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PREFACE

1989 marks the bi-centenary of the French Revolution. Rather than add to the torrent of writing engendered by this anniversary, we are devoting this year's volume of *The Socialist Register* to the theme of revolution at the end of the twentieth century. 1989 marks an anniversary for the Register itself – our 25th – and the exploration of this year's theme is well in line with the purposes which this annual has tried to serve since its inception in 1964, namely the discussion and elucidation of questions which, in both theoretical and practical terms, concern socialists everywhere.

The question of revolution is clearly one of these, perhaps the most important of all such questions. The socialist aspiration to create a cooperative, egalitarian, democratic and classless society entails, for its realization, a fundamental transformation of the social and political order, in a word, a revolution. But what does the idea of revolution itself entail today? To ask this question as we approach the end of this century immediately raises a host of issues concerning whether and how socialist aspirations can be realized, and poses problems and dilemmas over the very ways we can think about these issues, as well as over the ways in which they might be resolved.

These problems and dilemmas present themselves differently for socialists in the countries of advanced capitalism, in the 'third world', and in the Communist countries; and even within each of these global arenas. The decade of the 1980s has witnessed a sustained capitalist reaction in the West against many of the reforms, and indeed against the very notion of a gradualist reform agenda, whose achievement had long inspired the practice of socialist, and most communist, parties in the West. The 1980s have also witnessed the challenges mounted to 'actually existing socialism' in the East by movements like *Solidarnosc* from below, and *byperestroika* from above. At the same time, new revolutionary regimes in the Third World have displayed an extremely wide range of experiences and outcomes; and such diversity is inscribed again in the practices and ongoing struggles of revolutionary movements. What this indicates is that, even if socialist aspirations may be essentially the same, the problems of realization – of revolution – are never exactly the same and can never be addressed in uniform fashion.

The articles in this volume testify to this diversity. But they also testify to the fact that reflections on the meaning of revolution (and its always-present

nemesis, counter-revolution) in 1989 means far more than reawakening the ghosts of 1789. Revolution – for all its problems and dilemmas – remains very much a contemporary issue.

We wish to pay tribute here to Raymond Williams, whose appreciation of 'the long revolution' only enhanced his commitment to the need for fundamental change, for searching new ways of renewing the revolutionary agenda and making socialism more effective and influential in the modern world. Raymond Williams was a contributor to the Register, and we had invited him to write an essay on the meaning of revolution today shortly before his untimely death in January 1988. We feel his loss acutely, as must all those who have been instructed by his insight and inspired by his commitment to the spirit of revolution. This insight and commitment are well-reflected, we believe, in the quotation that opens the first essay in this volume which addresses a topic which Raymond Williams helped so much to elucidate, that is, the **importance**, as well as the difficulties, of **revolutionary** socialist change in the advanced capitalist countries.

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