Chapter Three – A Reply to Ralph Miliband

In his last work: ‘Socialism for a Sceptical Age’, Ralph Miliband outlined various objections to revolutionary Marxism and supported a left reformist alternative.(1) He argued that revolutionary Marxism had little support and this indicated that most people opposed the revolutionary transformation of society. This point has plausibility. Within advanced capitalist society the size of most Marxist organisations is miniscule and the standpoint of adherence to capitalism is hegemonic. Furthermore the onset of the recent crisis of capitalism has not altered this situation and Marxism remains marginal and peripheral. However this situation does not discredit Marxism and the perspective of revolution. This is because the continuation of the problems of capitalism could revive interest in the approach of Marxism, but we have to admit that this possibility is not inevitable and it is important that Marxism itself attempts to overcome its problems and marginalisation. It is entirely possible that the failures of Marxism are connected to internal problems at the level of theory and practice. These have to be corrected if Marxism is to become an influence in relation to political events and to have an importance in relation to the development of the class struggle.

If we analyse this question generally it is possible to argue that the possibility of revolution cannot be definitively excluded because of the continued importance of the class struggle. The very limitations of capitalism caused by its reliance on exploitation and alienation in order to ensure the domination of the capital-labour relation has led to the possibility of bitter class struggle. Marxism has acquired an influence in this context. However Marxism has undermined its own effectiveness and ability to relate to these developments because of a tendency to split into competing fragments. The result has been the isolation of Marxism from the class struggle and an inability to provide a perspective that could acquire mass support. Hence class struggle has not become conscious of the possibility of ambitious aims and instead has been limited to the defensive strategy of trade union politics. This means the potential for class struggle to challenge the dominant economic and political power of capital has not developed and often the result has been defeats which have discredited the notion of militancy as well as the conception of revolution. In other words the crisis of Marxism has had a material effect on the prospects of the class struggle and has generated an unfavourable situation for the potential of victories and progress. This does not mean that victories would have been inevitable if the mass movement was connected to Marxism but it would mean that the participants in struggles could develop higher levels of class consciousness that would generate the ability, determination and confidence to promote the prospect of victory. Hence without a relationship between Marxism and the mass movement the strength of the working class is weakened and its level of initiative is undermined. The result is a tendency for defeats. This situation has characterised the recent period because of the marginalisation of Marxism.

The alternative to the prospect of defeat is not to pose the necessity of revolution which can only be the outcome of the intensification of the class struggle. Instead what is initially important is to establish the relationship between Marxism and the mass movement. In this context the mass movement can acquire the perspectives and aims to advance the prospects of victory. Only in this context of advance can the issue of revolution become a credible aspect of the continued advance of the class struggle. The point being made is that revolution is the ultimate logical outcome of the progress and intensification of the class struggle. At a certain point the revolution becomes the logical expression of what should happen next. However until that point happens we should concentrate on what is required in order to make progress in the class struggle. We know that the continued domination of the trade union bureaucracy has created a strategic impasse. The approach of the trade union leaders does not provide an adequate basis for developing an effective response to the aim of the government to impose austerity measures and to try and resolve the cuts at the expense of working people. This situation should be favourable for the influence of Marxism to grow because Marxism represents a doctrine that can indicate why the only alternative for the working class in this situation is struggle in order to advance social interests. But the problem is that Marxism is undermined by its isolation and marginalisation and the fact that to some extent it has become comfortable in this situation. Like the people in Plato’s cave, the supporters of Marxism do not want the enlightenment of liberation from the ideological limitations of the cave and have become used to this situation of ignorance and impotence. Unless this ideological problem is overcome and the theoretical and practical effectiveness of Marxism is promoted, the various Marxist groups will remain useless as instruments for the advance of the class struggle.

Hence if the situation of the essential failure of Marxist organisation continues the conception of revolution will represent the mythology of Marxism rather than the logical expression of the development of the class struggle. The point is that the fact that capitalism generates class struggle will not become connected to the perspective of revolution if Marxism remains small and ineffective. Instead it is the increasing political influence of Marxism that creates the apparent connection between the prospects for the further advance of the class struggle and the approach of revolution. This is not to suggest that Marxism makes the revolution but rather the relationship between Marxist culture and the creation of the ambition for revolution is a close one. The struggle of the working class for revolution occurs when Marxism seems to be credible and important. This means a unity develops between the intensification of the class struggle and the growing influence of Marxism, with the result that revolution is put on the agenda. However this sense of purpose is lacking if Marxism remains marginal and instead the trade union leaders are dominant and the result is concentration on limited and sectional struggles. This prospect is entirely possible because of the present limitations of Marxism and its inability to provide for the promotion of inspiration and ambition to the class struggle. Hence the problem is not with the perspective of revolution but is instead an expression of the failings of the various Marxist groups.

It has been argued by some reformists that revolution is no longer realistic in the social conditions of advanced capitalism. This means the alternative is to argue for the possibility of reforms. Miliband outlines this standpoint in terms of the importance of socialist values like justice and equality which can be realised in terms of the implementation of reforms. In this manner the distrust generated about socialism by the ideology of Neo-liberalism can be overcome: “…..while a great deal of suspicion attaches to socialism as a word and as a doctrine, there does exist a great deal of support for demands which socialism encompasses, and which constitute a challenge to conservative ideology and practice – demands relating to welfare, public services, rights, democracy, fairness, justice, humane behaviour. Such demands and socialism are presently firmly dissociated. The problem for socialists is to show and make acceptable the link between them, and to explain that radical demands, for democratization, for equal rights for all, for the creation of communities of citizens, can only very partially be met, if they are met at all, within the existing structures of power and privilege, and why their fulfilment requires the kind of comprehensive transformation which socialism signifies – yet to do this without in any way belittling the importance and value of the struggles which are conducted for immediate and limited reforms.”(2)

The paradox of his argument is that Miliband has effectively upheld a process of revolutionary transformation in terms of the realisation of a collection of reforms. It is not possible to introduce fairness, justice and equality by the method of reform. The only prospect that the values of socialism will be realised in an effective and transforming manner is by the success of the act of the overthrow of the economic and political power of capital. This means the definition of contemporary revolution is the process by which the dominant economic and political power of the capitalist class is replaced by that of working people. In this context the realisation of the reforms and values that Miliband advocates would require the success of this revolutionary process. The point is that the logic of the capitalist system is replaced by a different type of logic because of the thoroughness of the change that has taken place. In contrast the introduction of reforms would mean that the logic of capitalism would continue to exist with the emerging logic of a different type of economic and political system. This situation could not exist permanently because the tension between the competing forms of logic would have to be resolved by the establishment of the domination of capitalism or by the reforms making way for a more revolutionary process of change. Hence what has been introduced by the reforms is the prelude to further movement to socialism or the prospect of defeat and the demise of the reformist regime. The regime of reformism is inherently unstable and unsatisfactory. Defenders of capitalism will not like the situation of a left reformist regime because capitalism will not be allowed to function efficiently and the process of profit making is compromised by the attempt to realise the values of socialism. But the supporters of reformism will be unhappy about the possibility of the reforms being undermined by the actions and objections of the defenders of capitalism. Consequently they will increasingly aspire for the reforms to become the prelude to revolution if the reforms are to acquire stability and be effective. In this situation the class struggle will intensify and the contradictions of society will have to be resolved by the revolutionary victory of the working class or by defeat and the re-establishment of the stability of capitalism.

However whilst Miliband is aware of the tensions that the introduction of the programme of reforms will generate, he does not connect this to the very character of the reformist process. Instead he is confident that the reformist government can generate sufficient mass mobilisation in order to defeat the resistance of the supporters of capital. But he seems to have glossed over the fact that the attempted introduction of reforms will also become unsatisfactory for its very supporters. They will be increasingly unsatisfied with the apparent self-limiting character of the process of the realisation of reforms and ultimately become aware that the problem with reforms is that they do not overcome the domination of capital over labour. Only the act of revolution can tackle the continued domination of capital in a decisive and principled manner. The task is for the transformation of the character of the relations of production and this can only be realised by the act of revolution creating new conditions that can enable different relations of production to flourish. In contrast, the implementation of a collection of serious reforms does not result in the demise of the economic and political power of capitalism, but it does undermine the functioning of capitalism. This means the process of the introduction of reforms has to be a prelude to a process of continued advance that results in revolution, or else brings about retreat. Historical experience has shown that that reformist governments have preferred to retreat rather than antagonise capital as Miliband is aware. But he considers that the prospects of the reforms he advocates will be different because of the influence of the mass movement and the related strength of the struggle for the realisation of reforms. But this argument cannot gloss over the importance of the unresolved social contradictions that will be created for the class struggle. The problem is that the forces of labour cannot establish a definite victory over capital by the introduction of reforms. Instead the result will be a modification of the conditions of the process of exploitation of labour by capital. This situation will be expressed by a shorter working week and other reforms, but this development will only encourage labour to strive to end the domination of capital. Hence the very success of reforms will place revolution on the agenda. The alternative will be for the mass movement to accept the resistance of capital and to accept the dismantling of the reform programme. But in any eventuality the issue of the implementation of reforms cannot be stable.

Miliband seems to be arguing that the relation of reforms to important socialist values provides a different quality to the reforms he is advocating. This means the reforms will be more substantial and durable. It will be more difficult for the supporters of capital to oppose the introduction of reforms and the reforms will have greater mass support than in the past. Hence he is trying to suggest that what he is proposing are ideal reforms that are more principled than the minor adjustments to capitalism which have been proposed by past Social Democratic administrations. Miliband is able to provide strong arguments for his approach. His standpoint is not trying to repeat the reformism of past Social Democracy and instead his reforms are more radical and principled. However his approach is still undermined by its self-limiting approach because the advocacy of reforms is based on the understanding that he is not suggesting they are a prelude to revolution. Instead they are still presented as an alternative to revolution even if what is advocated is based on the introduction of socialist values within society. It is also assumed that the inclination of the mass of the people is for support of the self-limiting character of the reforms, and so they will not support the revolutionary alternative, or the revolutionary continuation of the introduction of reforms. However the logic of the class struggle challenges these assumptions. The fact that these reforms are more radical than those in the past will only enhance ambitions to ensure their success by further progress being made by the act of revolution. For example, the introduction of workers control can only ensure the stability of this situation by revolution creating the conditions for the domination of socialist relations of production. In other words, the self-limiting character of the reforms will be contradicted by their principled and radical aspect. Hence the assumption will be that the logic of these reforms can only be realised by the process of revolution. It will not be possible for the implementation of radical reforms to coincide with the continuation of capitalism. This recognition will be recognised by the mass movement that will spontaneously reject the self-limiting character of reforms. Thus if demoralisation of the mass movement is to be avoided the continuation of the reforms has to generate the act of revolution. The alternative is still the spectre of defeat and the end of the process of the advance of reforms. Consequently, Miliband’s perspective cannot avoid the issue of the relationship between his standpoint and the role of revolution.

The above is not meant to suggest that revolution is inevitable. Instead what is implied is that Miliband is unable to establish the arguments for the logic of reforms as a self-limiting process. The development of reforms can either result in the advance to higher levels of struggle or else to the prospect of retreat and defeat. But Miliband has other arguments against revolution. He suggests that revolution results in dictatorship. This is a very determinist argument. It is implied that because past revolutions have resulted in dictatorship the only possible outcome of future revolutions will also be dictatorship. But supporters of revolution could argue that it is possible for the participants in the revolutionary process to overcome the mistakes of the past and so create the prospect of a different outcome such as the reconciliation of democracy with radical change. If we identify the reasons for the degeneration of revolution in the past we can establish the prospect of corrections at the level of theory and practice. The Russian revolution was the classical example of a proletarian revolution that regressed. We could argue that this was not because of the act of revolution and instead was connected to its aftermath such as civil war, isolation and scarcity. These developments encouraged the formation of monolithic rule of a single party and undermined the prospect of functioning Soviet democracy and workers control based on the importance of the trade unions. The defeat of international revolution could be said to be the major contributory factor to the degeneration of the revolution into a dictatorship. The Stalin regime thrived on the increasing difficulties of the prospects of the world revolution. Consequently when the prospects arose for the advance of the international revolution the Stalin regime distorted them into becoming an expression of its bureaucratic power, such as the expansion into Eastern Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

Consequently we have learnt that the compromise of the principles of democracy and popular participation undermine the prospects for the development of revolutionary regimes. The aim of survival should not be at the expense of the importance of democracy. Hence the dilution of the principles of socialist development should have strict limitations and be for a short temporary period. We have also learnt that the domination of a single party within the state apparatus is problematical and it would be more principled if the major revolutionary party resisted the temptation to predominate within the state. The rotation of leadership of the most important party would also be advisable in order to ensure that a bureaucratic privileged elite is not formed. It is also important to avoid the domination of a single national party within the International organisation so that the International does not become the instrument of any national revolutionary regime. The point being made is that the act of revolution itself did not create these problems and instead it was the process of the decline of the revolution that led to degeneration. The continuation of the popular enthusiasm of the revolution translated into policy can result in regime that are still accountable to the people and based on the democratic will. However if the popular level of the revolution ebbs because of bureaucratisation and the formation of a single party rule then the result will be the prospect of dictatorship. This is why the relations between working people and the dominant revolutionary party have to continue to be democratic and the institutions within society have to be a consistent expression of the popular will. The problem is not the act of revolution but instead the exploitation of the gains of the revolution because of the process of bureaucratic decline. In contrast, Miliband can only consider that the revolution is problematical because he considers it an act of an elite and not the genuine aspiration for democratic self-emancipation. This represents historical pessimism and equates the actions of Stalinism with the logic of the revolutionary process. However Stalinism is a distortion of the role of revolution for its own ends, and it cannot represent the revolutionary process. Genuine revolution is popular and democratic and this opposite to the actions and character of Stalinism. Hence Stalinism is counterrevolutionary rather than an expression of the aims and content of revolution.

Miliband also argues that the standpoint of revolution is based on the illusion of the necessity to smash the bourgeois state. Instead a strong state is required in order to ensure the success of the reformist project. This means he is effectively arguing that the bourgeois state in a democratised manner will carry out the process of reforms. It will not be necessary to carry out a revolutionary transformation of the state in order to promote the success of the socialist project. MIliband is aware that the role of the state in the past has undermined the process of change but he argues that the relationship between the popular government and the mass movement can overcome this problem in the future: “The accumulation of grievances…will in time bring about, on the basis of strong popular support at the polls and beyond, the accession to power of governments of the Left pledged to carry out measures of strong radical reform and renewal throughout the social order.”(3) This standpoint is based on the perspective that the relations between a left government within parliament and a mass movement can realise the necessary reforms to transform society and bring about the realisation of socialism. But he does not explain how this type of government will be elected when compared to the failures of Social Democracy in the past. Indeed, he is aware of the limitations of Social Democracy and its present inclination to adapt to the requirements of neo-liberalism, and therefore he has a problem of credibility when trying to suggest that the impetus is present for the promotion of an alternative socialist project. He maintains that the most likely generation of the forces of socialism will come from within the social democratic organisations.(4) But he ignores the fact that the left-wing of Social Democracy became historically weak in the 1990’s and was unable to challenge the right-wing shift of the leadership of the various Social Democratic organisations. He also suggests that it will be possible to develop coalitions of forces in favour of reform that would include trade unionists, ecologists, female and black activists. The result can be the development of new socialist parties that are radical but not traditionally revolutionary. This has been a manifestation of the recent period but it has not resulted in serious challenges for political power. Instead these socialist parties have tended to attract the votes of those people demoralised with Social Democracy. In other words the hegemony of the defenders of capitalism has not been challenged by these recent developments and instead there has been a strategic crisis of the supporters of the socialist project.

The situation has been generally monopolised by the rivalry between the defenders of capitalism and moderate Social Democracy. There has been the occasional upsurge of support for the parties of the radical and extreme left, but this has not undermined the hegemonic consensus concerning support for the existing system. Hence Miliband is under the illusion that it will be possible to develop the forces for radical reform despite the apparent failures of the project of revolutionary socialism and the strength of the ideology of support for capitalism. Instead we can argue that the very problems of trying to develop support for a revolutionary option is reflected in the difficulties involved in trying to generate support for radical reformism. For example in the recent elections in Spain, the failure of the moderate Socialist party to tackle issues of unemployment and crisis did not result in increasing popularity for left-wing organisations. Instead the Conservative forces developed their support and were elected. The situation was favourable for creating support for a party of radical reform that would be able to indicate that capitalism was the cause of the various social problems, and yet this did not happen. Instead moderate Social Democracy was discredited and the party of the bourgeoisie enhanced its support. In other words the period of crisis has not led to a notable shift to the left except for the development of trade union militancy in Greece. Thus definite support for the socialist project, whether of revolutionary Marxism, or radical reform, remains low. Furthermore in relation to the 1990’s when Miliband was writing, the project of neo-liberalism was uncontested and the situation was characterised by the increasing development of the conditions of boom and not crisis. This meant his standpoint was based on hope and imagination and could not relate or connect to any real developments. Consequently the argument that the project of radical reform was more popular than discredited revolutionary Marxism was dogmatic. Instead we could argue that because of the demise of Stalinism and the ideological strength of neo-liberalism the socialist alternative was very feeble. Developments since Miliband’s book was written have not altered this assessment. Instead we have the emergence of the crisis of capitalism and yet the generation of socialism as a mass and popular force has not happened.

Miliband believed that the renewal of the credibility of socialism would depend on making the argument for radical reform. His approach is based on the conception of the dynamic role of a popular government carrying out important reforms that would result in the transformation of the character of social power. The assumption is that a party led process of change would develop. However what has actually happened is that the emergence of a credible party of opposition has not occurred and instead the trade unions represent the major alternative to the austerity measures of the various bourgeois governments within Europe. Hence the focus of developing mass struggle against the aims of the ruling class has to begin before the assumption of governmental power by a socialist party. Indeed it would be an illusion to wait for the formation of a militant socialist government given the domination of the forces of moderate social democracy. The political forces of the parties of socialism remain peripheral. Hence the immediate and central strategic task is about how to influence the trade unions to articulate the aims and tasks of the socialist transformation of society. This will be a difficult task because the trade unions have historically been based on an accommodation to the interests of capital because of a focus on negotiation and the intention to obtain an improvement in the material conditions of labour. The trade unions are not historically suited to becoming the dynamic instruments of a strategic offensive to undermine the domination of capital. But it is possible for trade unions to become more militant and oppositional. For example, recently in Nigeria the trade unions embarked on an indefinite general strike in order to oppose the withdrawing of the fuel subsidy. Their militancy seems to have been successful and their aims realised. It is also very interesting to recognise that the supporters of the strike would have been willing to continue the strike until a workers government was formed. In other words the dynamics of the general strike created a mass sentiment for the transformation of society.

Consequently we can develop a strategy for revolutionary change based on the increasing importance of the trade unions within society because of the failures of the politics of moderate Social Democracy. This prospect is also connected to the fact that left-wing socialist parties have not emerged in mass terms as an alternative to the limitations of moderate Social Democracy. However we also know that the trade unions represent bourgeois politics within the working class as Lenin argued. If the trade unions are not changed and become more politically advanced the result will be the promotion of a different type of reformism. The standpoint of the trade unions will be based on what they can obtain within capitalism and not express the prospect of advancing the realisation of a different type of society. Many Marxist type organisations have adapted to this situation and diluted their demands in order to try and relate to the aspirations of the trade unions in an opportunist manner. But principled Marxism would insist that a political struggle has to be carried out within the trade unions in order to advance the influence of a revolutionary approach. The aim would be to transform the trade unions so that they could become the instruments of the development of class struggle to the point that it advances the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society. This is a difficult task because it would suggest the undermining of the domination of the trade union bureaucracy which historically has never really been realised in the past. The trade unions have always been reformist organisations because of the domination of the bureaucracy, and the rank and file has never been organised sufficiently to change this situation. Hence it is crucial that a Marxist organisation is developed within the trade unions that can advance the aims of the transformation of the unions in an effective manner. It could be argued that this is a very difficult task but it at least relates to the character of the class struggle as it is and not how we would like it to be. The historical failure of socialist political organisation has meant the trade unions are the most important counter-hegemonic social force, and the expression of the alternative to the austerity measures of the government. This means that the focus of the strategy and tactics of the struggle for socialism should concentrate on the trade unions and the role of Marxist political organisation should be related to this understanding.

However lets us assume that Miliband’s approach becomes valid and the prospect of an election of a left socialist government becomes credible. We would have to assume that the ideological situation has been radically transformed from a situation in which the assumptions of capitalism were not challenged into the recognition that an alternative society had become a realistic prospect. It would also be a fact that the class struggle would have intensified and the working class has become more class consciousness and receptive about the possibility of socialism. In this context any retreat of the left government would be considered unacceptable and the betrayal of the development of the class struggle. But unlike Miliband’s scenario, the major impetus of the process of struggle would no longer be the role of the government and instead would be based on the dynamism of the mass organs of the working class. In this context the role of the government would be to support the progress of the organs of the workers, and so the relationship between the government and the working class would change. No longer would the government have the dominant political role and instead the energy and dynamism of the workers would supersede that of the government and the emphasis would be upon the importance of the role of the workers for bring about the success of the process of transition to socialism.

Hence Miliband’s conception of the dynamics of the relationship between the socialist government and the mass movement is false. He assumes that a strong executive power would define a relationship of equality in which the role of the government would be crucial in the promotion of policy and the formulation of aims. This would be a new type of dual power: “In Marxist thought, dual power has always been taken to mean an adversary relation between a revolutionary movement operating in a revolutionary situation, and a bourgeois government under challenge from that movement. It is, however, possible to think of dual power in different terms: as a partnership between a socialist government on the one hand and a variety of grassroots agencies on the other.”(6) But if a really dynamic relationship did develop the result would be that the mass organs of the working class would be dictating to the government the tempo and progress of the process of transition. Miliband accepts that the activists would have a high degree of autonomy and self-organisation and self-initiative would be their principles of activity but this would mean that the government if it was actually genuinely participatory and democratic would become the expression of the will of the mass organs of the working class. Consequently the dynamics of the struggle would create a tendency for the dissolving of the bourgeois state and its replacement by organs of popular will. But Miliband disputes this and instead insists that a strong state with considerable executive power is required in order to promote the process of the realisation of radical reforms. He even argues that a period of executive rule on the basis of emergency powers will be needed in order to undermine resistance to the government. This approach does not actually bring the realisation of socialism any closer and instead will promote differentiation between the government and the mass organs of the working class. It is quite possible that his perspective will generate a situation of differentiation between the government and the organs of popular democracy. The result will be the actual creation of the confrontational dual power he is hoping to avoid. In this situation the task of the realisation of the advance of socialism will actually require the overthrow of the reformist government that is starting to undermine this process of transformation. The role of the strong state has become a reactionary opposition to the progress of social change and the transformation of society.

Miliband argues that his standpoint is based on the importance of the state and suggests that Marxists have underestimated the importance of the state and instead supported an illusory notion of its demise. But the problem with his approach is that he is conflating the role of the state under capitalism and socialism. He contends in confusing terms that: “The fact is that the executive power can be used to advance popular purposes. The history of capitalism itself shows that this to be the case: a radical government and the state under radical control would be needed to do infinitely better than what the capitalist state has reluctantly and grudgingly been forced to do over the years.”(7) And: “Notions of popular power as a substitute for a strong executive do not match p to the tasks which a radical government would face.”(8) Miliband seems to suggest that a radical government in control of a bourgeois state is able to implement anti-capitalist measures and advance the process of socialist transformation more effectively than the organs of popular power. Historical experience suggests that this perspective is flawed. If a radical government is in control of the state the result is the moderation of its actions and the reduction of policy to what is acceptable to the requirements of the bourgeois state. The interaction of state and government in these circumstances has the result of compromise and a retreat from the attempt to realise radical objectives. The influence and importance of the state has been utilised in order to dilute the principles and aims of the left-wing government. In contrast, the organs of popular power are organised outside of the limitations of the state and so are able to adopt objectives that are not based on adaptation to the influence of the state. This means these organs of popular power are more consistently able to uphold revolutionary objectives than the radical government that acts within the limitations imposed by the bourgeois state.

Consequently if the tasks of the transformation of society are to be advanced an important objective of the revolutionary movement is the smashing of the power of the bourgeois state. It has been understood that the attempt to control the bourgeois state has restricted the ability to influence developments, and the result has been the dilution of the aims of the mass movement and the radical government. However this does not necessarily mean that the creation of a socialist state should not be carried out. The issue is whether it is possible to construct a state that is democratic and amenable to the influence of the popular will. Is it possible to develop an accountable state? It could be argued that an executive power is required in order to carry out important functions within society, but this understanding should not be used as a justification for the bureaucratisation of the state. However these issues are distinct from the question of whether the bourgeois state can be the most suitable instrument for the process of socialist transformation. Miliband’s emphasis on the importance of the state could become the possible justification of the distinction between the state and the role of the popular organs of mass struggle. It would be this very disunity that would undermine the prospect of the transformation of society in a radical manner.

Miliband’s approach is based on the conception of the role of the state as potentially benevolent and progressive. It is similar to Kautsky’s view that it is possible to capture the state for the purposes of socialism, and so the aim of the destruction of the state is not required and indeed this would be counterproductive and opposed to the necessity of a strong state that can advance the progress of socialism. The implicit assumption is that a progressive bureaucracy acting within a democratised state can be the major agency of social change from capitalism to socialism. But the actual result of this process would be a type of state capitalism and not the implementation of socialism. Historical experience has indicated that the only principled and feasible prospect of the advance from capitalism to socialism is by the revolutionary mass action of the working class opposing the power of the existing state. But this is the very strategy opposed by Miliband, and instead he relies upon the conception of a dominant radical government within the bourgeois state promoting radical change. However, whilst this conception may bring about the realisation of some limited reforms, as in Chile of the 1970’s, the problem of the bureaucratic power of the state still remains. Only the realisation of popular power by the act of revolution can resolve the difficulties posed by the state in relation to the success of socialist strategy. It is the illusion of left Social Democracy to think that a radical government can resolve the reactionary problem of the role of the state. Instead the contradictions posed by the state are intensified and the only resolution of these contradictions is by the act of revolution.

Miliband suggests that the utilisation of emergency powers would resolve the issue of resistance to the actions of a socialist government. What is not recognises is that these powers are actually bestowed onto the organisation of the bourgeois state. Hence it is possible that these powers could be utilised against the supporters of the government and become the repressive means to oppose the process of transition to socialism. In any event the utilisation of emergency powers by the radical government would create a process of differentiation between itself and the mass organs of popular power. The most effective and principled manner in which the radical government could advance its measures would be by the process of popular consent. In contrast the resort to authoritarianism would mean that the popular aspects of the government were being diluted and replaced by the strengthening of the executive power. This situation could result in a precedent that meant the state become effectively Bonapartist or vacillating between the interests of the traditional ruling class and the working class. In other words the state was no longer dependent on its relation to the organs of popular power and instead was increasing based on an adaptation to the influence of the forces of reaction within the bourgeois state. The result would be a retreat of the radical government from the attempt to realise socialist aims and adaptation to the forces of reaction would result in the development of measures against the most militant sections of the working class. Hence Miliband’s assumption that the government equipped with emergency powers is an instrument of socialism seems illusory and what would happen is a shift to the right and the dilution of the principles of the government. Indeed it could be argued that the limitations and contradictions of a reformist government, because of the conflicting pressures of the forces of reaction and revolution, would result in the tendency towards the dictatorship and Bonapartism. These tendencies could only be resolved by the acceptance of defeat or by advance towards revolution. The tendency within history has been for retreat and compromise even by the forces of left Social Democracy. Miliband is against this approach of moderation and conciliation of the ruling class but his strategy suggests the possibility that retreat would be considered preferable to the unknown of revolution.

Miliband is aware of the problem of left governments acting in a repressive manner, but his response is to advocate the utilisation of strong powers: “All governments, when hard pressed, are tempted to behave in arbitrary ways; and a socialist government, faced with a multitude of grave problems, would also be subject to that temptation. This is why effective constraints upon the exercise of powers are essential. But it is well to be clear that the realization of a programme designed to transform the social order in democratic and egalitarian directions requires, as an essential condition, that the government be equipped with adequate power.”(9) Hence his strategy is contradictory. On the one hand he advocates the utilisation of restraint in the exercise of political power, and on the other hand he suggests that the government applies the use of strong state power in order to ensure that its programme is realised. These contradictions and tensions indicate an impasse in his strategy and the acknowledgement that he does not actually understand what would be the most effective approach in order to ensure the success of the policies of the government. His standpoint does assume the role of a strong state in relation to intervention within civil society. The implication is that the character of civil society does not have sufficient political strength in order to ensure the success of the process of socialist transformation. Bu the actual relationship of the state and civil society in order to ensure victory for the socialist project should be that the state encourages the ability of the social forces within civil society to generate progress of the perspective of socialist transformation. Only from within civil society can the class forces emerge that can encourage the prospects for the development of socialist relations of production and the role of the state should be to encourage and not impede this prospect. In contrast, Miliband is suggesting that the socialist character of civil society is weak and so a strong state is vital in order to encourage and promote socialism. Hence the state is vital in order to ensure the domination of social ownership of the means of production and the dynamism of collectivism. The assumption is that the forces of capitalism are strongest within civil society and so the action of the state is crucial if socialism is to become stronger than capitalism.

This standpoint is ironically not very different from the approach of Bolshevism. The neglect of the role of popular organs of democracy and workers control of production was because of the view that only the role of a strong state via the policy of state nationalisation could ensure that socialism was stronger than the forces of capitalism. Hence both Miliband and Bolshevism advocate a type of stateism in relation to their conception of transition to socialism, even if they differ about the issues of reform or revolution. But this means that both Miliband and Bolshevism underestimate the importance of mass organs of popular democracy in relation to their evaluation of the process of transition to socialism. Instead the state is defined as historically progressive and the forces of civil society as reactionary, or the expression of private aspirations that oppose the extension of nationalisation by the government. What is underestimated is the importance of the actions of the working class in advancing the process of social transformation. Hence the standpoint of both Miliband and Bolshevism gloss over the historical significance of the revolutionary role of working people. This is why there is common neglect of the striving of working people to overcome their alienated condition inherited from capitalism.

It is interesting that Miliband considers that public enterprise within the socialist economy will still be based on the significance and importance of the difference between management and the rank and file worker.(10) Thus what was considered as an expression of emergency requirements within the early years of the Soviet regime in order to promote economic efficiency is considered the norm by Miliband. The role of hierarchy, and strict division of functions between management and the workers, is assumed to be compatible with the aims of the emancipation of labour from exploitation. This means that the possibility that the role of the new management could promote new forms of exploitation and monopoly control over the surplus product is effectively dismissed. However what is not explained is how these hierarchical relations can promote common objectives within the relations of production. Indeed Miliband accepts that these differential relations within the economy will possibly promote tensions and confrontations. However he does not argue that the cause of these tensions – the dominant position of management – should be ended and replaced by economic democracy. Hence it is assumed that the interests of socialism and management are compatible. But the neglect of workers control of production as an integral aspect of socialist relations of production means that socialist economic forms are equated with state centralisation and nationalisation. It is interesting that he defines planning by governments as an expression of socialist planning and the example of this approach is the planning of various Social Democratic administrations. This means what was wrong with Stalinist planning was its inefficiency and rigidity and not the denial of the capacity of the producers to articulate forms of democratic planning. Miliband does formally refer to the aim of overcoming exploitation and the realisation of new relations of production based on cooperation.(11) But what is not explained is the relation of means to ends. If the role of management is assumed to be indispensable to the process of production the possibility will be present for the generation of exploitation because of differential access to resources and the inequality represented by the role of hierarchy. In this context Miliband does not even try to call for the democratisation of relations between management and the workers, and instead the assumption of relations between an ‘us and them’ is accepted. Thus it is not surprising that the formal reference made to the importance of economic democracy does not elaborate how the unequal situation between management and the workers can be resolved. Consequently it is not surprising that the progress of economic democracy is not part of the criteria elaborated to explain the advance of socialism and the overcoming of capitalism. Instead what is presented as crucial in this regard is the overcoming of commodification and the replacement of the market by the role of the plan.(12)

Miliband outlines the following definition of the superiority of socialism over capitalism: “In short, a socialised economy….. would free the whole of society from the ‘fetters’ imposed on it by the rationality of capitalism, and substitute for it an altogether different kind of rationality, attentive to human needs and seeking their satisfaction under the least onerous conditions possible. This liberation of society from the domination of capital is the essential condition for the creation of a social order in which the degree of cooperation and harmony unobtainable under capitalism would become possible.”(13) Given the prior analysis it is not surprising that Miliband’s definition of socialism emphasises the technocratic criteria of rationality and efficiency. He does not elaborate the importance of the conscious control of society because of the role of democracy and instead the character of society is presented in terms of the realisation of the highest levels of administration and the ability to plan in order to realise human needs. The role of cooperation is considered as a secondary aspect of this rationality and the significance of the capacity of humans to transform their social conditions is glossed over. This definition does not conceive of progress in terms of the increasing ability of humans to work together to realise common goals and instead the relation of humans to society is left ambiguous. Society is described as a harmonious mechanism that realises the ability to regulate itself virtually without the importance of human intervention. The assumption is that the state is the expression of the self regulating character of society. With this approach the relation of humans as agency to the role of structure is not clarified. Instead society is a structure that has virtually liberated itself from human praxis. This is why society defines human needs and imposes the mechanisms that will realise them.

The standpoint of Miliband outlines the shared assumptions between Social Democracy and Stalinism. They both represent a statist conception of the transition to socialism and in relation to their definition of socialism. This standpoint is based on the emphasis of the importance of the social ownership of the means of production and it is argued that the Stalinist bureaucratic command economy is a distortion of the role of nationalisation and the domination of the state. The argument is that the Stalinist control of the political aspects of the system is a distortion of the potential of the economy for the realisation of the liberation of humanity. This view underestimates the possibility for the nationalised character of the economy to also represent the development of exploitation and the extraction of a surplus by a ruling class. In other words there is an important difference between social ownership and nationalisation. The former can represent the importance of the role of the producers and the latter the centralisation of the economy under the control of the elite. But Miliband tends to reject these possibilities because he associates the exploitation of wage labour almost exclusively with the relation of private ownership of the means of production to the role of wage labour: “This is that the exploitation that occurs under public ownership is a deformation, in so far as public ownership does not rest on an require exploitation, and provides at least the basis for the cooperative association of the producers, under conditions of democratic control, and with differential rewards kept within agreed bounds. By contrast, the whole of economic activity under private ownership is exploitation, and makes no sense if it is not to result in the private enrichment of the owners and controllers of the means of that activity. Socialization offers the promise and the possibility of realizing the abolition of wage labour: such an eventuality is rigorously precluded by the very character of capitalism.”(14)

Miliband has outlined the association of exploitation with the private ownership of the means of production, but he has glossed over the possibilities of the promotion of exploitation within the situation of the state ownership of the economy. The point that is crucial is the character of the relations of production. If socialist relations of production were dominant that would mean that the producers had the autonomy and capacity to control the character of production. Democratic planning would also be compatible with this situation. But if the relations of production were based on bureaucratic domination this would facilitate the prospect of the extraction of a surplus by a new ruling class and represent a situation of exploitation. Historical experience has shown that state ownership of the means of production is just as likely as private ownership to generate the prospect of exploitation. It could be argued that this represents a deformation of what should be the situation in terms of the democratic development of social ownership of the means of production. But the point is that exploitation has still resulted because of the monopoly control of the means of production by elites that have a dominant relationship with the producers within the process of production. In order for this situation to be avoided requires the importance of democracy within the economy and political structures. The producers have to have the democratic ability to undermine the prospect of a dominant class forming within the relations of production. This means the prospect that the end to private ownership is identical to the demise of exploitation is contingent on the realisation of important economic and political factors. If these factors are not realised the economic system can generate exploitation because of inequality within the relations of production. Consequently it is not an automatic and inherent possibility that state ownership will undermine the possibility of exploitation. Instead we have to understand what is the type of state that is replacing the bourgeois state, is it democratic or an expression of the imperatives of a new hierarchy? Thus it is crucial that in the post-revolutionary situation the balance of class forces favour the generation of socialist relations of production that will overcome the prospect of the renewal of exploitation. This means the working class has to overcome the tendencies for the regeneration of the promotion of exploitation and alienation, and such a possibility is connected to the ability to defeat the forces of bureaucracy within the state apparatus. Historical experience has shown that this possibility is very difficult and instead the state has become bureaucratic and promoted the prospect of exploitation. It could be argued that in future the working class will have to develop a more credible economic and political strategy that can more effectively realise the demise of the role of exploitation within the relations of production.

However Miliband underestimates the importance of these developments because he associates the role of the state with socialism. He does not acknowledge that the control of the state by working people has been one of the most difficult tasks in history. The Russian revolution indicated that the popular and democratic phase of the revolution was followed by the revolution in decline when the tendencies for bureaucratisation of the state were consolidated. This process was connected to the undermining of socialist relations of production by the introduction of managerial domination of the economy. Hence it was the formation of a strong state that was the expression of the promotion of tendencies for the re-emergence of exploitation. This situation was ideologically justified by the differentiation between the criteria of efficiency and the importance of democracy. It could be argued that this process was a distortion of socialist principles, and that state ownership was not meant to justify new forms of exploitation. But the point is that this distortion became a reality at the level of the policy of the state and this meant practice conformed to criteria that expressed a logic that was not socialist. This logic was not socialist and not capitalist because of the demise of private ownership of the means of production. The fact that the state had not been democratised by the revolution meant that new objectives could be adopted that undermined the prospect of socialism and the end of exploitation. The strong state became a defender of the new process of exploitation, or a type of exploitation that occurred under the conditions of the state ownership of the means of production.

Consequently we can acknowledge from historical experience that what is more important than the state and state ownership of the means of production for socialism is the primary role of economic and political democracy. Only when working people have the capacity to define the character of what happens in economic and political terms can the tendencies for the formation of an elitist state be overcome. The result will be a political form of democracy that upholds the development of economic democracy and the promotion of socialist relations of production. What is crucial is that the power of the state over society is limited and instead the forces within society dictate what the state should do. This will mean society is able to withstand the reactionary impulses of a state that has established overwhelming power over economic and political processes. In contrast, Miliband seems to suggest that a strong state with supervisory control over society is the best guarantee of socialist development. But actual historical experience seems to indicate this standpoint is inaccurate. The result of the formation of a strong state is the ability to define the economy and politics in a manner that benefits the state and not society, and a dominant class is generated by the process of bureaucratisation of the state apparatus. This does not mean that the state is inherently reactionary but it does mean its role should be scrutinised and controlled by society. The problems with creating the correct balance between state and society were related to the fact of civil war that required a strong state and army and the cultural limitations of a small working class. It is to be hoped that these detrimental aspects will not be present in any future revolutionary process and that the actions of working people will be able to create a balanced relationship between state and society.

Miliband argues that socialism is not the construction of a command economy and the domination of one party rule. However his emphasis on the strong state would imply that these features may be generated unavoidably. This is because a strong state would represent the tendency to develop a type of economy with centralised control because of opposition to the alternatives of private ownership of the means of production and workers democracy. The importance of a strong state would also mean that the prospect of political pluralism would be replaced by the domination of a single party that would direct the actions of the state apparatus. But Miliband is also critical of the various forms of Stalinism that have adopted these features as being integral to socialism. IN other words, Miliband’s primary conception of the importance of a strong state would suggest something that is still ideal and not yet realised in practice. The type of strong state of Stalinism is something that is reactionary and cannot advance the prospects of the realisation of socialism. Indeed he would argue that socialism has to have the features of democracy, egalitarianism and social ownership. None of these features are present within Stalinism, except for the fact that nationalisation is the predominant form of economic activity. This standpoint means that he would consider that the Bolshevik experience was flawed from its beginning because of the difficulties in the development of democracy and the increasing ascendency of a state bureaucracy that undermined the prospects of equality. He would also suggest that the nationalisation within the USSR was not compatible with the social ownership that would be present within principled socialism, which would be based on economic democracy.

Miliband is aware that the standpoint of socialism as a future society is challenged by the problem of catastrophe and the apparent limitations of human beings. He also recognises the enduring problem of hierarchy and rule by elites. Historical optimism in the future also seems to be undermined by ecological problems. He also argues that the development of socialism might not be rapid and instead require a lengthy period of time to end all aspects of exploitation. The development of socialism will be undermined by traditions and culture and have its own serious contradictions: “There is a difficult path to be explored between a reckless voluntarism on the one side, which starts from the premise that everything is possible, and an exaggerated caution on the other, which can easily turn into retreat and paralysis.”(15) But the ideology that comprehensive social change cannot occur in the contemporary world is the latest form of historical pessimism. This analysis of Miliband is very perceptive. It has been the degeneration of civilisation because of war and state repression that has put the very question of progress and socialism into question. It has often seemed that the forces of barbarism have been stronger than the alternative of socialism. It could also be argued that humans are not capable of realising a society without exploitation and the very effort to promote socialism has led to its opposite in terms of the generation of new forms of exploitation or the consolidation of capitalism. Hence the promotion of socialism should be advanced in a non-dogmatic manner in which we are aware of the prospect of historical alternatives and that we might not succeed in realising our project. But we should not reject the socialist perspective because of these difficulties because only socialism and communism can overcome the situation of exploitation and establish a better future. The various attempts to improve capitalism have resulted in important achievements but the basic limitations of the system have remained. This means the historical alternative of capitalism or socialism remains, and the apparent alternative of localised and specific attempts at realising emancipation is not satisfactory. These will not overcome the problem of the continuation of capitalism.

Miliband is also perceptive to suggest that socialism will be a society of contradictions. It will be an illusion to believe that revolutionary rupture can resolve all problems. Instead the legacy of the relation of old to new will generate policy dilemmas, and this situation will be complicated by the importance of inertia and tradition. In this context it will be dogmatic to try and resolve problems in an abrupt manner that is reminiscent of Stalin’s collectivisation of the peasantry, but he also suggests that gradualism can create its own problems. However this advice is too generalised. There may be occasions in which measures have to be taken rapidly because of threats of external intervention or the expectation of the supporters of socialism. It may also be necessary to move slowly because of the continued level of support for private ownership. The point is that the issue of whether measures are taken quickly or slowly is secondary to the question of who is carrying them out. If the working class is carrying out intransigent measures in a democratic and principled manner the result will be the advance of socialism. But if working people also consider that it is necessary to act in a gradual manner because of continued unfavourable conditions for the construction of socialism this might not be a setback because the decision to act cautiously has been taken democratically. The point that is crucial is the relation of working people to democracy. In other words acts that are voluntarist or too cautious are generally taken by elites in which the role of the masses is passive. These extremes can generally be avoided if the process of policy making is represented by the actions of working people. Voluntarism is usually the feature of elites trying to change unfavourable conditions into a process of transformation despite the general reluctance of the mass of the people. The opposite of gradualism is often the characteristic of elites that are reluctant to challenge the economic domination of capitalism. In contrast the participatory role of the masses is better able to establish a standpoint that is both intransigent and if necessary also moderate.

Miliband argues that it is an illusion to believe that revolution can abruptly change the situation in favour of socialism. This view is one-sided. We know from historical experience that without revolution the prospects of socialism will not be advanced sufficiently in order to realise the appropriate transformation of society. Only the act of revolution can create the economic and political pre-conditions for the advance to the realisation of socialism. This does not mean that revolution is identical to socialism and it would be an illusion to have this view, but revolution creates a new situation in which the working class is potentially no longer a subordinated class and instead has more freedom of action for the promotion of measures that will realise socialism. The process of revolution results in a more favourable balance of class forces that enables the working class to develop its initiative and creativity. It is also important to remember that revolution will only have become possible because working people have formed popular organs, and so the act of revolution creates the political power of these forms of mass struggle. The result is the ability of these organs to act in order to promote the prospect of socialism in a democratic and participatory manner. It is also important to recognise that the alternative to the illusions generated by revolution in a rapid realisation of socialism is not the validity of reforms because the implementation of reforms does not change society so thoroughly when compared to the act of revolution. The actual process of trying to construct socialism after the revolution will soon dispel illusions in the quick realisation of socialism and instead people will become aware of the importance of policy and the necessity to develop a strategy for socialism. In this context, Miliband’s emphasis on democracy, egalitarianism and socialisation are important principles that can guide the process of the development of the policy required for the realisation of socialism.

Miliband’s most important point about the complexity of the process of the realisation of socialism is that it involves the problem of contradiction. He seems to be suggesting that the character of contradiction in this context is the importance of the problems that will be created in the process of the transition to socialism. The ability to realise socialism will be the ability shown in the attempt to resolve these problems. We can elaborate and suggest that one of these most important problems will be whether the new regime is able to realise material needs in a manner that is superior to capitalism. The superiority of the system will also be indicated by whether it is able to develop production in a democratic manner and without the formation of a new ruling class. In this manner the realisation of equality will be an indicator that the system is advancing without the generation of new class contradictions. The rejection of the importance of democracy and equality will be an expression that the process of the development of socialism is proving to be too complex and the result is the generation of new class contradictions. In other words it could be argued that the central potential contradiction is the prospect of the creation of a situation in which new class antagonisms are being created because of the difficulties in developing an efficient and democratic system of production. The level of ability and creativity of the working class will determine whether this potential contradiction is resolved in a progressive manner and the system is able to make economic advances in a democratic manner.

Miliband seems to suggest that the primary contradiction is between social ownership and the continuation of the private means of production. But this contradiction will only retain its importance if the forces of private ownership become a challenge to the domination of social ownership. Historical experience has shown that the most important problem of the process of transition to socialism is the generation of the formation of a new ruling class within the relations of production. This class has economic power because of its control and domination of the state. The challenge for the working class is to create a democratised state that can overcome this tendency towards the state becoming an alienated economic power. One of the other major contradictions of the past, between the proletariat and peasantry, is being resolved by the very process of economic development. Society is becoming more urbanised and this means that the peasantry is becoming part of commodity production and so is proletarianised. The possibility for unity between the working class and the peasantry is increasing and this will mean less tension in the development of socialism. In other words the most important problem becomes the question of whether the working class has the ability to develop socialist relations of production. Problems at this level will promote the formation of a new ruling class and its domination over the extraction of the surplus product. However, Miliband actually underestimates this problem because he locates most of the contradictions of the development of socialism with the role of Stalinism. Hence he actually does not anticipate the potential problems of socialist transition in the future. This means he seems unaware of the potential major contradiction being that between the increasingly dominant role of the state and the tendency for the subordination of the working class within the relations of production. It is true that historically this problem took the form of Stalinism, but we can suggest that this is a problem that can be abstracted from the historical importance of Stalinism and theoretically be defined as a contradiction of socialism. What will be vitally important is whether the working class has the economic ability and cultural capacity to resolve this potential contradiction.

It is also important to understand that socialism has not been realised in practice and so there are no examples that can be utilised in order to establish a guide to action. Instead the working class will have to rely on its own class consciousness and ability to resolve practical problems. The role of the party will also be important as the inspiration of the class struggle and the articulation of the importance of strategy and policy. But historical experience has presently outlined what is not necessary for the construction of socialism. Miliband does outline the importance of constitutionalism and the rule of law. Stalinism was based on the arbitrary utilisation of law that justified tyranny and despotism, and the prospect of the relation of socialism and democracy is based on the application of law in an impartial manner. If the law is arbitrary there is the possibility of favouritism and preference that would tend to uphold the interests of the powerful and dominant. But the impartial exercise of the law means that all are formally equal and stability within society can be encouraged by the understanding that it will not be possible for anyone to be able to misuse the legal process. This situation will also mean that people will know what their rights are under the law and the development of socialism will be connected to the realisation of rights. In this context equality and justice will be a right that is connected to legal interpretation and the rights of the citizen will also ensure that the state does not become omnipotent because that would be a violation of the rights of the people within society.

But Miliband considers that the role of the law and rights would be exercised within the context of the role of a strong state. There would be a balance between the activity of a strong executive power and the constraints of the law. This situation would enable the state to take decisive action in favour of the advance of socialism without becoming a despotic power. Hence he has a conception of a benevolent state that acts in an enlightened manner on behalf of working people and implements measures that enable the citizens to enhance the process of transition to socialism. This state would not become a tyranny because of the importance of the legal procedures and the rights of the people. The assumption is that the state is the active aspect of the process of the realisation of socialism and working people generally, if critically, act to implement the measures proposed by the government. But this perspective has been shown to be problematical. This would mean that Miliband’s ideal state would still have the tendency to become a distorted expression of the process of socialism because of the accumulation of economic and political power. At some point the state would become so powerful that its actions would tend to transcend the legal constraints and it would become an omnipotent dictatorship. The contradiction between an active and powerful state and a relatively passive citizenry would be resolved by the realisation of tyranny. Hence state intervention would define the character of society, and the state would become the most powerful economic and political mechanism. In this context it would be difficult to maintain economic and political democracy. Furthermore, the ideology of an enlightened elite would justify monopoly ownership of the means of production by the state.

In other words the problem is the imbalance between the state and society, and the role of law cannot resist the prospect of the formation of a dictatorship of the state. The answer is not to abolish the state after the revolution, which is impossible, but instead to restrict its power. This situation will enhance the prospect of the control of the state by society. The result can be the advance of economic and political democracy. Miliband seems to assume that the major instrument for the advance of socialism is a state that is constrained by the law, but his perspective does not undermine the prospect that the actions of a dominant state will facilitate the exploitation of labour within the process of production. What is actually vital to the prospect of socialism is the functioning of organs of popular will, and their success will be based on the ability to regulate and limit the power of the state. Miliband is adamant that only the state can carry out the functions of administration and he suggests that it is an illusion to believe that these functions can be simplified to the point that these tasks can be carried out by a society without the role of a state. He is possibly right in his assessment, but this does not justify the role of a strong state. This is because a powerful state would accumulate more functions than those of administration it would also become an important economic force and acquire the capacity to influence the activity of the democratic structures. The state would become a rival to the actions of the organs of popular will. Indeed the state will ultimately interact with the organs of popular will and they will become dependent on the power of the state. Ultimately the citizens will not be able to express opinions that differ from the approach of the operation of the state. Consequently the strong state has an inherent tendency to become omnipotent and to replace the influence of the organs of popular will. This is the lesson learnt from the history of the Russian revolution, but Miliband is reluctant to make these conclusions because he differentiates between dictatorship and the role of a benevolent state. To him the problem is dictatorship and not the importance of the state, and so the combination of democracy and the state will realise socialism. What is not acknowledged is that one of the important contradictions of any society in transition to socialism will be between the organs of popular will and the role of the state. Only if the organs of popular will control the state is the prospect of socialism encouraging.

Miliband argues that the state can be democratised by the influx of supporters of the socialist government into its organs of administration. The accountability of the state to the purposes and goals of the socialist government would be vital if the problem of bureaucracy is to be tackled and resolved. But Miliband is emphatic that certain aspects of bureaucracy are unavoidable in relation to the process of the carrying out of the tasks of government. But the lessons of the Russian revolution indicate that his approach is simplistic and over-optimistic. The influx of supporters of the revolution into the state only resulted in the swelling of the size and significance of the role of bureaucracy within the state. This also meant that the importance of organs of popular will being reduced, and the result was the formation of the omnipotence of the state. The importance of democracy would not mean a different result within the type of society envisaged by Miliband. Hence the role of the bureaucracy would become a problem and the state would acquire the tendency to become autonomous and to impose its will on the rest of society. The only alternative to this development would be the assertion of the influence of the organs of popular will. This means the policy should be the subordination of the state and government to the organs of popular will, and not the imposition of the state onto the activity of society. Miliband ultimately insists on the importance of the state and government because he is pessimistic about the organs of popular will being able to carry out functions of administration. He assumes that the people do not have the expertise of the state and civil servants. But why could it not be possible for the officials of the state to promote the ability of the organs of popular will to carry out functions of administration? Why is it not possible for the state to become progressively dissolved within society? Thus Miliband’s approach rests on the assumption that the state and society will be permanently differentiated and so the standpoint of socialism should be to support the intervention of the state within society. This perspective is actually pessimistic and does not explain that the process of advance towards socialism must rely primarily on the organs of popular will. The role of the state should be to carry out the decisions of the organs of popular will. This is because the alternative to this relationship is the justification of bureaucratisation via the increased power of the state.

Miliband argues that the problem of bureaucratisation could be tackled by the election of officials. This is an important policy for the development of the democratisation of the state. But the election of officials does not resolve the problem of the relation of the state to society. Instead the balance of power between the state and society has to be tackled. The election of officials may modify the problem of bureaucratisation but it will not abolish it as long as the state has autonomous power in relation to the rest of society. This means the democratisation of the state has to occur in the context of trying to ensure that the state is not the most important focus of power. It is the limitation of the influence of the state that can ensure the election of officials has the desired result of realising accountability and popular control. But this also means that the popular organs of will are established and subject to the interests of the people. These organs will be the most effective basis for the establishment of control and scrutiny of the actions of the state. They will be able to supervise the actions of the democratic officials of the state and facilitate the prospect that the state will act in accordance with the aspirations of the organs of popular will and so does not develop a tendency towards its autonomous power. In contrast, Miliband argues that the democratised state is the most effective expression of the popular will and is the instrument for the introduction and development of socialism. This means the role of popular organs is merely supportive of the actions of the state and the government. But it is this very unequal relationship between state and the organs of popular will that will generate the omnipotence of the state and create the conditions for the generation of bureaucratisation. The process of the election of officials will not undermine this assumption of economic and political power by the state and the related reduction of influence of the organs of popular will.

Miliband also argues that it is necessary to differentiate between the role of the executive and the legislative. This would mean a strong government implements the legislation agreed by the legislative organ which would be a Parliament elected by universal suffrage and based on the competition between parties. The support of over 50% of the population would represent a mandate for the introduction of legislation. Historical experience would suggest that organs that combined the role of legislation and the executive have accumulated vast powers that have contributed to the undermining of democracy and the promotion of the rule of elite’s. However the conclusion to be made is not that Parliament is the most suitable basis for the generation of democracy. It is entirely possible that the organs of popular will could be differentiated between the executive and the legislative and the criteria of policy would be decided by competition between parties that have been elected by universal suffrage. In the last analysis it will be for the people to decide whether they want Parliamentary representation, but the preference of many Marxists is for the role of organs of popular will because they have the potential for greater participation and the prospect to ensure that the government is democratic and represents the interests of the electors. Indeed the difference between electors and government would be narrowed by the fact that the government itself cannot exist outside of the relation to the organs of popular will. Unlike Parliament, which can become very unrepresentative and accumulate vast powers and uphold the interests of professional politicians, the organs of popular will attempt to realise a new and higher type of democracy that is genuinely participatory. However Miliband seems to be sceptical about the prospects of organs of popular will because they apparently failed in the Russian revolution and only the leadership of strong government can supervise the process of transition to socialism. But we could argue that leadership and firm government can also be provided by the organs of popular will if they are able to establish a stable form of relation between the role of the executive and legislative. It is not just the approach of Parliamentary politics that can combine the role of democracy with effective government. We would also argue that it is perfectly possible for organs of popular will to evolve mechanisms of policy making that have democratic approval. It would be pessimistic to consider that only Parliament has the ability to establish the interaction of the role of government and decision making in a democratic manner. Indeed it could be argued that the importance of organs of popular will are the most effective means to enable policy making for avoiding the promotion of the unaccountability of government and the justification of a bureaucratic apparatus. Miliband accepts the mystique of Parliament in order to reject possible alternatives, but we would argue that the problems of the Russian revolution do not make the role of the organs of popular will invalid.

However Miliband is correct to argue that the socialist political system should be based on the competition of political parties and this would include parties that support the restoration of capitalism. In this context it would be more harmful to socialism to refuse to accept majority support for a return to capitalism than to accept the verdict of the people. However it is to be hoped that success in the development of socialism would mean that people did not have reasons to vote for capitalism and instead the support for socialism would become more popular. The only alternative to a constitutional vote for capitalism would be the transformation of a socialist government into elite dictatorship that would no longer have a popular mandate. This situation would encourage the tendency for the state to generate forms of exploitation and bureaucratisation and working people would become even more alienated from the aims of socialism. The distortion of socialism in order for the dominant party to stay in power would only create the political conditions that would make capitalism even more popular. But it is also necessary to suggest that the formation and activity of organs of popular will would make support for the return to capitalism very unlikely. This is because these organs will generate the ability of people to participate in the process of the construction of socialism and so the creation of socialism is a conscious act of the people who are able to make their own history. In contrast, the attempt to develop socialism via the action of Parliament promotes the possibility that the very process of socialist development becomes reduced to the activity of an elite group of people. The mass of the people are uninvolved in this process and socialism is based on actions from above and not the expression of action from below. Socialism becomes the activity of a strong state via the role of Parliament, and the mass of people are uninvolved in this process. This situation is more likely to create the possibility that popular support for socialism becomes undermined and capitalism would regain popular appeal. It is also interesting that Miliband refers to the historical experience of Social Democracy in this context of Parliamentary socialism, but this experience is based on the modification of capitalism and not its transformation. Hence the election of conservative parties after the period of Social Democracy has not represented a return to capitalism and instead represents an alternative to the management of capitalism by left parties. Hence we have to wonder whether Miliband is genuinely calling for the socialist transformation of society via the actions of Parliament, or is he calling for Social Democracy to reject its rightward shift and re-establish itself as reformism.

What Miliband has argued very convincingly is that monolithic one party rule is not conducive to the success of socialism. The lack of political pluralism may mean the ability of a single party to impose its objectives onto society but this will not mean the advance of socialism. Instead the tendency is for the promotion of a party dictatorship that will create antagonistic differences between itself and the mass of the people. The only principled prospect of the development of socialism requires the democratic completion between parties because this enables people to support socialism on the basis of consent and therefore the situation is not the artificial expression of the imposition of the aims of the dominant party because of its exclusive control of the state. It is also entirely possible that more than one party will emerge that advocate socialism, and so people should have the right to make a choice between these different parties. But there is no inherent reason why political pluralism can only be expressed by the role of Parliament. This means it is perfectly possible that the organs of popular will can become the expression of the importance of political pluralism. Only the experience of the October revolution has raised questions about the ability of popular organs to express political pluralism. But the problem was not with the organs of popular will but because of the circumstances that undermined the chances of success of multi-party democracy. Hence in entirely different circumstances the prospects for the consolidation of multi-party democracy within a different political system may have been enhanced. The problems within the situation after the October revolution were not caused by the organs of popular will and instead were the result of the unfavourable conditions for the overall development of socialism.

Miliband argues that there has to be a distinction between the official sector of the state, which includes the role of the government and civil servants, and the role of citizen agencies that expresses the importance of the parties and trade unions. In order to oppose the prospect of government becoming an oligarchy it is necessary that the citizen section influences its actions. The major basis of this possibility is that the government becomes transformed from an organ that upholds the corporate power of business and instead acts in a democratic manner to facilitate the advance of socialism. This will mean a process of interaction with parties, trade unions and other organisations of the citizens. Interaction of this type would certainly advance the development of popular democracy. But the question is would this interaction be most effectively advanced by the role of Parliament or by some other expression of democracy? It is important to remember that Parliament is the institution that is most compatible with the representative democracy of capitalism. Hence it is often compatible with the tendency towards oligarchy. These limitations of capitalism mean that it is difficult to express the will of popular forces located outside of Parliament. Historically Parliament has contested with the trade unions about political legitimacy. Hence it could be difficult for Parliament, even if it had a majority of Socialist representatives, to become the expression of popular will. Parliament could remain the defender of oligarchy and vested interests against the aspirations of the people. In this context it may be necessary to establish a different political relationship that could promote a more democratic and principled relationship between the forces of the state and society. This relationship would be expressed by the organs of popular will, and it would mean that the very citizens become the officials of the state. Miliband argues that this prospect is impossible and that it is not practical to overcome the differences between government organs and citizens. Hence government cannot become entirely participatory. All people within society cannot become the government. This is true not we can still ensure that the influence of the organs of popular will means that the relation between government and citizens is transformed. The point is that for reasons of tradition and because of its inherent limitations Parliament may not be the organ that can transform the relations between officials and citizens. Instead we may have to rely on differences organs of political opinion in order to overcome the inherited problems of unaccountability and the distance between the state and society. But Miliband assumes that Parliament is the instrument for this process of transformation because it has become truly democratic because of the election of a Socialist government. This perspective could be possible, but Parliament could also be the bastion of tradition that tries to undermine the democratic transformation of relations between officials and citizens. The point is that organs of popular will would be more effective and principled means for the transformation of relations between the state and society.

Miliband is aware that only if oligarchic power is undermined will the advance towards socialism by possible. The point is what is the most effective manner in which this possibility can be realised? He is proposing that Parliament, which can be considered as part of the oligarchic institutions of society, is the institution that can best advance the overthrow of reactionary and vested interests. To the extent that the possibility that the socialist transformation via the role of Parliament has not been invalidated, he may be correct. But there are also other important objections to his approach which indicate the difference between reformism and revolution. If we have a reformist standpoint we are more likely to consider that Parliament is a suitable instrument for the transformation of society. However if we have a revolutionary perspective we are more likely to expect that the institution of Parliament will be transformed by the act of revolution and replaced by different organs of the popular will. If parliament remains it will be subordinated to these organs of popular will. This means the relationship between democracy and socialism assumes different forms and differs from the model of the role of Parliament. But this does not mean that it will become impossible to tackle oligarchic power as Miliband seems to suggest, and instead oligarchy will be tackled in a different manner. The necessity of different tactics does not make the strategic end invalid because socialism can still be constructed but it will have forms that are not envisaged by Miliband as viable.

Miliband insists that a genuine socialist government would aim to extend the influence of public ownership in a significant manner. The economy would be differentiated between public enterprise, cooperatives and a continuing private sector. It would be possible to reconcile the interests of management and workers within the public sector because of the influence of government policy and the attempt to realise the aim of efficiency through harmony: “There would be no such fundamental opposition between the ‘two sides of industry’ in the socialized sector of the economy. For the first time, there would come into being a genuine community of interests between all those engaged in the work of the firm, irrespective of their location in the process of production; and this could be expected to produce a spirit in the enterprise altogether different from that which prevails in capitalist enterprise.”(16) This point has been discussed previously, but we can also suggest that Miliband’s approach is based on the technocratic illusion that the change in the type of ownership will automatically and necessarily alter relations between management and the workers. Miliband assumes that the role of management is permanent and indispensable and so what is required is that this relation is modified and become more democratic and less antagonistic. But if management still have the ultimate control over decisions how is it possible to develop economic relations based on democracy? This is not necessarily an argument against management, but we have to be quite explicit that the only principled relation between management and workers is when the managers are effectively under the control and supervision of the workforce. What is envisaged is not that the managers are without any ability to exercise judgement and initiative but that this possibility is based on the ultimate democratic procedures based on the role of workers control of production. This prospect could be based on the trade unions being the most important part of the relations of production. The aims and objectives of work could be defined by the trade unions. Furthermore, the process of work could be subject to critical evaluation and all aspects of boredom and monotony could be challenged by the realisation of the views of the workers in practice. But it would be an illusion to consider that the very introduction of public ownership would alter the character of work and resolve the problem of hierarchy. If hierarchy has to be retained for reasons of efficiency it would be necessary to ensure that the managers do not become a state capitalist class because of a privileged relationship to the means of production and the allocation of resources. Hence the introduction of public ownership can be taken in an uncritical manner and instead has to be developed in principled terms that would enhance the ability of the workers to become the most important part of the relations of production.

Miliband makes the point that it is possible to develop an economy related to the role of planning targets and the increasing provision of needs in terms of the de-commodification of most of the important sectors of the economy. This would mean that the role of the market would be an expression of the character of a minority part of the economy. This standpoint seems to be both principled and flexible. He is arguing that planning need not have the problems of the USSR and instead it is possible to create high quality goods and to be efficient. It was the limitations of the Stalinist system and not the character of planning that led to problems. In a socialist society the need for most goods and services can be realise without the necessity of market regulation. This would express the development of a tendency that is already apparent within capitalism that many aspects of health, education and welfare are realised without the role of the market. However there are also certain goods that can still be best allocated through the role of the market. Hence it would be dogmatic to insist that the market has become totally redundant in the socialist society. Instead it would be a matter of consultation and involvement that would decide what goods could be provided in accordance with market criteria. This means that the definition of a socialist society is not decided by the extent to which the market has been overcome. This is because the aim of a society without the market is unrealistic. Instead we have to decide how to regulate the market in a manner that realises the public good. In these terms it could be argued that the market enhances variety and choice within a socialist society. But the importance of the market would be secondary within a socialist society because if the role of the market was primary in relation to the allocation of resources this could mean the tendency for the restoration of private ownership of the means of production and the subordination of the working class within the relations of production. Hence the character of the role of the market is to be compatible to a socialist system that is based primarily on the role of planning and the development of workers control of production.

However it is also necessary to suggest that Miliband’s effective definition of socialism as public ownership with a minority role for the market is problematical. This definition could be said to apply to the character of the system found within Stalinism. What is also vital, and seems to have been underestimated by Miliband, is the importance of economic democracy. Only when the workers have the ability to truly make important decisions can it be said that socialist relations of production are being developed instead of a form of state capitalism or bureaucratic collectivism. The crucial decision is does the state or the producers have the most important influence over the process of extraction of the surplus. This point is ignored by Miliband because he assumes that the state is identical to the interests of socialism. But the point is what is the character of the state and is it effectively under the sway of the workers and which means they are the most important decision makers. The importance of the state by itself is not identical to socialism and instead we need to know if socialist relations of production are being effectively developed. Miliband argues that he is aware of the problem of state bourgeoisie and the necessity of the alternative of economic democracy, but this is an afterthought and not an integral part of his conception of socialism. The emphasis on the role of public ownership is virtually abstracted from the point about its content and the crucial necessity that the state does not acquire autonomous economic power. Instead it is effectively assumed that public ownership is identical to socialism and the contradictions of this aspect are glossed over.

Miliband argues that whilst the working class does not have a necessary inclination to aspire to revolutionary transformation, it does have a class interest in the success of reforms: “Neither class location nor work automatically produces a left inclined consciousness; but the need to seek reform is nevertheless ‘organic’ to the working class, given its location in the productive process and society at large: wage earners are driven by the nature of that location to demand better wages and conditions, shorter hours, the extension of rights and benefits, and other related reforms. The strength of the striving for reform depends on many different circumstances; but it is never far from the surface. This helps to explain the support that large parts of the wage earning population have given to the major agencies of reform in capitalist societies.”(17) His argument is that the subordinated class position of the working class creates the interest and incentive to struggle for reform and not revolution. But if this argument is carried to its logical extension it would suggest that the working class only becomes interested in the reform of capitalism and has no political inclination in supporting socialism. The practice of the working class movement would be limited to the struggle for reforms, and there would be no mass support for socialism. But this has not been the historical experience of the working class. It has supported parties that have had declared aims of socialism, and the reason that the working class has been unable to realise this aim has not been because of indifference or mass opposition but because of the increasing right-wing tendencies of the parties that have represented them. The logic of working class consciousness has been to begin with a concentration on reforms and then to become more ambitious and to support the revolutionary transformation of society. Hence the hegemonic emphasis on reforms within the working class movement has been because of the general shift towards right-wing tendencies within Social Democracy and Stalinism. Furthermore, the demise of Stalinism has led to the general discredit of the very conception of socialism, but this has not meant a renewed emphasis on reforms. Instead there has been an ideological adaptation to the market logic of capitalism. In other words it would be a caricature to suggest that the working class movement has naturally and organically concentrated on reforms, and it would be an over-generalised error to suggest there has not been mass support for the revolutionary alternative at various times of the history of the class struggle. It also has to be recognised that at various times the very conception of reform has been discredited and replaced by the ideological hegemony of euphoria in capitalism.

Consequently the historical fortunes of trade union politics and Marxism help to explain the varying levels of influence of reform or revolution. In the period of the rise of the trade unions and when socialist organisation was often weak the influence of reformism and the view that capitalism could be modified by militant action and collective bargaining was very popular. This situation became consolidated by the rise of Social Democratic organisation. However the Russian revolution and the creation of the Communist International created mass support for the revolutionary transformation of society and the development of socialism. But the political regression of the Communist International created a new mass basis for reformism, and the forces of revolutionary Marxism became marginal. Some spontaneous struggles of the working class still had the dynamics of support for revolution, but the actual theoretical justification of revolution became a marginal current. In other words the spontaneous development of class struggle could still display tendencies towards revolution but the political articulation of the interests of the working class was outlined in reformist terms. This did not mean that the working class was naturally reformist but rather that the political elaboration of its interests were made in terms of a reformist world view. The result was actually a crisis of the working class in the 1930’s when the opportunities for the revolutionary transformation of society were rejected because of the increasing reformist character of working class political organisation. Only in the post-war period did the working class seem to have become naturally reformist because the boom enabled concessions and social improvements to be realised. But this period was replaced by the offensive of capital and a new crisis of the working class developed because the reformist character of their political organisations meant a strategy was not developed that could facilitate mass struggle to be victorious in this period when capital attempted to end the period of material social gains. The very lack of an offensive strategy that was popular meant the working class movement was on the retreat and suffered many defeats in the class struggle. Hence the development of a revolutionary approach would have actually facilitated the prospect of victory and defeated the offensive of capital. But it was the very strategic limitations of reformism that discredited this approach and promoted the right-wing shift of Social Democracy and Stalinism towards an uncritical acceptance of capitalism. The very major forces of reformism were rejecting reformism because of the pressures of the class struggle. In this situation the working class became disorientated and also developed tendencies towards the rejection of reformism.

Miliband’s view that the working class has an organic relationship to reforms was undermined by the very developments of the class struggle. The ideological interpretation of events led to the mood that capitalism could not be challenged and the programme of reforms and socialism was no longer on the agenda. Only tiny Marxist forces managed to continue to advocate socialism. This meant the popular basis of reformism was undermined by the political crisis of the working class movement. Social Democracy began to reject its reformist heritage and instead adopt a stand of uncritical acceptance of capitalism. The working class was influenced by this process and adapted to right wing views about society and the durability of capitalism. Events like the demise of Stalinism seemed to have confirmed this situation of the end of the politics of reforms and socialism. In this context, Miliband’s explicit support for radical reformism and socialism is an expression of a type of Marxist intellectual response to this situation. He was trying to reaffirm the reformist character of the working class in a period when the popular mood is for the rejection of reformism. His argument that revolution is unpopular within the working class is an attempted diversion from the fact that what has become genuinely unpopular is the reformist approach. Reformism no longer had mass appeal despite its past importance for working class history. The answer is not to try and reaffirm the necessity of reforms because this is a questionable exercise when the offensive of capital has undermined the prospect of the realisation of reforms in the present and future. Instead the task is to develop an offensive strategy that can promote militant class struggle capable of challenging the economic and political power of capital. The logic of the tasks of the class struggle indicates the importance of a revolutionary perspective. This standpoint may not be popular but it is what is required if the offensive of capital is to be effectively opposed. In contrast the left reformism of Miliband represents an historical anachronism that does not affirm an effective strategy for the class struggle. Any remaining illusions in reformism are not likely to promote success in the class struggle.

Furthermore the election of a left-wing Social Democratic government that connects the implementation of reforms with the development of socialism is very unlikely. The left wing of Social Democracy is historically weak and marginalised and Social Democracy has generally been transformed into being a tame instrument of the neo-liberal agenda. Hence the future of left wing Social Democracy is to establish political relations with the forces of Marxism and create new and united political organisations. The political principles of these organisations will not be advanced by the adoption of an old fashioned reformist programme that is inadequate for the tasks of the class struggle. Instead what will be adequate will be the attempt to develop an offensive strategy that can advance the interests of the working class in the contemporary situation. It is recognition of the tasks of the class struggle that promotes the creation of adequate programmes and not sentimental attachment to the reformist achievements of the past. However it has been that sentimental mood that has motivated Miliband. This means he cannot recognise the historical exhaustion of reformism and that the present period requires support for a different and more principled programme. Hence the reformist legacy of the past is of secondary importance when compared to the character of the tasks posed by the offensive of capital. But Miliband does not have a starting point of an understanding of the latest developments within the class struggle. Instead he starts with a romantic attachment to the importance of reformism and imposes this onto reality. The result is an idealism that cannot establish adequate perspectives. We should start not with how we would like the situation to be but instead try to establish what it is. The result should be a closer approximation of reality and the possibility of developing principled strategy and tactics. This will also mean the rejection of the reformist approach that has little strategic value in the present. Indeed it could be argued that Miliband presents a mythical conception of a left reformist government introducing reforms that can result in socialism. The actual character of the present situation suggests that socialism can only be introduced as a result of the revolutionary transformation of society. We cannot anticipate the precise details of this process but we can develop a strategy in order to promote the perspective of the revolutionary transformation of society. It is not Marxism that has discredited the reformist approach, but rather the offensive of capital has indicated the historical exhaustion of reformism. This situation should mean that principled Marxists should try to develop a strategy that would advance the interests of the working class in the class struggle.

Miliband considers in a cautious manner that the most effective basis of the advance of the cause of socialism is with the left wing of Social Democracy: “The outlook for left reformism is at present rather bleak; but this does not detract from the crucial preposition that it will for some time to come constitute the best hope for the advancement of radical politics.”(18) He accepts that the prospects of the left wing of Social Democracy are problematical but he still considers that what is wishful thinking represents the potential for the advance of socialist politics. However what he already knows as aspiration and not fact does not actually represent the progress of socialism. The right-wing tendencies of Social Democracy have not benefitted the left-wing and led to the growth of its support. Instead the left-wing of Social Democracy has been marginalised and it has become historically weak. In the era of globalisation Social Democracy has lacked a viable programme of socialism because the international development of the productive forces within an inter-connected global economy has undermined the credibility of left-wing national approaches like the Alternative Economic Strategy. The conception of socialism based on the intervention of the national state has been challenged by the development of the forces of global capitalism and the domination of the trans-national corporations. In this context the most practical and realistic standpoint seems to be the acceptance of the role of management of capitalism. The result has been that left-wing Social Democracy no longer has mass support because of the apparent anachronism of its programme, and the left Social Democrats belong to parties that no longer uphold reformism and have become tame instruments of the interests of global capitalism. The result of this situation is that the forces for socialist transformation no longer belong to Social Democratic organisations and instead the resurgence of the role of the trade unions in the period of economic crisis seems to represent the best possibility for the development of mass support for socialism. However this prospect for the advance of socialism is undermined by the historic weakness of Marxism and the lack of support for a socialist approach and strategy. The trade unions attempt to defend reformism in the context of crisis but this is done in terms of the justification of a defensive approach and the rejection of the development of an effective challenge against capitalism. This means working class politics is in a strategic impasse, and the perspective of socialism lacks mass support.

Miliband argues that the alternative is between the perspectives of revolution and radical reform. He suggests that the former approach has little popular support and the prospect for the introduction of radical reform still has possibilities for implementation within advanced capitalist societies based on the traditions of democracy. But the standpoint of reformism and left reformism has entered into crisis because of the implications of globalisation that has undermined the prospect for the introduction of national radical programmes of change. The result is that it is not just the forces of revolutionary Marxism that are weak, but so is left reformism that has become a peripheral part of Social Democratic organisation. This has meant the perspective of socialism lacks a political focus because of the crisis of all forms of socialist parties, whether revolutionary or reformist. The apparent strength of global capitalism has undermined the validity of all perspectives of national economic and political change, and in this situation an alternative socialist strategy has not yet been formulated. Consequently the trade unions have become the major expression of the political hopes and aspirations of the working class, but the trade unions reject political goals and this has meant there is widespread confusion about strategy and class aims. On the one hand the trade unions are incapable of providing political leadership for the working class but on the other hand the various forms of socialist political organisation seem discredited and antiquated. The result is various forms of moral protest and calls for the ethical regulation of capitalism.

In this situation the prospects for the revival of the left-wing of Social Democracy seem more unlikely than the renewal of revolutionary Marxism. This is because the approach of left Social Democracy was connected to the project of transforming their organisations into socialist parties. In the present situation this perspective seems impossible with the transformation of Social Democracy into becoming forces for the management of global capitalism. However the left wing is also reluctant to break with the Social Democratic parties in order to create new parties, except in some exceptional circumstances as in Germany. This situation has meant the rapid decline of the influence and popularity of left Social Democracy. On the other hand the advent of globalisation has meant that the approach of internationalism represented by revolutionary Marxism has acquired renewal credibility. The standpoint of international revolution could become the strategic alternative to the domination of global capitalism. But the weakness and fragmentation of Marxism has meant it is isolated from the mass movement. Hence Marxism will have to seriously address its organisational and political problems if it is to become relevant to the class struggle. The present situation of the lack of a political dynamic for the class struggle is very serious and it will be necessary for Marxism to attempt to overcome this situation in terms of overcoming its isolation from the mass movement. This prospect is helped by the fact that the economic crisis indicates that the era of reformism is over and that the alternative is between further defeats in the class struggle or the revolutionary transformation of society.

(1)Ralph Miliband: Socialism for a Sceptical Age, Polity Press, 1994

(2)p157

(3)p158

(4)p148

(5)p151

(6)p184

(7)p186

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