Conclusion: Miliband for a Sceptical Age?

Paul Wetherly, Clyde W. Barrow and Peter Burnham

Ralph Miliband made an enormous contribution to the revival and development of Marxist political thought in the second half of the last century, through a range of books and articles, from Parliamentary Socialism (1961) to the posthumously published Socialism for a Sceptical Age (1994b). These works stand as important statements and explorations of core concepts and theoretical claims drawn from classical Marxism, and as attempts to develop and apply Marxist analysis to understand and intervene in the shifting economic and political conditions of his time. But what of our time? Does Miliband’s work still help us to understand and intervene in the world of the 21st century?

This collection of essays is testament to the continuing relevance of Miliband’s work, at least in showing that Miliband’s ideas continue to merit discussion and debate. That is as it should be for a major thinker. For example, any discussion of the state debate within Marxism is likely to pay attention to The State in Capitalist Society and the Miliband-Poulantzas debate (e.g. see Hay, 2006). However, for Hay the interest in Miliband’s work is historical – it represents a stage in the development of Marxist state theory that has been superceded by subsequent theoretical developments, notably Jessop’s ‘strategic-relational’ approach. In his own contribution to this collection Jessop argues the need to move on from Miliband’s partial or one-sided analytical strategy which neglects the form of the capitalist type of state. There are scant references to Miliband in Jessop’s writings on state theory: the Miliband-Poulantzas debate gets a few mentions in State Theory (1990), and there are no references to Miliband in The Future of the Capitalist State (2002). In this collection Burnham also argues, though from a different standpoint, that Miliband’s state theory employs an analytical strategy that is wanting. In Burnham’s view Miliband is wrong to
emphasize the institutional differentiation of state and economic structure when, in fact, the state should be analysed as an aspect of the social relations of production.

Jessop and Burnham are not alone in this collection in offering sharp criticisms of particular aspects of Miliband’s work. Blackledge and Hoffman offer contrasting critiques based on the residues of Leninism in Miliband’s thinking. Both argue that Miliband’s conception of political strategy is wanting. For Blackledge this is because Miliband turned away from a Leninist revolutionary path, whereas for Hoffman it is precisely the residues of Leninism that are problematic. Blackledge urges a reconnection with and Hoffman a sharper break from Leninism. These contributions rehearse the argument between the claim that revolution (i.e. insurrection) is the only strategy that can find a path out of capitalism and the claim that what this path leads to is authoritarianism.

However other contributors to this collection emphasize the continuing relevance of a Milibandian perspective, rejecting the story told by Hay and Jessop according to which the chief merit of Miliband’s contribution to state theory in the past has been in allowing the debate to move on to the higher stage of development attained today. As Barrow shows, the view of the Milibandian perspective as a more primitive version of state theory relies on a simplistic and one-sided interpretation of Miliband as an ‘instrumentalist’ thinker. Barrow and Wetherly both aim to replace this ‘straw man’ with a more nuanced and sophisticated interpretation of the conception of the state as an instrument, as an element within Milibandian state theory. Both argue that, in its essentials, this theory has not been surpassed but remains relevant today, even if it needs to be updated with regard to the empirical and institutional details of contemporary states in capitalist society.

Miliband’s analysis of the state in capitalist society was an extension of his critique of Labourism and parliamentarism. The analysis of ‘the western system of power’ provided a more systematic theoretical framework for understanding the limits of social democracy and for setting out an alternative political strategy for socialist advance. Thus social democratic parties moved from the centre of analysis to becoming an element within a larger scale theoretical endeavour. Although the focus of Miliband’s work moved away from Labourism to the wider concern with state power and class power, Labour party politics remained a theme of his writing throughout and constitutes an important part of his legacy.

In this volume Burnham argues strongly for the continuing relevance of Miliband’s critique of parliamentary socialism. Indeed, while