



**CLASS POWER AND STATE POWER**  
**Ralph Miliband**  
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This is a collection of some of Miliband's best essays spread over nearly 20 years. It covers a wide range, from the renowned exchange with Poulantzas on the nature of the capitalist state, to an assessment of Allende's Chile, to a critique of what has emerged as the orthodoxy on Labour's 1983 defeat. The volume follows closely on the heels of Miliband's *Capitalist Democracy in Britain* (itself a re-working of his influential *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969)), and so seems to complement those more sustained works.

However, compilations of this kind are seldom satisfactory. True, in this case there is an overall theme and three thematic subsections to give it shape (though the last section on Britain is, absurdly, 30 pages long — as against 150 for the other two). Even so, there are changes of tone and gear across several distinct topics and 300 pages, and this makes the book feel long and somewhat uneven. General themes always seem to promise more than scattered reviews and occasional talks can deliver when assembled in one place.

Miliband's main concern over the years has been the connection between class structure and the state in capitalist society. Poulantzas, in the heyday of structuralist Marxism, accused him of 'empiricism' (lack of proper theory), because Miliband tried to show the personal and class ties between individuals within the separate branches of the Establishment. At the

time, Poulantzas seemed to many to have a point: shouldn't Marxists be more concerned with a scientific theory of objective political structures than with identifying those persons who happened to occupy them? Miliband's responses, and his valid criticisms of 'structuralist abstractionism' are reprinted here. Re-reading them today, his balanced emphasis on theory-plus-research appears not only to have been unfairly caricatured then, but stands as a manifestly correct Marxist method.

Miliband's standpoint on class and the state has always seemed correspondingly reasonable. He has sought to avoid *reducing* institutions and political regimes to their class basis alone; yet has insisted that state elites do in the end serve to uphold the capitalist system. He pointed out (in 1965) that Marx himself knew how the state could become independent of the contending class forces (as in 'Bonapartism'), though Miliband allows that this has been a 'secondary' view in Marx in the Marxist tradition, the primary one being that the state is a instrument wielded by the ruling class against both the interest of labour and popular democratic agitation.

To use a favourite Milibandish expression, the state apparatuses are not *simply* vehicles for capitalist interests, but that doesn't mean that they are not *also* that. State power, Miliband says, is definitely *not* the same thing as the power of a specific class, but against 'ex-' and 'neo-Marxists' he wants to insist that the state does not have interests separate from class-based social forces.

As a general perspective, this version of the 'relative autonomy of the state' view is persuasive. However, whilst remaining at that level, there must be a suspicion that Marxists want it both ways. Miliband in particular is prone to this charge. He has usually operated with rather imprecise definitions of both class and state (dominant class, ruling class, power elite, Establishment, political system and so on). This looseness is not a problem — in fact it is a virtue — from the point of view of the 'secondary' Marxist position I mentioned. But Miliband is also capable of some strikingly 'functionalist' formulations to the effect that whatever they might say, the gamut of ruling class fractions and state offices have as their general purpose the preservation of capitalist relations. There is some discrepancy between these two sides of the 'relative autonomy' position.

In one essay in this book, Miliband puts forward the idea that the relationship

between class and state is one of 'partnership'. As such, it can be harmonious or tense, and indeed can be said to characterise socialist regimes as well as capitalist ones. This suggestive notion needs to be given a substantive rather than just a theoretical treatment. The trouble with Miliband's last book, I thought, was that it hovered between another recapitulation of general and sometimes discrepant statements, and a detailed analysis of the British political formation. In that sense it was a missed opportunity, and this book is no substitute really.

Politically, Miliband's long-standing independent Marxist socialism is well illustrated here. Again, his typical strengths are evident, whether in his sympathetic but severely critical analysis of pre-coup Chile, or in his (surely correct) observation that the British Labour Party has never been socialist, or even held the pragmatic allegiance of the working class as a whole. His conclusion from the latter point is that the seriousness of the current working class 'desertion' from Labour has been, Hobsbawm-wise, exaggerated, and that the historic task of building a genuinely educative and independent socialist party in this country remains the only key to a distant future.

Miliband's middle way between what he terms revolutionary 'catastrophism' and reformist 'constitutionalism' is thus a principled one, and worthy of respect. There are many 'non-aligned' socialists who share his concerns, and it is certainly wrong to think that all active and realistic socialists have to be in the Party (whichever Party that may be thought to be). Nevertheless, the logic of Miliband's stance runs the risk of being either too Utopian or too pessimistic to offer much scope for effective interventions in current British political conditions. Similarly, whilst his independent Marxism is helpfully sensitive to the dangers of both ultra-leftism *and* reformism, he also seems to be caught uncertainly between the two. Perhaps a more productive approach is to question the moralism inherent in that increasingly abstract polarisation, rather than to continue to seek out an ideal — perhaps illusory — compromise. Ralph Miliband would possibly not disagree with that sentiment, but it is not clear to me that his considerable contribution to left thinking amounts to a theoretical or political position which is convincing enough in its own right to point the way forward.

**Gregor McLennan**