Ralph Miliband and the New Left

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If Edward Thompson, Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and Perry Anderson are perhaps the first names associated with the British New Left, Ralph Miliband is also justifiably regarded as one of its pre-eminent figures. He became involved at an early stage in 1957, playing a particularly important role in bridging different elements in the so-called ‘first New Left’ (Kenny, 1995). He brought together the generations, introducing Isaac Deutscher, whom he had known for some years, to the younger people who established Universities and Left Review; he helped Raphael Samuel to build the New Left at LSE after he had moved from Oxford; and he was crucially important in internationalizing the movement through his friendships with such figures as C. Wright Mills in the USA, Leszek Kolakowski in Poland and Marcel Liebman in Belgium. He also stayed the course, remaining involved with various incarnations of the movements until his death in 1994 (Newman, 2002). Yet if there are good reasons for identifying Miliband with the British New Left, there are also some difficulties in so doing.

The first problem concerns the concept of the ‘New Left’ itself. This appears relatively clear with reference to the first period between 1957 and the early 1960s, but it became much more nebulous as this era became more distant. Secondly, Miliband himself was highly individual in his political and theoretical beliefs. Certainly, he was associated with each phase in the development of the New Left, but this did not mean that he ever abandoned a critical detachment from it. However, these problems also provide the rationale and purpose for this article, for it attempts to clarify some of the difficulties in defining the New Left by exploring aspects of Miliband’s ideas in the context of some of the major phases in its history. It does this by considering three periods: that of the ‘first new left’; that of the 1960s, with the era of 1968 as the pivotal ‘moment’; and the difficult years in the 1980s.
Miliband and the first New Left

It is generally agreed that the ‘first New Left’ was created in the aftermath of the crisis of Communism in 1956, following Krushchev’s ‘secret speech’ and the invasion of Hungary, and was characterized by its rejection of Soviet Communism on the one hand and mainstream Social Democracy on the other (Kenny, 1995; Chun, 1993). Furthermore, the movement was given some organizational anchorage, with the establishment of the two journals, Universities and Left Review and New Reasoner, which merged to form New Left Review (NLR) in 1960. But even in this first phase, the New Left eluded clear definition. It was evidently opposed to the two dominant forces on the Left and in favour of new definitions of socialism, which, for example, involved heterodox interpretations of Marxism, which had been repressed since the Bolshevik revolution. Yet although the early New Left supported the most significant movement of the era – the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – this was not specifically socialist, let alone Marxist. Nor was there any clear strategic conception that unified the movement in these years. This means that attempts to encapsulate it inevitably focus on a constellation of values, ideas and activities, including a new culture or mood, rather than a distinct theory, doctrine or organization.

For Miliband, the creation of the British New Left in 1956–57 was an invigorating and wholly positive experience. He eagerly associated himself with it, and by 1958 he had contributed to both Universities and Left Review and the New Reasoner. Furthermore in December 1958 he became the only person who had never been in the Communist Party to join the editorial board of the New Reasoner. In order to understand the nature of Miliband’s role in, and attitude towards, the New Left, it is necessary to appreciate the reasons for his enthusiasm. A brief summary of his background is a helpful starting point.

He had arrived in Britain in 1940 as a 16-year-old Jewish refugee from Belgium, which was then being overrun by the Nazis. At that stage his only political involvement had been with Hashomer Hazair, the left-wing Zionist movement, but he had already adopted a broadly Marxist framework of analysis. Subsequently, he had been quite close to the Communist Party, without ever joining it, but after the War he became increasingly alienated from Communism for a variety of reasons, including Stalinist dogma over all forms of art and science, the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe, and the denunciation of Tito. He had joined the Labour Party in the early 1950s, playing a role in the Bevanite movement, and he had spoken as a delegate for the Hampstead Consti-