This is a profoundly pessimistic book. Far from subscribing to the thesis recently aired within these columns that the 'forward march of Labour has been halted', Miliband apparently refuses to believe that there ever was a forward inarch other than in electoral terms. Written in the same mould as his truly cathartic book, *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969), the current work is exclusively concerned with the nature of capitalist democracy in Britain since the passage of the 1867 Reform Act. Miliband's essential thesis is that there is a crucial tension in capitalist democracies between the promise of popular power enshrined in universal suffrage and the continuing denial of that promise in capitalist economic, political, and ideological practice. For, against the tendential pressures from below (especially from the labour movement) reflected in class struggles at the point of production and in the political arena, we find arrayed a vast nexus of institutions, organisations, and leading elites whose primary function is to contain these pressures and manage any residual class
conflict. The continuing success of these institutional constraints and practices is apparently now threatened by the worsening long term economic decline of Britain. But Miliband nonetheless concludes that the prospects for a revolutionary transformation of society are blocked by the dominance of the Labour Party in the (mis)representation of working class interests in socialist change.

In pursuit of this argument Miliband mobilises a broad range of relevant illustrative material culled from memoirs, official records, newspapers, and academic studies. In this respect the book should have the same cathartic effect as his earlier studies of parliamentary socialism and the state in western democracies. But the analysis of the state, hegemony, and political strategy has made considerable progress since Miliband published his own pioneering studies and this current work leaves the reader with a feeling of déjà vu and a desire for more detailed theoretical and strategic arguments.

In marshalling his arguments Miliband continues to rely on interpersonal relations and the motivations of different elites. In particular he stresses the high degree of ideological and political homogeneity of members of the establishment and always plays down the differences that exist within the ranks of capital, between capital and the governmental elites, and between these economic and political elites and those who occupy leading positions in civil society. Conversely Miliband emphasises the internal divisions within the working class, the underclass of the poor, deprived, and underprivileged, and the intermediate class (old and new petty bourgeoisies). He also highlights the differences between the demobilised, depoliticised mass, the activist minority, and the effectively pro-capitalist leanings of the trade union and party political elites who (mis)represent the interests of the mass as these are articulated by the activist minority at the base. To be sure Miliband does note in passing the role of more fundamental institutional constraints rooted in the operation of market forces and the separation between economic and political spheres of struggle; and he also attributes real inhibiting or containing effects to the logic of the parliamentary system of government. But the overall thrust of the argument is based on the role of a relatively unified establishment consciously containing and managing the threats that emerge from below.

The problem that Miliband appears to be posing is why national economic failure has not threatened the success of the dominant class in maintaining its position in British society. His answer is couched in terms of specific institutional and interpersonal features of British society and, indeed, he often appears to single out the Labour Party and its leaders for particular blame. Yet much of this argument is redundant in two senses. In the first place Miliband frequently notes that there has never been a real danger to the stability of economic and social order in Britain — no insurrectionary upsurge, no Popular Front like that in interwar France, no factory occupations like those in Italy — and hence there has been no major threat to be contained. Indeed, in reviewing possible sources of danger (military defeat, inability to resolve a major and particular problem, strong nationalist movements), Miliband is forced to conclude that the only objective threat is the long term inability of the state to resolve the economic and social problems of decline.

Secondly Miliband also presents a more general, all-encompassing argument that would cover the British case without the need for specific analysis. For he argues that capitalist democracy as such is sufficient to insulate capitalism from pressures that threaten its survival. At the end of his lengthy tour of British institutions and elites, Miliband argues that ‘one of the most notable features of capitalist democracy is precisely how resilient it is, and how great is the capacity of the political system to absorb crisis, conflict, and dislocation’ (p 148). Indeed he concedes that a postwar capitalist democracy has witnessed a veritable crisis of regime only in the case of France in 1968 and even here the crises was resolved in favour of capital. If capitalist democracy is so resilient, then the case of Britain can only be illustra-
live — there is nothing much to explain. Only a more detailed comparative analysis looking at crises of regime as well as countries without crises would be helpful theoretically or strategically.

With the publication of his earlier study of the state in capitalist society, the academic world was entertained with the famous debate between Poulantzas and Miliband on problems of method and theory. There is no point in reviewing this debate here but it is interesting to note that both theorists later reached equally pessimistic conclusions about the prospects for a democratic transition to democratic socialism. In his last work Poulantzas saw only a limited ‘window of opportunity’ for democratic socialism and greatly feared the prospects of a bureaucratic apparatus itself. Miliband seems trapped within an approach that recognises the limits of parliamentarism but offers no alternative solution, and continues to place the burden of making the revolution on the activist minority within the working class. In this respect Miliband seems much the more pessimistic of the two protagonists of former years and his failure to develop an alternative strategic perspective is particularly disappointing. Such a perspective would also require a much more direct confrontation with the work of Gramsci on hegemony and of Poulantzas on recent state theory than Miliband offers us in this work. Only then would we have a book which combines, in true Gramscian fashion, ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’.

Bob Jessop

BOOKNOTES

Cynthia Cockburn’s important study of the means used by printworkers to preserve the male domination of their industry is now available: Brothers: Male dominance and technological change (Pluto, £5.95). Pluto have also brought out a new edition of the absolutely invaluable Trade Union Directory (£7.95). A collection of short and rather bitty essays on the history of CND, to coincide with its anniversary, is published by Allisons & Busby: The CND Story, editors, J Minnion and P Bolsover, £1.95. Two more volumes in the Arguments for Socialism series: Hard Times (on the capitalist world economy) by Bob Sutcliffe and The Cuts Machine by David Hall, both priced £2.50. Allison and Busby reissue this month Level 7 by Mordecai Roshwald (£1.95) one of the very best anti-nuclear novels, first published in the late 1950s: definitely worth reading. The latest Counter Information Services Report has just been published, and at £1.95, provides an excellent breakdown on The City. Verso has just published an extremely important and detailed account of early Soviet experience Workers Control and Socialist Democracy by Carmen Sirianni at £8.95. The most exhaustive study yet of the British state’s anti-strike activities has been published by Routledge: British governments and strike breaking since 1919 by K Jeffery and P Hennessy £14.95 hardback only. Neil Harding’s 2 volume study of Lenin, for which he received the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize, is now available in a single paperback volume. At just £8.95 for over 700 pages, Lenin’s Political Thought is definitely a bargain. Finally there is a new and timely history of the steel unions and steel industry, clearly written by a protagonist in the recent national strike: C Docherty Steel and Steelworkers. Heinemann £14.50.

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He first sets out to explain, perhaps too briefly, how contemporary British society is capitalist. Then he examines class struggle in terms of political conflict - exposing how the British political system is inherently undemocratic. The main argument of the book - that the purpose of the undemocratic political system is to contain pressure from 'below' (i.e. from the working class) - is well made. Nonetheless, I recommend it is read by those interested in a Marxist critique of capitalist democracy. Read more. 10 people found this helpful. Democracy - Democracy - England: Among the assemblies created in Europe during the Middle Ages, the one that most profoundly influenced the development of representative government was the English Parliament. Less a product of design than an unintended consequence of opportunistic innovations, Parliament grew out of councils that were called by kings for the purpose of redressing grievances and for exercising judicial functions. In time, Parliament began to deal with important matters of state, notably the raising of revenues needed to support the policies and decisions of the monarch. As its Capitalist Democracy in Britain (Oxford Paperbacks). by. Ralph Miliband (Author). Would you like to tell us about a lower price? If you are a seller for this product, would you like to suggest updates through seller support?