Perhaps the most notable feature of the Register’s output is how consistent was its perspective over the years. Consistency is not necessarily the most admirable of virtues, since it may well indicate a stubborn blindness to changes that are occurring in the world. On the other hand, it may also indicate a refusal to indulge in passing fads and fashions. We avoided this ….

These words are Ralph Miliband’s, from his survey in the 1994 Socialist Register of its ‘direction, policy and output since its first appearance’ thirty years earlier. They may still serve as a useful marker for reflecting, on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, on the Register’s longevity despite the many defeats, disillusionments and retreats experienced by the left.

Miliband used to say that the Register ‘should be hard to write for, as well as hard to read’ – by which he meant that since the kind of essays it published demanded considerable effort on the part of the reader, contributors had a responsibility to work hard at producing essays that were not only of high analytical quality but also as readable as possible. While free of the procedural rigmarole associated with academic refereed journals, the commitment to both literary and analytic quality meant it was hard work to edit too, in various senses: deciding who could best tackle a given topic as each volume was planned; assessing whether drafts submitted showed enough potential to go ahead with; providing careful and extensive editorial commentary on each essay; and making sure that the style of writing was clear and accessible at a time when the opacity and clumsiness of much intellectual discourse affected the left like a plague.

While Miliband was the main force behind the Register, it would never have been born nor survived its first decade without the part played by
John Saville as co-editor as well as frequent contributor – although Miliband used to tease him for an editorial approach that was ‘a bit too Bulletin of the Society for Labour History oriented’.3 As Saville in fact became increasingly preoccupied with the Dictionary of Labour Biography in the 1970s, Miliband found himself handling most of the detailed editorial tasks for the Register (while continuing in close consultation with Saville on themes and contributors). It was no easy thing to turn out such a high quality 300–400 page volume year after year, without any office or staff (albeit aided by the remarkable copy-editing skills of Martin Eve at Merlin Press, who would drive over to Miliband’s house in North London on his motor bike to pick up essays when they were ready, and not too long after return with galleys to be checked).4 The problems of finding the time and energy to do this largely as a one man operation came to a head by the early 1980s.5 It became more and more difficult to get the annual volume to the bookstores with much time left in the year on its cover; and to ensure that no year was skipped, Martin Eve (with the help of David Musson) actually took on the editorship of the 1982 volume.

It was in the summer of that year that the question was first raised with Marcel Liebman and me (as well as George Ross, who demurred) of eventually joining Miliband and Saville as co-editors of the Register. Liebman was Miliband’s oldest friend and intellectual comrade, and Ross and I were the two former graduate students at the LSE with whom he had forged the closest personal as well as intellectual ties. The seeds were also set around that time for the transition to producing each volume around a specific theme. Liebman became a co-editor for the first themed volume in 1984 on The Uses of Anti-Communism; and, after having helped a bit with the previous two volumes, I finally came on board as a co-editor for the following volume, Beyond Social Democracy. ‘It is very unlikely we shall go on adding editors at this rate’, our preface to that Register quipped. In fact, the reverse would occur all too soon and all too tragically with Liebman’s death in 1986. The main tasks of editorship had already been shared between Miliband and myself from early 1985 on, with Beyond Social Democracy prepared as a special double issue for 1985/86 so as to allow us to put in place a more timely production schedule. This was maintained through our very close editorial partnership until Miliband’s untimely and unexpected death at 70, just two months after we finished the preface for the thirtieth volume of the Register in 1994.

Daunted by suddenly carrying sole editorial responsibility, I edited the 1995 volume with the help of Ellen Wood and John Saville (who had taken his name off the masthead in 1990 but continued to contribute essays and
advise on editorial direction). Less concerned about the too-many-cooks syndrome than Miliband and Saville had been, I then moved to establish the Register’s first editorial collective. Its membership initially consisted of active working groups in Toronto and Manchester, with corresponding editors spread from Hong Kong and Johannesburg to Boston and San Francisco. The new editorial collective – which mapped the themes of five future volumes (‘the last five year plan of the 20th century’, we called this) – was a crucial lifeline for me until Colin Leys became co-editor for the 1998 volume, exactly 20 years after his first Register essay had appeared.6 Our collaboration on the Register continued over the subsequent twelve volumes, very much aided by Alan Zuege’s outstanding editorial assistance. Leys retired as co-editor after playing the leading role in producing the 2010 volume on Morbid Symptoms: Health under Capitalism. Greg Albo and Vivek Chibber – already primed by serving as associate editors since 2008 – became the new co-editors.

With Albo also in Toronto (as Leys had been for much of his tenure as co-editor), and with Chibber in New York, this seemed to further confirm Gøran Therborn’s observation in 2007 that ‘the resilience of the small North American left stands out, in comparison with the larger but much softer and more often disheartened forces of Europe’. Indeed, one of his measures for this was that the ‘Socialist Register was launched in the mid-1960s as a very British enterprise, but is now, in the new millennium, edited from Toronto’.7 Yet without dissenting from the overall continental comparison, this could be misinterpreted as regards the Register. This is not only because its publisher continues to be Merlin Press in the UK (with Tony Zurbrugg, having taken it over not long before Martin Eve’s death in 1999, providing unwavering support with the creative help of Adrian Howe and Louis Mackay). Nor is it only because of the many members of the editorial collective located in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. It is also because it gives too short shrift to the Register’s international focus from the beginning. Miliband’s wide connections abroad were a key source for many contributors to the Register, which also always had a large readership outside the UK. Indeed this was why it seemed perfectly natural, when the idea of adding new co-editors came up in the early 1980s, for Miliband to think that Liebman’s residency in Belgium or mine in Canada were not serious obstacles. Indeed, Miliband himself was just then embarking on spending part of each year at North American universities. But as George Ross once told me, ‘if you want to be read in Alexandria, Egypt, publish in the Register; if you want to be read in Cambridge, Massachusetts, don’t’.
II

When the 1964 preface, in announcing ‘a series of annual volumes of socialist analysis and discussion’, expressed the belief that ‘the possibility of fruitful discussions is now greater than for a long time past’, the editors were clearly thinking beyond the UK. Insofar as it was ‘now better realized among socialists that dogmatic reiteration cannot, any more than crass empiricism, provide answers to the problems of the present’, this was a recognition of the general limitations of both Communist and Social Democratic parties, especially as venues of socialist analysis, discussion and education. The perception that the Register was ‘a very British enterprise’ was certainly understandable in light of its genesis in the British New Left. It is also understandable in light of all the attention the Register paid to analyzing the Labour Party and the labour movement in the UK, on which topics the first two volumes had five essays each. That said, the overwhelming majority of the 37 essays in these first two volumes were focused elsewhere. The lead essays in 1964, on Maoism by Isaac Deutscher and Nasserism by Anouar Abdul-Malek, set the tone for the Register’s consistent sobriety about third world revolutions. There was also an essay on Italian Communism by Andre Gorz (writing under the pseudonym of Michel Bosquet) and another on West Germany (‘The Reactionary Democracy’ by Jean-Marie Vincent), as well as wide-ranging comparative essays on ‘The Economics of Neo-capitalism’ by Ernest Mandel, ‘Imperialism Old and New’ by Hamza Alavi, and the break-up of the Second International (‘1914: the Great Schism’) by Marcel Liebman. The 1965 volume contained four essays on Russia and Eastern Europe (including one by Georg Lukács on Solzhenitsyn), three on the Arab world, one on the US (by Harry Magdoff), as well as a broadly comparative essay on welfare states (by Dorothy Wedderburn).

Another essay in that volume was by Hamza Alavi, on peasants and revolution in Russia, China and India, and the continuing close attention the Register would pay to new revolutionary developments in the third world, without romanticizing them, was exemplified by essays in subsequent volumes by John Saul and Giovanni Arrighi on ‘Nationalism and Revolution in Sub-Saharan Africa’, Eric Hobsbawm on ‘Guerillas in Latin America’, and Basil Davidson on ‘The African Prospect’. And as seen in the essays by Lucio Magri on ‘The May Events and Revolution in the West’ and Anthony Arblaster on ‘Student Militancy and The Collapse of Reformism’, the Register would remain no less sober about the student revolts in the 1960s, not to mention about the problems with trying to emulate Che or Mao, or Lenin and Trotsky for that matter. The major role the Register would play in developing Marxism’s conceptual apparatus in relation ‘to
the problems of the present’ was initiated with Miliband’s famous essay on ‘Marx and the State’ in the 1965 volume, and then sustained by his highly critical assessment in 1970 of ‘Lenin’s The State and Revolution’. This ‘sacred text’ of Marxist thought – the very notion of which was ‘alien to the spirit of Marxism, or at least should be’ – especially deserved such critical scrutiny, since ‘far from resolving the problems with which it is concerned, [it] only serves to underline their complexity’. Essays by Andre Gorz on ‘Reform and Revolution’, Rossanna Rossanda on ‘Class and Party’, J.P. Sartre on ‘Masses, Spontaneity, Party’, and Hal Draper on ‘The Death of the State in Marx and Engels’ further added to the Register’s assessment and renewal of Marxist theory. The early volumes also contained a series of critical essays on Engels, highlighted by Donald Hodges’ searing critique of the ‘allegedly’ scientific philosophy of nature (‘To him we owe the Soviet identification of Marxism with a scientific world outlook’).

Looking back from today’s vantage point, all this goes very far in explaining why the Register was not caught out or disheartened by the widespread but extremely thin intellectual dismissal of Marxism in later decades, nor by the ignominious collapse of communist regimes, the servile accommodation of social democracy to neoliberalism, and the disappointment of so many third world revolutions before the twentieth century was over. Indeed, in light of the tendency these days to measure the weakness of the left over the past quarter century with its alleged strength the quarter century before, it is important to recall that the Socialist Register was born at a time when the notion of socialist decline was already ‘pretty well taken for granted’, as Miliband’s essay for the first volume put it. It is also important for understanding the legacy of the early Register to recall how he addressed this: ‘[It] presumably means that at some particular point of time, at some point of the historical curve, socialist prospects were better, more hopeful … One would therefore expect the evidence for it to be blindingly obvious, or at least very easily obtainable. But it is not. In fact, the evidence points mostly the other way’.

Miliband then marshaled the following evidence. However admirable and heroic were many movements and struggles from Chartism to the Paris Commune in Marx’s time, ‘it is no disparagement of these pioneering endeavours to note the incoherence and divisions, the fragility of organization and the confusion of aims … [or] the fact that the established order of which capitalism had become a part found it discouragingly easy, despite its limited means, to repel the challenge against it’. And while the decades before the First World War witnessed the growth of working-class parties and unions, it was still the case that ‘a large part of the working classes, most workers on
the land, the bulk of the lower middle class and much the larger part of the intelligentsia still gave more or less active support to a variety of resolutely anti-socialist parties and causes’, including strong support for ‘imperialist ventures and conquests’. Meanwhile, the new mass organizations themselves not only quickly fell victim to ‘the bureaucratic curse’, but also were ‘riddled with energetic climbers, more concerned with place than purpose’. The interwar years – ‘usually most favoured as providing an illustration of the thesis of socialist decline’ – witnessed ‘the survival of the Bolshevik revolution’ but ‘the absence of revolution almost everywhere else, particularly in Germany’, leaving a deleterious image ‘stamped upon socialism by its consolidation in a country so profoundly backward as Russia’. This could not be erased by those who made the ‘acceptance of a grotesquely roseate view of the Soviet regime … the first criterion of socialist rectitude’. And while many labour movements in the 1930s grew in ‘numbers, organization, and influence … the thirties have a high claim to be considered as the most terrible period of defeat in this century for the international Socialist and Labour movements’. The Nazis ‘capture of Germany’ involved crushing with relative ease ‘a divided and demoralized labour movement’, and this was soon followed by the ineffective opposition to appeasement by labour movements in other countries. Moreover, it was ‘only in the world of historical make-believe that most British intellectuals and academics were then on the left, or that Cambridge University went off en masse to fight for Republican Spain. The reality was altogether different’. And if it was true that in the United States in the 1930s socialist ideas ‘gained a wider currency than ever before, notably among intellectuals and academics’ at a time when ‘trade unionism made spectacular gains’, the ‘feuding socialist groups never achieved any degree of popular support’ while the unions ‘found acceptable the New Deal’s explicit aim of putting capitalism back on its feet’. And here was the punch line:

What is true about the thirties is that the committed minorities were much more confident than the equivalent (and probably larger) minorities of the recent past that capitalism was more or less on its last legs, and that socialism was not only round the corner, but that, as proved by Soviet experience, it must soon usher in the reign of sweetness and light, with minor difficulties mostly caused by a handful of enemies of the people. This no doubt gave many socialists a sense of certitude which their successors have found it difficult to share. But since some part, at least, of the socialist confidence of the thirties was based on wishful thinking and undemanding faith, the loss of it may be less regrettable than is often
suggested. Socialism is not a religious movement. An awareness of its problems as well as of its promise may be a more solid and lasting basis of commitment than a belief in its magic properties as a cure-all.

A key strategic lesson Miliband wanted Register readers to draw from his observations on the 1930s concerned ‘the relationship between economic crisis and socialist commitment – or rather the lack of such relationship’. If deprivation alone was the catalyst, socialism would have conquered capitalism long ago. On the other hand, the very ‘character of capitalist “affluence”’ left plenty of room for socialist pressure and persuasion ‘to drive home the lesson that a system whose dynamic is private appropriation and profit makes impossible the rational and human organization and use of the tremendous resources it has brought into being’. This perspective was further sustained by Hamza Alavi’s essay which immediately followed Miliband’s in the first volume. It posed a fundamental challenge to the Leninist theory of imperialism as well as to various postwar Marxist explanations for ‘the continued functioning of the economies of the advanced capitalist countries which have helped to “postpone the crisis”’.

Sophisticated Marxists would qualify the prediction of the final crisis by a warning against interpreting the theory of crisis in a mechanical fashion. We should take into account, they would say, the influence of counteracting tendencies which could temporarily offset the basic tendencies working towards the final crisis. It is the timing of the crisis which, they would argue, cannot be foretold with accuracy; its inevitability is not questioned. Such qualification smacks of sophistry when we are considering a time span not of a few years but of decades. It is a hundred years since Marx wrote; and nearly half a century since Lenin wrote of the eve of the socialist revolution. Such a prolongation of the life of capitalism calls for a more searching analysis of the changes which have taken place since then … We do not suggest that capitalism shall be free of crises – for the conditions postulated in theory for the achievement of growth with stability cannot be realized within its framework. What we do suggest is that there is no necessity for a dramatic major crisis which would ensure the automatic collapse of capitalism.

Marxist economists who had shifted their perspective from a ‘breakdown thesis’ to a ‘stagnation thesis’ had recognized this much, but the main remit of Alavi’s argument was the importance of recognizing the ‘vast expansion’ of capitalist production, and the rise in working- and middle-class incomes
which allowed capitalists ‘to realize the value of this increased production’. The development of ‘more searching economic analyses of modern capitalism’ would be important for destroying ‘illusion and complacency’ on the left, and for helping to put ‘much greater emphasis on the conscious mobilization of the people for bringing about socialism – the contradictions of capitalism will not necessarily do the job for us’.\(^9\) These very words could have been used to sum up the overall perspective of the Register’s recent volumes on *The Crisis This Time* in 2011 and *The Crisis and the Left* in 2012.

III

No less crucial to the Register’s perspective has been its clear-headed recognition that social democracy and the Keynesian welfare state would not do the job either. Thus Miliband insisted in the 1964 *Register* that what ‘Fabian-minded socialists have always found … difficult to understand’ was that socialism was ‘not about the improvement in the condition of the working class, but about the abolition of that class’.

\(^{10}\) In her essay on the welfare state in the 1965 *Register*, Dorothy Wedderburn presciently pointed out that ‘a social reform won at a particular point of time can become adapted, modified, less effective as a result of market forces acting upon it. We cannot insulate our socialist victories from the complex operations of the capitalist system’. This was already happening to social insurance, where the acceptance of the ‘wage-relation as a basis for fixing social security benefits’, especially in the area of pensions, increasingly involved accepting ‘the judgment of, and the inequalities in, the market’.

\(^{11}\) For his part, John Saville – noting Richard Titmuss’s new evidence that what had been taking place in the 1950s was ‘not a leveling of incomes, but its opposite’ – laid a good deal of the blame for this at the feet of Fabian intellectuals who conceded too much to *The Economist* and other conservative voices. Arthur Lewis was only speaking in terms of ‘the general clichés of those years’ when he wrote in 1955 of almost reaching the limits of redistributive policies ‘not only in the sense that the incomes of the rich, after taxation, are now comparatively small; but also in the sense that we are in danger of destroying the incentive to take risks’.\(^{12}\) In fact, by the time the leadership of the Labour Party had ‘voted themselves out of office in 1951 to the bewilderment and disillusionment of their ordinary supporters’, the leadership was already by then ‘tired and exhausted, and without a shred of inspiration’. The inflated claims about the 1945 government’s accomplishments ran up against ‘the common sense skepticism of the working class’, for whom ‘evidence of a massive shift in income distribution was not exactly overpowering’. When another Labour government was finally re-elected the same year the *Register*
was launched, its editors could justifiably point to ‘the hopelessly wrong conclusions which the revisionists deduced from post-war economic and social trends [that] led them to argue for further accommodation to capitalist society, in order to allow capitalism to continue its good works’.  

Miliband argued in his 1965 Register essay that the left still had ‘no option but to try and implant socialist proposals in the thinking of the Labour movement, and to fight for their adoption as party policy. Realistic alternatives do not exist’. But he would himself leave the Labour Party a year later, above all in disgust with the Wilson government’s support of the US in Vietnam. By the time the second edition of his Parliamentary Socialism was published in 1973, Miliband made it clear in his new postscript that it was the view that the Labour Party could be turned into a serious socialist party that was really unrealistic. The 1973 Register featured an essay by Richard Hyman that showed how debilitating was the Labour leadership’s entirely negative attitude to the rank-and-file industrial militancy of the time, given the fragile and contradictory state of working-class consciousness. Indeed, in this light, even the defensive slogan of ‘Hands off the Unions’ which was the ‘favorite response of union leaders, “left” MPs, and the Communist Party … is doomed to failure by the current requirements of British capitalism: the power of trade unionism must escalate if it is not to be eroded’. The 1973 volume contained another essay by Hilary Rose which addressed similarly unhelpful attitudes to ‘the upsurge of a new form of political action, called variously community politics or community action: organizing around the neighbourhood and the home became a significant political activity’. Looking especially at claimants unions in the UK which had become ‘one vital strand within a nexus of activities focused on the home and street’, she observed that, like the black and women’s movements, ‘their critique is cultural rather than merely economistic and contains an edge of anger … partly in response to changing economic conditions, but also in response to the failure of the Labour Party and the neglect by many – if not most – Marxist groups of those not directly engaged “at the point of production”’. Yet this early Register essay also already discerned the political ‘tragedy’ lurking in these new movements, being one of the first to cite the subsequently famous pamphlet by Jo Freeman (just published in December 1972 under the pseudonym ‘Joreen’) on their ‘tyranny of structurelessness’. This concealed the leadership that lay in the ‘friendship networks at the core of the movement’ which often excluded ‘the very people who potentially could be of help to the movement’; at the same time, it denied ‘the movement the possibility of developing more complex forms of organization with which to meet the increasing opposition of the Welfare State’.
Notably, the 1973 *Register* also had an essay by Ken Coates which directly challenged Miliband’s view that it was unrealistic to try to turn Labour into a serious socialist party. A new left in the Labour Party (whose most prominent voice was Tony Benn, with whom Coates was closely aligned) was just emerging, inspired by the rank-and-file militancy and community politics of the time. While agreeing that the current Labour leadership’s ‘pragmatism inspires no sacrifices, blazes no trails, bodes no fundamental changes, and meets no deep spiritual needs’, Coates nevertheless insisted on asking: ‘If the Labour Party cannot be turned into a socialist party, then the question which confronts us all is, how can we form a socialist party? If we are not ready to answer this question, then we are not ready to dismiss the party that exists.’

Miliband directly addressed this argument in his famous ‘Moving On’ essay in the 1976 *Register*. He noted that twenty years after 1956 ‘the main problem for the socialist left in Britain is still that of its own organisation into an effective political formation, able to attract a substantial measure of support and to hold out a genuine promise of further growth’. He also granted that ‘insofar as it cannot be conclusively proved that the Labour Party will not in any serious sense be turned in socialist directions, the chances are that the controversy will go on for a long time to come’ – only immediately adding, ‘without leading anywhere’. Indeed, he insisted that ‘the belief in the effective transformation of the Labour Party into an instrument of socialist policies is the most crippling of all illusions to which socialists in Britain have been prone’. Nor did the essay brook any illusions about either the Communist Party or any of the newer groupings to its left – but this hardly made the argument that ‘there is no alternative’ to the Labour Party ‘in any way conclusive’. It was unwarranted to imagine that ‘the peculiar link’ that gave the party a ‘quasi-monopoly’ with the trade unions ruled out the growth of any serious alternative, since the history of socialist parties had shown that ‘not only is such a link unnecessary: it is in many ways undesirable’. Despite ‘many formidable obstacles’, what was required ‘was the formation of a socialist party free from the manifold shortcomings of existing organisations and able to draw together people from such organisations as well as people who are now politically homeless … which would at first be necessarily fairly small but which would have a capacity for growth such as the existing formations on the left of the Labour Party do not have and are not likely to acquire’.
In a certain sense Miliband was here only bringing to a logical conclusion what ‘[f]rom the first volume of The Register in 1964, its editors [had] constantly sought to encourage’, as David Coates later put it, namely ‘the emergence of a form of left-wing politics free of traditional parliamentarism on the one side, and of the Stalinism of Communist (and the Leninism of Trotskyist) politics on the other’. But the Register’s growing concern through the 1970s with the need for socialists to more urgently address the arduous and intricate task of developing socialist parties of a new kind had to do with the recognition that the existing ones were unable, as Miliband put it in ‘Moving On’, ‘to provide a credible and effective rallying point’ against the danger of a ‘marked and accelerating drift to the right’.

Andrew Gamble’s lead essay in the 1979 volume on ‘The Free Market and the Strong State’ clearly outlined how ‘the new ideologues of the right and the band of vociferous converts and roving spokesmen for management that consort with them’ were embarking on a major attempt ‘to appeal to that section of the working-class electorate for whom the policies and organizations of social democracy have become increasingly unpopular’. It was the inadequate response to this among unions as well as existing working-class parties which also set the stage for many intellectuals’ widespread dismissal of labour as a transformative or even a progressive social force. E.P. Thompson had already warned against this in the 1973 Register, in his 100 page-long ‘Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski’, whose explicit turn against Marxism was in many ways the forerunner of the path taken by a great many intellectuals in the West a decade later. Thompson noted how the old ‘pathetic fallacy of intellectuals that by their own thinking they can change the world’ was now being reflected in a generation of American radical students for whom ‘the entire white working-class was being “written off”’. He argued that there were ‘real reasons for this: but this writing-off did damage to intellectual growth itself. And in such situations both despair and rebellion can lead to the same terminus.’

Raymond Williams’ lead essay in the 1981 volume warned that the ‘don’t rock the boat, let’s unite to get Thatcher out’ stance of the Labour leadership was precisely the kind of ‘opportunist negativism’ that was likely to sow new confusions and further get in the way of developing ‘sustained popular understanding and support’ for a socialist alternative. This was also the remit of Stuart Hall’s original interpretation of the rise of Thatcherism. Picking up a central theme in the Register since its inception, i.e. that there was nothing inevitable about socialist advance, Hall’s lead essay in the 1982 volume argued that far from socialism being ‘the natural centre of
gravity of working-class ideas’, it was necessary to ‘stress the centrality of
the domain of ideological-political ideas and the struggle to win hearts
and minds to socialism’. And while one could ‘recognise a certain kind of
Marxist “traditionalism”’ behind this notion of the “inevitable triumph of
socialist ideas”… actually, it is even more deeply rooted in the non-Marxist,
“labourist”, traditions. Vulgar economism comes in many disguises.’ As
my own essay in the 1985/86 Register put it, it was precisely because ‘class
identity, class consciousness, class politics, were indeed but one of a number
of possible forms of collective expression even in a capitalist society … by no
means an automatic outcome of economic locations in productive relations
alone’ that it was also necessary to stress ‘ideological and cultural factors in
the formation of social and political subjects’. Indeed those intellectuals who
were concentrating on the shortcomings of Marxism ignored the fact that
(apart from their misinterpretations) this obviously could have little salience
in explaining the impasse of working class politics in those countries where
social democratic parties and unions had either never adopted or long since
rejected any association with Marxist thought. It was necessary in this context
to also pay attention to the ways in which they had constrained rather than
encouraged a broad rather than particularistic working-class consciousness.
Above all, it was necessary for the left to give priority now to fostering
working-class capacities ‘to provide leadership in their wider communities
in relation to multifarious forms of subordination, deprivation, and struggle’.

[A] politics that envisions creating a working class majority in terms
of collective socio-political identity does not need to mean that other
identities – of gender, or race, of ethnicity – have to be effaced … it is
possible for working people to think of themselves as workers and to
act politically in a way that allows for, in fact obtains strength from, a
simultaneous expression of their other collective identities in so far as a
popular socialist culture provides a common terrain of understanding,
purpose and activity. The 1990 volume on The Retreat of the Intellectuals rededicated the Register
to the task of ‘creating an intellectual and ideological climate very different
from that which has prevailed on the left in the past decade’. As the preface
explained, the ‘particularly pronounced’ retreat from Marxism through the
1980s had been accompanied by ‘a more general retreat from socialism
conceived as a radical alternative to capitalism. The very notion of capitalism
has come to be exceedingly blurred in much left discourse; and the notion
of a radical alternative to capitalism has been correspondingly devalued in
the eyes of many intellectuals who had previously been committed to it.’ No less blurred was the understanding of class. As Terry Eagleton’s essay so incisively argued regarding ‘the celebrated triptych of “class, race and gender”, a formula which has rapidly assumed for the left the kind of authority which the Holy Trinity exerts for the right’.

[This] formula comes near to involving what the philosophers might call a category mistake … The social constitution of categories like black and female is, like social class, a wholly relational affair; but nobody is black because someone else is white, in the sense that some people are only landless labourers because there are gentlemen farmers around the place. This distinction may not be of great political importance, but sloppy thinking about such crucial issues is always perilous. 27

What the Register consistently represented for socialist intellectuals in this context was evinced by John Saville’s ‘anatomy’ of the ‘intellectual feebleness and absence of a steadfastly critical approach’ of Marxism Today. This formerly very old-fashioned monthly journal of the Communist Party had responded to Thatcherism, as well as to broader neoconservative, neoliberal, postmodern and post-Fordist trends of the 1980s, with ‘the shallow and superficial trivia known as New Times’ (including an ‘editorial direction that thought it proper to devote two pages to fashion against one to politics’ in one issue). Political movements of the left especially needed to ‘be able to rely upon their writers and intellectuals to provide interpretations and judgements’ which consistently sought ‘to situate the individual within historical time; to relate the past to the present and offer a variety of perspectives for the future; to make sense of individual purpose, a matter of self-enlightenment, within a wider social-political framework and setting’. Precisely because the left had ‘often been wrong, confused and blinded by a dogmatic reference to the past which has encouraged a false or one sided understanding of the present, and mistaken prognosis of things to come’, what was all the more needed now for a really serious ‘review of the contemporary world’ was to provide an ‘informed, relevant and sharply critical approach to the dominant ideas and policies of those in power, and to those who uphold them’. 28

V

This remained the aim and purpose of the Register amidst the realization of a truly global capitalist order by the end of the twentieth century. The 1991 volume on Communist Regimes: The Aftermath had already analyzed the
capitalist transformations of those regimes, while the sheer breadth as well as depth of the neoliberal restructuring of economies, class structures and state apparatuses elsewhere justified the title of Robert Cox’s essay, ‘Global Perestroika’, for the 1992 Register. The concept of ‘disciplinary neoliberalism’, which Stephen Gill introduced in that volume, captured very well the EU’s impositions on Eastern European countries of the kind of conditionalities the IMF had applied to Latin America in the 1980s. It also appeared to meld with global American military discipline, as trumpeted after the Gulf War by George Bush Sr with the phrase ‘New World Order’. But the attachment of a question mark to this phrase in the title of the 1992 volume reflected our questioning of the notion that neoliberal capitalism, or for that matter the US imperial embrace, was entirely externally imposed on states, rather than promoted by capitalist forces within them. That this even included social democracy’s strongest citadels made the essay by Rudolph Meidner in the 1993 Register on ‘Why did the Swedish Model Fail?’ especially significant. Of ‘decisive importance’, he showed, was the internationalization of the Swedish economy, as the very large private companies favoured by Social Democratic governments grew into multinationals that increasingly invested abroad the handsome profits they secured through the trade union policy of solidarity wage restraint. Insofar as Sweden was now emulated by liberals and social democrats abroad, it was not for its balance between social control and private ownership but rather for its success at sustaining the competitiveness of its capitalists in international trade and investment through a labour market strategy of skills training and workplace flexibility.

The preface to the 1994 volume on Between Globalism and Nationalism, the last before Miliband’s death, asserted that ‘the Register is performing an important service in probing and challenging [the] assumption’ that globalization was a process that diminished or marginalized states. The false dichotomy between markets and states that had become so prevalent not only in mainstream discourse but also on the left was a symptom of all that had already been forgotten about the advances made in the Marxist theory of the state in the 1970s. But it demonstrated as well the need for further advances. My essay on ‘Globalization and the State’ sought to develop the concept of the internationalization of the state to capture the growing orientation of state policies and the responsibilities of state institutions towards facilitating and managing a global capitalist order. This was complemented by Greg Albo’s path-breaking critique of ‘progressive competitiveness’ as a left version of ‘supply-side’ and ‘competitive austerity policies’, while at the same time outlining the components of a genuine policy alternative which would focus on the reintegration of national economies through employment planning,
the redistribution of work and democratic workplaces.\textsuperscript{31}

A further concern of the Register at this time was to better understand the capitalist transformations taking place in many states of the Global South in defiance of the expectations of dependency theory, while avoiding the starry-eyed adulation of East Asia’s state-led economic development that had grown so common on the left. This had been the remit of Paul Cammack’s celebrated essay on ‘Statism, New Institutionalism, and Marxism’ in the 1990 volume, and it would remain a central concern, since even as late as 2005, as Vivek Chibber pointed out in his first essay for the Register, this adulation was still ‘not only to be found among political elites. It also emanates from a powerful and articulate wing of the anti-globalization movement – critical intellectuals, NGOs, and trade unions.’

In a period when free market policies have little credibility, but labour is not strong enough to pose a serious challenge to private property, some kind of statist development project appears to many to be the ‘transitional programme’ of our time. Defending a space for national capitalist development, under the direction of domestic groups, at least seems consistent in principle with conscious direction of the economy – even if under the hegemony of the national bourgeoisie … In this, the national bourgeoisie was inevitably contrasted with the local ‘compradors’, who, because of their links with metropolitan firms, were seen as irredeemably tied to imperial interests … But capitalists seem to have been happy to play both roles simultaneously – trying to protect their domestic market, while striving for lasting ties with metropolitan firms.\textsuperscript{32}

Many of the most original and influential analyses of neoliberal globalization have appeared in the Register, spanning academic disciplines and specialized debates so as to provide a critique of the dominant intellectual and political fashions, and to encourage analyses that transcended orthodox left perspectives.\textsuperscript{33} This built on the contributions to Marxist political economy the Register had published in previous decades by such luminaries as Michael Barratt Brown, Ernest Mandel, Harry Magdoff, Ben Fine, Laurence Harris, Andrew Glyn, Simon Clarke and others. But this now was undertaken in a more focused way with essays on the nature, consolidation and contradictions of neoliberal capitalism by authors like Elmar Altvater and Birgit Mahnkopf, Gerald Epstein and James Crotty, Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy, Mino Carchedi, David Harvey, Ursula Huws, David McNally, Hugo Radice, Alfredo Saad-Filho, Anwar Shaikh and others. This included enriching Marxism’s capacity to understand the transformations
states in the advanced capitalist world were going through while promoting and sustaining capitalist globalization as well as managing its contradictions. Not only their continuing cooperation in doing all this but the deep structural linkages among them that were developed in the process, with the American state consistently remaining at the core, increasingly led us to put particular emphasis on encouraging new understandings of the nature of imperialism that finally escaped the out-dated Marxist analyses of the old inter-imperial rivalries. This culminated in the Register’s much-celebrated and widely-translated volumes on *The New Imperial Challenge* in 2004 and *The Empire Reloaded* in 2005. As our preface to the first of these volumes put it, our goal was to ‘help make socialist theory and analysis realistic, and socialist activism focused and coherent, in the opening years of a new century marked by US-led globalization and a new and more overt form of US imperialism’.

The need for theory to inform practice is particularly acute at times of rapid and comprehensive change such as we are now experiencing. Perhaps the arbitrary division of time into centuries makes any ‘turn of the century’ seem a moment of exceptional change, yet it is striking that so many socialist thinkers had precisely the same feeling a hundred years ago, when imperialism was also a chief focus of their concern. Many non-Marxists as well as Marxists at that time saw global capitalism as in flux, or in crisis, and imperialism as its newly-defining moment. The range of thinkers involved then, and the scope of the work they undertook, should have warned us not to embark lightly on the similar task we were proposing to undertake a hundred years later, but it was only when we started commissioning contributions that we realized fully how much it was a task for many volumes, by many authors.

The concern to sustain the most positive aspects of the Marxist legacy while jettisoning those which had increasingly got in the way of both the intellectual and political advance of the left had in fact motivated the new editorial collective from the beginning. Its inspiration and contribution in this respect was especially evident when the 1998 volume on *The Communist Manifesto Today* was launched at a very large event at Conway Hall in London, called ‘Celebrating and Moving On’, which Sheila Rowbotham took the lead role in organizing for the Register collective. Her lead essay for the 1998 volume involved the brilliant conception of a letter written to Marx from a socialist feminist who had been active in many of the same struggles in the 1840s. Having chanced across the *Manifesto* in a shirt pocket in the laundry of the Wisconsin phalanx to which she had escaped after the
repression that followed the European revolutions, the letter penned to ‘Dear Dr Marx’ tells him of her disappointment at the Manifesto’s ‘exclusion of all reference to women’s part in our own emancipation’. The letter proceeds to remind him of much socialist feminist activity in Europe and to inform him of much else that socialist feminist women were up to in North America.34

The programme for the Conway Hall event which Rowbotham produced featured the performance of a play she wrote for the occasion, ‘The Tale That Never Ends’, as well as the reading by Julie Christie of a Pablo Neruda poem, ‘The Standard Oil Company’:

Their obese emperors from New York
are suave smiling assassins
who buy silk, nylon, cigars
petty tyrants and dictators.
They buy countries, people, seas, police, county councils,
distant regions where the poor hoard their corn
like misers their gold …

VI

In our essay on the Manifesto’s political legacy 150 years on, Leys and I noted that ‘stubborn historical facts’ about capitalism were breaking through ‘the illusions fostered by neoliberal rhetoric – and equally through the pseudo-left illusions of “new times”, “radicalism of the centre” and all similar dreams of a capitalist world miraculously freed from alienation, immiseration and crises’. Yet with Tony Blair’s recently-elected New Labour government not only signalling a rather enthusiastic (if also cynically pragmatic) accommodation to Thatcherism and the American imperium, but joining the dozen other social democratic governments in Europe unable, or at least unwilling, to break with neoliberal policies, we also noted that ‘[t]he tide of reaction is still flowing, but with diminishing confidence and force, while the counter-flow of progressive feeling and ideas gathers strength but has yet to find effective political expression’.35

Among the various reasons for this, we were acutely aware, was the debilitating loss of socialist vision and conviction in the wake of the retreats of the 1980s. How to move beyond ‘identity politics’ by resuscitating socialist feminism’s promise to renew Marxist analysis and working-class politics; how to develop socialist ecological analyses and practices that avoided either catastrophism or mere piecemeal reformism; how to support the widespread growth of the anti-globalization protest movement while recognizing that it was not in fact possible to ‘change the world without taking power’;
how to encourage new socialist parties committed to overcoming the old limitations of both parliamentarism and vanguardism: these remained the guiding concerns of the Register.

The advances socialist feminism made in the 1970s largely took place outside of the pages of the Register, apart from a few exceptions like Hilary Rose’s essay discussed above, or Hal Draper and Anne Lipow’s 1976 essay documenting what socialist feminists could still learn from Zetkin and Luxemburg. By the early 1980s the Register had become much more a site of socialist feminist analysis, as seen in Jane Jenson’s 1980 essay on ‘The French Communist Party and Feminism’, as well as Dorothy Smith’s lead essay in 1983 on ‘Women, Class and Family’ and Varda Burstyn’s ‘Masculine Dominance and the State’ in the same volume. This continued through the decade, with such essays as Elizabeth Wilson’s on ‘Thatcherism and Women’ and Zillah Eisenstein’s on ‘Liberalism, Feminism and the Reagan State’ in 1987, and Johanna Brenner’s on ‘Feminism’s Revolutionary Promise’ in 1989. Notably, Brenner’s subtitle, ‘Finding Hope in Hard Times’, expressed the frustration felt by many socialist feminists who, just as they were ‘trying to cope with what we experience as decline if not defeat of feminism, or at least of feminism as a grass-roots movement within which radicals could organize, some on the left are finding in feminism and other “new movements” revolutionary subjects to replace the working-class’.36 This presaged the Register’s critical engagement with this aspect of the ‘retreat of the intellectuals’, including Linda Gordon’s ‘The Welfare State: A Socialist-Feminist Perspective’ and Eleanor Macdonald’s ‘Derrida and the Politics of Interpretation’ alongside Ellen Wood’s ‘The Uses and Abuses of Civil Society’ and Amy Bartholomew’s ‘Should a Marxist Believe in Marx on Rights?’ in the 1990 volume. This continued with Marsha Hewitt’s ‘Illusions of Freedom: The Regressive Implications of Post-Modernism’ and Lynn Segal’s ‘False Promises: Anti-Pornography Feminism’ in 1993, Frances Fox Piven’s ‘Globalizing Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics’ in 1995 and Barbara Epstein’s ‘The Marginality of the American Left: The Legacy of the 1960s’ in 1996. Meera Nanda, who had worked as a molecular biologist with science for the people movements in India in the 1970s and 1980s, offered a particularly powerful critique in the 1997 volume of ‘the neo-traditionalism condoned, tolerated and, indeed, often celebrated by feminist and postcolonial science critics . . . Most progressive intellectuals in the West at the close of the twentieth century have come to see scientific rationality as the “mantle of those in power, those with authority.” But coming from where I come from, I can see the missing half of the dialectic: scientific rationality also contains the resources to challenge those in power, those
with authority.³³⁷

Perhaps most important was the Register’s determination not to hive off socialist feminist analysis as something separate from our ‘main business’. It increasingly informed the Register’s approach to political economy, as was evident from Ursula Huws’ ‘Material World: The Myth of the Weightless Economy’ and Wally Seccombe’s ‘Contradictions of Shareholder Capitalism: Downsizing Jobs, Enlisting Savings, Destabilizing Families’ in the 1999 volume on Global Capitalism versus Democracy. And it was especially evident in the 2001 volume on Working Classes, Global Realities (edited with the help of Greg Albo and David Coates), where a great many of the essays probed the contemporary relationship between class and gender in a broad range of both developing and advanced capitalist countries, and the challenges for working-class solidarity and socialist strategy that women’s participation in the labour force and in trade unions exposed. Brigitte Young’s essay on ‘The “Mistress” and the “Maid” in the Global Economy’ explored how the flexibilization of the labour market had produced greater equality between educated middle-class women and men while creating greater inequality among women, not least through the way the growing participation of professional women in the labour market was accompanied by the largely ‘invisible’ development of paid work in the private household by growing numbers of migrant women. Rosemary Warskett’s essay on ‘Feminism’s Challenge to Unions’, in assessing the effect that feminism as an ideology as well as women’s increasing membership and rise to senior positions had on trade unions, observed that while many gains had been made, this nevertheless stood in ‘stark contrast to a vision of transforming the hierarchical nature of the work-place, with its authoritarian division of tasks and separation of intellectual and physical labour. The earlier socialist-feminists’ vision of changing union organization so as to promote the value of all people’s work in terms of self-activity and human liberation is removed from the agenda, and equity, in terms of what white men have, becomes the ultimate objective’.³³⁸

Sustaining this vein of socialist feminist analysis remained an important priority for the Register in the new millennium, as seen in essays by Barbara Ehrenreich, Fran Piven, Barbara Harriss-White, Lynn Segal, Paula Tibandebage and Maureen Mackintosh, and Pat and Hugh Armstrong, among many others. The Register thus stood steadfast against what Meg Luxton and Joan Sangster in the 2013 volume identified as ‘the problems of amnesia’. In countering the claim that ‘second-wave feminism came to share a “subterranean elective affinity” with neoliberalism’, they argued instead that ‘liberal feminism’s compatibility with neoliberalism is an explicit, structural
compatibility, and that it has been able to achieve almost hegemonic status as “second-wave feminism” only to the degree that socialist feminism has been ignored or defeated’. Recognizing this was essential ‘to avoid an American-centric understanding of feminism, and to move beyond taken-for-granted assertions about intersectionality to develop an analysis of class relations that thoroughly integrates gender and race and other systems of discrimination and oppression’.

The 2000 volume on *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias* contained not only Frigga Haug’s ‘On the Necessity of Conceiving the Utopian in a Feminist Fashion’ and Johanna Brenner’s ‘Utopian Families’, but also essays by Diane Elson on ‘Socialized Markets, not Market Socialism’, and Kate Soper on ‘Other Pleasures: The Attractions of Post-consumerism’. Soper’s socialist environmentalism was also indicative of the increasing attention the Register was paying to the ecological question. This was by no means a new concern, as seen by Peter Sedgewick’s 1966 essay on ‘Natural Science and Human Theory’, Hilary and Steven Rose’s ‘The Radicalisation of Science’ in 1972, S. M. Miller’s analysis of the American left’s new environmentalist politics in 1980, or Michael Bodemann’s essay on the German Green Party in the 1985/86 volume. But it was only with the 1993 volume and David Harvey’s lead essay on ‘The Nature of Environment: Dialectics of Social and Environmental Change’ that the Register could be seen as making a really significant contribution. This was followed by such essays as Larry Pratt and Wendy Montgomery’s on ‘Green Imperialism: Pollution, Penitence, Profits’ in 1997, John Bellamy Foster’s ‘The Communist Manifesto and the Environment’ in 1998, Soper’s above-mentioned essay on post-consumerism in 2000, and Foster and Brett Clark’s ‘Ecological Imperialism: The Curse of Capitalism’ in 2004. But it really took the 2007 volume on *Coming to Terms with Nature* for the Register to make a major impact in terms of advancing the ecological analysis of contemporary capitalism. This volume also made a much needed contribution to better understand the limitations of environmentalist politics, with Frieder Otto Wolf’s ‘Party-building for Eco-Socialists: Lessons from the Failed Project of the German Greens’ and Greg Albo’s ‘The Limits of Eco-Localism: Scale, Strategy, Socialism’.

But it has been the continuing political impasse of the left more generally that has continued to especially occupy the Register’s attention. As wave after wave of protests against neoliberal globalization took shape in the proclamation that ‘Another World Is Possible’ at the first annual World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Naomi Klein observed in her lead essay in the 2002 Register that ‘Many people said that they felt history being made in that room. What I felt was something more intangible: the end
of The End of History’. Yet it was the very organizational intangibility of the alter-globalization movement that limited its capacity to effect real political change. Recalling Hilary Rose’s citation in the Register of ‘the tyranny of structurelessness’ on a much smaller scale four decades earlier, Stephanie Ross’s essay in the 2003 Register identified the key problems with the anti-globalization movement’s ‘variety of decentralized decision-making structures’. Such structures could not ‘ensure equal and effective participation’ since they tended to be ‘fluid in terms of membership and loose in terms of the extent to which participants are bound by the decisions made’ … Consensus produces its own tyranny, that of endurance, in which “the last ones left at the table get to make the decision”.

The admirable impulse to international solidarity that so inspired the anti-globalization movement also donned rose-coloured glasses, the wearing of which the Register has always resisted, as it did now with Judy Hellman’s ‘Real and Virtual Chiapas: Magic Realism and the Left’ in 2000, and Sergio Baierle’s ‘The Porto Alegre Thermidor: Brazil’s “Participatory Budget” at the Crossroads’ in 2003.

Hilary Wainwright’s ‘Once More Moving On: Social Movements, Political Representation and the Left’ in 1995 and her ‘Building New Parties for a Different Kind of Socialism’ in 1996, had already sharply posed the question of whether the ‘political methodology’ of the new social movements might be able to make new headway in developing popular democratic capacities and contesting for state power to the end of transforming it for socialist purposes. She hoped that their ‘principles of organisation, approaches to power, views of knowledge and of whose knowledge matters’ could be adapted in ways that would inform the development of parties of a new kind. Unfortunately the ANC in South Africa and PT in Brazil which seemed to embody exemplary alliances between grassroots movements, trade unions and parties would soon disappoint the socialist hopes so many had invested in them. The Register has closely probed the reasons for this in South Africa, from Patrick Bond and Mzwanele Mayekiso’s, ‘Reflections from the South African Struggle’ in 1996 to John Saul’s ‘On Taming a Revolution: The South African Case’ in 2013. And its coverage of the PT runs from Huw Beynon’s ‘Democracy and the Organization of Class Struggle in Brazil’ in 2001 and Baierle’s ‘Porto Alegre Thermidor’ in 2002 to João Pedro Stédile’s ‘The Class Struggles in Brazil: The Perspective of the MST’ in 2008 (not to mention the two essays on Brazil in this volume). The contrasting assessments in the 2008 volume of Hugo Chavez’s Bolivarian revolution offered by Margarita López Maya’s ‘Venezuela Today: A “Participative and Protagonistic” Democracy?’ and Marta Harnecker’s ‘Blows and Counterblows in Venezuela’ are also particularly worth going back to in
light of Chavez’s death this year.

Careful assessment of the possibilities and limitations of the most significant new socialist parties and governments around the world has remained the hallmark of the Register. This is why it seemed especially appropriate to close out the Register’s first half century in 2013 with The Question of Strategy, featuring essays on ‘Rethinking Unions, Registering Socialism’ and ‘Socialist–feminist Strategy Today’ alongside essays on ‘Strategy and Tactics in Popular Struggles in Latin America’ and ‘Twenty-first Century Socialism in Bolivia’, as well as on the Occupy movement in the US and the new European parties of the left, from Rifondazione in Italy to Die Linke in Germany to Syriza in Greece. That the broad questions this volume raised has generated a new discussion of ‘the return of the question of the party’ is a welcome tribute to the Register’s ongoing contribution.43

VII

It is impossible to conclude this survey of the Register’s perspective on class and politics over the past five decades without noting the irony that this fiftieth volume should contain an observation that ‘most working-class voters view the possibilities of a Miliband-led Labour government with at least tepid optimism’. This is in the essay by Andrew Murray, the chief of staff in Britain’s largest union, on whether socialists should be supporting the new Left Unity initiative to form a new working-class party rather than still engage in trying to change the Labour Party. Murray’s observation, offered in favour of staying in the party, speaks more generally to the electoral base that social democratic parties retain in the working class today (so far only broken in Greece during the current capitalist crisis, with Syriza’s meteoric rise and Pasok’s abject decline).

Murray’s essay makes the most spirited socialist case for staying in the Labour Party since Ken Coates’s essay in the 1973 Register. But to say that the Labour Party even today remains the tepid choice of most working-class people is only, as Ralph Miliband put it in his ‘Moving On’ essay, ‘to open the discussion, not to conclude it’. The question Raymond Williams posed in the 1981 Register on whether the continuing electoral appeal of social democracy’s ‘opportunist negativism’ is likely to sow new confusions and further get in the way of developing ‘sustained popular understanding and support’ for a socialist alternative still rings true. It was the strength of what Williams criticized as the ‘let’s unite to get Thatcher out’ appeal that drew Miliband’s sons (both born after the Register was founded) into the Labour Party in the 1980s. When Labour finally formed a government again almost twenty years later, there were many who claimed that these types of
criticisms had no contemporary relevance. But as David Coates put it in his 2003 anthology of *Register* essays, *Paving the Third Way*:

Part of the New Labour appeal is its telling of the party’s own history. But much of that telling is itself partial, misleading, self-indulgent, and persistently distorting of the nature and limits of earlier Labour leaderships. New Labour is not as new as it likes to think … earlier and current revisionisms have features in common, and operate within parameters and logics that were evident long before the current leadership even joined the Party, let alone led it. The limits of Old Labour paved the way for the limits of New Labour …

As it turned out, the Miliband who defeated the other for the party leadership was always more uncomfortable with New Labour’s accommodation to Thatcherism and the City of London, although even the latter never was so ‘unthoughtful’ as to express himself like Peter Mandelson did in avowing that he was ‘intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich as long as they pay their taxes’. The votes of trade union activists in the party’s electoral college made the difference in the election of the Miliband who blamed the New Labour philosophy (and the invasion of Iraq) for the defeat in the General Election, and demanded that the theme of inequality once again become a central political issue of British politics. And Ed Miliband has even from time to time actually touched on the core relationship between class and politics that underlies this inequality, as in his preface to an e-book by the ‘Blue Labour’ group of intellectuals:

Historically, debates within Labour have often been conducted on the basis of a choice between ‘more state and less market’ or ‘more market and less state’ … both the statists and the pro-market voices underplayed the importance of the aspect of our lives and our communities that must be protected from the destructive effects of both markets and the unresponsive state …. Labour originally grew out of a vast movement of voluntary collectivism. We should remember the co-operatives, mutual associations, adult schools and reading circles that constitute a proud tradition of mutual improvement and civic activism … we need to rediscover the tradition for labour as a grassroots community movement – not for the sake of nostalgia for the past, but to strengthen our party’s capacity to bring about real change to people’s lives.
Yet it was the same new leader who, in a speech to the annual Trade Union Congress in September 2011, took it upon himself to tell the assembled delegates: ‘Strikes are always the consequence of failure. Failure we cannot afford as a nation. Instead your real role is as partners in the new economy.’ This was, of course, a message designed to be heard by the assembled media, and through them by bankers, managers and investors, but perhaps above all by a Parliamentary Labour Party overwhelmingly made up of MPs whose political inclinations were instilled by New Labour in its ascendancy. But whatever the constraints on the new leader, his words to the TUC were indicative of something much deeper, namely what Ralph Miliband meant by the ‘whole philosophy of politics’, which someone who aspires to become a leader of a social democratic party must imbibe – or give up such aspiration unless he secretly intends to irrevocably split the party once he comes into office. The joke widely circulated during the party leadership campaign – which went something like ‘Ralph Miliband always said the Labour Party leadership would betray the working class, and he produced two sons to prove it’ – was above all inapt because ‘betrayal’ was a word the father very seldom used, except to challenge its misuse, even with respect to such a momentous event as the calling off of the 1926 General Strike ‘without guarantees of any kind, either for the miners, or against the victimization of other workers’. The notion of betrayal, he argued,

should not be allowed to reduce the episode to the scale of a Victorian melodrama, with the Labour leaders as the gleeful villains, planning and perpetrating an evil deed. The Labour movement was betrayed, but not because the Labour leaders were villains, or cowards. It was betrayed because betrayal was the inherent and inescapable consequence of their whole philosophy of politics – and it would be quite foolish to think that their philosophy was the less firmly held for being unsystematically articulated … Most important of all … was the belief common to both industrial and parliamentary leaders, that a challenge to the Government through the assertion of working class power was wrong. Try though they might to persuade themselves and others that they were engaged in a purely industrial dispute, they knew it was more than that, and it was this that made them feel guilty, uneasy, insecure.47

To be sure, Ralph Miliband always insisted there was room for manoeuvre within the capitalist state. Even in conditions of a crisis in capital accumulation, it was possible for a radical leader ‘to treat these conditions as a challenge to greater boldness, as an opportunity to greater radicalism’; and
he argued that in doing so, such a leader was ‘likely to receive the support of many people, hitherto uncommitted or half-committed, but willing to accept a resolute lead’. But he rejected explanations of the failure to do this that were based on the ‘personal attributes of social-democratic leaders’, insisting that ‘the question cannot be tackled in these terms’, nor even just in terms of ‘the tremendous weight of conservative pressures’. Rather it needed to be tackled in terms of ‘the fact that the ideological defenses of these leaders have not generally been of sufficient strength to enable them to resist with any great measure of success conservative pressure, intimidation and enticement’. 48 What is especially notable about the ‘Blue Labour’ intellectuals today is that they have so little to offer the new leader of the Labour Party by way of such ideological defences. Indeed, while reasserting the need for the Party to rediscover the social activism of the old labour movement, they trumpet the old collectivist values and practices only so long as they are attached to the promise of class harmony rather than finding more effective ways of promoting class struggle.

We shall have to see which of the alternative scenarios Murray sets out for a post-2015 Labour government led by Ed Miliband actually comes to pass. Even the most positive one, which envisages that this government could ‘generate – even in spite of itself – an arena of struggle over its direction which could bring benefits in terms of strengthening the movement, and could create circumstances for the working class to recover a measure of confidence’, would inevitably produce a split in the Labour Party, starting at the very top. This calls to mind my own first contribution to the Register in 1979, which also took the view that to be viable a new socialist party would need to take with it some left Labour MPs, many constituency activists, and even some unions from the Labour Party:

One important reason for making the attempt to found an even remotely viable socialist alternative is that it would act as pole of attraction for those socialist elements within the Labour Party to break out of the vicious circle of both trying to change the party and maintain its defensive unity, and put their energy, their talents, and the respect and legitimacy they enjoy in the eyes of many trade unionists to more positive use … [But] it need not inherit by this token the same structure or all the burdens that come with the Labour Party tradition. With different leaders, a different ethos and with a positive attitude to Marxism, these elements would necessarily combine in a different way … [which] need not carry with it the same separation between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activity, and the same division of labour between industrial and political leadership. 49
This is not at all a case for reverting to Leninist forms of party organization. Murray’s sharpest line is that ‘there is absolutely nothing that can be adduced for or against Leninism from the crisis eroding the SWP, any more than the results obtained by the experiments of the Large Hadron Collider need verifying by observing the Duracell Bunny’. This does not negate Ralph Miliband’s argument in ‘Moving On’ that those who took the Bolshevik revolution as ‘their common point of departure and of arrival, the script and scenario which determines their whole mode of being’ were doomed to marginality. But as he went on to say: ‘This is not why any of the groupings of the “ultra-left” have failed to become mass parties or even large parties; it is why they have scarcely become parties at all … [T]he main cause of their lack of attraction is not their sectarianism, dogmatism, adventurism and authoritarianism but their basic perspective which produces their isolation; and it is their isolation which at least in part if not wholly produces their unpleasant characteristics.’

That these parties, wherever they still exist, are more or less in their death throes almost everywhere, can only help clear the ground for new forms of party organization more suitable to twenty-first century conditions to be seeded and take root.

At the same time, it must surely also be finally recognized by now that so much of the thinking that produced the retreat of the intellectuals in the 1980s failed to appreciate how the strategic choices of party and union leaders were determined by highly pragmatic calculations rather than the writings of Marx, or this or that Marxist theorist. For a really serious socialist intellectual like Andre Gorz, it took less than a decade after his *Farewell to the Working Class* was published in the early 1980s before he made it perfectly clear that he still thought that no strategy for socialism was possible without a strategy for labour at its core: without powerful and committed organizations of workers, social movements drawn from a ‘non-class of non-workers’ would be ineffective agents of change. But this also meant that organizations of workers had a ‘particular responsibility’, since the success or failure of other social movements depended on labour taking ‘a common course of action with them’. This is more than ever true today, when it is clearer that, as much as socialist parties of a new kind are needed in the twenty-first century, so are unions of a new kind (such as the New Trade Union Initiative in India, whose highly creative community organizing and rapid growth will be explored in the *Register’s* next volume). But it is doubtful that creative and combative labour movements can emerge on any large scale without new socialist organizations emerging and their activists playing a key role.

Of course, we must ask what a strategy for labour means today amidst
the vast restructuring of work taking place on a global scale. The decline of jobs in the manufacturing sector does not represent a ‘hollowing out’ of advanced capitalist economies, or even of manufacturing as an important element in them. If some old industries are dying, others are on the rise. The lowly paid retail service sectors where the fastest growing occupations are often located takes place alongside the rapid growth of business services as well as new bio-medical, communications and entertainment industries, and the development of classic labour-capital relations in health and education. As Ursula Huws so clearly shows in this volume, the growth of work in these sectors, whether highly or lowly remunerated, does not at all reflect the end of the material economy: ‘There are few jobs that do not require workers to bring their own knowledge, judgement and intelligence to the task in hand, and even fewer that do not involve some physical activity, even if this just entails speaking, listening, watching a screen or tapping keys’. That the growth of precarious work is taking place in all sectors, and in the advanced capitalist world as much as elsewhere, is an inevitable consequence of the actual realization of capitalist globalization by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

But what precariousness means in very different social contexts can itself be quite different, especially in terms of the consequences it may hold for the people concerned. It is certainly incorrect to treat the ‘precariat’ as a different social category, conceptually and actually, than the working class. In fact what we are witnessing in many respects is the very kind of precarity of work – and of life – that led to the designation of dispossessed workers as a proletariat in the nineteenth century, as Bryan Palmer points out in his contribution to this volume. To address the question of the organizational and political implications of this mainly in terms of the declining industrial base of working-class movements is rather myopic, since it misses the long-standing unionization of many ‘service’ workers from municipal workers in early decades of the twentieth century to teachers and nurses in the 1960s and ’70s to the Walmart working class today. It is useful to recall that it was only through their unionization that industrial workers overcame their earlier precarity. And it is absolutely necessary not to romanticize this by imagining they had some sort of inherent aptitude for organization or political radicalism. It is also a mistake to analyze working-class formation and identity in terms of wage work alone. Working classes are constituted by households, extended families, neighbourhoods, communities in which workers who sell their labour power for a wage are embedded and thus intertwined with a broad range of non-waged work. Moreover, changing urban housing and transportation patterns in the twentieth century were
often more important to the decline of working-class identities than was deindustrialization or occupational shifts. We need to be sensitive to the ways all this is changing again, and what it means for working-class formation.

The question of whether new configurations of class are conducive to the development of socialist alternatives is really what this fiftieth volume of the Register is all about – and the fifty-first will be as well.

NOTES


2 Despite the very many differences that Miliband certainly had with George Orwell, his ‘Politics and the English Language’ must have held a strong appeal, especially in identifying the four questions that ‘a scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself … What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: could have I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?’ Miliband would likely have agreed as well with Orwell’s claim in his essay ‘Why I Write’ that, apart from ‘sheer egoism’ and ‘aesthetic enthusiasm’, writers were motivated by two main things: ‘Historical impulse: Desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity’; and ‘Political purpose: Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter people’s idea of the kind of society they should strive after’. ‘Why I Write’ and ‘Politics and the English Language’, both written in 1946, were published together in a collection with two other essays as George Orwell, Why I Write, London: Penguin, 2004. The quotations here are at pp. 4-5 and 113.


7 Göran Therborn, ‘After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in a Post-Communist World’, New Left Review, 43(Jan/Feb), 2007, p. 99. The fact it was edited in Toronto specifically had much to do with the uniquely supportive environment that York University provided. Straddling the Atlantic between editors and publisher, as well as readers and writers, has occasioned much agonizing over British versus American styles, with a Canadian compromise usually settled on.
10 Miliband, ‘Socialism’, p. 102.
23 E.P. Thompson, ‘An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski’, Socialist Register 1973, p. 84. To Kolakowski’s apparent endorsement of this ‘writing-off’ when he said ‘Let us imagine what “the dictatorship of the proletariat” would mean if the (real, not imaginary) working class took over exclusive political power now in the U.S.’, Thompson retorted: ‘The absurdity of the question appears (in your view) to provide its own answer. But I doubt whether you have given to the question a moment of serious historical imagination: you have simply assumed a white working class, socialized by capitalist institutions as it is now, mystified by the mass media as it is now, structured into competitive organizations as it is now, without self-activity or its own forms of political expression: i.e. a working class with all the attributes of subjection within capitalist structures which one then “imagines” to achieve power without changing either those structures or itself: which is, I fear, a typical example of the fixity of concept which characterizes much capitalist ideology’ (pp. 99-100, n. 69).
27 Terry Eagleton, ‘Defending the Free World’, Socialist Register 1990, London:
Among the essays in this volume were ‘Perestroika and the Neoliberal Project’ by Patrick Flaherty, ‘Marketization and Privatization: The Polish Case’ by Thadeus Kowalik, ‘Privilegentsia, Property and Power’ by Daniel Singer, as well as ‘Perestroika and the Proletariat’ by Sam Gindin and myself (based on a trip to meet with Russian autoworkers we had just made). In his essay critiquing proponents of market-socialist reform, Michael Lebowitz set out for the first time his important argument that rather than focusing upon productive forces as the condition for the development of a common system of production, what was required was ‘not merely exhortation but the actual creation of democratic and decentralised forms in which people change themselves in the course of changing circumstances’ so as to overcome the self-orientation, including towards their own labour power, that working people acquired under capitalism, and which market socialist forms further fostered. ‘When we consider the cynicism, the retreat into private lives, the everyday accommodation to anti-social and illegal acts, the ripping off of social property, etc. described by so many observers, we are quite justified in wondering whether [Actually Existing Socialism] offers any prospects for the passage to a communist society. Indeed, the question which emerges is whether it is possible to get there from here? Is it, rather, necessary for people to retrace their steps back to capitalism and then to attempt, through the inevitable struggles which emerge from the contradiction between human beings and an inhuman existence, to try again?’ ‘The Socialist Fetter: A Cautionary Tale’, Socialist Register 1991, London: Merlin Press, 1991, pp. 367-8.

The trade unions’ famous wage earner’s plan, which went under Meidner’s name and intended to achieve the gradual socialization of capital in exchange for wage restraint, had by this point been so watered down by successive Social Democratic governments concerned with sustaining their partnership with capital that ‘the whole scheme must now be considered a rather symbolic gesture. The strong Swedish labour movement had proved its inability to encroach upon private ownership, the very core of the capitalist system … The Swedish system, balancing private ownership and social control, has broken down because real power has shifted from labour to the owners of capital’. Rudolph Meidner, ‘Why Did the Swedish Model Fail?’, Socialist Register 1993, London: Merlin Press, 1993, pp. 225-6.


As the introduction to a collection of these essays that Merlin Press published in 2004 put it, their effect when taken together allowed globalization to be understood ‘in its totality: not as a mere series of “reforms” giving free rein to transnational companies but as a radical programme to reshape the entire economic, political, legal and ideological landscape of capitalism. They link the economics of global capitalism both to its geopolitical dimensions and to


43 See the various papers on Mimmo Porcaro’s essay in the 2013 Register by Mario Candeias, Jan Rehman, John Milios and Haris Triandafilidou, and Porcaro’s response, posted during August 2013 at http://rosalux.de/english as well as in The Bullet, available at http://socialistproject.ca.


45 The word ‘unthoughtful’ was much later used by Mandelson himself to characterize this comment. See Shiv Malik, ‘Peter Mandelson gets nervous about people getting “filthy rich”’, *The Guardian*, 26 January 2012.


