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# Miliband and the State

BY

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Ralph Miliband was right in urging socialists to leave the legacy of Leninism behind us. But achieving socialism will still require a change in the fundamental nature of the state.

Leo Panitch's defense of the thought of the late Ralph Miliband — specifically his 1969 classic, *The State in Capitalist Society* — makes for excellent reading. The two most important things that Panitch emphasizes, and which deserve to be emphasized, are how Miliband was at pains to prove that social-democratic governance of capitalist society does not, and cannot, overcome capitalism's inherent nature as a class-exploitative system nor the inevitability of capitalist economic crises, and that Miliband didn't actually hold to an "instrumentalist" theory of the capitalist state. (This fallacy has been repeated so many times that Clyde W. Barrow had to write a painstakingly detailed piece demolishing this "artificial polemical construct.")

Panitch also usefully stresses Miliband's focus on the day-to-day fight under capitalism for pro-worker "structural reforms" — or, as André Gorz labels it in his 1964 book *Strategy for Labor*, "non-reformist reforms." In Panitch's words, Miliband understood that "radically intended socialist reforms must run up against certain limits." He never claimed that structural reform was about, to quote Ed Rooksby, an "unbroken line of reforms leading from capitalism to socialism." Contrary to the assertions of certain far-leftists, Miliband simply wasn't a more left-wing version of the "parliamentary socialists" that he so sharply criticized in his other 1960s classic, *Parliamentary Socialism*. His emphasis on extra-parliamentary and multifaceted class struggle in *Marxism and Politics* (1977) makes this clear, even though he unfortunately calls his strategy "strong reformism." His use of the term "reformism" — merely connoting that his outline of a path to socialism in capitalist democracies departed sharply from the literal civil war strategy of the early Communist International — was very much at variance with how, for example, Rosa Luxemburg understood that term.

## Democratic Centralism

However, Panitch is simultaneously too strictly “Milibandite” in following his late mentor while at least slightly distorting one of Miliband’s views. He praises “Miliband’s critique of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of Lenin’s democratic centralism.” Where democratic centralism is concerned, Miliband makes clear in *Marxism and Politics* that he’s at least aware that Lenin’s critics of 1904, Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, “tended to exaggerate very considerably what really separated them from Lenin and the ‘centralists.’” It was only during the Russian Civil War that Lenin embraced “dictatorial centralism” and even then he usually “did not try to make a virtue of what he believed to be required by dire circumstances.” Subsequent research has only made clearer the differences in the “early” and “later” meanings of democratic centralism. While there’s no “one size fits all” model of socialist organization, there’s also nothing innately wrong with “diversity in thought, unity in action” as a regulative ideal.

In contrast, where Panitch follows Miliband too closely is in his “fuzziness” over what the dictatorship of the proletariat meant to Marx (and Engels), if not Lenin. While Miliband agrees with Marx that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes,” he also claims in *Marxism and Politics* that “[what] follows the ‘smashing’ of the existing state is the coming into being of another ‘state proper,’ simply because a ‘state proper’ is an absolutely imperative necessity in organizing the process of transition from capitalist society to a socialist one.” He asserts that Marx and Engels and Lenin all disagreed with this. With Lenin he clearly has a case; on one hand, in Chapter Five of *The State and Revolution*, Lenin says that between capitalism and socialism “[a] special apparatus, a special machine for suppression, the ‘state,’” is still necessary for “the suppression of the exploiting minority by the exploited majority”; on the other hand, back in Chapter Three he argues that “since the majority of people itself suppresses its oppressors, a ‘special force’ for suppression is no longer necessary!” For Lenin, the dictatorship of the proletariat is simultaneously what Miliband, in *Class Power and State Power* (1983), labels “unmediated class rule” . . . and not. It’s a “state proper,” and yet it isn’t . . .

But Marx is far more coherent. Yes, in his *Drafts of the Civil War in France* he says that the Paris Commune of 1871 was “a revolution against the State itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society.” But the published version is considerably less “anarchist.” It “only” states that the “social republic” is the creation of “the political form at last discovered under which *to work out* [emphasis mine] the economical emancipation of labor” and “a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule.” There’s no reason to doubt Hal Draper’s statement that the radically democratic Commune “was a *workers’ state* of brief duration and naturally with all kinds of limitations and inadequacies. Marx’s characterization of the Commune was so sweeping in this regard that there can be no doubt that, for him, it was accepted as an example of the *rule* (or “dictatorship”) of the proletariat.” In 1875 Marx is even clearer that the dictatorship of the proletariat is a “state proper,” albeit one which is “thoroughly subordinated” to society.

It would be foolish for Marxists in the twenty-first century to cite the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” outside of “schools” on Marx and Marxist terminology. But ignoring the original meaning of said phrase is a mistake. Like Miliband (and Marx), Panitch understands that no political revolution can make an immediate “jump” from capitalism to the classless society (“socialism”). What it *can do*, via the working class constituting the majority of society, is subordinate both capitalists and the classes and strata “between labor and capital” to its rule.

There’s no reason to believe that this process, in countries where the working class comprises a majority, would require *greater* state coercion than currently exists in liberal-democratic capitalist societies — provided that the working class is able to take power on a continental or near-continental scale. Given capitalist globalization, an isolated workers’ state would quickly collapse due to economic sanctions from the major capitalist powers — military intervention would probably only rarely be needed to restore capitalist rule.

# Miliband and Marxist Political Strategy

Despite the great merit of what Panitch calls Miliband's "realistic perspective" in "clarifying socialist strategy," said perspective contains absences. Of course, Miliband was opposed to the "Stalinist dogmatics" of "socialism in one country" and never took any of the conferences of the Communist International as having determined a socialist "line of attack." But only vaguely in both *Marxism and Politics* and *Divided Societies* (1989) does he deliberate the *limits* of what even the most sincerely radical government — and movement — can achieve in a single country. Moreover, though he acknowledges that the transition to socialism requires "radical changes in the structure, modes of operation, and personnel of the existing state, as well as the creation of a network of organs of popular participation," in none of Miliband's writings does he plainly discuss the most important prerequisite for a transition out of capitalism: recruitment and education within the armed forces. The end of conscription in many states may make this especially difficult. It must be done anyway. If socialists everywhere demanded free military training and service for those who desire it and democratic political and trade union rights within the military (as once existed in West Germany), this would help.

## With Miliband — With Caveats

It should be evident that this article isn't meant as an "anti-Miliband," let alone an "anti-Panitch." It certainly isn't intended as a return to the traditional "Leninist-Trotskyist" version of a dual power "strategy" which *assumes* the eventual emergence of a parallel state of workers' councils much as neoclassical economists "assume a can opener." It's meant merely as an assessment of Ralph Miliband's Marxism, its weaknesses as well as its strengths. In combatting the dogmas of much of the far left, at times he "bent the stick" too far the other way.

Leo Panitch, often with Sam Gindin, has powerfully articulated answers to the "what is to be done" question — at least, what is to be done now and in the near future. His immediate strategic guidelines, which build upon Miliband's analyses of class power and state power, are sound and insightful. He could credibly accuse me of putting the socialist cart before the horse. Nevertheless, within the context of the debates over socialist strategy in *Jacobin* and other publications, certain "fundamentals" require restatement. If what Miliband and Panitch have labeled "insurrectionary socialism" is a nonstarter within long-established bourgeois democracies, it's also profoundly true that "the transcendence of the working class itself to realize humanity's diverse potentials," in Leo and Sam's words, requires the taking of political power by the working class through the dissolution of the coherence of the armed forces of capitalist states. One might, with a rhetorical flourish, even call this the "smashing" of the existing state and establishing "the dictatorship of the proletariat" — or, to invoke an eloquent socialist writer, *a different kind of state*.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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