This 53rd volume of the *Socialist Register* addresses the question of the meaning of revolution in the twenty-first century. Coming to terms with the legacy of 1917 is obviously one aspect of this. ‘October’ was a unique event that provided inspiration for millions of oppressed people, and also became an inevitable point of reference for socialist politics in the twentieth century. The twenty-first century left needs to both understand and transcend this legacy through a critical reappraisal of its broad effects – both positive and negative – on political, intellectual and cultural life everywhere as well as on the other revolutions that took place over the last century. But the main point of the volume is to look forward more than back.

All revolutions emerge in conjunctures saturated with unique contradictions, contingencies, class alignments and struggles. This concrete confluence of forces constitutes the political conditions that revolutionaries must not only understand, but also act and organize within. The ‘political event’ of gaining state power, whether by taking parliament or in a collapse of the existing political regime, has proven time and again to be less crucial than the social revolution of building capacities for self-government and the democratization and socialization of institutional resources. The ‘event’, in itself, may be a dramatic rupture that opens up new political possibilities and imaginaries bursting beyond the limited horizons of capitalist market calculation. But it will never be a sufficient condition for the exploited and oppressed to build their own capacities for establishing collective, rather than competitive, ways of living through developing socialist democracy. There is a need, in this context, for the left to maintain an openness to, and patience with, the quite varied experiments in social alternatives to neoliberalism as they emerge in the current period. It is anything but clear where new space for projects of structural reform might open up, or more profound ruptures might suddenly burst onto the political scene.

In this sense, even if the anniversary of 1917 occasions it, this volume is not a history of revolutions, or a collection of recipes for making revolution
today. At a time when reform as it was understood in the twentieth century appears as impossible as revolution in the foreseeable future, it is necessary to try to rethink yet again the relationship between capitalist crises and both revolution and reform, and to do this in relation to the current conjuncture as well as the trajectories of radical politics in various regions. The volume also addresses the processes at work in the remaking of the socialist movement today and how far this may help in placing revolutionary transformations and democratization of the social order back on the agenda. This includes assessing the salience of the concept of the revolutionary party and of the working class as a revolutionary agency today. What both of these mean not only for political practice but also for revolutionary vision, including its artistic expression, has also been our remit, as has the meaning of revolution in the context of the immense ecological challenges the twenty-first century faces.

Of course, the Socialist Register has always been concerned to interrogate the shifting meaning of and prospects for revolutionary ruptures from capitalism, recognizing that revolutionary moments of the past continue to shape the terrain of the present, but that there are no blueprints that would guarantee the successful making of democratic socialism in the future. As Ralph Miliband put it in the first volume in 1964: ‘The most obvious lesson provided by past socialist experience in the countries of advanced capitalism concerns the relationship between economic crisis and socialist commitment – or rather the lack of such relationship … The repetition today of the depression of the early ‘thirties, in countries like Britain and the United States, would probably have far more dramatic consequences. But it is by no means certain that the consequences would necessarily flow in socialist directions.’ And if it was for this reason that so many essays in the Register undertook a critical analysis of what Lenin had called social democracy’s ‘parliamentary cretinism’, there was at the same time an acute awareness of Leninism’s inadequacies. Miliband’s famous ‘Moving On’ essay in 1976 opened by noting that ‘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’. One reason for this was the persistence among so much of the radical left of ‘a common perception of socialist change in terms of a revolutionary seizure of power on the Bolshevik model of October 1917. This is their common point of departure and of arrival, the script and scenario which determines their whole mode of being. But this Bolshevik model has very little appeal in the working class movements of bourgeois democratic regimes in general … [which] imposes upon revolutionary socialists a strategy
of advance which has to include a real measure of electoral legitimation.’

How to achieve this without falling back into social democratic gradualist illusions, how to combine ‘Reform and Revolution’, the title of Andre Gorz’s brilliant essay in the 1968 volume was, and remains, the Register’s primary concern: ‘A socialist strategy of progressive reforms does not mean the installation of islands of socialism in a capitalist ocean. But it does mean … an intensification and deepening of the antagonism between the logic of social production according to the needs and aspirations of men, and the logic of capitalist accumulation and the power of management.’ A key concern of the Register, therefore, has been assessing whether the conditions for this were being enhanced, or rather undermined, precisely in the face of what Elmar Altvater, in a remarkably prescient essay in the 1979 volume, identified as the ‘dual line of attack – authoritarian structuring of government policy, which no longer seeks social and political compromise with the workers’ movement, and the release of the economy to market forces – [which] presents the workers’ movement with a historic challenge, and will gradually compel the formulation of alternatives to the prevailing policy.’

As the release of these ‘market forces’ around the globe through the ensuing decade enveloped even those Communist regimes which had claimed the legacy of 1917, the Preface to the 1989 Register, on the theme of ‘Revolution Today: Aspirations and Realities’, opened with these words: ‘The socialist aspiration to create a cooperative, egalitarian, democratic and classless society entails, for its realization, a fundamental transformation of the social and political order, in a word, a revolution. But what does the idea of revolution itself entail today? To ask this question as we approach the end of this century immediately raises a host of issues concerning whether and how socialist aspirations can be realized, and poses problems and dilemmas over the very ways we can think about these issues, as well as over the ways in which they might be resolved.’ The Register has continued to address these questions ever since – even devoting entire volumes to them, such as the 2000 volume on ‘Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias’ – while increasingly seeking to bring socialist-feminist and eco-socialist perspectives to bear on them.

Yet we were swimming against the tide, even on the left. As one of our most prominent contributors, who for many years was also a member of the Register’s editorial collective, Ellen Meiksins Wood, put it in the 1990 volume on ‘The Retreat of the Intellectuals’: ‘We live in curious times. Just when intellectuals of the Left in the West have a rare opportunity to do something useful, if not actually world-historic, they – or large sections of them – are in full retreat. Just when reformers in the Soviet Union and
Eastern Europe are looking to Western capitalism for paradigms of economic and political success, many of us appear to be abdicating the traditional role of the Western left as critic of capitalism. Just when more than ever we need a Karl Marx to reveal the inner workings of the capitalist system, or a Friedrich Engels to expose its ugly realities “on the ground”, what we are getting is an army of “post-Marxists” one of whose principal functions is apparently to conceptualize away the problem of capitalism.

Even in mourning Ellen’s death this past year, we are mindful that she lived to see the tide turn back, to see that the era of conceptualizing away the problem of capitalism was well and truly over. Recognition that the consequence of this ‘will not necessarily flow in socialist directions’ was what led to the 2016 volume on ‘The Politics of the Right’, and we very much hope that this year’s volume will help in rethinking how to shift the flow in socialist directions (as we hope our subsequent volumes on rethinking democracy and eco-socialist ways of living in the twenty-first century will as well). As always, we want to thank all our contributors for their essays, and for the eagerness as well as comradeship with which they approached thinking through such a difficult, and most often sharply contentious, topic.

Since its inception, the Register’s editors have had the considerable good fortune to work with the highly progressive publishers at Merlin Press, and we are especially happy that Tony Zurbrugg, with his essay in this volume, follows in the footsteps of his predecessor, Martin Eve, who contributed an essay to the 1983 Register. We are also very grateful for his and for his colleague Adrian Howe’s help, support and patience in producing this volume, as we are for Louis Mackay’s great cover art. We would also like to thank Lin Chun, who was extremely generous as a contributing editor in securing and editing Wang Hui’s essay; Mathew Flisfeder for his help with securing Slavoj Zizek’s essay; and Bernard Gibbons for his translation of Fabien Escalona’s essay. Finally, we want to express our appreciation to our long-serving assistant editor, Alan Zuege, and to Steve Maher, without whose hard and creative editorial work this volume would not have come to fruition.

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