

PARLIAMENTARY SOCIALISM REVISITED

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The years which followed the end of the second world war were notably deficient in critical socialist writing. The radicalism of the war years, which had produced the massive swing to the Labour Party in the general election of July 1945, weakened steadily after about 1948, and this for several reasons. One was the revival of the Conservative Party and their success in exploiting the middle class dislike of austerity produced by rationing and the continuation of wartime controls; another was the failure of the Labour government to develop further its own radical programme; and a third was the marked complacency which was beginning to be exhibited, notably by the intellectuals of the Fabian Society, about what had been achieved in terms of social change. The background was the rapidly worsening international situation and the hardening of attitudes between the western powers and the Soviet Union. Stalinism inside Russia was exhibiting the intellectual stupidities of Lysenko and Zhdanov, and outside its national boundaries, the brutalities and terror of the regimes on its western borders were provoking vigorous anti-Soviet reactions. The complexities of the Cold War, which involve a recognition of the major responsibilities of Britain and the United States for much of the deterioration of international relations, were greatly simplified and were to be subsumed beneath a widespread anti-communism and anti-Sovietism that led to the hysteria of **McCarthyism** in the United States and a pervasive Cold War mentality in western Europe: much colder in countries like Britain than is commonly appreciated.

The Conservative Party came back to power in Britain in the latter months of 1951 although the Labour Party polled its highest ever total of votes. For the rest of the decade the Labour Party was faction ridden, and by 1959 it had lost three general elections in succession: 'the fifties' **Ralph Miliband** wrote in the concluding pages of *Parliamentary Socialism* 'have often appeared to lack the political instrumentalities of radical change. And to this impression, a consolidating Labour Party, revisionist in practice if not in theory, has greatly contributed. If politics in the fifties have seemed

a decreasingly meaningful activity, void of substance, heedless of principle, and rich in election auctioneering, the responsibility is not only that of the hidden or overt persuaders: it is also, and to a major degree that of Labour's leaders'.

Parliamentary Socialism was the first major critical analysis of the Labour Party in Britain since the end of the war in 1945, and its intellectual impact was considerable. Miliband's opening words justified the title of his book. In a comment that has been widely quoted he wrote:

Of political parties claiming socialism to be their aim, the Labour Party has always been one of the most dogmatic – not about socialism, but about the parliamentary system. Empirical and flexible about all else, its leaders have always made devotion to that system their fixed point of reference and the conditioning factor of their political behaviour. This is not simply to say that the Labour Party has never been a party of revolution: such parties have normally been quite willing to use the opportunities the parliamentary system offered as one means of furthering their aims. It is rather that the leaders of the Labour Party have always rejected any kind of political action (such as industrial action for political purposes) which fell, or which appeared to them to fall, outside the framework and conventions of the parliamentary system. The Labour Party has not only been a parliamentary party; it has been a party deeply imbued by parliamentarism. And in this respect, there is no distinction to be made between Labour's political and its industrial leaders. Both have been equally determined that the Labour Party should not stray from the **narrow** path of parliamentary politics.

It was the incisive analysis of the history of the Labour Party since the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in **February** 1900 that caught the imagination of the younger age groups within the Labour movement. Most had read nothing comparable. Earlier generations had available accounts such as Egon Wertheimer's *Portrait of the Labour Party* first published in German in May 1929 with an English translation in the following month – a somewhat neglected text, although Wertheimer had only the 1924 Labour government on which to rest any serious observations about Labour in power. In 1937 Allen Hutt published for the Left Book Club the nearest equivalent to Miliband's analysis in *The Post-War History of the British Working Class* although Hutt omitted any appraisal of the serious mistakes the Communist Party had made at certain times: notably the 1929–1931 Class Against Class period of malignant sectarianism. Hutt was especially critical of the pusillanimity of the Labour leadership and their accommodation to capitalist society. There was also much to be learned from the biographies of prominent figures, both of the Right and the Left: of the former *From Workman's Cottage to Windsor Castle* (1936) – a revealing title – and the latter Fenner Brockway's *Inside the Left* (1942) with its illuminating examples of the Labourist traditions within the years of the 1929–31 Labour government. But no one had unravelled in the way that **Miliband** did the strands of liberalism and reformism that came together to provide the leading ideas of the British Labour Party.

There are some general points that need to be made arising out of

Miliband's analysis over the decades he covered. One, which in the light of the subsequent history of the Labour Party after 1961, needs further emphasis, is foreign affairs and Labour's policies. Before 1939, although there were examples of the acceptance by the Labour leadership of the Conservative Party's approach – the issue of Non-Intervention in the first eighteen months of the Spanish Civil War is one of the most scandalous – nevertheless within the body of the Labour movement and often also within its leadership there was a long-standing tradition of a radical critique of government, that is, of Conservative, foreign policies. The influence of the Union of Democratic Control, and the pacifism which came out of the years of butchery of the first world war, remained important influences during the whole of the inter-war years. The widespread confusion over support for a rearmament programme in the second half of the nineteen thirties is an example of the struggle of powerful political ideas at all levels of the movement. It was accepted as axiomatic that the activities of the armament manufacturers were obscene, and the acquiescence in the most recent decades of armament sales as a necessary and useful contribution to the British balance of payments would have been unthinkable in the years before the second world war. **Ralph Miliband** recorded the widespread opposition to the rearming of Germany during the 1950s although the Labour and trade union leadership were able to use the block vote in its support; and to the Suez debacle, against which there was a vigorous opposition, although, as he notes, once the military operations ceased so did the Labour leadership's campaign.

If *Parliamentary Socialism* had been written two decades later the pervasive influence of the Cold War would have been given a great deal more emphasis. Since he wrote the archives of the Foreign Office and other departments have shown the **anti-Soviet** and anti-communist policies of the Labour Government after 1945 from the very beginning of its term of office. The Foreign Office, with Ernest Bevin as their powerful spokesman, was more single-minded in the first months than the United States. The starting point was Empire and the central aim the preservation of the pre-war colonies as an integral part of Britain's status in the world as a major power alongside the United States and the Soviet Union. Such a place in the world power system was not possible for Britain without American dollars and this involved, among other requirements of the so-called special relationship, a high level of defence expenditure – well beyond the resources of the United Kingdom – from the end of the second world war until the present. Labour in office and Labour out of government accepted levels of defence costs which throughout the whole postwar period were higher in proportion of its national income than any western European country; undoubtedly one of the important factors in the relative economic decline of Britain by comparison with other advanced industrial societies.

These continuities were explicit as well as implicit in *Parliamentary Socialism*. The most important single issue in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the manuscript was being completed, was unilateral nuclear disarmament. The 1960 Labour Party Conference declared in favour of a **unilateralist** defence policy by not quite 300,000 votes: a decision reversed the following year after a vigorous mobilisation of supporters by Hugh Gaitskell. But Gaitskell had lost his attempt to revise Clause IV of the Party's constitution: the clause which **formally** committed the Labour Party 'to secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry and service'. Gaitskell had begun and lost his campaign for constitutional revision soon after the defeat at the 1959 General Election, but the Party Conference of 1960 was asked to accept a general statement of aims which embodied the aims of Gaitskell and the Right wing of the Party and which was a clear enough indication of the route that Gaitskell, had he lived, would have consciously followed. The statement adopted at the Conference, as a clarification of its basic economic policies, accepted that the Party's

social and economic objectives can be achieved only through an expansion of common ownership substantial enough to give the community power over the commanding heights of the economy [and] recognising that both public and private enterprise have a place in the economy it believes that a further extension of common ownership should be decided from time to time in the light of these objectives and according to circumstances, with due regard for the views of the workers and consumers concerned.

This attempt by Gaitskell to weaken the principles embodied in Clause IV has been matched by the statements of Tony Blair after he became leader of the Labour Party in the summer of 1994, and the promise of a Conference in the spring of 1995 to find acceptance of a new form of words which will embody the basic principles of the Labour Party in the future. It is really very odd that revisionist Party leaders feel it necessary to change the text of the Constitution when throughout the whole history of the Labour Party the leadership has without scruple ignored both Constitution and Party Conference decisions when it suited their purposes. It is perhaps just as odd when for so many in the Labour Party the wording of the original Clause IV is appreciated as a necessary symbol of aims and policies when all are aware that in most elections, both before 1979 and certainly after, Clause IV has been absent from any serious political strategy. But the opposition to change in this context is that **the** Labour leadership can never be reminded too often of what the post-1918 **Constitution** involved; and there are, after all, quite a large number of ordinary members of the Party who still call themselves socialists.

The particular historical circumstances in which the Party leaders feel it necessary to set down their revisionism upon the Mosaic Tablets have some important features in common. In the 1950s the Labour Party had lost three successive elections; in the 1980s and early 1990s four general elections had gone to the Tories; in both periods the economic and social background was believed to have changed in ways that demanded a radical re-thinking of Labour's approach. In the fifties, in addition to the faction fighting within the Labour Party – an important electoral consideration – there were two rather contradictory matters that together helped to persuade many voters either to abstain from voting Labour or to support the Tories. The first was the point made by Ralph Miliband in the opening words of Ch. 10: 'The Labour Party' he wrote 'accepted its loss of office in 1951 with a certain complacency. This was partly due to a feeling that so much had been accomplished since 1945 that a breathing space had become natural and inevitable'.

This belief that 'so much had been accomplished' was both an important statement of fact and a figment of the imagination of Fabian intellectuals. The nationalisation programme and the social reform measures, with the creation of the National Health service as its most important single achievement, were regarded by Labour leaders not as the beginning of the social revolution, but as *the* social revolution. There would be some Labour ministers who might agree that there was still much to be done to consolidate the social revolution, but their own intellectuals were in no doubt about what had been accomplished. In *New Fabian Essays* published in 1952 Crosland argued that we were no longer living in a capitalist society but rather in a half-way stage to socialism, and in the same volume John Strachey, the former Marxist from the 1930s, was of the opinion that 'the Labour Government between 1945 and 1951 did in fact appreciably modify the nature of British capitalism'. In his abridged and revised version of *The Future of Socialism* (1964: originally published in 1956) Crosland was still writing that 'the distribution of personal income has become significantly more equal; and the change has been almost entirely at the expense of property incomes'. Full employment, of course, was the central factor in the rise of living standards, but to speak of anything approaching a fundamental change in the nature and working of capitalist society was implausible. It was to be demolished in economic and statistical terms in the 1960s by Richard Titmus and others, but the observant worker only had to look about **him/her** to appreciate that the evidence of a massive shift in income distribution was not exactly unmistakable.

And this was the second of what was described above as the two contradictory factors which influenced voting patterns by the end of the nineteen fifties. On the one hand the Labour Party managers were much concerned

with those they called the 'floating voters', those, that is, who were supposedly no longer tied to their class position in society because of increasing affluence; and on the other, there was the estimate that by 1960 there were between seven and eight million persons living below a defined 'national assistance' standard. During the nineteen sixties the inequalities of income began to widen; not on the scale that occurred in the 1980s but still observable and measurable. As in the Thatcher years the Labour leaders in the late 1950s began to shift away from their obvious constituency – the wage earners of the traditional kind, much more numerous than they were two decades later – and their social policies became less radical and more blurred in their impact. In the Thatcher decade the Labour leadership, especially when Kinnock assumed the position of Leader of the Opposition, became wholly bemused with consumerism and the workings of the market, entirely supportive of the Conservative Government's foreign policy, notably in support of the Falklands War and the Gulf War, and running away as fast as was politically practicable from Labour's historic alignment with trade unionism and the concepts of collectivism and egalitarianism. These were changes and developments, given the difference of two decades, comprehensively in line with the analysis that over twenty years earlier suffused the pages of *Parliamentary Socialism*.

The publication of *Parliamentary Socialism* was widely acknowledged. R.H.S. **Crossman** in the *New Statesman* discussed the work in a long hostile review of three columns which seriously distorted the main lines of Miliband's analysis. His exposition, wrote Crossman, was 'grotesquely one-sided' but **Crossman** nevertheless recommended that the Labour leadership, 'determined to rebuild the Party's morale', should be ready to study carefully an account of the present 'crisis of confidence, even when it is presented in the form of partisan history'. And he continued:

If it is horrifying to see how unfair some of these charges are, it is important to remember that Dr Miliband is speaking for a horrifyingly large number of active Party workers.

The main theme of Miliband's analysis according to **Crossman** was that the 'real fight' against Toryism required direct action, a 'semi-revolutionary demand for strike action' which the greater part of the Labour movement 'instinctively shies away from'. *Parliamentary Socialism* was, of course, arguing a much more subtle understanding of the history of the Labour Party. **Ralph Miliband** was certainly not against direct action where the circumstances demanded an intervention by the organised working class, as in the years immediately after world war one. But situations such as opposition to the military support for the anti-soviet forces in the immediate aftermath of the war occur only seldom. What **Miliband** was arguing was that the struggle for elementary rights or against reactionary

policies cannot be confined to Westminster but that a wide range of options is available to popular movements in order to express their political will. Thus support for Republican Spain between 1936 and 1939 evoked an extraordinary range of political and social activities, from large demonstrations in the major cities to collection of foodstuffs and the provision of humanitarian aid. Spain is notably relevant to the central thesis of *Parliamentary Socialism* given the utterly shameful support for the policy of Non-Intervention by the official Labour movement for the first eighteen months of the war: a support for the British Government which encouraged the fascist powers in their large scale assistance to **Franco**. But there are so many other examples, whether in the years of unemployment during the thirties or the more affluent decade of the fifties. It was the passivity of the Labour and Trade Union leadership that formed a central part of the analysis of Labourism by Miliband: his emphasis upon the narrow constitutional parameters that the Leadership accepted from the beginning of the century; their deference to the established order and their fear of any upsurge of militancy from below.

But to return to **Crossman** in the *New Statesman*. He was answered in the week immediately following (27 October 1961) by the present writer in a letter which the editor placed at the beginning of the correspondence columns; and I reproduce some parts of my letter here as an example of one expression of the political sentiments of the Left of those days. My letter began:

I was delighted to read Mr Crossman's review of Ralph Miliband's book on parliamentary socialism. **Mr Crossman** has long been my favourite example in British affairs of the Kansas politician who sat securely on the fence with his ears to the ground on both sides; and that **Miliband** has helped to push him off the fence is a considerable achievement. For what Crossman's furious review amounts to is a firm commitment to the existing Labour leadership and its practices that is, in the context of Mr Crossman's own political history, little short of heroic.

The remainder of my letter was concerned to provide **Crossman** with the opportunity to state his own analysis of the historical record of the Labour Party:

It is widely believed [I wrote] that in this last decade the Labour Party, inside and outside Westminster, has been inept and incompetent, devoid of ideas, drained of political passion, regarded with **derision** by the Tories and by their own supporters with, at best, an apathetic acquiescence. Three general elections in a row have been lost. Labour Party politics are not even radical **politics**, and the generations under 30, not to put too fine a point on it, can hardly be said to be enthusiastic in their support for Mr. Crossman's colleagues on the front bench. Is this a wild exaggeration, and if it is why do so many who are far beyond the ranks of Socialists believe it to be true? Anyway, let us have a pithy statement from Mr. Crossman which sums up the record of these last ten years.

My letter ended with a reference to **Crossman's** accusation of 'a degree of tendentious distortion and misquotation which no journalist or politician

would dare to use'. After noting that I could not share Crossman's faith in journalists and politicians, I accepted that the matter of 'distortion' was always capable of being argued about in a serious historical work; but that 'misquotation' was a matter of fact and **Crossman** was invited to produce his examples. He replied the following week (3 November 1961) and again it was the first letter in the correspondence columns. He began by making such an absurd mistake that it confirmed how superficially **and/or** hurriedly he read the books he was offered to review, for he began by apologising for not having included me as one of the authors of *Parliamentary Socialism*. What he was referring to was the generous acknowledgement of my help at the drafting stage by Ralph Miliband; but as to authorship, I pointed out in a letter the following week, **Crossman** had only 'to look at the dust cover, the publishers blurb, the title page, the list of acknowledgements and the heading of his own review to see that the author is in fact Ralph Miliband'.

Crossman in the 3 November letter listed his own diagnosis of what had gone wrong in the 1950s:

- (1) The fundamental reasons for Labour's failures in the 1950s were economic and social – in particular the development of an affluent society, which made it extremely difficult to arouse popular enthusiasm either for a Socialist analysis or for Socialist measures. This situation was exploited with great skill by British Conservatism.
- (2) It is probably true that once Lord **Attlee** had made the fatal decision to go to the country in the autumn of 1951, Labour had no chance of regaining office during this decade, whatever we said or did.
- (3) In these circumstances it is my belief – argued at length in a Fabian Pamphlet, *Labour and the Affluent Society* – that our wisest course would have been to behave not as *the alternative government*, but as a *fighting opposition*, prepared to remain in the wilderness until events **undermined** popular faith in the Establishment and confirmed our radical criticisms. What we should have concentrated on between elections was not propaganda to the apathetic voter, but the education of a cadre of active Socialists who really understood the contradictions of the affluent society, and who could explain to the electorate how those contradictions can and must be overcome by the next Labour government.

Crossman then continued to make the extraordinary statement that the Left did not seem to believe in the need for political education; and then apologised for the accusation of misquotation which he had made in his first letter. But much more important than these matters of detail, which are certainly not unimportant, was the general **political** attitude that **Crossman** displayed. These were clearly **dominated** by the improvement in living standards – the 'affluent society' – although it never occurred to him that full employment due to a world boom was the most important single factor and that there were very large social groups in society still living on what for advanced industrial societies were conditions of poverty. The high levels of defence expenditure were not considered worth remarking on, Mau Mau and the Cyprus crisis were just coming to an end, the entrenched conservative institutional structures of British society were still in place,

and all **Crossman** could suggest was to wait until the electorate came to appreciate the 'contradictions' in a society of affluence.

There followed the publication of *Parliamentary Socialism* two decades during which the Labour Party were in government for more years than the Tories, although at the beginning and the end their majorities were insecure. But the sixties, as we all know, were years of vigorous debate – so very different from the fifties – when many matters hitherto regarded as being confined to the closet were brought out into the open and vigorously debated. By the end of the decade the Vietnam War agitation had crossed the Atlantic, and the events of May 1968 in Paris had passed over the English Channel. There was a serious interest among the younger age-groups in socialist theory, often it must be acknowledged, of the **esoteric** kind that occupied so much time on the Left Bank. The output of socialist books in the sixties and seventies certainly filled the empty shelves of the nineteen fifties which had been much commented on. But the intense and serious discussions of the 1968 generation began to run into the sands during the next decade. The Labour governments from 1964 were not without some social advances, but their incompetent handling of the economy and the absence of anything approaching an imaginative understanding of the changing problems of British society, founded as they were upon encrusted conservative administrative and constitutional structures, steadily alienated the various parts of their native constituencies. In the general election of May 1979 there was a massive swing of 2.2 million votes to the Conservatives, and this included an eight per cent swing among skilled industrial workers.

The election defeat of 1979 was followed by a decade of major retreat for the whole Labour movement. Continued de-industrialisation steadily reduced the number of trade unionists in the old established unions which drew their membership from the manufacturing sectors. The sharp recession of the early eighties, which might even have been capitalised on by the shambling leadership of Michael Foot, was countered by the Falklands War which Labour supported and from which Thatcher reaped an electoral benefit. And then there came Kinnock, after the general election of June 1983 which had left Labour with only 28.3 per cent of the national vote (against 36.9 per cent in 1979).

The political Left inside the Labour movement had advanced its positions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and when Kinnock was elected Leader it was this Left he had to defeat before he could seriously **remould** the Labour Party in a new image. This process was interrupted by the most important single political issue for Labour during the whole of the decade: the miners' strike of 1984–5. The strike, it must be emphasised again, was the key political question for Britain in the 1980s. A miners' victory would have had profound consequences for politics in general and naturally for

the Labour movement itself. There was a remarkable response from the grass roots of the movement by no means limited to groups of unionists and Labour Party members of the left. There was an understanding at the base of the movement that the miners had to be supported against the Thatcher government, buttressed as she and her government were by the media and supported on the ground by physical violence from the police. In December 1984 – the strike began in March 1984 – the government cut social security benefits for the families of striking miners, and the shadow Cabinet refused all demands from back bench **MPs** to raise the issue in the Commons. During the first ten weeks of the strike, after which the Commons went on holiday for a fortnight, there was no debate initiated by the Labour front bench. Discussion had always come as a result of initiatives from backbenchers. The Labour front bench continued **throughout** to regard the strike as damaging to their standing in the opinion polls. On 31 July 1984, after the strike had lasted 21 weeks, it was Opposition Day in the Commons when Labour could choose the subject of the main debate. The miners' strike continued to dominate the media. The motion which **Kinnock** spoke to was one which condemned the general industrial and employment policies of the Thatcher government, and he made only a brief reference to the miners' strike towards the end of his speech; and this, let it be repeated, at a time when there was only one issue that everyone in the country was talking about.

The miners' strike was not only a turning point for the Labour Party, it was also a central question for the Thatcher government, and we now know the extraordinary lengths to which the Government employed its intelligence services to undermine the position of the NUM leadership. The Labour front bench certainly underestimated the importance of the miners' strike, but this was not a mistake the Tory government were ever going to make. The propertied classes always have a very clear appreciation of *their* enemies, and matters of constitutional propriety are never allowed to interfere with their plans. All this was clearly understood by the author of *Parliamentary Socialism*, and what happened to the Labour movement in the 1980s was wholly in line with his analysis of both the unemployed nineteen thirties and the more affluent nineteen fifties. His book *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, published a few months after his death at the end of May 1994, takes forward a number of important themes already considered in his first work. He was concerned especially to emphasise the problems that would always be encountered in parliamentary democracies by social movements engaged in serious reform of one kind or another: not, he emphasised, necessarily of a direct **socialist** kind. As he noted in *Socialism For a Sceptical Age*, there was

a general failure on the part of many writers on the Left to take seriously the existence of a formidable structure of power in capitalist democratic regimes, and the lengths to which

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people will go in order to preserve it. To ignore this allows any amount of model construction; but the construction, however attractive, lacks any basis in reality. Revolutionaries may have tended to under-estimate what is possible within the compass of capitalist democracy; but social-democrats have tended to be blind to the severity of the struggle which major advances in the transformation of the social order in progressive directions must entail. Of course, all such warnings can be airily dismissed as left-wing paranoia, but this is to fly in the face of extensive experience. (p. 163)

There have been other trends in the years since *Parliamentary Socialism* was written that confirm the analysis it offered. The failure to develop new directions of a radical kind has meant that the sober judgements of the closing pages of the 1961 volume – summed up in the title of the closing chapter, 'The Sickness of Labourism' – have been further augmented. **Miliband** had emphasised the importance of the trade union relationship, and when full allowance is made for the political character of much of the union leadership the argument for the close connection between the organised working class and the Labour Party remains unaffected; except that it was precisely the trade union connection that Kinnock was anxious to weaken, and there is little evidence that the post-Kinnock direction of the Labour Party is moving in any other way. Miliband's last book, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, is in a number of respects a further development of *Parliamentary Socialism*, although it was not planned or written as a continuous history. Inevitably, of course, since the volume had two main purposes, one, the argument for a socialist society in contemporary terms, and two, an examination of the many political problems that would be encountered in achieving a democratic socialist objective the history of the radical movements of the twentieth century formed the backcloth for the elaboration of his analysis. The exposition is grounded in historical experience, and again and again reference is made, has to be made, to the politics of the past and their relevance, whether qualified or not, to the present and future. Throughout this final volume **Miliband** relates what has gone before to an understanding of the present and what might develop in the future. The quotation which follows is an example. He is asking the question whether there would appear to be any prospect of the existing social-democratic parties moving towards more radical policies, and he notes that history does not offer much consolation to those who look for change. But he continued:

Against this, there are a number of different factors to be taken into account. One of the most important of these is the end of the Cold War, which has lifted the immense burden it had placed on the Left ever since 1945. Social democratic leaders had played a major role in the containment of ~~left~~ militancy in the interwar years, particularly when it was Communist-inspired or led. This role became ever more pronounced after World War II; and it turned social-democratic parties into invaluable allies of conservative parties. On all major issues, notably over foreign policy and defence, there existed in fact a fundamental consensus between social democratic leaders and their conservative opponents*. The Communist bogey was a most valuable weapon in the hands of social democratic leaders.

Its elimination does not mean that their struggle against critics on the Left is now over; but it removes from the reckoning an argument against **Left** critics that was used to great effect. 'Trotskyite' and other derogatory labels do not have quite the charge which 'Communist' and 'fellow traveller' once had. (p. 146)

These passages were followed by a discussion which **Miliband** emphasised was the most important factor in the future development of social democratic parties, and this was the failure of market economies 'to tackle effectively a vast range of massive problems, from unemployment to the deterioration of public and collective services': in general the deterioration in the quality of life for the mass of the people. He accepted that the outlook in this context was somewhat bleak at the time of writing, but he insisted that at some time in the future the **problems** and difficulties of capitalist society would provide serious opportunities for parties of the Left. Whether those opportunities would be taken would depend upon the ways in which Left politics had been developing over the previous years. He noted that the decline of the Communist Parties 'for all their weaknesses and derelictions' had represented a marked impoverishment for the Left in general; and he could have gone on to remark that in the British case the 1980s represented the first decade in the twentieth century when there was no effective political organisation to the left of the Labour Party that was developing a distinctive socialist perspective, and at the same time creating the organisational channels through which ideas and policies could be transmitted into the main groupings of the Labour Party.

There was one particular matter in this context that was taken for granted in *Parliamentary Socialism* but which received important emphasis in his last book. The early history of the socialist movement in Britain centred upon the propagandist activities of groups of devoted socialists in different towns and regions. Political education was the key to the spread of socialist ideas. The street corner meeting, the production and sale of pamphlets, the distribution of leaflets and the door to door canvassing of socialist candidates in elections, local and national: these were the **recognised** activities of socialists, and they educated, agitated and organised. It has always been accepted that socialist propaganda is a central necessity of the socialist movement. The forms of **propaganda** change, and the radio, cinema and especially television have ended most of the forms of political activity that were typical of the past. The matter was not commented on in any marked degree in *Parliamentary Socialism*, being taken for granted, but *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* made the point several times that political

*In a footnote to the text quoted above was written: 'The consensus also applied to the bitter and bloody struggle against movements of colonial liberation in former colonial possessions; and this struggle too was waged against 'Communism'. The French Socialist Party in particular was implicated after World War III in the savage wars waged by the French Republic in Algeria and Indochina; but other social democratic parties in colonial countries, for instance the Labour Party in Britain, were also involved in such wars.'

parties of the Left have an indispensable role in the creation and development of a counter-hegemonic culture to that of the dominant groups in society. He emphasised how crucial it was for the success of any reforming government to have prepared the ground well; to have brought together the economic and social grievances and to have presented the alternatives: 'how much . . . its philosophy and its policies have come to be part, again in **Gramsci's** terms, of 'the common sense of the epoch', at least for a large part of the population; and how much in consequence the vote which brings it to office is not only a vote against hitherto governing parties, but a positive vote for what the government proposes'.

Parliamentary Socialism was a key text in the revival of socialist ideas in the 1960s and 1970s. It offered for the first time an extended analysis of why the great hopes of 1945 had so quickly evaporated into the dull conservative decade of the nineteen fifties; and it fitted the great stirrings of political conscience which came with the nuclear debate at the end of the decade. Most of Ralph Miliband's writings in the three decades which followed were concerned with the class nature of society and the role of the State. It was his last book, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, that brought together much of his thinking about the manifold problems of agency and power for a more progressive future, and his analysis needs to be read together with the historical understanding of his first major work.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The first requirement is obvious: to read, or re-read, *Parliamentary Socialism*, first published by Allen and Unwin in 1961 and then re-issued by Merlin Press in 1964, and in a second edition, with a postscript, in 1972. As indicated in the text, the historical background that Ralph Miliband analysed down to the end of the 1950s has a central bearing on the arguments of his latest work, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, (Polity Press, 1994).

The flow of writing on socialist history and socialist themes that began from around the time that *Parliamentary Socialism* was first published has continued to our own day. For the political developments which followed the revelations of Khrushchev in 1956 about Stalin's regime, and the invasion of Hungary which came eight months later, there is a solid account in Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh University Press, 1993) although it can be expected that a good many other analyses will follow. David Coates, *The Labour Parry and the Struggle for Socialism* (Cambridge, 1975) covers the same ground as did Ralph Miliband – and is much influenced by him – but continues the story into the 1970s. Later the same author published *Labour in Power? A Study of the Labour Government 1974–1979*. There are two other important marxist analyses, both published in 1976: David Howell, *British Social Democracy* (Croom Helm) and Leo Panitch, *Social Democracy and Industrial Militancy* (Cambridge). A less politically committed text but useful for its careful documentation is Patrick Seyd, *The Rise and Fall of the Labour Leji* (Macmillan, 1987). There are four books for the 1980s that are required reading. The first two are concerned with the politics of the Labour Party. Gregory Elliott's *Labourism and the English Genius: The Strange Death of Labour England?* (1993) provides a well-written historical background to the 1980s; and Richard Heffernan and Mike Marqusee, *Defeat from the Jaws of Victory: Inside Kinnock's Labour Party* (1992) offers a devastating critique of the whole decade and most particularly after Kinnock's assumption of leadership of Labour in 1983. Both books are published by

Verso, as is one of the most important books ever published concerning the machinations of those who control state power, Seumas Milne's *The Enemy Within: MI5, Maxwell and the Scargill Affair (1994)*, is a closely documented analysis of the infamies of British Intelligence operating at the behest of their political bosses – of whom Margaret Thatcher was chief – a campaign of lies, distortions, **disinformation** and surveillance against Arthur **Scargill** and the National Union of Mineworkers that matches the worst accounts of the FBI under Hoover. This decade of the **1980s** was not only a period of marked political backsliding from even the moderation of previous decades, it was also one in which many of the intellectual Left, much influenced by Paris, moved away from classical **marxism** to various forms of intellectual and political agreement with the existing order of society. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class. A New 'True' Socialism* (Verso, 1986) provided a succinct, adroit analysis of these new intellectual trends which remains the best introduction we have to date.