

NEWS

Ralph Miliband, 1924 - 1994

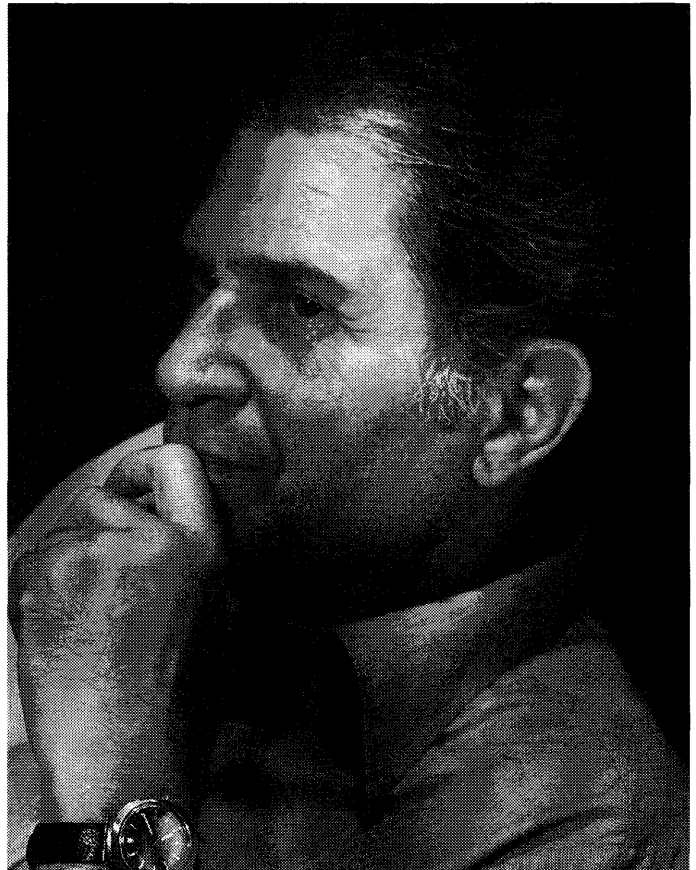
The Common Sense of Socialism

For anyone studying or teaching politics in the late 1960s and 1970s, the publication of Ralph Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society* in 1969 was a watershed. The 'pluralist' theories which had dominated the discipline, especially in North America, somehow never quite recovered from this exposure of the emperor's fatuous nakedness; and in the debates that ensued, 'the state', with everything it implies about the concentration of social power, re-emerged from behind the mystifications of 'the political system' and 'political behaviour' to become a, if not the, central theme of political studies.

On the left in particular, the 'Miliband-Poulantzas debate' became a major preoccupation. It is still easy to remember the intellectual excitement generated by a whole new mode of Marxist discourse which had rescued the state and politics from the epiphenomenal, and to recall the force of Miliband's personality and conviction (not to speak of his humour) as he spoke, in public or private. But it is harder to recapture just what specific issues were at stake in that debate. Important divergences there certainly were between the main protagonists – not only concerning matters of theory but about the political practices of Stalinism, Maoism, Eurocommunism, and so on; yet in historical perspective, their differences seem incommensurate with the intensity of the debate, or at least the intensity with which post-graduate students then followed it. The political issues that preoccupied the left 'before the fall' seem very distant, and the differences between Miliband and Poulantzas, both in their various ways looking for a ground for socialism neither Stalinist nor social-democratic, may seem less significant in the face of the gulf that now divides Marxism from a whole range of post- and anti-Marxist trends on the left. Nonetheless, even now one difference still stands out, and that is the difference in intellectual style.

To say this is not at all to trivialise the issues. I now think that the distinctiveness of Ralph Miliband's intellectual style has always been essential to his substance and to the qualities that have continued to be such a vital resource for the socialist left, making his death such a serious blow. That style represented a *project*. It testified to a specific conception of the task confronting socialist intellectuals. And it may be no exaggeration to say that this style and this project distinguish Miliband from all other major socialist intellectuals of his generation.

'The ultimate purpose of counter-hegemonic struggles,' Miliband wrote in 1990, 'is to make socialism "the common sense of the epoch".' This involves two things: 'a radical critique of the prevailing social order', and 'an affirmation that an entirely different social order ... is not only desirable ... but possible'. This may seem, on the face of it, no different from what any



socialist intellectual would claim, among other things, to be doing. Yet it would be very difficult to characterise, say, Althusser or Poulantzas (or today's post-Marxists and post-modernists) as speaking for the 'common sense' of socialism. It was certainly not their aim to lay out an intelligible and persuasive argument for socialism which takes little for granted. The issue here is not simply their scholastic opacity – though the contrast with Miliband's translucent clarity is striking enough. The point is also that, even when they were talking about the same things, they clearly saw the substance of their project very differently from Miliband. Whether their object was to reconstruct the epistemological foundations of Marxism or to translate the strategic debates of European Communism into theoretical terms, it was certainly not to argue the case for socialism, and even less to make it 'common sense', in any meaning of that phrase.

In fact, it is hard to think of anyone else who has taken on this task – a task perhaps less conducive to theoretical flourishes than are the intellectual enterprises of other social thinkers on the left, but nonetheless in many ways more difficult – with anything like

Phenomenology and Politics

British Society for Phenomenology Oxford, 15-17 April 1994

Miliband's consistency, comprehensiveness and breadth, not to mention his commitment and lucidity. Marxist historians like E. P. Thompson have contributed greatly to the denaturalisation of capitalism, and to the affirmation of other human possibilities, by tracing its history back to its contested origins, to the confrontation of capitalist principles with other, resistant practices and values. And some Marxist philosophers have laid a foundation for a socialist epistemology and ethics. But Miliband stands virtually alone in his systematic effort to map the political terrain of capitalism, to chart a course for socialist struggle within it, and to delineate the anatomy of class and state power in capitalist society – the barriers which it erects against a more humane and democratic social order as well as the resources and agencies available to overcome them.

This project was carried out in a whole series of books, after *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961): not only *The State in Capitalist Society*, but also *Marxism and Politics* (1977), *Capitalist Democracy in Britain* (1982), *Class Power and State Power* (1985), *Divided Societies* (1989), *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* (forthcoming), and many articles, as well as in his co-editorship of the *Socialist Register*. While reading his measured yet deeply engaged critique of capitalism and his sober yet ultimately optimistic assessment of the possibilities of socialism, it is hard to see how any thinking, reasonable and realistic person with a modicum of human decency could fail to be a socialist. Who else writing today – when even the critique of capitalism is out of fashion – can claim to have the same effect?

Miliband clearly believed, and even more so in recent years, that socialism is an objective that cannot be achieved in a single life-time. It should perhaps be seen, he wrote in his last book, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* (the proofs of which he lived to see but not to correct), as a striving toward a goal rather than the goal itself. But against the background of recent history and mass defections from the socialist project, what is remarkable about this testament is not its hint of pessimism but its steady conviction that the goal is worth striving for and is finally attainable.

The steadiness of Miliband's commitment owed much to the unflinching clarity of his intellectual vision and the independence of his political judgment, which saved him from both mindless enthusiasm and abject despair, from both blind attachment to a party and a loss of faith in socialism with declining party fortunes, from both the certainties and the inevitable disappointments of socialist determinism. Welcoming every sign of advance toward democracy in the Communist world, he nevertheless showed a prescient scepticism about the direction of reform. Unambiguously committed to a truly democratic socialism, he freely conceded the inadequacies of traditional socialism in confronting the questions of gender, race and nation and accepted the lessons of the 'new social movements'; but he never lost sight of *capitalism* as an over-arching totality or of class as its constitutive principle.

The last lines of Ralph Miliband's last book sum up his convictions and his project: 'In all countries, there are people, in numbers large or small, who are moved by the vision of a new social order in which democracy, egalitarianism and cooperation – the essential values of socialism – would be the prevailing principles of social organisation. It is in the growth in their numbers and in the success of their struggles that lies the best hope for humankind.'

Ellen Meiksins Wood

Politics was on the agenda in more ways than one at this conference. Whether the theme of the gathering – 'Phenomenology and Politics' – was ever really confronted, however, remains an open question. In fact much remained an open question after the proceedings had closed and the crowd dispersed, not least the question of what occurred at the AGM on the Saturday, during which the long-standing President of the convening Society, Alfons Grieder, was deposed and a new President elected in the form of Simon Critchley from Essex University. Shameless eavesdropping revealed that the transition may not have been an easy one; the event was portrayed as comparable to the deposition of the *ancien régime* – a veritable revolution, so it was described. If in no other sense, then, the theme of the conference was given substance in this episode.

On the whole the meeting was a success – efficiently organised in beautiful surroundings with stimulating and lively discussion throughout. Basil O'Neill's opening discussion of the Oedipus myth as a vehicle for conceiving a genuine encounter with the Other was by far the most thought-provoking and valuable of the presentations. In adopting Irigaray's criticism of Levinas for offering an ethics of abstract humanity, however, O'Neill introduced the spectre of abstraction into the proceedings that haunted the remaining contributions. These ranged from John Llewelyn's paper entitled 'Levinas' List' (a sometimes disturbing consideration of the Holocaust, employing that fashionable assortment of languages characteristic of the growing trend for turning philosophical communications into Babel) through discussions of Hegel, Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort and Heidegger, to culminate in Richard Beardsworth's fearlessly radical attempt to demonstrate the relevance of deconstruction to the 'contemporary world'.

The tone of Beardsworth's paper was epitomised in such audacious declarations as 'All philosophy is already political'. If the statement is no doubt true, however, nevertheless you might be hard pressed to convince a disbeliever of that on the strength of this gathering, for, despite the question of concrete applicability being raised more than once from the floor, the papers and discussion remained at a high level of abstraction. This returns us once again to the question of whether phenomenology ever did encounter politics in any real sense over the weekend event, and to the above mentioned *coup*, because there is perhaps something to be learned about the phenomenology of politics from the fact that, while the conference speakers were offering us quality *intellectual* engagement, the executive committee of the BSP were truly getting back to the things themselves as the dirty business of *Realpolitik* went on, as always, behind the scenes. The reappearance of this age-old dichotomy gives us something to think. Moreover, if it becomes a regular feature of BSP conferences that themes are actualized in this way, then next year's gathering should be an event to watch out for. It will be held at the same venue between 31 March and 2 April 1995, on the theme of 'Philosophy and Psychoanalysis'.

Jane Chamberlain

Sighs of the Times

Foucault Conference, London, 25 June 1994

A decade to the day after Michel Foucault's death, 'Signs of the Times' organised an anniversary conference. Conferences are normally dull affairs, but a conference on Foucault promised to be more spunky than most. The plenary session, 'Locating Foucault', consisted of papers by François Ewald, James Miller, Colin Gordon and Kate Soper followed supposedly by questions. Boldly, but somewhat injudiciously, the chair stated that the success of the conference was to be measured not by the attendance but by the quality of the discussion.

Ewald has not only written on Foucault, but knew him well and worked with him closely. One can only say that it is a shame that none of the style, wit or insight of the master has rubbed off on the pupil. Ewald's French presentation was simultaneously interpreted, sadly so perfectly that it was every bit as uninspiring in English as in the original. Miller, a biographer of Foucault, addressed the problem of the philosophical life. He claimed that this area had been neglected by philosophers who were preoccupied by formal logic. This view is nothing if not controversial. Most philosophers would contend that, whilst the question of the philosophical life has been kicking around for over two millennia, philosophy had only a brief love affair with ideal languages in the early twentieth century.

Colin Gordon raised the issue of the demise of politics by posing the question 'Who are we?' – answer, one-time 1968 Marxists. Then Gordon outdid Foucault and Adorno by claiming that 'the Enlightenment project was a continuation of militarisation by other means', not so much a provocation as an untrue exaggeration. Still, Gordon captured the mood of the moment when, echoing Foucault, he declared that 'you have no right to despise the present'. What this meant effectively was that we (ex-Marxists) no longer reserve the right to despise the institutions of neo-liberalism or social-democracy; on the contrary, after Foucault, we should reappraise them.

Last, and regrettably least, Kate Soper spoke on the tensions between Foucault and feminism. Whilst acknowledging Foucault's importance for feminist theory, she introduced a welcome note of dissent, criticising Foucault on four counts: for his androcentrism, his anti-progressivism, his radical anti-essentialism, and his behaviourist ethics. Sadly she had to squeeze her presentation into the remaining fifteen minutes, a feat achieved only by means of a high-velocity delivery more reminiscent of a rap-artist than a rhetor. There was no discussion.

There were a few dissonant notes after the break, when the plenum dispersed into parallel sessions. Jean Grimshaw and Lois McNay offered feminist critiques of Foucault, drawing some hostile but intelligent responses from the floor. Wolfgang Fritz Haug went so far as to pronounce that 'for Foucauldians Foucault is useless' and argued that the microanalysis of institutions must be welded to a Marxist analysis of capital. Curiously nobody

disagreed, though it is hard to see how anyone who subscribed to the earlier repudiation of Marxism could not have. It is amazing the extent of *de facto* agreement which can be reached between well-meaning soul-prisons, all of whom champion difference, inhabit different conceptual loci, disavow universalism and reject the consensus theory of truth. The consensus (by which of course I mean that loose alliance between multiple and divergent perspectives) consisted of four ideas.

1. *Junk the past.* Get rid of the myth of emancipatory progress and ditch moral-juridical universalism. In one discussion Stuart Hall summed up the general mood with the assertion that 'universalism always leads to exclusion and oppression'.

2. *Herald the future.* The aim of 'Signs of the Times' is to 'redraw the political map', to chart a 'new terrain', to boldly find 'new forms' of organisation and participation. We get the point but what are they? Empty eschatological gestures are merely signs of the times; they are not the new politics. Mark Perryman goes as far as to call for 'the creation of an entirely new language and space where accommodation and action can easily develop'. The trouble is that languages, theoretical frameworks, political organisations and ethical forms of life do not emerge entirely new and fully formed like Athena from the brows of Zeus. This is why we have no right to despise the present, nor the past either for that matter. On the contrary we have an obligation to understand them.

3. *Stop knocking liberalism.* When the post-modern fog lifts this 'new terrain' is all too familiar: namely, the institutions of neo-liberalism. The politics of difference always enjoyed an elective affinity with liberal individualism, a relation which must be acknowledged if it is not to avenge itself in the return of libertarianism. But won't this belated espousal of neo-liberalism seem just arbitrary and, dare one say, ethnocentric, if one simultaneously disavows universalism as the basis for political legitimacy.

4. *Do it yourself; or rather, do as Foucault did.* Don't recite what he said. That philosophy should not so much reflect on Foucault's work, as pick up his tools and use them, was a motif common to John Rajchmann and Nicholas Rose. Rose proclaimed that, whilst microanalysis was innovative, risky and altogether worthy, philosophical comparisons between, say, Foucault and Habermas, were boring and predictable. This was either a slight or an embarrassing gaffe, since his offering was followed by Professor Haug's reflections on Foucault and Marx. Not that Rose did any microanalysis.

The conference itself was a prime candidate for analysis: too many speakers, with too little time allocated to each and inevitably too few questions afterwards - a recipe guaranteed to kill. Perhaps along with the new ethics, new politics, new languages and new theoretical landscapes, we need new conferences too.

Gordon Finlayson

In response to enquiries about his article 'Philosophy and the Information Superhighway' in *Radical Philosophy* 67 (p. 63), Sean Sayers has a number of documents giving further details of how to access the electronic lists and other facilities described in it. If you would like copies by e-mail, please send him a message to: sss@ukc.ac.uk.