

# REVIEWS

are increased by Miliband's use of *social reform*, therefore 'social reformist', where generally 'reformist' has been used pejoratively to describe a particular political approach. Thus, Miliband does not refer to Social Democratic and Labor parties as 'reformist' but as parties of social reform.

To Miliband, social reform is an intrinsic part of the politics of capitalism — he is concerned in this book primarily with bourgeois democracy — including capitalist political forces which have regarded reform as a barrier to socialism, and also including movements and associations of workers whose aims did not go beyond the achievement of specific and limited reforms, for instance, the early stages of British and Australian trade unionism. The author believes that this trend is uppermost in the large working-class parties in several capitalist countries. (The Australian Labor Party would be an example.) Even where there is a formal commitment to wholesale social transformation, these parties are in fact parties of social reform. The improvements that a necessarily imperfect society requires are not considered part of a coherent and comprehensive strategy of socialist change.

In contradistinction to what he describes as *social reform*, Miliband asserts that 'reformism' is one of the two main strategies of socialist revolution dealt with by marxism. The other is 'insurrectionism', which he equates particularly with later leninism. Miliband is not entirely free from ambivalence about the two strands. He fairly plainly favors — a bit tentatively — the 'reformist' path for marxists in bourgeois democratic regimes because although 'bourgeois democracy is crippled by its class limitations' the civic freedoms of bourgeois democracy, which are under constant threat of further and drastic impairment are 'the product of centuries of unremitting popular struggles'. (Miliband, p. 189.) Regimes which lead to the suppression of all opposition and the stifling of all civic freedoms must be taken to represent a disastrous regression, whatever the economic and social achievements of which they may be capable. Yet Miliband acknowledges that there are many regimes where radical social change ultimately will depend on the force of arms. But there is an underlying, perhaps unwarranted, assumption that this path will automatically lead to a very serious regression if it is applied in countries of 'advanced' capitalism.

Miliband sets out with great skill the legitimacy of 'reformist' marxism, its dangers and its promise. What he means by 'reformism' is what Marx meant in the *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League* and *The Class Struggles in France* when he wrote of 'making the revolution permanent' (not what Trotsky meant), striving for the advancement of the aims of the proletariat within the framework of capitalism 'until all more or less possessing

# BOOKS

**Marxism and Politics**, Ralph Miliband, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 199. \$A5.95.

Arguably the most interesting and, probably, most controversial part of this important book is the chapter on reform and revolution. Of course, Miliband is not the first to tackle this aspect of marxism. A great number of the ideas, references and issues he writes about have been dealt with over a long period of time by others — not least by Marx and Engels themselves. But few, if any, have set out the situation so well in the space of a few thousand words. Miliband has systematised and analysed many of the key problems and, while he hasn't provided final solutions, he has asked many of the right questions.

What may be an acute difficulty for the reader in Miliband's treatment of the making of socialist revolution lies in his use of the word 'reformist'. With the meaning and usage of 'reformist', as throughout the book, the author seeks to go back to fundamentals. Despite the connotations of 'reformist', he maintains the validity of the non-pejorative use of the word. The reader's difficulties

classes have been forced out of their position of dominance' (quoted Miliband, pp. 158-9). Marx and Engels made it clear from 1848 to 1895 that this striving included constant pressure for reforms of every sort. Indeed, Lenin in one of his too-neglected texts, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, at the height of the 1905 revolution, sticking closely to the program of Russian Social Democracy, presented the Bolshevik case in essentially the same terms.

Such a strategy is, of course, not to be equated with 'gradualism' as propounded by Sidney Webb and the original Fabians, according to which the achievement of a socialist society is conceived as a slow but sure advance by way of a long sequence of reforms, at the end of which (or for that matter in the course of which) capitalism would have been transcended. This socialist strategy had more to do with piecemeal collectivist social engineering than any current within the marxist tradition. Unlike marxism, its smoothly gradualist perspective was intended to appeal to the liberal-minded upper and middle classes who favored state intervention and collectivist measures. Marxist 'reformism' does have a long-term view of the advance towards socialism, the chipping away at *all* the structures of capitalism, but marxist 'reformism' is directed to the masses. It is a strategy of social struggle and more specifically class struggle on many different fronts, at many different levels: in this sense it is quite definitely a politics of conflict.

The nub of the difference between marxist 'reformism' and its alter ego, 'insurrectionism', is that a 'reformist' strategy is clearly and emphatically first directed to a politics of conflict within the limits of constitutionalism as defined by the existing political structures. This emphasis on constitutionalism, electoralism, and democratic representation is certainly crucial in the definition of 'reformism', but it is not simply 'parliamentarism' — an almost exclusive preoccupation with parliamentary politics, electoral success, increased representation and government-forming. (Australians are, of course, very aware of this political style. Most Labor politicians see the world in these terms.) Contrary to the common caricature of its far-left opponents, marxist 'reformism' is compatible theoretically and practically with forms of struggle which, though carried on within the given constitutional framework, are not related to elections and political representation: industrial struggles, political and social campaigns, demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, work-ins, etc, to advance specific or general demands, oppose government policies, protest against given measures and so on. Rosa Luxemburg, who remained to the end fundamentally a 'reformist' marxist, in 1904 advocated the need to develop working-class parliamentary action, 'one of the most powerful

and indispensable means of carrying on the class struggle'. One of the most urgent tasks of the workers' movement was, she said, '... to save bourgeois parliamentarism from the bourgeoisie and use it against the bourgeoisie' (quoted Miliband, pp. 161-2). This could not be done by concealing class struggle but only by emphasising class struggle both inside and outside parliament. Concomitant with this process of bending parliament must go an equal or greater strengthening of extra-parliamentary action.

Miliband doesn't overlook the dangers of marxist 'reformism' as a revolutionary strategy. There is the danger of 'reciprocal constitutionalism' — what others have taken to be integration into the capitalist system. Although legality and constitutionalism, at least in non-revolutionary circumstances, do not mean abandoning revolutionary aims, parties with serious electoral ambitions are tempted to widen their support to appeal to politically less radical sections of the people and so emphasise the relative moderation of their immediate demands. To put it another way, their immediate program may fall short in all respects of real transitional demands. Another danger is too great a preoccupation with the risks of what Engels called 'vanguard skirmishes' in case the 'shock force' of the party was put at risk.

Miliband applies these considerations to pre-World War I German democracy and the post-World War II communist parties of Western Europe and 'advanced' capitalist countries in general. In the latter case, he considers the scenario of a coalition of leftwing parties, in which the communist party has an important or preponderant place, winning an election with a common anti-capitalist program. What happens then? The danger would be that marxist 'reformist' leaders would renege from implementing the program. There would be some changes of state personnel, institutional, administrative and social reforms, even some measures of state ownership of industry — but that is all. No more could be expected from leaders who may have been well integrated in the bourgeois political system. They would act as agents of stabilisation and would be willing to suppress the working class militancy which would be fostered by the situation.

Before looking at how Miliband deals with these possibilities, it is important to consider his appraisal of what he regards as the alternative marxist strategy. While he recognises Marx and Engels' belief in class conflict and the repressive role of the state, he seems to attach too much significance to the impact of World War I on Lenin's thinking. In fact, while Miliband's separation of the two strands of marxist strategy is a justified analytical distinction, he tends to not allow for the possibility of overlap and interaction. In other words, he shows a lack of sufficient discrimination in his thought on this point. He is

right in criticising the Third International's over-sanguine theses of 1919-20, and Lenin must bear considerable responsibility for the simplistic character of the Twenty-one Conditions and other Comintern theses of the period. But Lenin was not as inflexible as Miliband implies, although the sweeping generality of much early Comintern doctrine demonstrated a naive internationalism, failing to suggest strongly enough that the variables of different national situations could easily outweigh a belief in the universality of bolshevism.

Miliband, however, goes too far in his strictures on the Comintern (as he implicitly acknowledges elsewhere). He rather sweepingly asserts '...Leninism as a coherent strategy of insurrectionary politics was never seriously pursued by the Third International... it was never seriously pursued by its constituent communist parties' (Miliband, p. 169). Certainly, some Comintern theses were inapplicable to many situations, but 'insurrectionary' politics were rightly or wrongly pursued in places as different as Canton and Hamburg, and as late as 1928 the Comintern quite deliberately sought to perfect the theory and practice of armed insurrection. And this option was kept alive and proved successful in China and Yugoslavia, and played a part in communist politics elsewhere.

In spite of his generally favoring a 'reformist' strategy for the countries of 'advanced' capitalism, Miliband finally chooses to declare both the 'reformist' and 'insurrectionist' models as not representing realistic perspectives. Leaving aside his objections to the 'insurrectionist' option, in what areas does he find 'reformism' at fault? Although his detailed argument becomes slightly contradictory, the crux of his analysis involves what might be called a moderate or weak 'reformism' and a radical or strong 'reformism'. The moderate 'reformism' is outlined above, with its dangers of integration. Miliband's outline of the response of the radical or strong 'reformism' seems politically pretty sophisticated (Miliband, pp. 183-8).

His final point is made too briefly, which may reflect a failure to examine the practice of revolutionary movements in as much depth as he has assiduously examined the classical texts. However, his point is quite tantalising in its implications. He maintains that what is required is '... a flexible and complex network of organs of popular participation operating throughout civil society and intended *not* to replace the state but to complement it. This is Miliband's 'reformist' version of 'dual power'. The organs of popular participation do not challenge the 'reformist' marxist government but act as a defensive-offensive and generally supportive element in what is a semi-revolutionary and exceedingly fraught state of affairs. Such a situation, Miliband argues, would be consistent with the dictum of The

Civil War in France that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purpose'. For what would follow, if counter-revolution was to be foiled, would be '...a vast extension of democratic participation in all areas of civic life — amounting to a very considerable transformation of the character of the state and of existing bourgeois democratic forms' (Miliband, p. 188).

**Marxism and Politics** covers much more than the chapter on reform and revolution. It systematises splendidly several of the central issues of marxist political theory: class conflict; culture, consciousness and ideology; the state; class and party. As Miliband himself points out, much of the theoretical exploration of politics in classical marxism is unsystematic and fragmentary, and there are very definite limits to efforts to construct or reconstruct. Much of the available writing is perfunctory or simply silent on major issues of politics and political theory. Then there is the additional problem brought about by stalinist impoverishment of creative theorisation. The accent was on authoritative interpretations and non-arguable propositions. So there is a vast amount of ground to make up.

Miliband says that in marxist politics, it is essential that Marx and Engels should have textual priority. It is only then that one can usefully take up Lenin, Luxemburg, Gramsci and others to construct a marxist politics. Although a beginning has been made since the 1950s, mainly in the countries of 'advanced' capitalism, nothing like enough has been done to constitute a body of serious work on all the major topics of political thought and practice. Miliband, the co-editor of the annual *Socialist Register*, now the Professor of Politics at Leeds University, where he wrote *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961) and *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969), did not set out to write a comprehensive work on marxism and politics. Nevertheless, he has succeeded in writing a short, lucid book for the interested reader, which makes the distinctive features of marxist politics, and many of its problems, immediately accessible.

## FILMS

**Blue Collar** is nothing less than a stunning American film, full of drama, intrigue, action, comic dialogue, even sex. Yet this movie, shown at the recent Sydney Film Festival, has failed to attract a commercial distributor in Australia. The reason: its unorthodox theme. It is not about the winning of the West, the conquest of space, or