

# CAPITALIST DEMOCRACY IN BRITAIN

**Ralph Miliband**

Oxford University Press 1982 hbk £8.95  
ISBN 0 19 827445 9

This is a profoundly pessimistic book. Far from subscribing to the thesis recently aired within these columns that the 'forward march of Labour has been halted', Miliband apparently refuses to believe that there ever was a forward inarch other than in electoral terms. Written in the same mould as his truly cathartic book, *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969), the current work is exclusively concerned with the nature of capitalist democracy in Britain since the passage of the 1867 Reform Act. Miliband's essential thesis is that there is a crucial tension in capitalist democracies between the promise of popular power enshrined in universal suffrage and the continuing denial of that promise in capitalist economic, political, and ideological practice. For, against the tendential pressures from below (especially from the labour movement) reflected in class struggles at the point of production and in the political arena, we find arrayed a vast nexus of institutions, organisations, and leading elites whose primary function is to contain these pressures and manage any residual class

conflict. The continuing success of these institutional constraints and practices is apparently now threatened by the worsening long term economic decline of Britain. But Miliband nonetheless concludes that the prospects for a revolutionary transformation of society are blocked by the dominance of the Labour Party in the (mis)representation of working class interests in socialist change.

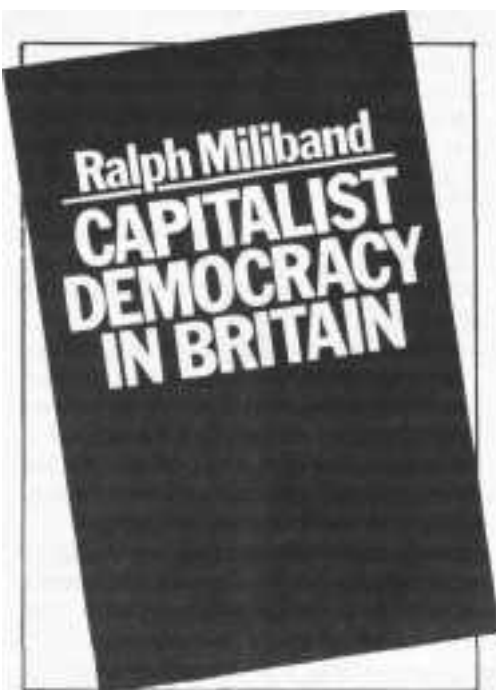
In pursuing this argument Miliband mobilises a broad range of relevant illustrative material culled from memoirs, official records, newspapers, and academic studies. In this respect the book should have the same cathartic effect as his earlier studies of parliamentary socialism and the state in western democracies. But the analysis of the state, hegemony, and political strategy has made considerable progress since Miliband published his own pioneering studies and this current work leaves the reader with a feeling of *dejd vu* and a desire for more detailed theoretical and strategic arguments.

In marshalling his arguments Miliband continues to rely on interpersonal relations and the motivations of different elites. In particular he stresses the high degree of ideological and political homogeneity of members of the establishment and always plays down the differences that exist within the ranks of capital, between capital and the governmental elites, and between these economic and political elites and those who occupy leading positions in civil society. Conversely Miliband emphasises the internal divisions within the working class, the underclass of the poor, deprived, and underprivileged, and the intermediate class (old and new petty bourgeoisies). He also high-

lights the differences between the demobilised, depoliticised mass, the activist minority, and the effectively pro-capitalist leanings of the trade union and party political elites who (mis)represent the interests of the mass as these are articulated by the activist minority at the base. To be sure Miliband does note in passing the role of more fundamental institutional constraints rooted in the operation of market forces and the separation between economic and political spheres of struggle; and he also attributes real inhibiting or containing effects to the logic of the parliamentary system of government. But the overall thrust of the argument is based on the role of a relatively unified establishment consciously containing and managing the threats that emerge from below.

The problem that Miliband appears to be posing is why national economic failure has not threatened the success of the dominant class in maintaining its position in British society. His answer is couched in terms of specific institutional and interpersonal features of British society and, indeed, he often appears to single out the Labour Party and its leaders for particular blame. Yet much of this argument is redundant in two senses. In the first place Miliband frequently notes that there has never been a real danger to the stability of economic and social order in Britain — no insurrectionary upsurge, no Popular Front like that in interwar France, no factory occupations like those in Italy — and hence there has been no major threat to be contained. Indeed, in reviewing possible sources of danger (military defeat, inability to resolve a major and particular problem, strong nationalist movements), Miliband is forced to conclude that the only objective threat is the long term inability of the state to resolve the economic and social problems of decline.

Secondly Miliband also presents a more general, all-encompassing argument that would cover the British case without the need for specific analysis. For he argues that capitalist democracy *as such* is sufficient to insulate capitalism from pressures that threaten its survival. At the end of his lengthy tour of British institutions and elites, Miliband argues that 'one of the most notable features of capitalist democracy is precisely how resilient it is, and how great is the capacity of the political system to absorb crisis, conflict, and dislocation' (p 148). Indeed he concedes that a postwar capitalist democracy has witnessed a veritable crisis of *regime* only in the case of France in 1968 and even here the crises was resolved in favour of capital. If capitalist democracy is so resilient, then the case of Britain can only be illustra-



live — there is nothing much to explain. Only a more detailed comparative analysis looking at crises of regime as well as countries without crises would be helpful theoretically or strategically.

With the publication of his earlier study of the state in capitalist society, the academic world was entertained with the famous debate between Poulantzas and Miliband on problems of method and theory. There is no point in reviewing this debate here but it is interesting to note that both theorists later reached equally pessimistic conclusions about the prospects for a democratic transition to democratic socialism. In his last work Poulantzas saw only a limited 'window of opportunity' for democratic socialism and greatly feared the prospects of a bureaucratic Stalinism and/or authoritarian statism managed by a social democratic or conservative mass party. Miliband also foresees a drift to authoritarian conservatism or else an abortive attempt by an emasculated, internally divided Labour Party to introduce socialism through purely parliamentary means. However, Poulantzas developed an Austro-Marxist 'left Eurocommunism' as an alternative strategy and stressed the importance of developing democracy at the base, linking new social movements and class struggles, and combining extra-parliamentary struggles with struggle within the heart of the state

apparatus itself. Miliband seems trapped within an approach that recognises the limits of parliamentarism but offers no alternative solution, and continues to place the burden of making the revolution on the activist minority within the working class. In this respect Miliband seems much the more pessimistic of the two protagonists of former years and his failure to develop an alternative strategic perspective is particularly disappointing. Such a perspective would also require a much more direct confrontation with the work of Gramsci on hegemony and of Poulantzas on recent state theory than Miliband offers us in this work. Only then would we have a book which combines, in true Gramscian fashion, 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'.

Bob Jessop

BOOKNOTES

Cynthia Cockburn's important study of the means used by printworkers to preserve the male domination of their industry is now available: *Brothers: Male dominance and technological change* (Pluto, £5.95). Pluto have also brought out a new edition of the absolutely invaluable *Trade Union Directory* (£7.95). A collection of short and rather bitty essays on the history of CND, to coincide with its anniversary, is published by

Allison & Busby: *The CND Story*, editors, J Minnion and P Bolsover, £1.95. Two more volumes in the Arguments for Socialism series: *Hard Times* (on the capitalist world economy) by Bob Sutcliffe and *The Cuts Machine* by David Hall, both priced £2.50. Allison and Busby reissue this month *Level 7* by Mordecai Roshwald (£1.95) one of the very best anti-nuclear novels, first published in the late 1950s: definitely worth reading. The latest Counter Information Services Report has just been published, and at £1.95, provides an excellent breakdown on *The City*. Verso has just published an extremely important and detailed account of early Soviet experience *Workers Control and Socialist Democracy* by Carmen Sirianni at £8.95. The most exhaustive study yet of the British state's anti-strike activities has been published by Routledge: *British governments and strike breaking since 1919* by K Jeffery and P Hennessy £14.95 hardback only. Neil Harding's 2 volume study of Lenin, for which he received the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize, is now available in a single paperback volume. At just £8.95 for over 700 pages, *Lenin's Political Thought* is definitely a bargain. Finally there is a new and timely history of the steel unions and steel industry, clearly written by a protagonist in the recent national strike: C Docherty *Steel and Steelworkers*. Heinemann £14.50.

\*\*\*\*\*

Booksellers Classifieds

To advertise your bookshop for only £2 per line, telephone 01-2514406.

• For a list of radical bookshops in Britain, send a s.a.e. to: **Federation of Radical Booksellers**, c/o Oakleaf Books, 109 Church St, Wolverton, Milton Keynes.

London

- **Economists Bookshop** Clare Market, Portugal St WC2. Tel (3-5pm weekdays) 01-405 5531. Specialising in the social sciences, including socialist and feminist studies. Magazines. Pamphlets. Second-hand department.
- **Collet's London Bookshop** 62 Charing Cross Rd., WC2 08B. For all books on Gay and Feminist politics, Ireland, Disarmament, Marxism, Social Sciences, Third World, Racism, Fascism, Aesthetics, Industrial Relations. (Tel 836-6306)
- **Collet's International Bookshop** 129 Charing Cross Rd., WC2 OEQ. . Hooks in Russian and in translation; general books, but specialising in Political sciences, Peace, Feminism, E. F. L. Foreign language,

Travel, Radical Book Bargains. Also Classical records, Posters and Badges. (Tel 734-0782/3)

- **Collet's Penguin Bookshop** 52 Charing Cross Rd., WC2 OBB. Large stocks of Penguins, Pelicans and Puffins. New and secondand. (Tel 836-2315)
- **Collet's Chinese Bookshop** 40 Great Russell St., WC1B 3PJ. Books, Works of an, Prints, Cards and Handicrafts from China. (Tel 580-7538)
- **Collet's Record Shop** 180 Shaftesbury Ave., WC2H 8JS. Specialists in Folk and Jazz music from many countries. Also books on Folk and Jazz. (Tel 240-3969)
- The Other.Bookshop 328 Upper St N1. Tel 01-226 0571. For all your radical, feminist, radical black and third world literature. Open Mon/Tues/Sat 10-6 Wed 12-7 Thurs/Fri 11-7.
- **Bookmarks** 265 Seven Sisters Rd N4. North London's leading socialist bookshop. Two floors of good books and pamphlets.
- **Hammersmith Books** Over 100,000 out-of-print titles. A world-wide mail order service since 1948. We buy books, too. Barnes High St, SW13. Tel 01-876 7254.

South East

- **Nick Spurrier**, 79 Whitstable Rd, Canterbury, Kent CT2 SEA. Tel 62764. Monthly lists of 2nd hand books on trade unions, Soviet Union, socialism, economic history. Books searched for.
- **The Odd Volume**, 53 Upper Gloucester Road, Brighton (27845). New & second-hand books on politics, history, feminism, third world, philosophy & literature. Open Mon-Sat 9.30-5.30. Regular lists issued of s-hand & out-of-print titles; latest sent on request.

Scotland

- **Clyde Books** 292 High St., Glasgow. Tel 041-552-4699. We are a progressive bookshop specialising in books for the Labour and Trade Union Movement.

\*\*\*\*\*

British capital was able to secure a hitherto unprecedented position in the world market. Britain truly was the workshop of the world. Inevitably, Britain was chased by rivals - most notably Germany and the United States. Britain was no longer the undisputed world hegemon. Still the most powerful capitalist state, but visibly suffering relative decline. Increasingly Britain experienced difficulties in accumulating capital. To overcome that and delay working class revolution the ruling classes turned to the restriction of competition and a greatly expanded overseas empire. As part of this the e Institute for Public Policy Research. Democracy in Britain. Essays in honour of James Cornford. Edited by Guy Lodge and Glenn Gottfried 2014.Â The contributors to this collection have been asked to set out elements of a new democratic reform agenda for Britain, picking up on newly emergent issues and concerns, such as the rise of political Englishness, the imbalance of power within the economy, and the mounting disaffection of citizens with the political class. Our hope is that these essays will inform the ambitions and strategies of a new generation of reformers, inspired by the spirit and legacy of James Cornford, in whose honour this collection is published. 2 IPPR | Democracy in Britain: Essays in honour of James Cornford. FOREWO