RETHINKING CLASS: 
THE LINEAGE OF THE SOCIALIST REGISTER

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In 1960, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote to a letter to his friends in the British New Left, published in its recently founded house journal *New Left Review*, in which he urged them to abandon what he dubbed the ‘labour metaphysic’ – a belief in the working class of the advanced capitalist societies as the historic agency of change – as ‘a legacy from Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic’. This labour metaphysic, Mills said, ‘is an historically specific idea that has been turned into an a-historical and unspecific hope’. His phrase quickly became a classic. Much quoted, it may be seen as presaging later debates in the US New Left as well as the broader displacement of class as the major analytic of the left. Convinced that working-class agency in the advanced capitalist countries ‘has either collapsed or become most ambiguous’, Mills was especially interested in the potential of the radical intelligentsia as an agent for change, an interest often taken to be a distinguishing feature of New Left movements.¹ Yet the early British New Left was by no means ready to follow his advice. Among the friends on the editorial board of *NLR* to whom Mills addressed himself were Ralph Miliband and John Saville, who three years later, following the organisational and political crisis that engulfed the early British New Left, would found the *Socialist Register*. Miliband, in fact, was a close personal friend as well as political ally of Mills’, but he thought his views on the question of working-class agency mistaken. Others in the early New Left took a different view: if few were ready to make the leap that Mills suggested, they were certainly convinced of the need to address questions of class composition and structure, class relations and class consciousness. As the *Register* revisits similar questions some fifty years later, the purpose of this essay is to reappraise the early New Left’s class analysis, to provide the reflection on the origins of the *Register* that such a significant anniversary warrants, and to see whether these past debates can help orient our present perspectives.
THE EMERGENCE OF THE BRITISH NEW LEFT

The term New Left describes a wide array of left activist and intellectual currents arising from the late 1950s in different national contexts. Sometimes regarded as synonymous with the student and broad-based radical movements of the 1960s that culminated in the uprisings of 1968, its claim to novelty vis-a-vis the ‘old left’ is most often seen to lie in characteristic emphases including a strongly libertarian and democratic impulse; a commitment to cultural as well as political transformation; experimentation with novel forms of political organisation such as direct action and participatory democracy, and a readiness to consider non-class or cross-class forces as agencies for radical change. In comparison with this broader activist and international milieu the New Left in its British incarnation was somewhat distinct, in its nature as a primarily intellectual formation and in its relatively stronger connection to established traditions including Marxism, Communism and the British labour movement.

A vibrant and intellectually fertile expression of the conjuncture of 1956, the British New Left emerged from the convergence of a group of disillusioned Communists who published a dissident journal, The Reasoner (later New Reasoner, 1956–59), to debate the implications for Communism of the Khrushchev revelations, and who subsequently resigned over the Soviet invasion of Hungary, with a group of younger, independent socialist students around the Oxford-edited journal Universities and Left Review (1957–59). This broader grouping adopted the label ‘New Left’ in 1958 to denote their aspiration to create an activist and participatory, but theoretically-informed, socialist ‘movement of ideas’ through channels such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the network of left clubs begun by ULR. New Left Review (NLR), produced from a merger of the two original journals, was originally intended as voice and pivot for this novel formation. Its early editorial board comprised many who were or would become leading lights of the British intellectual scene, including its first editor Stuart Hall, who along with Raphael Samuel and Charles Taylor had founded ULR, founders of the Reasoner Edward Thompson and John Saville, and Raymond Williams, who was closer in age to the Reasoners but in some of his preoccupations to the ULR group. Closer in age to the ULR founders but based at the London School of Economics rather than Oxford, Ralph Miliband, who had joined the New Reasoner board in 1958, also joined the NLR editorial board. A little later, a third group was co-opted that included Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn and Robin Blackburn, some of whom had been involved with the Oxford magazine New University.2

Internationally, the key political contexts for the New Left endeavour
comprised the crisis in world Communism touched off by Khrushchev’s 1956 ‘secret speech’, the Cold War, nuclearism and anti-nuclearism, decolonisation and the rise of third world national-liberation movements. Domestically, it was a political scene dominated by the discourse of postwar ‘affluence’ and, on the mainstream left, by Labour Party ‘revisionism’, to which Anthony Crosland’s recasting of socialism to emphasise (as he saw it) its ethical ends of welfare and equality over economic means such as nationalisation made the single most important intellectual contribution.³

Crosland’s thesis relied on a widely shared perception that the character of postwar British capitalism had been qualitatively altered via a separation of the functions of ownership and control and the rise of the ‘welfare state’. In similar vein, developments such as rising working-class incomes; changing patterns of production and consumption; rapid social, technological and cultural change; suburbanisation and the rise of a ‘mass society’ – all contributed to a loss of confidence in the continued relevance of socialism and its claim on working-class support, aptly encapsulated by Richard Crossman when he asked ‘If welfare capitalism can provide the majority with security, how can we ever persuade them to prefer socialism?’²

The New Left responded to its conjuncture by positioning itself outside ideological orthodoxies as an independent formation whose avowed commitment to ‘a socialist and humanist transformation of our society’ involved an explicit recognition that socialism and Marxism must be opened to critical scrutiny, both in terms of their theoretical basis and political practice.⁵ The NLR’s first editorial at the beginning of 1960 put it this way:

Conceiving itself as a forum for discussion and fresh thinking, the diversity of this early New Left (before the differences that led to reorientation of NLR and the launching of the Socialist Register by 1964, of which more later) makes efforts to categorise its political and theoretical positions difficult. On any given issue, including its relationship to Marxism, there was no New Left ‘line’ but rather a range of contending perspectives. Nevertheless, its location ‘between Stalinism and social democracy’ implied
certain orientations. Opposing bureaucratism and authoritarianism of whatever stamp, New Leftists saw socialist strategy as necessarily grassroots and democratic. In a notable contribution, E.P. Thompson attempted to rethink the reform/revolution dichotomy for British conditions, effectively arguing that cumulative reforms could acquire a radicalizing and mobilizing potential that could have transformative implications. Although this view was by no means universally shared, the early New Left pursued a strategy of ‘making socialists’ which aimed to bridge the gap between intellectual and political work in a genuinely novel way, by offering a theoretical reworking of socialism as communitarian, democratic, and humanist, while at the same time seeking to discover, model and popularise this vision through practical efforts to create a distinctive grassroots New Left movement.

THE NEW LEFT’S CLASS ANALYSIS

New Left thinkers made highly original, in some areas groundbreaking, interventions around class consciousness, agency, the significance of culture and the dynamics of class struggle. However, while their class analysis both drew on and challenged Marxist sources and ideas, it did not always do so explicitly. There was disagreement – though it was not always fully explored – on some fundamental issues, and the milieu as a whole achieved no synthesis of its various perspectives. Thus, as with many of the issues it addressed, it is in the range and prescience of its discussions of class, rather than in any single insight or resolution, that the New Left contribution lies.

As the early New Left cohered, the nature of contemporary British working-class culture and consciousness became one of its distinct preoccupations, shared, though with different emphases, by the Reasoner and ULR groups. Interest here was stimulated in particular by Richard Hoggart’s Uses of Literacy (1957), a pioneering text of cultural studies which combined personal reminiscence with a nuanced study of the ways in which newer forms of mass publishing were received by working-class audiences. Hoggart’s central thesis – that working-class culture and ways of life were threatened by an encroaching ‘mass culture’ – was keenly debated within the New Left. Williams, writing as part of a ULR symposium on the book, rejected the pessimism implicit in Hoggart’s approach and argued that it was the ‘collective democratic institution, formed to achieve a general social benefit’ that represented the most distinctive expression of working-class culture, rather than the everyday practices romanticised by Hoggart. Williams’ critique reflected his own developing project at this time, pursued through Culture and Society (1958), his essays within the New Left, and The Long Revolution (1961) to articulate a new theoretical and strategic centrality
for culture in socialist thought, a project the ULRers found particularly inspiring. His discussion of Hoggart also took in the broader debates of the period, rejecting a creeping tendency to equate low, or mass commercial culture with working-class culture, insisting that ‘there are in fact no masses, there are only ways of seeing people as masses’ and arguing that working-class adoption of new consumer goods in no way signified ‘embourgeoisement’: ‘these changes are changes in the use of personal things, and have nothing to do with becoming bourgeois in any real sense’.

The reception of Hoggart’s text touched off a broader debate within the New Left in which its thinkers responded to the challenges ‘affluent capitalism’ was thought to pose for socialism. In general, New Leftists were highly sceptical of the Labour Party’s revisionist claims regarding a supposed transformation of capitalism and the presumed effects in terms of altering class structures, identities and political preferences. They disputed the extent and significance of phenomena such as the ‘incomes revolution’, separation of the functions of ownership and control in the capitalist economy, and rising social mobility, and found little evidence to support arguments for a reorientation of Labour and socialist objectives. Roused in particular by the arguments of Industry and Society, a 1957 Labour policy paper that proposed a shift of the party’s goals from the full nationalisation implied by the party’s founding commitment to ‘the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange’ to a more limited policy of greater state control of capitalist enterprises, the New Left published a series of pieces that rebutted revisionist claims and renewed arguments for traditional socialist objectives.

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Overall, then, there was little sense within the New Left that the objective structures of the capitalist economy and class system were changing. However, a 1958 piece by Stuart Hall, ‘A sense of classlessness’, which
detected a growing disjunction or disconnect between these objective structures and the subjective consciousness and identity of class, was more controversial. Though Hall, in common with other New Leftists, rejected any notion that higher living standards and consumption in themselves would necessarily alter class attitudes, he nevertheless saw the shift from production to consumption within capitalism ‘as a social system’ as a key change. Consumerism, he suggested, tied the working class into the market in new and insidious ways:

the ‘new things’ in themselves suggest and imply a way of life which has become objectified through them, and may even become desirable because of their social value. In those places in welfare Britain where the working class has been put directly in touch with ‘the new opportunities’, the ‘whole way of life’ is breaking down into several styles of living … each imperceptibly but … exquisitely, differentiated from one another.\(^{15}\)

This, he suggested, was engendering a sense of confusion and disorientation around perceptions of class identity – the ‘sense of classlessness’ of the title – which even though it was a false consciousness (since objective class relations remained the same), inasmuch as it rendered ‘the real problems not only more difficult to solve but more difficult to see’, was indeed a critical strategic problem for socialists, demanding the development of a new kind of left cultural politics.\(^{16}\) As theoretical justification, Hall’s piece challenged traditional Marxist distinctions between economic, cultural and political spheres, arguing against any ‘simplistic economic determinist-reading’ of base-superstructure in favour of a reconceptualisation that allowed for mutual interpenetration.\(^{17}\)

Such a critique of Marxist economism, and more specifically, of the base-superstructure metaphor, was common ground within the New Left, underpinning both Thompson’s eloquently articulated ‘socialist humanism’ and Williams’ as yet only embryonic project to articulate a position he would later describe as ‘cultural materialism’. Not surprisingly, given the differing political formations of the two groupings, the attitude of the ULR group to Marxism was more deeply revisionist that that of the Reasoner cohort. As former Communists, the Reasoners identified far more easily with Marxism, which (with some notable exceptions, most obviously Thompson, whose work was somewhat unique among this group) they tended to see as a more or less self-sufficient body of theory, albeit distorted in the application. The ULR group, formed by postwar conditions and student politics, though they made in some areas a deeper appropriation of Marxist themes (particularly
alienation), were more likely to see Marxism as a tradition itself requiring reworking and scrutiny.  

More immediately controversial than these underlying theoretical divergences, however, was the practical question of the differing extent of the two groups’ orientations to a politics based within the working class. The theme of ‘classlessness’ brought this to the surface. Hall’s piece was the most important statement of a more general openness amongst the ULR grouping to consider non-class or cross-class forces as potential agencies for change. This, it should be said, remained rather implicit than explicit, conveyed mainly through the characteristic, youthful style and eclectic preoccupations of the journal, which included some attention to an emergent politics of race, as well as in its involvement in an array of spin-off and outreach activities. But it was enough to provoke a response from Thompson, who penned a robust defence of working-class self-activity and an uncompromising critique of the ‘anti-working-class attitudes’ he detected among some of his younger New Left colleagues. Published as ‘Commitment in Politics’ in ULR, his essay opened by rehearsing the ‘jibes’ he said he had heard being directed at ULR’s politics by ‘the active rank and file socialist’, stalwarts of the ‘old’ left, amongst whom, though he did not say it directly, he might have included himself:

These ULR types (the jibe runs) are passionate advocates of commitment in the arts, but they evade commitment on the central issues of class power and political allegiance. They are angrier about ugly architecture than they are about the ugly poverty of old-age pensioners, angrier about the ‘materialism’ of the Labour Movement than about the rapacity of financiers. They wear upon their sleeves a tender sensibility; but probe that tenderness, and one finds a complex of responses which the veteran recognises as ‘anti-working class’. They are more at ease discussing alienation than exploitation. … They see the authentic expression of the younger generation in a squalid streetfight in Notting Hill, but the thousands of young men and women who flock every night into the technical colleges … do not come into the picture at all.

Though his immediate target was an impressionistic article that saw in sections of working-class life ‘a population jaded almost beyond redemption’, Thompson was also addressing the wider arguments of his ULR colleagues, whom he criticised for over generalising from the present period of relative working-class quiescence, and of lacking a sense of history. Taking up Stuart Hall’s assertion that contemporary capitalism was based upon consumption
rather than production, for instance, Thompson argued that the working class had always been ‘built into the market’ – the change was one of degree rather than of quality. And he found in a tendency to bemoan the ‘materialism’ of working-class culture (though this was in fact less typical of ULR than of the wider mainstream discourse around affluence) a patronising and ahistorical denial of the right of each new generation to make ‘fuller and more complex claims on life’ than their predecessors: ‘What do we want the present generation of working people to fight for? We do not want to push them back into the old, cramped claustrophobic community which was based on the grim equality of hardship. The aspiration toward community, if it arises in the present generation, will be far richer and more complex, with far more insistence on variety, freedom of movement, and freedom of choice, than in the old-style community’.  

In recognising the justice of these new claims, Thompson’s position in fact had much in common with ULR’s own aspirations for ‘socialism at full stretch’. But in contrast to ULR’s (at this point) somewhat vague ‘culturalist’ emphasis, he insisted that socialism must be rooted in the actual experience and history of the working class as political agents. Thompson emphasised a continuous radical lineage, best seen in the self-organisation of a minority of politically conscious working-class activists. Ignorance of this history could make ‘the record of our working class look like an instinctual, almost vegetable evolution, in which the active role of the minority, as the agent of social change, is belittled’. Against these attitudes, Thompson presented working-class history as a continuous ‘way of struggle’ between ‘competing moralities’ within the working class as well as against class rule above.  

Thompson’s arguments in ‘Commitment’ clearly anticipated those he would pursue in The Making of the English Working Class, on which he was working at the time. Yet they did not fully address some of the concerns that animated ULR’s exploration of ‘classlessness’. As Stuart Hall pointed out in an exasperated reply to his critics, his own concern was with the potential of the media, advertising and consumerism to engender a ‘sense of confusion about what class is and how much it matters, and where class allegiances lie’ – in other words, to change the perception of class identity in ways that were depoliticising.  

Thompson, insisting on working-class agency as a fundamental of socialism but also admitting a ‘dulled’ political consciousness on the part of the contemporary working class, saw the problem as essentially one of political organisation, perhaps brushing aside too easily those questions of ideology and hegemony that would continue to preoccupy Hall. The ‘classlessness’ debate then gave an early but very incomplete indication of some serious theoretical and political divergences
that would come to the fore later in the oppositions between humanism and structuralism and later still, the various post-Marxisms of the last two decades of the twentieth century.

In the meantime, Thompson published in 1963 what was undoubtedly the most important single contribution to class analysis to emerge from this early New Left milieu, his *The Making of the English Working Class*. Its key emphases – in theoretical terms, on class as a historical phenomenon, as process, and as relationship, and in political terms, on the importance of working-class agency in its own ‘making’ – are well enough known and have been often enough debated not to require restatement here. Yet one of the reasons that Thompson’s book proved such a rich resource for subsequent discussion is precisely the relative absence from the text of sustained conceptual analysis. At the centre of Thompson’s endeavour was an imaginative and subtle exploration of the interaction between social being and social consciousness, between agency and necessity (or structure) in class formation, drawing on but not limited to the Marxist tradition. But this was only made partially explicit. As Bryan Palmer has argued, while the precise detail of this interaction provides fertile ground for theoretical appropriations and reappropriations, the real significance of *The Making* lay not in the detail of its specific arguments but rather in ‘that the book opened interpretative eyes to a new way of seeing class. … Its meaning … and its consequent great achievement, lies in the unmistakable rupture it forced in the historical literature … where class formation could no longer be posed, by radicals and reactionaries alike, as a mechanical reflection of economic change’.

FROM REASONER TO REGISTER

As well as a work of history, *The Making* was a further, and definitive, intervention in New Left discussions of working-class consciousness, identity, agency and experience, as well as a powerful expression of Thompson’s ‘socialist humanism’. But its completion actually coincided with the disintegration of the early New Left.

Pulled apart by internal contradictions and unable to sustain the momentum that had briefly propelled it, by late 1961 the early New Left was already in the process of disintegrating. Political differences and financial difficulties combined to exacerbate the critical tension at the heart of the early *NLR* enterprise: was it primarily a journal of ideas or a movement of people? A transfer of editorship and subsequently ownership of *NLR* in 1962–63 to Perry Anderson secured the journal’s future whilst also inaugurating a shift in its perspectives. The well-known controversies and animosities attending this
transition have sometimes been overplayed, masking underlying continuities that render the commonly accepted ‘generational’ periodization of these ‘two New Lefts’ somewhat suspect. It is nonetheless true that Anderson’s NLR became a more self-consciously and narrowly intellectual project than the earlier version, renouncing organising and activist ambitions in favour of a project of gradual transformation of the British intellectual scene, envisaged as being achieved in the main via a sustained programme of translation and exposition of continental Marxist theory.27

Thompson’s arguments in *The Making*, coinciding as they did with the final stages of the collapse of the early New Left, were not really taken up by his early New Left peers. Anderson and (especially) Tom Nairn, now beginning to define a different direction for NLR in a series of essays that began with ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’ in early 1964, did respond to the book, but they did so in a somewhat selective and incomplete way that exaggerated theoretical and methodological differences and was over-determined by an uncompromising judgment of the political failures of their New Left predecessors.28 Nairn and Anderson presented their analysis of British historical development as a reversal of the Thompsonian class optic. Against his stress on agency, on the possibility and promise of native radical traditions in a creative encounter with Marxism, and on a history of working-class resistance, they emphasised what they saw as the structural subjugation of the working class, the result of a historic class compromise between agrarian and mercantile capitalism. Arguing that ‘a supine bourgeoisie produced a subordinate proletariat’, they saw in English working-class consciousness no more than a reactive and defensive impulse, such that its struggles were ‘the very opposite of coherent, aggressive self-assertion. It was an experience of being driven into revolt, and finding every means of expression cut away, every channel blocked’.29

The achievements of working-class culture that early New Leftists such as Williams and Thompson most valued, their collective democratic institutions, became in this schema expressions of withdrawal, corporateness and defeat. The ensuing, and famous, polemic between Anderson and Thompson only partially explored the theoretical differences at stake.30 In the meantime the fragmentation of the project of the early New Left ended a phase characterised by an exploratory treatment of class that anticipated future controversies but was ultimately inconclusive.

It was in the wake of an acrimonious meeting of the NLR editorial board that the idea for a new ‘socialist annual’ was first mooted among a small group of former New Reasoner editors in April 1963. Miliband was the main originator of the idea, and he invited Saville and Thompson – the latter
of whom was at that time also considering suggestions from other former ‘Reasoners’ to reconvene their group and perhaps revive the *New Reasoner* – to join him in the enterprise. In the event, the *New Reasoner* was not refounded, and Thompson eventually declined to serve on the board of what became the *Socialist Register*. The *Register*, then, while in some ways a clear successor of the *New Reasoner*, had its own orientation which perhaps more than anything else reflected Miliband’s distinctive perspective. The only member of the *New Reasoner* editorial board never to have been in the Communist Party, he was also the only member of either editorial team to vote against the merger of ULR and NR, which he correctly regarded as possessing somewhat different perspectives, particularly on the question of political organisation. As, essentially, party-oriented Marxists, the Reasoners’ rejection of the discipline and orthodoxy of the CPGB left them without a party, but still with a strong sense, as Miliband put it ‘of political agencies’, and a close orientation to working-class politics, and it was these elements that attracted him to their project. Miliband saw the ULR group, by contrast, as part of a ‘more or less anti-organisation current’, which, though vibrant and energetic, was not capable of providing the sharp political orientation he believed was required for the left to regroup. Having seen the early New Left primarily as preparatory work for ‘something a good deal more oriented’, he did not, therefore, fully share Thompson’s enthusiasm for the more nebulous possibilities of a New Left ‘movement’, and as his biographer Michael Newman has shown, remained consistent in his basic belief that party organisation was what the left ultimately required.

There were also further differences, between Miliband (and increasingly also Saville) and Thompson in the nature and degree of their orientation to Marxism. Although these were neither explicitly aired in the early New Left’s journals nor fully explored in private correspondence, they were significant enough to be a factor that weighed in Thompson’s decision not to join the SR editorial board. In an exchange of letters in 1963, Miliband responded exasperatedly to Thompson’s mention of such differences – declaring, in reply to the latter’s admission that he could not identify himself as a Marxist ‘without important qualifications on essential matters’ – ‘My God, isn’t that exactly my own position?’ Yet Miliband, though he greatly respected Thompson and admired his work, was relatively unsympathetic to some aspects of his thought, particularly, perhaps, the moral emphasis that so shaped his ‘socialist humanism’. When Saville mooted the idea of soliciting a piece (from Alasdair MacIntyre) for the *Register* on ‘The Moral Basis of Socialism’, his co-editor rejected this as ‘an utterly lousy idea … it is exactly the kind of waffle which this sort of piece always produces that I should like
to see avoided’. While his objection was less to a humanist reading of Marx per se than to what he saw as the imprecise and rhetorical style in which such humanist readings were too often couched, it was nevertheless noticeable that his own contributions to the New Reasoner, like Saville’s, drew mainly on Marxism as social theory rather than as a source of ethical inspiration. According less prominence to questions of culture and consciousness than did some of his colleagues, his position on Labour revisionism and ‘affluence’ was also more uncompromising. ‘I hate people speaking of working-class affluence, it is such a shameful mockery’, wrote Miliband in a letter in 1963. And when Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell attempted to revise Clause IV of the party constitution to de-emphasise common ownership, Miliband wrote a parody for the New Statesman – casting Gaitskell as a priest delivering a sermon entitled ‘Should we drop Christ?’ – that could hardly have been more to the point.

What Saville and Miliband most sought, then, to carry over from the New Reasoner was not its socialist humanist commitment nor its pronounced literary flavour. These had been Thompson’s distinct contribution, and though neither theme would be entirely absent from the new annual, they were peripheral concerns. Rather, they wanted to recover the former journal’s accessibility of style and directness of tone, its sense of appeal to a readership within the labour movement and its adoption of an idiom of internationalism that was solidaristic and politically responsible, in sharp contrast to the variety developing within NLR, whose uncritical Third Worldist tendencies Miliband, like Thompson, deplored, (though he objected far less to its orientation to continental traditions of Marxism). Above all – and for Miliband particularly – it was the urgent need to a ‘recreate a journal of the autonomous left’, with the sharp political orientation that the new model NLR now signally lacked, that motivated him to found a new publication. By May 1963, plans were crystallising for the annual, spurred on by Miliband’s view that NLR was now doing ‘NO political work’ and was even ‘a positive discredit to intellectuals in the Labour movement’. ‘And the whole journal’, he added, ‘is now written in a barbarous, Fringlish sort of way’.

By November, the title Socialist Register was settled upon. It was suggested by Martin Eve (the close friend of Thompson’s who ran the Merlin Press) in a reference to William Cobbett’s Political Register, the radical weekly which had run from 1802 to 1835, and strongly advocated the extension of the suffrage. This title was enthusiastically received by the editors – ‘I kick myself for not having thought of it first’ wrote Miliband to Saville, ‘I think it’s got everything we want, it’s sober, sharp, distinct’. With the subtitle ‘a survey
of movements and ideas’, the first issue appeared in April 1964. Reflecting the closeness of Saville and Miliband’s collaboration, in which, as Miliband later recalled, there had been a ‘largely unspoken agreement between us that we would mainly publish work that would fall within the broad Marxist tradition … to which we both belonged’, its first, brief editorial set out a clear agenda: to the journal’s purpose of ‘socialist analysis and discussion’ its editors brought ‘a definite and committed point of view, and this bears a direct relationship, not only to what we write ourselves, but to our choice of contributors. At the same time, we have no wish to imprison discussion within a narrow framework.’ This distinct position, later characterised by Miliband as ‘unsectarian left’, and as ‘somewhere between ultra leftism and left Labourism’ was intended to have political as well as simply intellectual significance.

With its coordinates clearly established, the Register’s treatment of class and agency has been basically consistent, though by no means static. In regards to the British context, its early volumes developed the strand of work Miliband and Saville had begun within the New Reasoner, which focused in the main on the problem of political organisation. Miliband’s Parliamentary Socialism had expounded in 1961 his basic position at this time, which was that notwithstanding its major shortcomings (chief among which was a dogmatic attachment to parliamentarism that made it essentially a party of social reform rather than of socialism), the Labour Party, as the dominant expression of working-class politics, remained the only realistic party political vehicle for socialists in the UK to be involved in. ‘Get in and push’, was the nub of his advice to socialists, and to this end essays in the Register in its first two years considered ‘Labour Policy and the Labour Left’, nationalisation, trades unionism and the limits of the welfare state. By 1966, Miliband would himself leave the Labour Party in disgust at the Wilson government’s policies, but the basic orientation to a class-based politics and party organisation would remain. The Register also published, in its second volume, Thompson’s excoriating critique of the Nairn-Anderson analysis of British class and capitalist development. Miliband fought hard to persuade Thompson to moderate his tone, and particularly the imputation, at the end of the essay, of Stalinism to Nairn and Anderson. This was mainly due to an unwillingness to allow any hint of sectarianism within the journal, but it was also true that the Register editors, Miliband particularly, were coming to admire the intellectual seriousness of the new NLR. Nairn’s analysis of the Labour Party, in fact, had much in common with Miliband’s own, indeed in 1961 Nairn had written a long letter to Miliband in which he set out many of the arguments and premises that underpinned his NLR essays, and sought
the other’s opinion. Miliband was also much impressed with the *NLR* edited volume, *Towards Socialism*, of 1965. In a letter to Saville, he criticised Thompson for not seeing ‘how genuinely important some of that stuff of Perry’s and Tom Nairn is. Particularly Perry … he is absolutely brilliant’. Though the projects of the two journals were quite distinct, Miliband and Anderson shared key orientations, and particularly following the latter’s reassessment of *NLR*’s priorities in the early 1980s, the *Register* and *NLR* would make common cause to articulate a ‘resolute left’ position against ‘post-Marxism’ and the ‘new revisionism’ associated with *Marxism Today*.

A basic consistency may also be seen in regards to the journal’s coverage of ideas and movements internationally, where new departures and developments were subjected to careful analysis uninfluenced by intellectual faddism. Thus *SR* maintained a critical distance from the radical eruptions of 1968, warning of the insufficiency of students and intellectuals as agencies of change. It is also worth noting that in its discussions of the US New Left, the *Register* was at least as interested in the black civil rights movement as in the white student movement: though the first published evidence of this was a piece on Black Power in 1968, Miliband had in fact wanted to commission something on this earlier but had proved unable to find anyone to write the kind of socialist analysis of the black movement he sought. There were also considered treatments of class politics and guerrilla struggle in Latin America, a sustained interest in Third World radical movements, especially in Africa, and analysis of the possibilities of peasant movements, in addition to a developing strand of theoretical work that developed and illuminated Marxist analysis of class, party and state.

**CONCLUSION**

As C. Wright Mills so clearly saw, the New Left emerged, and to some extent defined itself against, an intellectual and political climate already in the 1950s characterised by a gathering sense of anxiety on the left about the role and relevance of class analysis. What resources then can this New Left, from which the *Register* traces its lineage, offer for a renewal of class analysis today?

Among the general emphases most worthy of restatement might be its willingness to interrogate the theoretical, empirical and sociological bases for those phenomena – ‘affluent’ capitalism (or in today’s context ‘globalization’), the ‘end of ideology’, or ‘crisis of Marxism’ – so often adduced in support of arguments that declare class analysis redundant; and equally as important, to recognize that the effects of social and economic change, at the level of class consciousness and political allegiance, are never pre-determined, but
rather sites of struggle and resistance. A general sense of refusal, too, of the more patronising and simplistic manifestations of a leftist ‘loss of faith’ in the agency of the working class; and an alertness to the complexities of working-class culture and history, an attention to the lived experience of class, is also surely as necessary as ever. More specifically, in regard to such fundamental theoretical questions as how class is to be defined; how class formation occurs; what class consciousness is, the New Left also produced a rich and suggestive body of work, though one which does not point in any single direction. Some of the issues at stake in its discussions (class as relationship versus class as objective structure, for instance) were only clarified rather later, while others, such as ULR’s exploration of classlessness, which began to consider the significance of ideology and the workings of hegemony, might be seen as themselves anticipating some aspects of the ‘discourse-theoretical’ and ‘post-Marxist’ challenges to class analysis. In terms of orienting the Register’s perspectives today, we might end with Miliband’s rejoinder to Mills, some years later, which can also serve as a characterisation of the Register’s distinctive contribution. If ‘metaphysic’ in Mills’ formulation may be taken to denote that which is above matter, a first principle, an abstraction, then Miliband was surely right to insist that there is nothing ‘metaphysical’ about the centrality of class struggle to Marxism: for it is not, and has never been, an attachment that rests on groundless faith nor an ‘a-historical and unspecific hope’, and nor does it preclude a recognition that the capacity of working-class agencies to realize their transformative potentials is far from inevitable. In this sense, he certainly had no trouble at all with Mills’ conclusion: ‘we can’t “write off the working class.” But we must study all that, and freshly’.

NOTES


11 In this section I draw on arguments made at greater length in Madeleine Davis, ‘Arguing affluence: New Left contributions to the socialist debate 1957-1963’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 23(4), 2012.


16 Hall, ‘Classlessness’, p. 40.

17 Hall, ‘Classlessness’, p. 43.


21 Thompson, ‘Commitment’, p. 53.

22 Thompson, ‘Commitment’, pp. 52, 54.


On the two ‘generations’ see Peter Sedgwick, ‘The Two New Lefts’, in David Widgery, ed., *The Left in Britain*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, pp. 147-50; Ellen Meiksins Wood, ‘A chronology of the New Left and its successors: or, who’s old fashioned now?’, *Socialist Register*, London: Merlin, 1995; Michael Rustin, ‘The New Left and the present crisis’, *NLR*, I/121(May/June), 1981, pp. 7-9. Those involved in the early New Left went on to found new initiatives: organisations and publications with a direct New Left lineage, aside from the *Register*, included the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies established by Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall in 1964 and History Workshop founded by Raphael Samuel at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1966. In addition to these, New Leftists were active in a plethora of radical organisations and initiatives including the Centres for Socialist Education, the Institute for Workers’ Control, and the May Day Manifesto project; the short-lived newspapers *Black Dwarf* and *Seven Days*; the movement for women’s liberation; and later in the 1970s and into 1980s, the Centres for Marxist Education, the revival of the disarmament campaign as END, and the Socialist Society.


33 Newman, Ralph Miliband, p. 94.


35 Letter from Thompson to Miliband, October 1963 and Miliband’s reply, 29 October 1963, Miliband Papers, University of Leeds Special Collections, File CO/45.


39 Letter from Miliband to Thompson, 10 May 1963, Miliband Papers, File SR/1.

40 Letters, Miliband to Thompson, 10 May 1963, File CO/45; Miliband to Saville, 15 May 1963, File SR/1.

41 Letter, Miliband to Saville, 4 November 1963, Miliband Papers, File SR/1.

42 Miliband, ‘Thirty Years of the Socialist Register’, p. 2.


44 Quoted in Newman, Ralph Miliband, p. 122.


46 Thompson, ‘Peculiarities of the English’.


48 Quoted in Newman, Ralph Miliband, p. 118.


