

CAPITALIST DEMOCRACY IN BRITAIN

Ralph Miliband

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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.

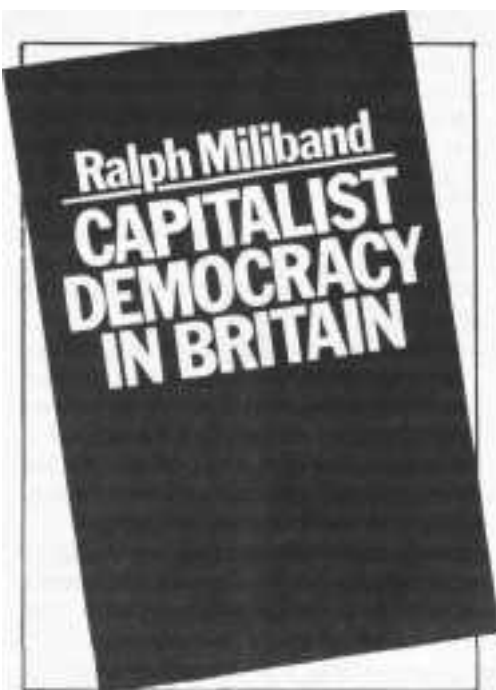
In pursuing this argument Miliband mobilises a broad range of relevant illustrative material culled from memoirs, official records, newspapers, and academic studies. In this respect the book should have the same cathartic effect as his earlier studies of parliamentary socialism and the state in western 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-



ii IPPR | Democracy in Britain: Essays in honour of James Cornford. CONTENTS. Preface James Cornford, 1935–2011.Â Indeed these reforms coincided with a rise in political disengagement. British democracy – in common with many other advanced democracies – is characterised by some alarming features. Political participation has not simply declined but become dramatically more unequal, 01: Lodge and Gottfried. The capitalist system is the most productive mode of production in the history of humankind. In the space of a few centuries the world has been transformed beyond all recognition. Average life expectancies have more than doubled. Technological developments occur at a rate that would have been previously unimaginable.