism, until monopoly capitalism eventually became dominant and consolidated. It was at this point that the concentration of capital took place and the production process became highly exploitative. Once capital monopoly emerged, the relations of production were modified. This monopoly of capital contained contradictions within itself. These contradictions also operated between monopoly and non monopoly capital. A further contradiction occurred between non monopoly capital and the traditional bourgeoisie, including contradictions within non monopoly capital itself (Poulantzas and Fernbach 1979).

The question that then arises is this: where should managers and leaders of the state apparatus be placed? To which structural determination or class do they belong? Are they part of the capitalist class or not? This is a compelling question. Two answers are usually given. First, they are identified with economic ownership and therefore belong to the capitalist class, since they promote relations of economic ownership. Second, they are compelled to operate within a system that must remain loyal to the logic of profit. Even so, Poulantzas finds both answers unsatisfactory, because economic ownership must be distinguished from decision making. The second answer also ignores the fact that the criterion of class membership is not a matter of behavioural motivation, but an objective category referring to the form through which surplus value is appropriated and realized. It is from this point that Poulantzas develops his theory of the petty bourgeoisie in both its old and new definitions.

### **The Dilemma of the Middle Class**

The petty bourgeoisie constitutes a difficult problem within the theoretical framework of social class. Before discussing it further, Poulantzas notes that there are three main views regarding this new petty bourgeoisie. First, some argue that this salaried group can be included within the bourgeoisie, or that it has undergone a process of

embourgeoisement. Second, others place it within the working class, referring to it simply as the salaried class. Third, a position represented particularly by Dahrendorf attempts to divide them between those who belong to the bourgeoisie and those who belong to the working class. Another tendency, despite its various forms, is known under the broader label of the middle class. Because of its distinctive position, this group may be described as a buffer or intermediary, bridging the bourgeoisie and the working class while at the same time functioning as a stabilizing factor within bourgeois society. In this perspective, the middle class is treated as a homogeneous group, generally defined on the basis of income, mentality, and psychological motivation (Poulantzas and Fernbach 1979).

The petty bourgeoisie in the older sense includes traders, small industrial entrepreneurs, independent craftsmen, and similar groups. The theoretical problem that arises is this: where exactly should this petty bourgeoisie be located within the structural determination of class? Do they possess defining features comparable to those of the bourgeoisie and the working class? What are the political and ideological positions of the petty bourgeoisie? Can it sustain an autonomous class position of its own over the long term? In the older sense, the petty bourgeoisie does not belong fully to the capitalist mode of production, but rather represents a transitional form between the feudal and capitalist modes of production.

The new petty bourgeoisie tends to be somewhat anti capitalist, though more in the form of reformist illusion than radical opposition. It is usually more concerned with issues of participation and, out of anxiety over possible proletarianization, tends to desire career advancement, promotion, vertical mobility, and similar aspirations. It also tends to revere power. The petty bourgeoisie in the older sense is ideologically often anti capitalist, though still essentially committed to the status quo. It fears any fundamental social transformation. It is also anxious about proletarianization. For that reason, its demands usually revolve around

equal opportunity, fair competition, opposition to monopoly, and similar concerns.

If we contextualize this within the Indonesian case and its religious phenomena, the studies by Jati (2016) and 'Aina (2018), which discuss the Muslim middle class as an agent of socio-political change, are particularly worth bringing into the discussion. Yet the idea of agency here seems more closely aligned with what Poulantzas calls reformist illusion: they demand moral and social improvement, engage in da'wah through various models (Dewi, Fata, and Fauzi 2024), and seek to claim authority over sacred texts through new media (Ahmadi 2019) as a way of asserting legitimacy. This aspiration reflects the mentality of the new petty bourgeoisie, which seeks status and recognition while ultimately remaining committed to the status quo, without any real intention of transforming the capitalist system that surrounds it.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Poulantzas shows that the petty bourgeoisie, or middle class, cannot be understood as a class with stable political or ideological autonomy. Its position remains structurally ambiguous, as it may align with either the bourgeoisie or the working class depending on the broader historical conjuncture. Although his argument is rooted in the European experience, it still offers important insights for understanding class formation in developing societies. In the Indonesian context, this perspective is especially useful for reading the Muslim middle class as a social formation that mediates between religious aspiration, capitalist consumption, and political influence. Seen from this angle, the Muslim middle class is not simply the outcome of economic growth, but an active agent that reproduces its status and identity through education, religious institutions, and digital media.

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