

Ralph Miliband (1924-1994)

Ralph (named Adolphe at birth) Miliband was born in Brussels on 7th January 1924 to Polish Jewish parents who had left Poland to seek a better life in Belgium. Ralph's father, Samuel, was a craft leather worker who, with his wife Renee and family, settled in the working class community of Saint-Gilles. The Milibands were instinctively socialist, non-religious but traditional Jews, whose ethnic identity set them apart from Belgium's working class and trade union movements of the time.

The German invasion of the Low countries on 10th May 1940 meant that Belgium would also be occupied and on 16th May Ralph and his father fled to England on the last British boat to leave occupied Belgium, while Ralph's mother and younger sister stayed behind and hid with a farming family in a small village for the duration of the war.

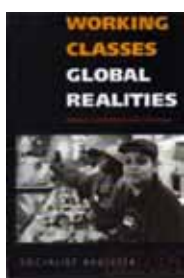
Settling in London as refugees, the young Miliband changed his name from Adolphe to Ralph and both he and his father found temporary work as furniture removers emptying bombed houses. The huge class inequalities of English society and the miserable conditions of people living in the East End reinforced Miliband's instinctive commitment to socialism. Very soon after his arrival in the UK, he made a point of visiting Marx's grave in Highgate cemetery where he swore a silent oath to the workers' cause. In the autumn of his first year in England, aged 16, he enrolled at Acton Technical College on a course sponsored by the International Commission for Refugees in Great Britain. Although he initially struggled to master English, Miliband improved rapidly by studying English, History and Politics, and spending many hours in the Chiswick Public Library where he came across the works of Harold Laski. In 1941 he matriculated and was admitted to the London School of Economics (LSE), which was temporarily evacuated to its wartime site in Cambridge.

Impressed by Miliband's enthusiasm and eagerness, Laski took the young intellectual under his wing, although the two men often disagreed over politics, with Miliband adopting more left wing views. Politically active on campus, Miliband was elected Vice President of the LSE Students' Union in 1943 but his university career was temporarily halted when he joined the Navy to serve as a German speaking radio intelligence officer on the Mediterranean front. Demobilised from the Navy in 1946, Miliband returned to the LSE where he obtained a first class degree the following year. In 1947, he was awarded a Leverhulme research studentship to work full-time under Laski's supervision on his PhD thesis, 'Popular Thought in the French Revolution', which explored the political ideas of the menu people (the 'common people'). As his research proceeded at a slower pace than he anticipated, Laski arranged some summer teaching for him at Roosevelt College (now Roosevelt University) Chicago, and in June 1949 helped his young protégé to obtain an Assistant Lectureship in Political Science at the LSE.

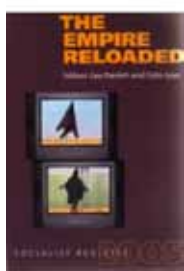
Laski's death in 1950 at the early age of 56 was a tremendous blow to Miliband. The LSE Professor had not only influenced his political and intellectual development but also tried to intervene several times to help Ralph's personal situation as an immigrant who found it difficult to reunite his family in England after the war, which they finally accomplished in 1953. It was also Laski, according to Susan Watkins, who steered Ralph clear of joining any Communist grouping and influenced his decision to join the Labour Party in 1951 to work

with left-wing Bevanites, including Michael Foot, Jo Richardson, Ian Mikardo, Russell Kerr and Konni Zilliacus.¹

Despite a troubled relationship with an unsympathetic administration over the LSE's treatment of radical students and staff during the heady days of the student movement in the late 1960s, Miliband was to remain there until 1972 at which point he took up an appointment as Professor of Politics the University of Leeds. By that time he had become one of the leading Marxist thinkers in Britain and one of the principal figures associated with the British New Left which began to emerge after 1956 with the expulsion of dissident members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Among others, Edward Thompson and John Saville, became prominent through their critique in the *Reasoner* of the Soviet Union's suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and of the suppression of free debate inside the CPGB.



In 1958, Miliband joined the group by contributing essays on socialist strategy for the *New Reasoner* and the *Universities and Left Review* (ULR) edited by Stuart Hall and Raphael Samuel. He soon joined the editorial board of the *New Reasoner* and, when it merged with ULR in 1959, the *New Left Review* (NLR) although Miliband opposed the merger on political and intellectual grounds. The large NLR Board disbanded in 1963 and was replaced by a smaller younger team, which inspired two of the ex-members, Miliband and Saville, to set up the *Socialist Register* – an annual publication, which they coedited until 1990 when Saville withdrew to be succeeded by Leo Panitch. The *Socialist Register* remains an influential annual publication on the left to this day which will, at a future date, make available back issues of the *Socialist Register* on the internet.



1961 was a key year in the life of Ralph Miliband's life, during which he published his first book, *Parliamentary Socialism; A Study in the Politics of Labour*, which Leo Panitch called "one of the seminal texts of the British New Left". By means of a detailed historical analysis, Miliband demonstrated how the ideology and process of the party's politics since 1900 were dominated by their dogmatic attachment to the dominant parliamentary model that, in Leo Panitch's words, had "insulated the leadership from the mass party and rendered them both unwilling and unable to educate and mobilise for radical purposes their own class and activist base".² In short, Labour's political commitment to socialism and human emancipation was directly contradicted by its performance in opposition or in office. Miliband's growing scepticism about Labour's primary commitment to a parliamentary road to socialism as opposed to invoking extra-parliamentary action grew throughout the 1960s. He played an active role in the campaign against the Vietnam War and attacked Wilson's defence of American foreign policy as the 'most shameful' moment of Labour Party history.

This realisation of the shortcomings of the Labour Party combined with a parallel rejection of Communist or Trotskyist alternatives led Miliband to renew his commitment to accessible socialist education as one of the most important elements in reenergising an alternative socialist politics in opposition to capitalism. Miliband's best known and important

¹ Watkins, Susan (2003), 'A socialist Cassandra', *New Left Review* 19, pp. 152-60

² Panitch, Leo (1994), 'Ralph Miliband: Socialist Intellectual, 1924-94', *Socialist Register*

contribution was *The State in Capitalist Society* published in 1969. Inspired and dedicated to his friend C. Wright Mills and his study of US power in *The Power Elite*, Miliband produced a critical sociological analysis of how the state functioned in Western democracies by questioning the prevailing pluralist notion of the state as a neutral arbiter between competing interest groups. Miliband's thesis did not follow the classic Marxist model that the state in capitalist society was a capitalist state. He mapped out instead by means of an empirical study a new formula for the state, its power, bureaucracy, judiciary and military and provided an analysis of how state policy was defined by the dominant economic class through direct and indirect relations between business and the apparatus of the state. He avoided the traditional structural determinism that had dominated Marxist state theory and instead developed further the more controversial concept of the state's 'relative autonomy'.

His intervention led to the now famous Miliband-Poulantzas debate, sparked by Nicos Poulantzas' 1969 critical review of the book, in which he criticised Miliband's over-emphasis on the determining role of individual members of the ruling class instead of seeing them as fairly passive deliverers of decisions already locked-in by the system. The debate would continue throughout the 1970s and early 1980s and gradually bring in more theorists³ fuelled further by Miliband's publications, *Marxism and Politics* (1977), *Capitalist Democracy in Britain* (1982) and *Class Power and State Power* (1983)

Miliband's experiences at the LSE of the expulsion of staff and students during and after May '68 directly contributed to his founding in 1970, with John Griffith, the Council for Academic Freedom and Democracy (CAFD). In 1972 Miliband took up the chair of politics at the University of Leeds where he taught until 1978. It was there that Miliband began his role as director of the Lipman Trust in 1974, having been introduced to Michael Lipman by Ian Mikardo MP.

In 1978 Miliband resigned from Leeds and became a roving academic teaching part-time in North America, at Brandeis University, Boston, York University, Toronto and finally as Distinguished Visiting Professor at the City University Graduate Centre from 1987 to 1992. During the 1980s, Miliband became increasingly involved in efforts to build and empower the independent left in Britain. In 1981 he helped found and run the Socialist Society with old allies from *New Left Review* that included Robin Blackburn, Tariq Ali, Michele Barrett, Michael Rustin and Hilary Wainwright. This was a venture which attempted to straddle the left of the Labour Party and the various strands of socialist movements outside it, without seeking to set up an alternative left Labour Party.

Many famous socialists and activists in the New Left lent their support to this venture in addition to the original grouping, including Raymond Williams, Tony Benn and Perry Anderson, finally coming together in the Socialist Movement that emerged from the Chesterfield Socialist Conferences. Subsequently, in 1994, the green-left monthly magazine *Red Pepper* became the independent left's voice, in succession to previous magazine publications such as *Catalyst*. Miliband's participation in these ventures was characteristic of his commitment to developing socialist education and thought outside the narrow confines of academia.

³ See Aronowitz, Stanley & Bratsis, Peter (eds) (2002), *Paradigm Lost: State Theory Reconsidered*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Ralph Miliband died on May 21 1994 aged 70. He had been ill for some years and had undergone debilitating surgery but by sheer force of will he was able to complete his last book, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, an affirmation of his belief in the desirability and hope of a fairer socialist political order. To commemorate his contribution to the *Socialist Register* the 35th issue of the annual was dedicated to Miliband and entitled 'Why not Capitalism' – a title he had originally intended for *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*. It is widely held within socialist and academic circles that Ralph Miliband was an inspired teacher. Leo Panitch, student at the LSE until 1972 and later co-editor of the *Socialist Register* from 1985, wrote the following eulogy to his mentor in a posthumous tribute:

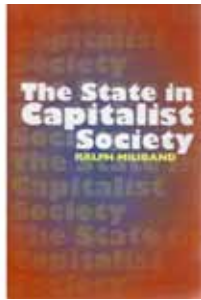
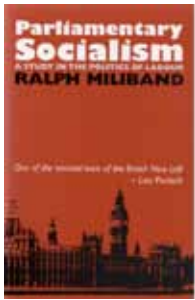
It was, I think, his determination to inspire students with a sense that their work really mattered politically that made him so effective a teacher. He convinced us that it was not enough to know how to criticise conventional political science and sociology, but that it was a matter of some political urgency to go beyond vanguardist postures and slogans and engage ourselves in constructing a vibrant, unobstructed and accessible Marxist political science...Those of us who went on to do PhD work with him were never just writing a thesis to get a degree and a teaching position: we were writing a book, which, he constantly impressed upon us had its part to play in furthering the possibility of progressive social change...The reason he was so popular was only partly due to the fact that the LSE attracted so many radical students that the very few radical faculty on staff inevitably carried a heavy burden. It was also due to Ralph's great warmth and humour, his openness and generosity. Nor was it just or even mainly, the most radical students who studied with him. Because he had no time for dogmatism, he in fact turned many of the militants off, while attracting into the socialist intellectual community many students who had come from quite other directions.⁴

It is a mark of the high esteem in which he was held that in 1996 The Ralph Miliband Programme was created at the LSE through a generous anonymous benefaction from a former PhD student who had been inspired by Miliband's contribution. The programme mixes a public lecture series with the appointment of visiting teaching fellows and the award every three years of a Miliband Scholarship in Political Sociology to a promising current or new postgraduate student working in the field in the departments of Sociology, Government or International Relations.

⁴ Panitch, Leo (1994) 'Ralph Miliband, Socialist Intellectual, 1924-1994', *Socialist Register* 1995

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