

# RALPH MILLIBAND [1924-1994]: A PERSONAL TRIBUTE TO A COMMONSENSE SOCIALIST

Desmond Mallikarachchi

Ralph Milliband died last year at the age of seventy. At the time of his death, Milliband had already earned fame as a perceptive and eloquent Marxist in the rank of international scholars of his time such as Althusser, Polantzas, and E.P. Thompson. He, with others, continued the marxist theoretical discourse with great conviction and commitment over thirty years since the early '60s. He was more a polemical marxist than a merely descriptive writer on the subject.

Milliband taught political science at the London School of Economics for many years and at Leeds University where he became Professor of Politics. During this period he wrote a number of books related to politics and marxism. *Parliamentary Socialism* [1961]; *The State in Capitalist Society* [1969]; *Marxism and Politics* [1971] *Class Power and State Power* [1985]; *Divided Societies* [1989]. *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, his latest book, was in the press at the time of his death. He also held the co-editorship of the Socialist Register, one of the most popular marxist theoretical journals of his time.

Through these books and the articles he published in the Socialist Register and other journals, he clearly demonstrated that his main purpose was to continue Marx's critique of capitalism. Unlike Garaudi, and many others, Milliband never withdrew from this task until the time of his death. He committed to this arduous task, considering it as the foremost obligation of a genuine marxist. He never felt physically exhausted or intellectually lethargic at any of time during his career. In particular, he never allowed others to 'rest in peace' in their academic ivory towers. Not only did he open debates on many issues but he kept them going with true spirit and momentum. The debate, Milliband regarded, as Marx did, as an essential part of the marxist (socialist) method itself. He made debates lively, rigorous and informative. Those who followed the Milliband-Polountza debate know how intellectually stimulating and argumentatively rigorous it was.

There was of course many others who were committed to the task of critically evaluating capitalism. Marxist scholars like Marcuse, Adorno and Habermas, for example, engaged in this task but their critique of capitalism has been more of an epistemological critique rather than a practical programme. French Structuralist marxists such as Althusser and Polountzas, on the other hand, have been committed more or less to a similar task while E.P. Thompson, the marxist historian, contributed greatly to the denaturalization of capitalism. But it was Milliband who stood virtually alone to chart a course for a socialist struggle within English (and global) marxism and to reveal the awful and atrocious anatomy

of class and state power within the capitalist system the reverberations of which we ourselves experienced during the past two decades in particular. The scholastic opacity and abstract theoretical orientation of these intellectuals, at least from Milliband's point of view, blurred the proper vision of the main issue namely, the realisation of the socialist ideal. Those intellectuals were primarily interested in the reconstruction of the epistemological foundation of marxism through a critique of capitalism and that alone. Unfortunately they confined their intellectual mission to the development of a critical philosophy. These attempts, though useful in the long run, have not been of much help, for Milliband, in the construction of a practical programme for socialism. As Milliband saw, socialism is a practical political endeavour rather than a 'hermeneutic political surgery' on the concept of marxism.

Milliband, all throughout, was very pragmatic and realistic in his vision of socialism. He believed, as he has made explicit in his last book, that socialism is an objective that cannot be achieved in a single life-time. For this reason he envisaged a cooperative effort but emphasised very clearly that the need or the feeling for it has to be created in men with no compromise. That is, the effort has to be socially defined. Then only, he said could the need for it be made authentic and thereby the first brick for socialism laid. This he called commonsense socialism, and presented the argument for it using a minimum theoretical jargon. Most people could understand what he was driving home. On the other hand, he always preferred to refer to current events both as his subject matter and his object of criticism. [Chile truck drivers case for example].

Milliband also stressed that the building of socialism cannot be done over night or 'in one stroke'. What he was labouring for was to lay the first strong and steady brick towards the building of socialism. This is not at all a form of pessimism as some accused him of embracing but the capturing and 'real reading of the present situation. The need of a cooperative effort he emphasised as he increasingly realised the dynamics and the dialectics of the contemporary capitalism. Four years prior to his death [1990] he condensed into one sentence all that he had been writing about during the past three decades and wanted to say. "The ultimate purpose of counter-hegemonic struggles is to make socialism 'the common sense of the epoch'. This involves two things. A radical critique of the prevailing social order, and an affirmation that an entirely different social order... is not only desirable... but possible". [Milliband as quoted by Wood]. This is an important message for everybody but particularly for the Sri Lankans who seem to have given up their struggle to build socialism. ■