By devoting the 2015 Socialist Register to investigating class formation and class strategies on a global scale, as we also did the 2014 volume marking the Register’s fiftieth anniversary, we were going against fashion in quite deliberately emphasizing the fundamental importance of class analysis, class discourse and class politics for the twenty-first century. It has unfortunately been the case that even in left circles over the past several decades any talk of class, let alone class struggle, became decidedly unfashionable. Of course, this was in many ways a very old story. When the Register was founded in 1964, the irrelevance of class had already been proclaimed in mainstream intellectual circles, and this was increasingly echoed by the leaders of social democratic parties. Twenty years later, as the political compass of even the more radical left began to swing to a proliferation of ‘other’ identities, Ralph Miliband faced this head-on in the 1983 Register: ‘Socialist work means intervention in all the many different areas of life in which class struggle occurs: for class struggle must be taken to mean not only the permanent struggle between capital and labour, crucial though that remains, but the struggle against racial and sex discrimination, the struggle against arbitrary state and police power, the struggle against the ideological hegemony of the conservative forces, and the struggle for new and radically different defence and foreign policies’. Yet, amidst an endless stream of images across the new communication technologies, the left’s attention became more and more focused on those very spaces of ‘civil society’ and the ‘global economy’ in which class relations and class struggles seemed all too little visible.

This remained largely the case in the first years of the new millennium, even as the representatives of the global ruling classes, in response to the challenges issued by ‘anti-globalization’ protests, already started wringing their hands once a year about the world’s poor at gatherings like the World Economic Forum in Davos. The first great capitalist crisis of the twenty-first century that erupted in 2008 only seemed to confirm that the fundamental chasm before contemporary capitalism lay somewhere in the symbolic and fictitious world of credit-money and not in the class relations of contemporary finance and production – at least until Occupy issued a new class discourse,
in the stark form of a struggle between the one per cent and ‘we’, the 99 per cent. Now, over the year between the publication of the 50th annual volume of the Register and this, the 51st, what has been appropriately coined ‘the Piketty bubble’ – i.e., the extraordinary amount of mainstream attention devoted to the publication of Thomas Piketty’s Capital in the Twenty-First Century – seems to have justified, however unintentionally, our decision to produce two successive volumes devoted to sustaining, sharpening and spreading class analysis.

Piketty’s analysis of the inherent, persistent, law-like structure of inequality between capital and labour is explicitly cast in terms of comparing centiles rather than classes. As he puts it in a section of his book headed ‘Class Struggle or Centile Struggle?’: “The concepts of deciles and centiles are rather abstract and undoubtedly lack a certain poetry. It is easier for most people to identify with groups with which they are familiar: peasants or nobles, proletarians or bourgeois, office workers or top managers, waiters or traders. But the beauty of deciles is precisely that they enable us to compare inequalities that would otherwise be incomparable, using a common language that should in principle be acceptable to everyone’. Yes, it is in fact easier to get mainstream attention, and even approval, this way. But it is more instructive, and more dangerous to the power structures that sustain capitalist inequality, to think of class not ‘as a structure, nor even as a “category”, but as something which in fact happens … in human relationships’. These famous words are from the 1963 preface to The Making of English Working Class by Edward Thompson, who was very much present at the conception of the Socialist Register the same year. ‘The finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and a real context’.

It is in this sense that last year’s volume, Registering Class, took a quite different tack from Piketty’s by locating growing social inequalities not in an empiricist account of trends in the accumulation of assets relative to rates to growth, but in the political conditions and social struggles allowing the spread and deepening of capitalist social relations. In this vein, ‘capital’ cannot be examined only in its manifestations as wealth, as important as that is for understanding the parameters of power in capitalist societies. The essays in last year’s Register on the changing configuration of the capitalist classes sought to provide a careful accounting of the concrete, material ways capital is organized and exercises its power and hegemony so as to extract and accumulate its wealth in the twenty-first century. However useful his data set and all the attention he draws to persistent and growing inequality,
Piketty tells us next to nothing of these issues. If he provides a certain break with neoclassical economics, Piketty nevertheless returns us to a sociology of classes as statistical artifacts of income and asset brackets, rather than that of classes as a specific ensemble of social relations, experienced and organized in particular ways, to explain the historical form, trends and contradictions of wealth and income inequalities. In this paradoxical world, it is income and assets which explain classes, rather than historical class relations that explain the accumulation and social forms of wealth. This is far removed from an understanding of class as a social process, made and remade in class struggle through which working-class people collectively organize to overcome, or all too often to reinforce, divisions amongst themselves, in the context of the socioeconomic and political inequalities of capitalist class relations.

The current volume, *Transforming Classes*, takes as its departure point class relations in this latter sense – the way working classes are being made and remade in the struggles against neoliberalism, austerity and authoritarian governments. Indeed, the purpose here is to take an account of the balance of class forces, the old and emerging forms of workplace and political organization, and the strategies being debated and adapted in different zones of the world. The volume begins with an essay that cuts new ground in theorizing the working-class experience from the prism of social reproduction, wherein race, gender, ethnicity and migration are all constitutive of class and necessarily define key features of the terrain of class struggle. As much in the advanced capitalist countries as in the most imperialized zones of the Global South – in fact, through their mutual imbrication in global labour markets – workers’ livelihoods, particularly those of migrants, are directly connected to household formation across borders. Taking up this concern to develop a truly global awareness of the transformations of social classes and class politics, the essays that follow – as authoritative in their appraisals as in their range – focus not only on such key developing capitalist countries as India, South Africa, Turkey, Egypt, Brazil and Chile, but also on the momentous political and discursive dimensions of the capitalist transformation of class relations in China under the auspices of the ruling Communist Party. And no less indispensable to the overall assessment of global capitalism are the essays here that attend to the advanced capitalist world. In both trying to understand the transformations which the so-called new middle classes have been going through as well as the state of trade unionism in Europe and North America, these essays focus on the need to develop an adequate class theory and class politics for today. In this respect, the four essays that compose the symposium on ‘Labour and the Left in the USA’, with which this volume concludes, provide not only sober readings but also shed light
on promising campaigns for new working-class organizations in and beyond the workplace even in the imperial centre of world capitalism.

Both volumes on class began from a workshop held in Toronto in February 2013. Over the last year, we solicited a number of additional essays as the volume’s themes cohered and new class struggles burst forward requiring analysis and debate. We want to thank all our contributors for their essays, as well as Ana and Robert McLuhan for their excellent translation of Ricardo Antunes’s essay from Portuguese. We are especially grateful to Colin Leys, Alan Zuege and Adam Hilton, who provided not only invaluable editorial assistance but also considerable help in conceiving the volume. Adrian Howe and Tony Zurbrugg at Merlin Press are also once again due our gratitude for being such sympathetic and supportive publishers, as is Louis Mackay for yet another imaginative cover.

The Socialist Register begins its second half-century with some reorganization and renewal of its editorial collective. With this volume, Vivek Chibber joins Colin Leys and Alfredo Saad-Filho as an associate editor, and while Hidayat (Gerard) Greenfield is departing due to his heavy international trade union responsibilities, we are pleased to announce that Lin Chun, Hannes Lacher, Şebnem Oğuz and Stephanie Ross are coming on board as new contributing editors. As with Madeleine Davis and Ray Kiely who joined us last year, we very much look forward to their active collaboration on the Register.

It would be remiss of us not to mention the deaths of Stuart Hall, Norman Geras and Tony Benn over the last year. The importance of Stuart Hall’s attempt to rethink class in the formation of the British New Left was highlighted in Madeleine Davis’s essay on the lineages of the Socialist Register in last year’s volume, as was his contribution to ‘the battle for socialist ideas’ (the title of his 1982 Register essay) in the face of the bankruptcy of Labourism and the rise of Thatcherism. Although Norman Geras resigned as a contributing editor in 2003, we will always value his contribution of five outstanding essays over the previous decade on socialist morals, ethics, hope and vision. Tony Benn himself contributed to the 1989 volume with an essay on ‘Obstacles to Reform in Britain’, and to the 2003 volume with an interview on ‘Bush and Blair: Iraq and the UK’s American Viceroy’. His appreciation of the Register long graced our volumes’ back covers. We can do no better to express our own appreciation of Tony Benn than to say that his definition of his original purpose in seeking nomination as a candidate to become a Member of Parliament in 1950 as to ‘make, teach and keep socialists’ well expresses the Register’s continuing purpose.

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