

“PLEASE BEGIN WRITING UTOPIAS AGAIN”

An Interview with Dr. Terence Renaud

Interview by **Esther Reichek**

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IN DECEMBER, Managing Editor Esther Reichek sat down (virtually) with Dr. Terence Renaud, lecturer in the Humanities Program and Department of History at Yale University, to discuss his new book, *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition* (Princeton, 2021) and the radical potential of the future. The following conversation has been edited for clarity.

I loved *New Lefts*; I was so happy to have the opportunity to read it and I thought that it was exciting, of course, intellectually and historically, but also very moving because of the emotional associations throughout the book. Could we start by talking about the origins of the project for you and your process? I know one of the exciting contributions of *New Lefts* is getting away from the periodization that isn't able to capture continuity in neoleftist movements over the course of the 20th century. Did you start with a particular movement and then and go backward or forward?

I began my research by focusing on the book's main case study, the New Beginning group in Germany, which formed around 1930 in Berlin. It was a small group of dissident Marxists, renegade communists, left-wing social democrats, all of whom were dissatisfied with the current left-wing parties and unions that were on offer at that time. And this was still two

or three years before the collapse of the Weimar Republic, so ostensibly it was still within the context of a democratic electoral republic. I wanted to know first of all why this organization formed, why it thought that it could apply Leninist principles to the main problem that they diagnosed on the German left, which was disunity, fragmentation. You basically had communists fighting social democrats, at a time when the real threat, the real crisis was fascism. You had this frustrating situation where the different factions—you might say, moderates and radicals—in the German labor movement were fighting each other, sometimes with actual violence on the street, but mostly rhetorically and politically, when the common enemy of fascism was right at the door, threatening everything that had been accomplished up until that point and certainly threatening any type of revolutionary socialist aims.

I did a lot of empirical research to determine who belonged to the small organization, which again was

called New Beginning, and I was particularly attentive to the ways that the small group changed into an antifascist underground organization after 1933. So there was a lot of piecing together scraps of information from Gestapo files and from collections of papers that ended up in exile outside of Germany during the 1930s during this era of repression—a lot of figuring out who was who, because all of these underground resistance fighters had multiple names and aliases. I have a giant spreadsheet. They operated not only in Germany, primarily collecting information and doing the work of surveillance on Nazi society and the economy; they also smuggled that information beyond German borders and published it abroad as reports on the situation inside Germany. The point was to provide a counternarrative to the official propaganda of the Nazi regime and hopefully rally a united antifascist front, not only among Germans, but among socialist parties elsewhere in Western Europe and Britain. So this was a transnational project. New Beginning's agents were operating in Prague, in Paris, in London, even in New York toward the late 1930s and during the war years.

The project thus started as a collective biography. I was interested in this group also because I knew that several of its former members went on to prominent careers in West German and occasionally East German academia and politics after World War II. I was curious about why this small group, which never comprised several hundred core members and then maybe a couple thousand sympathizers, achieved such intellectual influence over several decades of the mid-20th century—primarily in Germany, but again, because of their exile contacts, there was an international context for their work. It was through that empirical research that I finally projected forward and made it into the 1960s.

Examining several key figures who used to belong to the New Beginning group, I realized that many of these figures who are now a bit older had become defenders of the democratic establishment. Many are still social democrats in one form or another, but they are very much defenders of the democratic welfare state against the new generation of social discontent: radical students who declare their solidarity with anti-colonial struggles around the world, speak about Vietnam at every public assembly, and at least in their

The book tells the history of plural new lefts.”

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Dr. Terence Renaud, lecturer in the Humanities Program and Department of History at Yale University.

Photo courtesy of Kathryn L. Brackney

rhetoric, talk about a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and imperialism. So, how did that generational conflict evolve that pitted these former radicals, who used to be engaged in the antifascist underground and were revolutionary socialists in their youth, against a new generation, which sometimes called itself the New Left? It was thinking through this problem that led me to conceive of the general argument of the book about this historical succession of new lefts. As a response to existing historical scholarship on the history of the New Left in Western Europe, I wanted to encourage people to look backward in time to the 1920s and '30s in order to recognize the theoretical and organizational precedents to what coalesced in the late 1950s and 1960s as the New Left. The book tells the history of plural new lefts before the proper name New Left of the later time.

I found the motif of the former radicals maturing and turning on the next generation really compelling. I know that there are exceptions that you mark throughout the book, I guess Marcuse springs to mind, at the end [of *New Lefts*]—even when he gets older, he's still young at heart, he still is able to have sympathy and understanding for the new generation of radicals. Is there an inevitable temporal pressure where you're always going to see people as they get older in these movements become more conservative or attack the youth who are doing what they themselves had done earlier on?



That's a good question that several protagonists in my book examine themselves: what is this generational process? Is there some kind of age-determinism in the propensity to adopt a radical political stance? And I do reference the work of the Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim, who wrote an influential essay on the problem of generations in 1928. Mannheim introduced the concept of generations that I tried to apply in the book, basically a non-age determinist concept of generation that instead conceived of a generation more in terms of general social conditions that prevail at a certain time and socialize a group. This conception may have a strong age component, but it's not necessarily linked to age. A generation socializes an age cohort into a common set of experiences, or a common material reality perhaps. He was alluding to, for example, the front generation and World War I: a common set of experiences and traumas that caused this group of mostly young men—but not exclusively young men—to develop a sense of shared identity, a collective identity. Mannheim also had in mind the German youth movement of the early 20th century. He was at pains to show that there are real social factors at play that determine what a generation is, rather than any kind of regular biological rhythm based on your birth year, which I think is the more common understanding of what a generation is.

In popular media, when people talk about the millennials or Gen Z there's often some kind of specific age range when people are born here or there. Well, a Mannheimian concept of generation would say, well, the millennial generation does correlate to some extent with people born, say, in the 1980s and early 1990s, but its determining factor is the experience of declining job security, or social factors that cause some kind of millennial sensibility to develop, which is not directly linked to age. So, how does that apply to my history? I wanted to examine youth or youthfulness or renewal within small or factional organizations on the left, usually on the far left of a broader movement that didn't necessarily translate into the age of its members. You mentioned a figure like Herbert Marcuse, who was a German-American Marxist philosopher affiliated with the Frankfurt School. He certainly was resistant to ever being called the chief theorist of the New Left, but he certainly was revered by many of the young people in the 1960s looking for traditions of, let's say, an anti-capitalist Marxist theo-

ry that was not so rigidly economically deterministic. Marcuse incorporated Freud and psychoanalysis and wrote about the counterculture. He wrote about the repressive situation of an advanced capitalist society whose entire ethos revolves around consumer decisions within the marketplace. He would conceive of this as a potentially repressive structure, and this appealed to the youth of that decade.

I think youth for Marcuse was a real problem that needed to be addressed. He associated it with revolutionary politics per se: the attempt to break away from the old establishment, break away from systems of administrative or bureaucratic rationality that had concretized over time, and instead create new organi-

“Is there some kind of age-determinism in the propensity to adopt a radical political stance?”

zations, new modes of being, a new sensibility that allowed for more creative expression. I'm using different words to describe the general problem of youth and renewal on the left. Marcuse was able to recognize this problem and make it the center of his radical philosophy, even when he was very much an old man by the late 1960s. He's notable because he declared his open solidarity with the student rebels, the anti-colonial resisters, and the New Left. And this was the opposite course to that taken by his former colleagues in the Frankfurt School of Marxist philosophy like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Adorno infamously called the police on students who were protesting in his classroom in Frankfurt.

Marcuse is emblematic of the ways that a generation could attract members of older age cohorts who nevertheless sympathize with the ideals of the new generation and who want to actualize a revolutionary

program, a creative revolutionary program that puts the interests of the youth first. I don't write about this much in the book, but I really admire that as a model for multi-generational solidarity that is worth emulating, especially in the context of today's climate movement, when clearly, in terms of the material effects of global warming and catastrophic climate change, it's young people who will inherit this disordered planet. At the current moment it tends to be older people who are in positions of power and who are in the position to actually make policy changes or otherwise curb carbon emissions, so what we really do need is some kind of generational solidarity. I realize this goes beyond your question but I'll just say it now: I am angry when I see in the media all of these chiding attacks against the utopian sensibilities of the youth, or the naïveté of the youth, or sometimes even older people chiding millennials such as myself for spending all their money on avocado toast and that's why we can't afford to buy a house or something like that. I just can't stand the directionality of that criticism, because it would seem that there's very little self-reflection among the older generation about decisions that were made decades past that have put us in this economic situation and the situation of general ecological crisis. In order to make a change, to make a revolutionary break from what has existed until now—and I think the climate movement definitely makes a case that this is a necessary step—we do need both young people and old people turning around to face each other.

That moment of multi-generational solidarity is something that I saw occasionally in the history that I was looking at from the 1930s to the '60s. It wasn't the rule—often young people would align with a particular faction—and it didn't necessarily have to be on the left. Young Germans in 1920s and '30s, sometimes people forget, were very much attracted to fascism. University campuses in Germany at that time were hotbeds of right-wing reaction, and so the left-wing or communist students were very much in the minority. Youth doesn't necessarily mean left-wing, but it lends itself to a certain radicalism in whatever politics the youth adopt.

What you're saying about the climate movement made me think about the section on futurology and Flechtheim and the larger idea of neoleftist movements representing some kind of radical rupture

with the past and saying, “the future doesn't have to be like today, and it doesn't have to be like yesterday.” We can simultaneously use the knowledge that we have and the radical traditions that we have and imagine something totally different, create something new. Futurology feels particularly pertinent to thinking about environmental catastrophe, environmental disaster. But at the same time, I wonder if there's already—maybe this is just pessimistic—a sense that the future has already been constrained and is less possible because so much has already happened?

Yes, Ossip Flechtheim invented the term futurology, which he wanted to refer to a new scientific or scholarly approach to, let's say, critical utopian studies. That involved literary analysis on the one hand—an analysis of utopian and dystopian writing—but on the other hand empirical sociological analysis of economic trends, forecasting, and game theory. Futurology didn't really get off the ground when Flechtheim first proposed it in the mid-1940s, but it was picked up later on in the 1960s, mostly by other people. The American sociologist Daniel Bell was into future studies and futurology, for example. There was a futurology club that popped up during the Prague Spring of 1968. There were various other groups that were attracted to this mode of thinking about the future and, of course, there were also modes of forecasting and game theory that were uncritical and very much funded and institutionalized by the Cold War geopolitical rivalry. I suspect that people today maybe haven't seen that old Matthew Broderick movie from the 1980s called *WarGames*, but it was a fun movie about a hacker who hacks into NORAD and a computer whose purpose is to simulate various nuclear war scenarios between the US and USSR. The drama of the movie is that the military staff at NORAD can't recognize the difference between the computer simulation and what they believe to be a real nuclear attack. And so, this hacker kid played by Broderick has to go in and fix the machine. But that's an example of uncritical application of future scenarios when it pertains to military planning.

Another uncritical application of future studies is corporate planning and assessment of future risk, and you can see this very clearly in the fossil fuel industry, which has invested a lot of money into studying carbon emissions, the change in global temperatures, and

the rise in sea level. I'm talking about Exxon Mobil and Shell: they've devoted a lot of resources to this type of thing, so that when Exxon Mobil builds a new generation of offshore drilling rigs in the Gulf they know exactly how high to elevate them off the surface of the ocean, because they expect the ocean to rise. This is internal futures research that's been done by the fossil fuel corporations since at least the 1980s. Outwardly, however, they're not publicizing information; instead, they're investing all kinds of resources in climate change denial and propaganda that obscures the real physical effects of this thing. The critical utopian studies that Flechtheim advocated was inspired by Karl Marx's famous "Thesis Eleven": philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it. The point of critical science and this mode of futurology developed by Flechtheim was to encourage social transformation.

You ask a good question, though, especially in the context of climate change: is it the case that the future is no longer completely open to a plurality or infinity of possibilities? Is it possible that, due to rising temperatures and the narrowing window of action, we're telescoping in on one possibility, which is some kind of major catastrophe or cascading catastrophe? I hope that's not the case. I understand why that would be a fear, and I understand the type of despair that such a narrowing range of possibilities could lead to. I do think that one valuable part of futurology that remains is not only to suggest that the future remains open to contestation and that we can control our fate, but also to direct our attention back on futures past: there were moments of decision in the past when the future was more open, when certain decisions could have been made, specifically to curb carbon emissions, and they weren't. I think this turning of our attention back on futures past could provide an impetus and a certain critical awareness of who is responsible for the current degradation of the planet. And this could be beneficial to a political strategy for contesting that power. I think people in the climate justice movement are very much attentive to this type of thing. Some historical wrongs—most historical wrongs—cannot be made right; there's always a scar or irreparable harm, especially when it comes to the climate, to the physical environment. But justice can still be forward-looking and could generate a certain type of solidarity and antagonism against the correct opponents, namely, those responsible for this looming climate catastrophe. So yeah, I would say that because of the narrowing window of opportu-

nity on climate change, there are two futures, maybe, that are still possible. The one future is unmitigated disaster from essentially doing nothing, or just these moderate, insufficient policy commitments, such as were made at the most recent COP meeting in Glasgow. The other future is a slightly better outcome which might be prompted by a response to catastrophes associated with global warming, like mass heat wave deaths.

I'm thinking of an imaginative book by Kim Stanley Robinson called *The Ministry for the Future*, which is set in the near future and gives a fictional account of ways in which the titular UN ministry, plus a number of guerrilla groups around the world, take action to radically curb carbon emissions and create a more livable world amid the irreparable harm that's already been done.

I think that's a possible future, but it's something that needs to be fought for and struggled for. I don't think that we have any cause to be optimistic or hopeful that all these problems will be solved somehow, that there will be no damage, and that we can return to a status quo. I think that's a pretty naïve hope. The preferable future of the two that I laid out is the one in which considerable damage is done, but those responsible for reaping profits from fossil fuels, the politicians who have enabled such a thing, the general culture of jet air travel and other high carbon-emitting lifestyles—these practices must be changed, these politicians must be ousted, fossil fuel companies must be broken up, nationalized in some way, and placed back under democratic control. It's a marginally better future that ought to be fought for, but again, the window is narrowing and that ratchets up our sense of crisis.

I think one of the reasons I'm so interested in the future and the way that you deal with the future in *New Lefts* is that I study antiquity. Often when there are discussions about the future, arguments are made that ancient societies or pre-industrial, pre-modern societies couldn't envision a future, that there that their ideas about the future were vastly different from our own, because they didn't have certain technologies and there was a lot less certainty in the world. I think there is some value to some of those claims, but they often get distorted. There's an interesting linguistic phenomenon that I think about when I consider the future, which is the tendency of subjunctive verbs to become futurative. For instance, "will"

in English initially has a subjunctive meaning, of wanting to and desiring to do something, which over time leads to a future reading. It's very different from more scientific futurology but an interesting way of thinking about the future, as a space for things that people want to see, rather than just an inevitable thing that's distinct from the present.

I think that's a very perceptive observation, and I do think you're right that even claims made by modern historians about, say, the effect of the democratic revolutions and the industrial revolution of the late 18th century and early 19th century on conceptions of the future—that it was this radical break with premodern cyclical concepts—are often exaggerated. You're correct to make this literary observation about the nature of language, the nature of human capacity to collectively imagine a future together. All these things must have deeper historical roots, and empirically I think you could find examples of such utopian thinking even in premodern civilizations. As you were speaking, I was reminded of the work of another German philosopher, Ernst Bloch, who was a Marxist that people sometimes associate with the Frankfurt School. He wrote a book in 1918 called *The Spirit of Utopia*, which makes a similar argument to yours about the subjunctive verb. He speaks a lot about the mood of “as if,” the way that people can talk about a future scenario as if it has already happened or imagine what a future might be like. And I think another kind of grammatical particle he examined in that book was the “not yet,” the way of imagining a revolutionary politics that is grounded on the principle of hope and utopian desire but also recognizing that we're not yet in a position to realize our project. It's our task to bring this future into being.

Bloch went on to write a book about Thomas Müntzer, the Protestant theologian who was more radical than Martin Luther and who inspired a peasant rebellion in the early 16th century. Müntzer had a theology of hope that was so incredibly radical for its time and sort of anticipated the communist utopias of a later period. So yeah, I think this is an impulse that runs deep. In my book I talk about a little bit how the various kinds of Marxist that I examine who are operating from the 1920s to the 1960s in Western Europe, really sometimes were careful not to appear as utopian. Because it is the case that Marxist socialism, at least in its classical 19th-century form, wanted to distinguish itself

from the various currents of utopian socialism that preceded it: Saint-Simon, Fourier, Robert Owen, all these brands of socialism that imagined creating some kind of commune in the present that could solve all the problems of society with technological fixes or organizational fixes. If you're Fourier, if you set up your “phalanx” correctly, have the right number of people and everyone has the right jobs, then you know you will bring into being this wholesome, organic, utopian condition. The Marxists thought that he [Fourier] was unrealistic and unnecessary, because the critical drive of a socialist movement and the strategy of a socialist movement ought to be directed against the existing structures and mechanisms of capitalist society. Marx the political economist, or critic of political economy, thought that he could recognize tendencies within a capitalist world system that necessarily led to contradictions and crisis. In other words, he thought that scientifically and empirically one could find proof that capitalism was going to break down.

Now, it didn't break down, so the debate among Marxists who followed in the late 19th century into the 20th century was about why the crisis tendencies that Marx identified—like the falling rate of profit and the greater immiseration of the working class—didn't result in the breakdown of capitalism and the emergence of a new mode of production, as he thought would happen. Later Marxists pointed to imperialism, which created new markets for capitalism. Eventually, people like Marcuse, whom I mentioned earlier, and some of the Frankfurt School thinkers started examining the psychology of oppression and the authoritarian personality, and they started suggesting that one consequence of a crisis of capitalism might actually be a deepening fascist reaction, not just not-socialism, as an inevitable result of capitalism breaking down. These were ideas in the air in the middle of the 20th century among Western Marxists, who were more open to cultural explanations than, let's say, the orthodox communists of the Soviet Union. But all of them probably would have denied that they were utopian, because they had what they considered to be a scientific analysis of capitalism and the social structures that developed in conjunction with it.

In the '60s, though, I do think there was a revival of the more explicitly utopian currents within the broader socialist tradition. This was because there was a new turn to communitarianism. In the 1970s going forward, beyond

the scope of my book, there was a kind of return to the commune form, a separation from existing society, a turn toward left-alternative lifestyles. From a present-day left perspective, such phenomena, while impressive and radical in their own way, might very well be open to criticism for sidelining the issue of political power in favor of pursuing a countercultural project, of enacting in some utopian way a separate community that actualizes revolutionary principles and values but doesn't actually change the surrounding social conditions. All of these communes collapse very quickly, and the utopian sensibilities of many people coming out of the '60s were soon co-opted by that larger capitalist social structure. If you take a look, for example, at a book called *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, it's very much about how the radical sensibilities of the '60s contained in the countercultural critique of capitalism were co-opted by a new form of neoliberal capitalism that celebrated individual self-expression and was also skeptical of an authoritarian state. So all kinds of things that we typically associate with a neoliberal government mentality, or the sort of new hegemony of the late 20th century and early 21st century, some interpreters might not directly blame the New Left for, but would draw ironic parallels between these two things and say that this is all a result of giving up on the old left project of seizing democratic state power, organizing yourself as a mass party, and empowering large unions which necessarily have a certain bureaucratic form.

All these hallmarks of the old left were abandoned to various degrees by the activists of the New Left and maybe to their detriment. It's a hard thing to judge in retrospect, but filtered through the lens of present-day struggles on the left, I think there's probably not much sympathy looking back on some of these experimental small groups of the past. So that was another thing I was facing while writing the book. I felt like I needed to defend or repair the reputation of some of these new left formations, which I still think embodied a crucial part of the broader ecosystem of left-wing thought and practice, even if I am open to the criticisms that people have made of the elective affinity between neoleftism and neoliberalism.

What you were just saying makes me think about your epilogue, in which you talk about the importance of these neoleftist movements for different movements today, and at the same time, you

acknowledge that maybe the organizational form of these movements can't offer a great example. And when you were talking about Bloch and the future and what the future might be like, it reminded me a bit of your first chapter on Lukács and about the essay as a transitional form and as an anticipatory genre: writing to something that hasn't yet happened. I know this is also a theme of the different movements that you look at, that they're anticipating something and that's the productive emphasis on the future but they always have the tendency to disintegrate. How do you connect these two impulses or directions?

That question reminds me of the best essay that I've read about the Black Lives Matter protest of 2020, the second wave of BLM. It was by Tobi Haslett in the magazine *n+1*, and it's called "Magic Actions." Its title alludes to a phrase that Amiri Baraka used, but it captures the sense that you were describing.

There was a remarkable sense of possibility that was palpable on the street at the height of the protests in the summer of 2020, a sense that anything's possible. The burning of a police precinct building in Minneapolis was cathartic in the moment, but it also gave a glimpse of a future without repressive police that has not yet come into being. Eventually the Minneapolis city council backed down and decided not to abolish the police department, even though they initially had committed to do so. I do think that these radical events have a capacity to open up people's awareness, not just individually, but collectively. It's the sense that you get when you're in a crowd mobilizing, and it does have a magical quality. This is what Haslett writes about in his wonderful essay.

I write about a similar event in 1968, when a wave of student rebellions in Paris turned into the largest general strike in French history, lasting a few weeks in May and June 1968. This radical moment of '68 also resonated with uprisings and crises around the world in that year. It might be the last moment when it seemed like the capitalist order (and France, technically, was a democratic capitalist order, although whether the Gaullist state was truly democratic is kind of a question) might be challenged by this general strike, the much sought-after union between the radical intellectuals and workers who were engaging in both

wildcat strikes and official strike actions. That union was materialized on the streets of Paris and other French cities for some time. It was a moment of enormous potential.

I see it as a symbolic culmination of new lefts in Western Europe and what they were trying to achieve, mainly because of the ways in which, in the neighborhoods of Paris, spontaneous action committees took over the administration of everyday life. Nowhere to be seen were the political parties or the agents of the state: it was people directly administering the affairs of their neighborhood out of necessity. You needed to clean up the trash and provide daycare services. But the action committee also provided forum to debate what we want, what does our neighborhood want, how are we going to articulate demands, how are you going to bring about this new society, for which we do not have a blueprint or ready-made plans. But we are pragmatically acting in the moment and collectively bringing this new world into being. There are radical moments in history when such things seemed possible. In my book's history, they punctuate a longer continuity of left-wing movements, groups, and organizations that formed on the margins of the mass parties and large unions. These neoleftist formations were always in one way or another waiting for such a radical event to recur, and that's when they were at their best in a way. But they're all short-lived, they never last long, so you know there's always going to be that response by a defender of institutionalized politics, and that response is going to be, "well, what concrete results can you point to," of, say, the 1968 uprising or the BLM uprising of 2020? Were police departments abolished? Was policing significantly reformed? Is the condition of Black and brown people in the United States substantively better? That's a challenging question.

In evaluating the success or failure of new lefts or of these radical events, it's important to consider longer term and indirect effects. An example that I talk about a little bit in the epilogue is the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, which started in Manhattan and then had imitations all around the world: occupations of symbolic sites of global finance and trade with the purpose of highlighting the massive wealth inequality that'd been exacerbated by the 2008 economic recession.

So, were there direct pragmatic results from Occupy

Wall Street, which fizzled out after two months? It's hard to say, but I think there is a better case to be made that the salience of the issue of wealth inequality today, the resurgence of interest in democratic socialism among young people today, the great hopes that were attached to the Bernie Sanders campaign, the rhetoric of the 99% versus the 1%—all these things emerged indirectly with a medium-term and longer term significance out of Occupy Wall Street. That's the general way that radical events can change the social and cultural terrain, even when it would seem that in the immediate political contest they've lost or been defeated. That's a recurrent phenomenon that I see in the history of the left in Europe and elsewhere. It's this imperative to deal with and, in a postmortem-type way, analyze political defeat, while also examining the new social and cultural terrain that's been made possible by various iterations of new lefts and left contestation. Because our societies don't change in any homogeneous, one-dimensional way. We live in infinitely complex societies that are networked globally in complex ways, and there are different rhythms of change, or uneven and combined modes of development. I think that any serious analysis with an aim toward social transformation has to take into account these different rhythms.

One of the parts of your analysis that I find really exciting comes up in what you were just saying about periods of organizing and anticipating punctuated by moments of radical change or rupture. It was from the introduction, where you identify hope and despair as the two prevailing emotions or emotional states of the left, which I found really refreshing because I think a lot of discourse is focused on the melancholy of the left, which feels much more static and doesn't account for moments of dynamic change and renewal. Does radical hope have to necessarily involve despair at moments because of defeat?

I like the way that you phrase that question. Left-wing melancholia has certainly been the primary affect or emotion that is associated with the history of the left. I know most about the context of Western Europe, so I'll direct my comments toward that particular string of defeats. In the 20th century, due to circumstances of war and general economic crisis, there were opportunities for revolutionary success. 1917 is the great date in the win column for the global cause of communism or

the left, but revolution didn't succeed or didn't succeed for very long anywhere else in Europe. Fascism absolutely decimated left-wing parties and unions. Socialists and communists were the first targets of fascist parties in Italy, in Germany, and elsewhere, before those fascist regimes began persecuting ethnic minorities. And the resurgence of activism in the 1960s, which is the culmination of my book, also was a massive defeat, at least in the immediate political sense.

Melancholia, or dwelling on incomprehensible loss, is the affect there. What I was hoping to do by suggesting that it might be better to think instead of an alternating dynamic between hope and despair, was to capture the mentality and account for the political commitment of historical subjects at various moments when their actions would seem inexplicable if they were simply melancholic. If you were consumed by despair at past defeats and completely preoccupied in the melancholic task of working through past trauma in maybe even in a therapeutic sense, then what would inspire you to engage in new political projects? What would inspire you to form new organizations, to mobilize new constituencies, or to fight and struggle for social change? I just don't see what would inspire you, how despair could inspire anything but nihilism and resignation, impassivity in the face of injustice or oppression. That's why I wanted to set up this dialectic or dynamic between hope and despair. Because you do need a certain modicum of hope to inspire political action, even if that ends in disillusionment. That's a process that I chart in the history of the several generations that are at the center of the book. Many of them do become disillusioned eventually, but then there is an opportunity for rekindled hope, often in alliance with a new generation of social discontent.

One other thing I'll say on the subject: for the past few years I've been reading a lot of work by the author Ursula K. Le Guin, who is known as a science-fiction writer. But many of her stories that are set in traditional fantasy or science-fiction settings she called instead psychomyths. She was very much into the psychoanalytical work of Carl Jung and really focused on the affective dimension, or the interior psychology of her characters. Often the sci-fi setting was just an excuse for her to examine radical changes in the psychology of her characters. She wrote the finest utopian novel that I've ever read. It's called *The Dispos-*

essed, and it's about an anarchist-communist society that forms on this desolate planet that doesn't have very rich resources. It's a breakaway community from a much richer capitalist planet.

The reason I like it so much is that Le Guin really demonstrates that, while there's much to be admired on this anarchist-communist planet, there's still a great deal of misery and grief and struggles of other kinds. There may not be class struggle, but there's still existential struggle that human beings go through and it's a hard life. It's not a rosy picture that she paints of this socialist utopia, but it's still an incredibly imaginative

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project in the politics of hope. The book imagines that another world is possible, but it's not going to be perfect because human beings can't be perfect. It might be better in substantive material ways than what has been the status quo up until that point (from her perspective, the status quo was a capitalist economy and authoritarian state). I highly recommend returning to Le Guin.

Earlier I mentioned the work of Kim Stanley Robinson, who also sometimes writes in that vein. In general, I wish that there were more utopian media now, whether in literature, TV, or film. I think so much of the anxieties probably filtered through the war on terror, economic crisis, looming climate catastrophe—all of this has resulted in the dominance of the dystopian genre: zombie apocalypse or total environmen-

tal breakdown, this is our vision of the future. I think we would really benefit by considering actual utopian alternatives, and again I don't mean idealized perfections of society, but just imagining different worlds that are not simply the dismal expectations based on things now, things that are currently happening, processes that are just going to continue happening until we end up in some death-spiral, dystopian end.

That's my appeal: somebody out there, please, please begin writing utopias again. I think we need it. We need to bolster that sense of hope, especially the type of hope that can emerge out of collective struggle and solidarity to reestablish that dynamic between hope and despair, which I think is really necessary for any project of social transformation or political mobilization.

These aren't very utopian, but I'm thinking about the novels of Philip Pullman and the idea that even though obviously all of these worlds have their own unique problems, there are still different worlds out there and they exist at the same time—

Infinite worlds.

Yeah. Also, I guess I'm thinking about before [the interview] when we were talking about Epicureanism and Lucretius and I think it's been argued that Pullman is rewriting *Paradise Lost*, but also reclaiming Lucretius—matter is not viewed as somehow polluted like within some forms of Christian theology.

Right, right. This brings us to one place where I disagree with my Yale colleague Martin Hägglund, author of the fascinating work *This Life*, which is a defense of what he calls secular faith against spiritual faith, against any kind of transcendent religious faith. I don't think that it's necessary even for a socialist movement—which certainly is focused on material transformation and has a historical materialist interpretation of the world—to sideline or purge religious sensibilities from the world. I think this is a hopeless endeavor and an undesirable task that's a relic of Enlightenment rationalism.

I think there's great emancipatory potential in the world religions. The traditions that I know something about, Christianity and Judaism, have long traditions of radical messianism. I mentioned [Ernst] Bloch earlier; he was of the opinion that it would be possible to

create a synthesis of Marxist revolutionary ideology and Christian or Jewish eschatological hope, and this might be the intellectual component of a new revolutionary movement. But on a much lower or more popular level, I think it's really important to take people where they are and recognize that outside the university and outside the works of Marxist philosophy, people hold really weird beliefs.

People are very institutionalized, socialized into religious communities, and it would be a hopeless and, again, undesirable orientation, I think, for the left to seek to disabuse people of their illusions or demystify the world. Most religious traditions have points of emancipatory hope that can be identified and built upon and can provide cornerstones for a general movement. I talked earlier about the need to build a multi-generational movement, particularly in the context of responding to the looming climate catastrophe. One might also build a multi-faith movement and multi-ideological movement, with the limitation that the overriding ideology or set of values needs to be oriented towards social transformation rather than any kind of resignation to the status quo or defense of the way that things have always been. I see in the history that my book lays out many examples of collaboration between Marxists and religious socialists that were often very productive in conditions of dire necessity, such as an antifascist struggle.

There are always points of recognition among people who in good faith are engaged in an emancipatory struggle. I know that Martin Hägglund has much better philosophical responses to me, but I would not necessarily recommend his project of building a new left solely on the basis of secular faith or an adherence to material existence alone: there can be something more. And I don't think it's necessarily a useful thing to proscribe belief in a transcendent soul or heavenly state if those beliefs may serve the utilitarian end of transforming this world that we currently inhabit.

How do you view the position of a historian as a world builder and as someone actively involved in shaping the future of these movements? Near the end of *New Lefts*, you mention that the historian can feel the moment of awe or the moment of transformation, along with the subject or object of study, instead of some historians who approach e.g., May

and June '68 and say this happened, but then it failed and that was the end and move on, because this was just a few weeks in time. Put differently, I'm wondering about the role of the historian in creating a multi-generational or multi-faith organization? I'm also alluding to your earlier comments about the pressure you felt while writing to defend some of these marginal groups in history.

I like the way that you described historians as world builders or world makers. I think much of the work of a historian involves recovering lost worlds, and one of the lost worlds that I aimed to recover in this book was the lost world of the old left, the lost world of labor that really conditioned the politics of the left in Europe up through the middle of the 20th century. What do I mean by that? If you were a member of the Social Democratic Party in Germany up until, say, 1933 when that became impossible, then you knew all your social clubs and activities that you were engaged in, you could do with fellow Social Democrat comrades in solidarity. You knew that, regardless of whether you were a dirt-poor proletarian who had no savings, if somebody in your family died, either your local union or the Social Democratic Party would pay for the funeral. You knew that you always had this communal support which sometimes took material or financial forms. It was a world that you inhabited; when you're a party member, you pay dues, you have a democratic voice in how the party's constructed. It goes beyond mere voting for your preferred candidate, which is basically the narrow, emaciated form of political affiliation that we experience in this country now. So, in recovering these lost worlds of the left and lost worlds of labor in my book, my aim was to contextualize the emergence of new lefts, which in many respects were opposing some of the elements of those worlds and seeking to build another world of the left.

Also, I think world-building is useful now in the present context, in which we lack mass left parties of the sort that existed earlier in the 20th century and the late 19th century. In Europe there are still parties that are called socialist or labor parties, but they sort of operate in a quasi-American mode as electoral campaign vehicles, rather than bodies for whom membership really matters, where you would devote your life to a cause. Empirically it's very easy to demonstrate the decline in union density, which rapidly

declined in the United States but also it has declined considerably in Europe, relative to the middle of the 20th century.

I think it's useful to show what was possible when you had a much more highly organized left and labor force: what was possible was real political contestation, a real contest for power.

It would behoove people on the left now to consider, what would it take organizationally to reconstruct something like that lost world? Of course, history never repeats itself, but there are ways in which we can be inspired by past phenomena. The other thing I'll say in response to you: I don't claim to be a purely objective historian when it comes to this subject. There's a quote that I like from the historian Russell Jacoby, who wrote some years ago, "Without passion and commitment, history is not only without a soul, it is without a mind," and I've always taken this to heart.

I do believe personally in the cause of the left. That doesn't mean I uncritically approach the subject. On the contrary, I think that in the melancholic mode, it is the task of anyone on the left to critically work through past defeats. But in order to give my history a soul, and in order to give it a mind, that is, a conceptual sophistication and a narrative coherence, I'm upfront about my commitment. And frankly, I don't believe historians who claim to be purely objective, that "I'm just a dispassionate arbiter of facts." I think that if you're claiming that, you're simply not being upfront about what your actual commitments are.

I realize that's maybe a controversial thing for a historian to say, and I tried to explain it in my book's acknowledgments and a little bit in the introduction. But I think it's ultimately a necessary ingredient for history with a soul, that there is some kind of commitment there, some modicum of sympathy with one's historical subjects.

Granted, I can totally understand why, say, a historian of Nazi Germany may lack any sympathy with their subjects, but there might still be a commitment that drives that person's work, like, "I want to understand exactly how the Nazi regime functioned because I want to prevent it from ever happening again." There's some kind of orientation either to a political cause or to some critical truth that needs to motivate historical

work, and I think that historians could afford to be more upfront about it.

As we look to wrap up the interview—you've already been so generous with your time—I was wondering if there were any other topics you'd like to bring up about New Lefts. I was also wondering whether the process of writing New Lefts has changed your direction of scholarship or approaches to these various issues.

I don't have a lot to add. I will say that I'm glad and relieved that I'm done with the book, because I worked on it for a very long time, first as a graduate student and then afterwards. It feels liberating to move on to other interests and concerns.

One thing I'll say is that the geographic scope of the book is European. I focus on a German case study, I examine transnational connections, and then I include comparative cases from France, Spain, and to a lesser extent Britain and Italy. The point of those comparisons is to define what I call neoleftism as a general phenomenon that might apply outside the confines of my main German case. Neoleftism is a succession of radical breaks with the organizational form of the established left, so the new lefts that I examine—these plural new lefts from the 1930s to the '60s—all were experimenting with non-party forms and non-union forms. But this radical break with the past only made sense within that context of the world of labor and the old left.

There had to be an established and highly organized old left in order for these new lefts to pop up on the margins, have all the dilemmas that they faced, have this generational turnover, and follow the pattern that they did.

First, I would be delighted if people who read this book and know about other geographies, not least the United States, which I only address tangentially in the book, but also, Latin America and Asia and Africa—I would love for them to test my concept of new lefts in those geographies that they know, and if it doesn't work, I would like to hear about it, because that would in turn help me refine the concept as I think it applies in Europe.

That's one invitation for engagement by scholars or readers who know something about another part of the world. Secondly, sometimes I'm asked about what the

practical lessons of the book are especially for a contemporary left in the United States. I would just caution anyone against seeking to replicate the organizational forms of new lefts past. After all, those historical new lefts formed on their own existing political and social terrains, opposing established lefts, and it was in that reactive formation to what they saw as the oppressive structures of Social Democracy and Communism, in addition to the standard oppressive structures of capitalism and the authoritarian state, that they articulated their theories and mobilized them the way they did.

If there's anything to imitate now or any lesson to draw, it's to analyze seriously and relentlessly the political and social terrain that exists now, and analyze the potential for political contestation or social transformation through the existing organizations of the left. In the United States, one has to confront the Democratic Party, for example, and figure out what the limits of working within the Democratic Party are but also what the limits of trying to avoid the electoral system [are] in this country, because you'd end up in the NGO/nonprofit world, the social movement world. Relentlessly criticize the existing conditions as a precondition for determining what has to be done now. And if the left does that today, then they will be acting in the spirit of historical new lefts without making the mistake of simply repeating them in a sectarian manner. There's nothing that I can stand less than people who read only Lenin and Mao and fiercely debate how to apply their dictums to our present-day concerns.

There's a lot to be learned from the historical texts of the left, but you'd have to be pretty naïve to think that you can directly apply these ideas from previous historical areas and situations and stages of capitalist development to our own moment. Marx told us to let the dead bury their dead, and to draw our poetry from the future: we have tasks now that demand our attention, and while history can be an inspiration, it's not going to provide any ready-made plans for what to do in our present moment. ♦