

Factual – Measured - Critical

**In Praise of Ralph Miliband, Political Sociologist**  
**Norman Stockman, University of Aberdeen**

Anyone interested in British political news will have found it difficult to avoid the recent furore over Labour Party Leader Ed Miliband's father, Ralph Miliband. It was sparked off by the article about him carried by the [Daily Mail on 27 September](#). The burden of Geoffrey Levy's article was to argue that Ed Miliband's political agenda has been decisively shaped by his father's political ideology as a Marxist socialist.

Much of the subsequent 'debate', and in particular Ed Miliband's vigorous [response](#), was provoked by the additional slur of the headline: 'The man who hated Britain', for which the main 'evidence' was a diary entry written by the 17-year old Ralph when fairly newly arrived in Britain. But both his son and other contributors to this fracas (taking place against the background of the Privy Council's examination of different proposals for press regulation in the wake of the [Leveson inquiry](#) into press misbehaviour especially phone-hacking) have mostly remained content to treat Ralph Miliband as political thinker or ideologist, with 'views' with which others might agree or disagree (as Ed says he often did)

Ralph Miliband was indeed actively engaged with socialist politics: for example, he was the founder and, until his death in 1994 the editor of [Socialist Register](#), an annual survey of socialist debate around the world. However, this by no means exhausts his contribution to intellectual life. He had a distinguished career as an academic political scientist and sociologist, and much of his work in these fields deserves to be remembered and to be read.

Foremost, is his book [The State in Capitalist Society](#), first published in 1969 and still in print. This book became a standard text in political sociology, the branch of sociology that examines politics in its social context. At the time when Miliband wrote the book, the prevailing view of politics in liberal democratic societies such as Britain and America was referred to as pluralist. This involved the assumption that politics in such societies was a relatively open competition between political parties competing for support among the electorate, a competition in which the general framework of representative democracy merely provided a neutral 'level playing field'. Political scientists and sociologists typically would conduct enquiries into factors that might influence this competition: how political parties were formed, how they attracted votes, what kind of people voted for which parties, and how other kinds of political forces such as pressure groups were involved in the electoral process and in the business of government.

Ralph Miliband was a leading voice challenging this prevailing consensus. His book aimed to show not just that this assumption was mistaken, but also that the doctrine of pluralism was itself part of a set of ideas which acted as an ideology disguising the true nature of power in capitalist societies.

Factual – Measured - Critical

The two components of the title of Miliband's book repay analysis. First, 'capitalist society': to identify a society as 'capitalist' is to see as essential to it a particular set of economic and social arrangements, especially the private ownership of the means of production (factories, farms, mines, etc.). In the Marxist tradition, but definitely not exclusively there, private ownership of the means of production divides the society into classes. Most fundamentally, these are the class that owns the means of production and the class(es) that do not. The sociological analysis of the class structure of capitalist societies has become increasingly complicated, and Miliband points to some of the complications, for example the position of a class of managers, who may or may not own shares in companies and corporations, but who are allied to the property-owning class by being employed to manage companies profitably.

Miliband builds up a picture of the 'dominant class' who benefit disproportionately from the institutions of capitalism. This class is not completely closed: people born into working class families can, in a minority of cases, amass property by rising within existing corporations or establishing their own businesses. However, Miliband shows how processes of family inheritance mean that membership of the dominant class is largely hereditary.

Secondly, 'the state': Miliband analyses the state as a set of interrelated institutions which together enable 'state power' to be exercised, namely the government, the administration, the military and the police, the judiciary, regional and local governments, and parliamentary assemblies. Undue emphasis on central government and the parties that compete to form the government disguises the full set of institutions in which state power lies.

The central question of Miliband's book can now be seen: what is the relationship between the economic power of the dominant capitalist class and the power of state institutions? His answer rests on analysis of the composition of the personnel of the state institutions. Drawing on sociological research into the elements of what he calls the 'state elite' (higher civil servants, judges, top military officers, police commissioners, as well as parliamentarians and government ministers), Miliband shows that these people tend either to come from the dominant class or to be closely related to it through social and cultural connections. In Britain, for example, the state elite is predominantly recruited from the classes that send their children to public schools and elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. The state elite comes to see political and social affairs through the prism of the dominant class, reinforcing the dominance of capitalism. The image of open competition between political forces of various hues, as put forward by the doctrine of pluralism, then, is shown to be a mask behind which capitalist power is maintained.

This is of course a very simplified summary of a complex work of sociological analysis. I put it forward to show that Ralph Miliband was not (just) the socialist ideologue as portrayed in

Factual – Measured - Critical

the *Daily Mail* and elsewhere. If his analysis of the state in capitalist society were accurate, it would need to be taken into account by any 'evidence-based' political argument, even by politicians and commentators who do not share Miliband's political predilections.

However, Miliband also knew that social scientific research on the workings of capitalist society ran counter to interpretations of capitalism more deeply embedded in the culture of capitalist societies, and would have its work cut out to make itself heard in public debate. He discusses these issues in two chapters of his book on 'processes of legitimation'. If this analysis of the state in capitalist society is true, the argument goes, why is it not more widely accepted by those classes in society who lose out from capitalist domination? His answer is that further processes and institutions operate to lend an aura of legitimacy to the domination of the capitalist state, institutions such as religion, education, and the mass media. All have a built-in hostility to critical analysis of capitalism, however much that criticism is based on social scientific research.

His writing on the mass media is pertinent to the present 'Miliband affair'; he writes of the press: 'whether independent of more or less conservative parties or specifically committed to them, most newspapers may be relied on to support the conservative side or at least to be deeply critical of the anti-conservative one, often vociferously and unscrupulously so'. An apt comment on the present antics of the *Daily Mail*.

None of the above is intended to imply that Miliband's book is beyond criticism. All findings and interpretations in social science, as with any other kind of science, are provisional and often contested. In the case of *The State in Capitalist Society*, criticism was immediate, and came notably from other proponents of Marxist approaches. It was reviewed in [New Left Review](#), another socialist journal which Miliband helped to found and edit from 1960, by the Greek structuralist Marxist, Nicos Poulantzas, who argued that Miliband placed too much emphasis on the personal and social characteristics of the state elite. According to Poulantzas, the modern state has an intrinsic structural relationship to capitalism, and it doesn't really matter who exercises state power, they would all be faced with the same imperatives. The debate between Miliband and Poulantzas, in which many others took part, stimulated a great development in the study of the state, both within Marxism and from other sociological perspectives, which is still [very much alive](#).

I have tried to suggest that Ralph Miliband was a distinguished political scientist and sociologist of whom British social science should be proud. His work is in some respects dated, but still lively and stimulating, and well worth reading by present day students of these subjects. His work bridged academic social science and public debate, and he could be considered a rare example of the 'public intellectual', a species that Britain needs now more

Factual – Measured - Critical

than ever. The question of whether this has anything to do with the politics of his son(s) is one that can be left to others to discuss, if they wish.

*[Norman Stockman](#) taught sociology at the University of Aberdeen from 1968 until his retirement in 2005. He has published several books and articles, including *Understanding Chinese Society* (Polity Press, 2000).*