



INTERVIEW WITH JOHN KANNANKULAM

Funda Hülügü

“The West German state debate is very abstract and the Franco-Italian, let’s say Mediterranean state debate is more struggle oriented”

Prof. Dr. John Kannankulam teaches critical political economy at the Philipps University of Marburg, Germany. He is a former student of Joachim Hirsch, one of the most famous contributors in the West German state derivation debate. Prof. Kannankulam’s research area focuses on the political economy of the European Union and Germany. Recently, together with his research associates they proposed the heuristic device of “historical materialist policy analysis” (Capital and Class, 2014). Thus, they would argue, the students of the Marxist state analysis could bring together abstract analysis with empirical research. I think and hope that the following lines would inspire many young scholars not only interested in the historical materialist analysis but also in the history of Marxist political thought. I think that it is now time to reconsider the Marxist theories of state without forgetting the historical developments which have conditioned them.

Funda Hülügü: Dear John, I know that you have been intensely working on theories of capitalist state since your very early studies and have recently proposed a methodological way to get beyond the “institutions” void in state form analysis. How would you define us the capitalist state?

John Kannankulam: From my perspective, the state as a definition is a form determined material condensation of a relationship of forces. It is of course not my definition, but it is a definition that you might find in the writings of Bob Jessop, who was one of my supervisors during my PhD. Bob made this definition and what he did is to bring into synthesis, two strands of materialist state theory: one line is the state-derivation debate of the 1970s where form determination and form analysis come in, and the other line is Nicos Poulantzas, of course, who gave us this famous definition. Both lines of argumentation stress different things.

We can expand this definition by referring to Marx's analysis in *Capital* Vol. I. If you go for a form analytical line of argumentation, you would probably stress the first chapters where Marx develops the value-form. I think part of the form analysis that was developed in the 1970s in West Germany tried to adopt the insights that Marx developed in his discussion of the value form. In our society, structured and driven by many contradictions and antagonisms, there is alienation, sort of alienation taking place not only in relation to value in the form of money but also with regards to the political. Out of the contradictions of capitalist society, there is not only a kind of alienation taking place with regards to the value form but also with regards to the political form, institutionalized in the state. This is one side that you can find in Marx' *Capital*, but also in *German Ideology* and in the writings on *Hegel's Theory of Right*.

The other strand that is more or less taken up by Poulantzas is Chapter 8 in *Capital*, the struggle over the working day. This chapter is very insightful with regards to questions of class struggle and the state. Marx shows that the limitation of the working day was a result of a) the working-class struggle and its upheavals, but on the other side – this is very important, but many Marxists forget about it – b) the divisions within the ruling class itself. Capital was divided. There was this free trade faction and there was this protectionist faction in England at that time. Marx is very clearly arguing that the working class was able to benefit from this split within the capitalist classes to get the working day limited. What we learn from Marx in Chapter 8 is that the struggle of the working class against capital and different factions of capital are structuring politics, which is then taken up by Poulantzas - who comes to it via Gramsci.

What we see in the Chapter 8 is that the limitation of working day as a political decision is really a material condensation of relationship of forces. It is the condensation of the ongoing struggles and contradictions. The non-intended outcome is the specific limitation of the working day.

This is fantastic. Every scholar who has the chance must read both parts. The definition of the state as form determined material condensation of relationship of forces is at its best bringing both parts of Marx's analysis of capital together, where he stresses the alienation on the one hand and but on the other hand argues that the alienation and estrangement that is taking place are not merely abstract and above ahead but pushed through and developed by antagonistic class struggles and contradictions within society.

One could argue that a structural argumentation and the agency-based argumentation are both contained within this definition. There *is* form determination. In other words, capitalism is restricting the ability to do things. On the other hand, this is not determined forever and not even for the last

instance. But it is a determination driven by class antagonisms and struggles. As I wrote in my PhD, the struggle is *the engine* behind the form. Struggle and form are co-determined.

FH: John, how would you position yourself vis-à-vis different strands of Marxist state theory? For example, there are political Marxists who bring very important historical sociological insights to the state debate, and there is a strand also known as open Marxism focusing on form analysis and arguing against the Poulantzasian discussion of the relative autonomy of the state.

JK: Among the political Marxists, who I came across is Benno Teschke. He wrote about *the Myth of 1648*. I came across it when I was writing this article with Hirsch on the internationalization of the state (Antipode, 2011). I liked it because I am a fan of history and especially of medieval history. This is due to my past as I was studying History as minor subject in Frankfurt. Teschke very nicely argues that the establishment of capitalism within feudalism does not mean that feudalism was thrown away. Simply put, Capitalism co-existed with feudalism from which he concluded that Capitalism doesn't need the modern state with its monopoly on the use of coercion. Teschke, from my point of view, however, confuses historical development and logical argument since the fact that the historical development in England did not automatically lead to modern capitalistic type of state and society does not mean that there are no logical connections between capitalism and the monopoly of coercion in the state. The logical argumentation is not to be mixed up with historical development.

When it comes to Open Marxists, I sometimes think that John Holloway finally reduces form to action. There is no space for relative autonomy of structures against action and I think this is from my point of view, overstressing to one side. Yet, Holloway by dissolving the form into action gives the power back to the people. This is inspiring for social movements but from theoretical level, I would argue, there is a gap between structure and agency, and we must keep this in mind. The fetish of the commodity is an alienated form that is being produced by the praxis of the people, but it is not directly controllable. You cannot control it directly.

FH: Yet my problem with this relative autonomy discussion is that it might lead and most of the time leads to conceiving the state as a sovereign subject.

JK: This reminds me of Michael Heinrich, the famous researcher of Marx, who was giving a comment after a presentation of mine during one of the conferences of our *Assoziation für Kritische Gesellschaftsforschung* [Association for Critical Social Research] and said: "if the state is a relationship of forces this would mean that you change the relationship of forces and then you simply change the state". I

replied: “Michael, you obviously read your Marx very properly. But why you do not do it for Poulantzas?” Poulantzas is not arguing that the state is a simple relationship of forces; but that the state is a material condensation of a relationship of forces. He is saying that there is condensation of social forces “within” a materialized structure. Marx had a very clear idea about it. And this is what relative autonomy implies. We enter in this world at some point. There are pre-given structures. What we can do in trying to change the pre-given structures is not having a one to one effect. We do produce structures through action or praxis but there are pre-given condensations and materializations of former action and they are more or less stable.

Sometimes the struggles condensate probably on a parliamentary-democratic type of state. But the relationship of social struggles not only condensates in parliaments. Here we can bring in Gramsci, the integral state. The state-civil society complex. That means there is condensation of forces but not only within the state but also within the civil society, in sports clubs, in newspapers, etc. Some forces are stronger than the others. This does not mean that the forces that become stronger will become automatically hard law. There is selectivity within the state apparatuses, following Althusser and Poulantzas. Structural or strategic selectivities within the state and its institutions are letting through specific (condensations) of social forces and not others.

We have a good idea in saying that the state is not the thing, and the state is not the subject. Within the state, there is of course bureaucracy and state personnel. There are some selectivities, enacted of course via these people. I always give the example in my seminars: Let’s consider there is some environmental issues going on in Marburg and there is a huge protest taking place. We say we want this and that to be done. Some NGO tries to give a direct phone call to the Ministry of Environmental Issues in Berlin. It will probably not get through to the minister. But if there is, let’s say, the CEO of a very important energy company, he might certainly get through easier. This is of course a very simple example. But it might help us to understand what structural selectivities and relative autonomy mean. The state, however, itself is not a subject but a relative autonomous material condensation of a relationship of forces. Again.

FH: But the capitalist state form itself is selective, is not it?

JK: Yes, of course. This is also to be examined at different levels of abstraction. There comes the Claus Offe argument. He once pointed out that the state has “an interest in itself”. The state’s political personnel are dependent on being reelected. There is this democratic process. They must show something to the people, where economic growth and a reduction of unemployment are generally important issues. Simply speaking, the interest of the state personnel brings to

the table the structural selectivity and dependency of the state as a tax state. Since if there is no growth but an economic crisis the tax revenue will diminish – which is the source of the state and its personnel. Hence, there is a structural dependency between the state and capital. But they are not the same. They are separated from each other but at the same time very dependent. They are autonomous in relation to each other as a relative or relational autonomy. Structural selectivity is therefore also reasoned in the fact that surplus value must be produced first. And the state – out of its “own interest” – should provide some capitalists with the possibility to acquire surplus value.

That is why the West German State Derivation Debate came about in the 1970s, when the social democrats for the first time after the Second World War were entering Government in Germany. These social democrats were very Keynesian. They had the idea: “Now, we can control the capitalist contradictions via the state”. They were very euphoric about state planning. It is within this context that leftist, Marxists students of 1968 developed Marxist state theory: against this fetishism of the state and state planned capitalism. These Marxists were telling the social democrats that it is not possible. With a modern state, even though it is autonomous, and separated from the economy, it is not possible to get rid of the capitalist contradictions because it is dependent on capital accumulation. There is structural dependency and the state is not autonomous at all. That was the main line of critique of the West German leftist students in the state derivation debate. They were proving this, that the social democrats are wrong, on a very theoretical level. The West German state debate is very abstract and the Franco-Italian, let’s say Mediterranean state debate is more struggle oriented. Because they are arguing from within the struggles of the Communist Party. We did not have a similarly important Communist Party in West Germany during 1960s and 1970s. There was not so much agency with the organized working class in West Germany, at least for those students. There were of course working-class movements, but they were rather closely connected to the social democrats in power at that time.

FH: How do you operationalize this kind of analysis? You also say that there is a void about how to study concretely the state? What is this new proposition of yours? Could you provide us, the students of the state theory, with some hints on how to forge a link between empirical analyses and conceptual debates on the capitalist state? Or to put it simply, could you elaborate on your “historical materialist analysis of institutions” method.

JK: As I said, the problem with the West German debate was over-theorization. You end up with the question of “what is to be done?” in concrete analysis and praxis. I was lucky enough to study in Frankfurt with Joachim Hirsch. Hirsch’s seminars were always engaged with the question of what the relevance is of what

we discussed for social movements. Hirsch was very interested in the added value of these debates. We as his students, we had the idea to develop this further.

One bridging point was Gramsci's notion of struggle over hegemony. The idea that we had is to bring it down: what it means if people or groups, or opposing forces try to organize hegemony within the state-society complex and then try to get it condensed or materialized within the state. In a way, Gramsci and Poulantzas are stressing different sides of the same coin. Poulantzas stresses the selectivities within the state apparatuses, and parliament, and ministries and so on and so forth. "Political society" in the Gramscian sense. Gramsci himself looks at the hegemony over society, sports clubs, parties, NGOs, etc. We had the idea that we could try to methodologically "operationalize" relationship of forces via hegemony with reliance on something that the transnational historical materialists already did. I mean the Amsterdam School, Toronto School and the Marburg School, where Frank Deppe and Hans-Jürgen Bieling provided some critical analysis of the European Union. What they came up with is this notion of *projects*.

They said you could aggregate specific actors under one umbrella, and you can name this umbrella as a project. What we, Sonja Buckel, Jens Wissel, Fabian Georgi and other colleagues in our research project "State Project Europe" (<http://staatsprojekt-europa.eu/> for an English translation of our insights: <https://www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/38197/the-european-border-regime-in-crisis/>), brought to the debate is that projects do not necessarily mean that there are very conscious actors behind them. We argue that projects bring together specific actors who follow the same strategies even if they might not know each other. We tried to aggregate different positions around one political debate and try to find out who is arguing for what, with what argumentation and with what strategy. Therefore, we had the idea that we could cluster several positions and bring them together under what we named "hegemony projects".

This is of course also coming from Bob Jessop, who wrote a very famous article in *State Theory* (1990) where he was arguing that there are accumulation strategies; and hegemonic projects. But we had the idea that the term hegemonic project is not precise enough, because there is no distinction being made between projects that are struggling to become hegemonic; and those that are not yet. We therefore label these groups of different actors and strategies as hegemony projects. We try to bring to the fore, especially through discourse and media analysis, different actors who struggle over a specific political conflict. In our case, it was migration politics in Europe. We tried to operationalize this abstract notion of relationship of forces through hegemony projects in an ex post analysis. I think that this is what we can do. For example, we can say there was

the closing of borders at that point and ask why it was dealt with in that way and not in another. We can try to proceed like peeling off an onion and take its leaves – the (relationship of) social forces – off and off. With that we try to see which projects were engaged in this political conflict at the time and with which strategy. We try to give an answer to why and how “this and that project was more successful” to reach to its political goal than the other one? What forces are behind the material condensation of relationship of forces? That was our idea to bring some more empirical research here.

FH: But what are your criteria for differentiating among projects? How do you come up with the idea that “Okay these actors actually do have *different* hegemony projects”? Do we really have that many different hegemony projects out there?

JK: We started our research in the Institute for Social Research, in Frankfurt. There was a colloquium of Axel Honneth. At that time, he was the leader of the Institute for Social Research. Honneth was very suspicious and probably had the idea that these guys are Marxists and Marxist class analysis always knows who (following his or her class position) has which idea and strategy. “What are your criteria?”, he asked. “Is not it finally the question of having means of production and not having means of production?” He was making a good point. Sometimes we certainly tend to know from the beginning. But our research showed us, for example, that when we look at the German Unions or British Unions, assuming that they are internationalists you would expect that they do have a pro-migrant perspective. Some do have. But those on the shop floor are very afraid that those migrants would come in and take away their jobs. All with less payment. This competition within the working class has also an influence over the Unions. If we look at Oscar Lafontaine and Sarah Wagenknecht, who led the Left Party in Germany, they, of course with having an eye on the lower ranges of the working class and working poor in Germany, were arguing against migration. From a strategic point of view, they were not in line with the left-wing radical or pro-European type of project. But they were rather part of a protectionist-national type of project. On the other hand, we had some interviews with some industrial organizations, with capital, which are very much in favor of migration. They say a free market of world labour is to the benefit of the whole. But at the same time, they say “you cannot say this publicly. We have to be very careful.” What we are saying therefore is that we cannot depart from the class backgrounds of people to determine their projects. We can’t simply derivate strategy from class position.

FH: My problem then is that why is it not enough to say that they do possess different ideological views. When I hear “hegemony projects”, I do expect to see that different actors purposively align to get a political power position, possess an openly stated purpose and a political destination...

JK: Historical materialist policy analysis is a toolbox. What we try to do is to aggregate. We bring different groups together and say that even though they might not be in the same political party and they might not even be aware of each other, at the end of the day some do follow the one same strategy that could be clustered as a hegemony project. If we go for the right-wingers, they have a very clear idea of what they want. Even though they are in different parties like in CDU-CSU, in SPD, in the Unions and the Left Party, even though they do not connect with each other, when it comes to the debate you could hear from these different sides, similar arguments. Their strategies form a general hegemony project with more or less influence in the integral state or the transnational ensemble of apparatuses in Europe. We, as researchers give a shape to this fluent type of actors.

FH: What is the map of hegemony projects now in Europe?

JK: That is unfortunately obvious, I think. It is the upswing of the many far right parties around Europe against the defeat, and that I think is the part of the story, of an upswing of a transnational organizing Left during the Eurozone Crisis. We had this occasion in Portugal, in Spain, in Greece and partly in Italy. There were radical democratic groups on the streets acting against the neoliberal core countries from the North. But as we have seen in the Greece Laboratory, this was defeated. They got exhausted. They got dried up. Against this background, against the defeat of the Left, it is now more or less in the hands of the Right to take the critique against the Eurozone. They do this in a protectionist, nationalist, racist, and chauvinist manner. If you look for example at Italy now, part of their ideas to have a parallel currency to the Euro and so forth were also part of the ideas developed in Greece at that time. Beforehand there was this harsh objection and rejection against Greece. One wonders why this is not the case against the Italy. I do not know what the outcome would be. That is also very frustrating now to see that the critique against European Policies is not being performed in a progressive-solidaristic manner, which could be and should be the solution. After years and decades, the Southern Countries with the “Dublin System” have been left alone with the problem that people come to their shores in seeking entry to the European Union. Northern countries were not willing and able to give the support that would have been necessary. It is now to the far Right to say that European migration policy is not functioning. We do not have a crisis of migration in Europe but a crisis of European Migration *Politics*. Up to now it is not dealt with and it is devastating.

FH: Do you think that these different hegemony projects lean on different factions of capital?

JK: I did a little research about that with Fabian Georgi. We found out that there was a split within the neoliberal hegemony project in Germany during the Eurozone Crisis. We found this quite interesting. One part of the neoliberal project was in favor of rescuing the banks, which were mostly the German and French banks who borrowed money to Greece. On the other hand, we had minor and medium size capital factions, also neoliberal, who said “no, that is not in our interests because our capital rests on inner accumulation, on national capital accumulation. We don’t want to rescue these banks. Let them go down. They borrowed the money, and it was their risk.” We had a split within the neoliberal hegemony project at this time. The pro-side was saying that is very important with regards to the Euro and to the international competition of currencies. There were of course transnational forces behind that. The small and medium size capital was against it. Out of this split and controversy the AfD came up at that time.

At that time, AfD [far right Alternative for Germany] was generally a part of the neoliberal project. It was the nationalist-protectionist splitting part of the neoliberal project. Like Bernd Lucke, who is a professor for economics in Hamburg. The rivalries within the neoliberal project were an important part of the party development in Germany. When that debate was going down at that time, the summer of migration came up in 2015 and played in favor of the nationalist forces. In the beginning there was a harsh drift within the neoliberal and conservative project itself. For the political history of Germany, this is unique. We know by now that these neoliberal actors within the AfD are more or less gone. Lucke is gone and his successor Frauke Petry is also gone. They are now only playing the anti-migration and racist card, because Eurozone crisis at least from a German perspective is no longer there. This is no longer a playing field for them.

FH: Do you agree with this notion that we are undergoing a crisis of neoliberalism and of the neoliberal state?

JK: When we started analyzing this Eurozone Crisis in 2007-8, for a short time I had the idea of “yes, the neoliberal era of capitalism is coming into a severe crisis like that of Fordist-Keynesian capitalism in the 1970s”. But, looking at it from a German perspective, this has been at least for some time settled. I think German neoliberal capitalism is very stable and solid. Out of this, I wonder how you could argue for the crisis of neoliberal state. But still, this is a perspective from Germany.