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Terence Renaud. *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021 ISBN: 9780691220796.

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Do the political ends that leftists pursue necessarily require them to abandon the distinctive form and style of leftist politics? Put differently, is the left fated to choose between living out its ideals in organizations that have little chance of achieving its long-term goals (including the conquest of power), or single-mindedly focusing on achieving its ends, at the risk of betraying its core principles? These questions capture what Terence Renaud calls the “neoleftist dilemma,” (5) and it is the conceptual problem that his book explores. Though *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition* is a deeply historical study, one that charts the interplay between “neoleftism” (11)—the term Renaud coins to refer to the broader trend, distinguishing it from its later iteration—and social democracy in twentieth-century Germany. It also wrestles with key issues concerning the nature of leftist politics, broadly construed.

Far from being a work of political theory, Renaud’s book is an eminently empirical and exquisitely researched study of socialist politics in Germany from the 1920s to the 1960s. Its premise is that the phenomenon of the “new left” is much older than is commonly recognized. Far from being a movement that emerged in the 1960s, “neoleftism” emerged in Germany in the early 1930s (though building on earlier ideas) in response to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler’s rise to power. The book’s through line is New Beginning, a leftist organization formed in the early 1930s (after initially being called “the Org”). While drawing on extensive archival work and providing a meticulous reconstruction of New Beginning’s history, Renaud also shows how this movement’s driving principles left an enduring mark on socialist politics, and how its key figures played important roles well into the postwar era. New Beginning was one of several small leftist groups that, in a time of rampant political anxiety, sought to “reorganize the left under the banner of radical anti-fascism and a revolutionary new culture” (4). Renaud traces the history of this project and its key players, showing how they dealt with the Nazi seizure of power, the Spanish Civil War, and the experience of exile. He examines New Beginning’s impact on the reconstruction of the left in the Federal Republic of Germany and its role in the Social Democratic Party’s ultimate break with Marxism in 1959. The book’s concluding chapter explores the resurrection of the neoleftist project in the 1960s by such figures as the student radical Rudi Dutschke, and the complex reactions on the part of old new leftists that this revival elicited. Renaud’s goal is to probe the connections between two moments that are usually considered in isolation—interwar antifascism and sixties radicalism—in a manner that “brings the phenomenon of neoleftism into focus” (277).

Despite the empirical focus of the book, Renaud constantly foregrounds his material’s theoretical stakes. Neoleftism—that is, the problem of new lefts—is, he suggests, a recurring and perhaps inevitable dynamic in leftist politics—and not only in Germany. To borrow a term from Michel Foucault, neoleftism could even be described as an historical *a priori*—a “problematic” inherent in a distinct, historically-situated type of politics. Renaud calls this problematic the “neoleftist dilemma.” Phrased abstractly, the dilemma raises the question of the adequacy between the content of politics—the ends a movement seeks to achieve—and its form—the institutional structures through which political ends are pursued. In more concrete and historical terms, Renaud examines how groups like New Beginning that contain “hierarchical party and union structures”—particularly the German Social Democratic Party (SDP)—“might pose an obstacle to grassroots mobilization” (4), which they deemed necessary for reinvigorating the left.

In particular, neoleftists were haunted by what the sociologist Robert Michels called the “iron law of oligarchy” (24): the fear that as democratic parties flourished, they would develop hierarchical and conservative tendencies that would betray their ideals of democracy.¹ Consequently, they “experimented with alternative forms: councils, assemblies, action committees, discussion circles, networks, and even militias” (4). The basic form of the dilemma’s solution consists, for Renaud, in “a total commitment to synchronize revolutionary means and ends” (281). A party—or any leftist political entity—cannot suspend its principles in

¹ This claim was developed in Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: Hearst's International Library, 1915).

the name of pragmatism; it must prefiguratively embody the principles that it seeks, over time, to extend to society as a whole. This alignment of form and content is ethical, but also functional: democratic and egalitarian structures ensure that parties can always renew themselves. Mirroring Hannah Arendt's insight about revolutions, neoleftists constantly strive to "maintain their own capacity to begin anew" (15).²

It is because leftist politics seek to transform society by advancing it towards an ideal, to emancipate oppressed and marginalized groups, and to establish an egalitarian social order, that neoleftism, Renaud suggests, is a permanent temptation. While he is interested in the transmission of political ideas—how aging neoleftists rethink their youthful commitments, how young neoleftists find inspiration in the youthful thought of previous generations—his argument ultimately implies the no leftist political movement is ever immune from neoleftist criticism. An iron law of neoleftist critique is the parodic rejoinder to Michels's theory.

An important consequence of this understanding of neoleftist politics is that it has implications that extend well beyond neoleftist groups. A major theme of Renaud's book is the way in which former New Beginning members, particularly in the wake of the devastation in which fascism's demise had left the country, committed themselves to a reformist and often non-Marxist form of social democracy (particularly after 1959). Yet Renaud's evidence suggests that these figures did not so much instantiate Michels's law as embody a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung*: something of neoleftism is preserved even in its negation. During the war, "groups like New Beginning changed their opinion of democratic capitalism and the welfare state" (that is, they came to view it quite favorably) (131), and "plans for a postwar new left took increasingly liberal hues" (136). As German socialist and Communist parties debated whether they should unite in 1945-46, former neoleftists were virulently—and presciently—opposed, as they had little trust in the Soviet Union and its German proxies. Even as they accepted the idea of joining the "old left," a residue of their former radicalism survived, filtered through the sieve of historical experience, in the liberal democratic politics they came to embrace. A neoleftist hero is less something to be, than to *have been*.

These considerations inform Renaud's analysis of the rekindling of neoleftism in the 1960s, which, in a sense, is the book's punchline. The new new left drew inspiration from the old new left, even as the old new left mounted a defense of the new old left. The political rhetoric of "old" and "new" and the resulting confusion is a major theme of this chapter. Young radicals like Rudi Dutschke (in Germany) and Daniel Cohn-Bendit (in France, though his background was German) liked to emphasize that they were simply brushing off the ideas that many of their elders had embraced in the 1930s. This, the latter maintained, was precisely the problem: the sixties radicals were engaged in a "romantic regression" (as former New Beginning member Richard Löwenthal put it in a famous intervention³), which failed to assess the shortcomings of interwar fascism and neoleftism. Renaud explores this complex dialectic, in which neoleftism rises up against the perceived moderation and institutionalization of an old left before shaping the outlook of a new generation of moderates and institutionalists—which, in time, will be targeted by a new breed of neoleftists.

Though the moderation of old left parties is an issue that Renaud considers, his real concern is with the question of form: that is, the kind of organizations that leftist movements seek to build. "Fundamentally," he writes, "this is a book about form" (5). The crux of the neoleftist dilemma lies in institutions' "inability to sustain new forms" (281). Politics is the entire focus of Renaud's book, but he recognizes that the question of harmonizing form with the need for fluidity and novelty goes beyond politics. Indeed, it is a question that haunts modern culture, particularly modern art. Renaud anchors his argument in an opening chapter on "leftism and the new." He examines the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács' engagement with what the German sociologist Georg Simmel called the "tragedy of culture": the human need, particularly in modern times, to resolve the alienation of modern society by giving objective form to subjective feeling, only to find

² See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006 [1963]).

³ Richard Löwenthal, *Der romantische Rückfall: Wege und Irrwege einer rückwärts gewendeten Revolution* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1970).

that these very forms eventually give rise to a new sense of alienation.⁴ No form is permanently immune from incipient estrangement. Lukács would map this intuition onto his growing interest in Communist politics: the “solution to both the tragedy of culture and the alienation of workers from lifeless party organizations was leftism” (31). It is significant, in this light, that a figure who discreetly reappears throughout the book is Bertolt Brecht, an artist whose commitment to Marxism was as profound as his efforts to dismantle the traditional forms of his medium, theater, and infuse it with the formlessness of his own revolutionary aesthetic. One wonders how much this essentially aesthetic impulse accounts for the concerns with political form that preoccupy the figures Renaud examines in his book.

The relationship between Renaud’s ambitious attempt to theorize the “phenomenon of neoleftism” (277) in general, and his narrower focus on New Beginning and its members, is the main question explored in this forum. All three reviewers find Renaud’s meticulous reconstruction of this current’s long history impressive and convincing. Their skepticism is aroused, however, by Renaud’s desire to use this history to make broader claims about history of “new lefts.” Giuliana Chamedes maintains that Renaud is unclear about the reasons that led interwar leftists to abandon their earlier commitments after the war, a point with implications for Renaud’s analysis of New Beginning, as well as his more general claims about the neoleftist dialectic. She also questions Renaud’s tendency to assume that “the older one gets, the more conservative one becomes.” Furthermore, Chamedes considers Renaud’s contention that neoleftism inclines towards internationalism, notably when he asserts that German antifascist participation in the Spanish Civil War was “functionally similar to European radicals’ solidarity with Third World anticolonial struggles in the 1950s and 1960s,” to be a “stretch.” Talbot Imlay makes exactly the same point in his review, noting that if anything, Renaud’s point about the Spanish Civil War “highlights the deep-seated Eurocentrism of so many on the European non-Communist left before 1945, for whom empire was a secondary concern at best.” Michael Scott Christofferson challenges Renaud’s generalization of the neoleftist phenomenon—his claim that New Beginning is “representative and generative of the history of the new left throughout Western Europe—specifically by challenging the parallels that Renaud draws between the history of the West German and French lefts in the postwar period. Christofferson believes that the socialist left’s path from Marxism to reformism, and the way this dynamic impacts new left movements, is not, contrary to Renaud’s claims, paralleled in France. Renaud engages with many of these concerns in his extensive response.

Renaud concludes his book on what he considers to be optimistic note: “The struggle continues” (294). He also describes his approach as an “analytic of optimism” (87). Yet do the “neoleftist dilemma” and the dialectic of leftist politics to which it gives rise necessarily warrant such optimism? Is the dilemma borne out by twentieth-century German history, which Renaud illustrates so brilliantly, evidence of the left’s irrepressible capacity for renewal or its neurotic incapacity to overcome a double-bind? Regardless of one’s opinion, *New Lefts* provides invaluable material for wrestling with this problem.

Contributors:

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⁴ Georg Lukacs, “Aesthetic Culture,” trans. Rita Keresztesi-Treat, *Yale Journal of Criticism* 11:2 (1998): 365-379; Georg Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, trans. Peter Etzkorn (New York Teachers College Press, 1968).

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Giuliana Chamedes is Mellon-Morgridge Professor of European International History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She completed an MPhil in European History at the University of Cambridge and a PhD at Columbia University. Her first book, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe*, came out with Harvard University Press in 2019, and won the Michael Hunt Prize in International History (2020) as well as the Marraro Prize (2019). Her work has been published in the *Journal of Contemporary History*; *Contemporary European History*; *French Politics, Culture, and Society*; and in numerous edited volumes. She has received support for her research from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Mellon Foundation, and the DAAD, among others. She is currently drafting her second book, tentatively titled *Failed Globalists: European Socialists, the Welfare State, and the Challenge of the Global South, 1971-2022*.

Michael Scott Christofferson is a Professor of History at Adelphi University in Garden City, NY. His most important scholarly contribution is his book *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (Berghahn Books, 2004) that has also appeared in French (Editions Agone, 2009 and 2014 for the second, "pocket" edition) and Romanian (Editura TACT, 2018) translation. He is currently in the final stages of writing a book under contract with Verso Books on the life, politics, and scholarship of the historian of the French Revolution François Furet. It is tentatively titled *Terminating the Revolution: François Furet and the Politics of History*.

Talbot C. Imlay teaches in the Département des sciences historiques at the Université Laval in Québec, Canada. His most recent book is *Clarence Streit and Twentieth-Century American Internationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). He is currently writing a book on the origins of realism as a paradigm for understanding international relations, which situates its emergence in multiple debates within the United States during the interwar years on the underlying dynamics driving international politics.

On 1 January 1916, the Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci penned a short article in the left-wing paper *Avanti!*. “I hate New Year’s day,” Gramsci polemicized. Each orbit around the sun does not offer a chance to start anew, he affirmed; the very idea that we can erase the past and start again is “an impediment, a guardrail that prevents us from seeing that history continues to unfold, without sudden arrests or interruptions.”⁵ The task for socialism was not to divorce itself from history, but rather to situate itself at history’s heart.

Terence Renaud’s *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition* is concerned with this problematic. It charts how dissident socialists in twentieth-century Germany and France ensconced themselves within history, understanding themselves at once as children of the past and makers of the future. The book kicks off circa 1917 and traces the pre-history of the 1960s New Left, showing how many of its most famous ideas and catchphrases (e.g., ‘the personal is political,’ the anti-bureaucratic impulse; and the call for radical renewal as an end in itself) are not new at all. Rather, their origins lie in the tumultuous years between World War I and World War II, as socialists who sat on the margins of major political parties crafted an antifascism that was not Soviet, under the shadow of arrest, deportation, and execution. The book’s understanding of socialist time-politics is innovative; so is its transwar perspective. An important contribution to the history of European left-wing movements, *New Lefts* will be of interest to scholars of twentieth-century intellectual history and the history of contentious politics.

As the book investigates the history of dissident socialism, it shifts the focus away from the large political organizations that have received the lion’s share of attention in the historiography. Its main case study is a little-known group founded in Berlin around 1930. They called themselves the Org, short for Leninist Organization. Their strategy—straight out of Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin’s 1902 work, *What Is To Be Done?*—was based on the idea that the masses were unable to spontaneously coalesce into a revolutionary force and overthrow the capitalist class on their own. To ensure socialist victory, a conspiratorial band of professional revolutionaries had to entrust ‘the proletariat’ with education, class consciousness, and the tools needed to make socialism a reality. Like many fellow German leftists, members of the Org also believed that Germany occupied a special place in Europe. While they saw the Russian Revolution as an inspiring first step, they argued the German revolution-to-come would supersede the Russian.

The Org was a small group, and one convinced of the importance of staying small (being a revolutionary vanguardist is no mass affair!). Following the rise of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler to the Chancellorship in January of 1933, Org members continued to meet in secret and publish underground under alias names. They analyzed new rights as they built their own new left. One person close to Org, the Austrian doctor and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, emphasized that fascism was not an elite coup but rather a mass phenomenon. To beat fascism, a large-scale movement that touched on every aspect of daily life was needed. Through his involvement in the Org and companion groups like the German Association for Proletarian Sexual Politics (Sex-Pol), Reich called for a left sexual politics, arguing that the individual choices constituted political acts and that sexual freedom was the path towards political emancipation. Sexual repression of the “natural” impulse for free love was a capitalist tactic in order to advance class domination; freeing the body would free the mind and unshackle the revolutionary possibilities of the moment.⁶ Free-love centered discussion circles would have a potential added benefit: activists hoped they would bring into the socialist fold repressed Central European youth who would be eager to talk about sex and sexuality (69).

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, “Sotto il mole,” *Avanti!*, 1 January 1916. Translation mine.

⁶ See Wilhelm Reich, *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* (Copenhagen: Verlag für Sexualpolitik, 1933); *ibid.*, *Sex-Pol: Essays, 1929-1934*, trans. Anna Bostok, Lee Baxandall, and Tom DuBose (New York: Random House, 1972).

The vision did not come to pass. The Org never became a mass phenomenon; rather, it risked a stillborn death as a result of internal in-fighting. Reforged under new leadership in 1935, the Org was now led by a generation of dissident socialists eager to democratize the decision-making processes and abandon Leninist vanguardism. How exactly they understood the Soviet Union and Soviet-style Communism remained unresolved. Even key figures within the new/old group, like Richard Löwenthal, waffled back and forth. In 1938, he said that Popular Fronts against fascism would only succeed if they excluded Communists sympathetic to the Soviet Union. In 1939, he affirmed that the Soviet Union remained “the last bastion of hope.”⁷ It was hard to make up one’s mind.

After the war, luminaries from the Org shifted to unclouded anti-Soviet, anti-revolutionary, and anti-Communist positions; by the mid-1950s, any remaining allegiance to the imperative of a global anti-capitalist revolution inspired by Moscow’s example was gone. Former Org members like Löwenthal became key figures within the German Social Democratic Party. On Renaud’s read, they embraced the center-left label, jettisoned a commitment to the working class, and courted middle class voters. This culminated in the Godesberg party convention of 1959, where Marxism was abandoned in favor of support for “freedom,” the market, and political and civil rights. While one could make a case that there was a degree of continuity from the interwar years (former Org members still believed in the importance of internal democracy, for instance), the discontinuities were striking.

Renaud poignantly closes his narrative with a debate between Richard Löwenthal and Rudi Dutschke, firebrand leader of the 1960s New Left. In July 1967, the two men faced off at the Free University of Berlin. Löwenthal accused Dutschke of a romantic revolutionism devoid of contact with reality. In response, Dutschke extracted a pamphlet from his pocket and read aloud a passage that Löwenthal (under the alias Paul Sering) had written back in the 1930s: “In order for the next German revolution to succeed, the revolutionary party must be created so as to prepare in equal measure for organizing mass action and running the economic apparatus.”⁸ Dutschke wanted to show that Löwenthal was a fellow revolutionary—that the two men shared more than it seemed. But Löwenthal did not take the bait. Instead, he scornfully replied that Dutschke had “proven himself to be my posthumous disciple” because Paul Sering, after all, had died long ago (210-11).

New Lefts is an impressive book: beautifully written, deeply researched, and able to bring to the fore connections rarely seen by histories with shorter chronologies. However, some core historiographical interventions remain under-developed. An important one has to do with causality. What exactly led interwar dissident socialists to abandon their prior visions? Renaud follows much of the historiography in noting that developments internal to the Soviet Union and then the Soviet bloc—for example, the Stalinist purges, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Hungarian Revolution—gave socialists pause. He also repeatedly suggests that the older one gets, the more conservative one becomes. In the process, Renaud relitigates many internal socialist debates. But is this really the full story? *New Lefts* seems to rely a great deal on the self-reports of its historical protagonist (“we grew up,” “we (eventually) recognized Soviet horrors,” etc.). But this identificatory approach, as scholars like Michael Christofferson have argued, is often unsatisfactory: historical actors and actresses are not always the ones best positioned to construct self-reflective causal narratives.⁹ There seem to be other analytical and explanatory moves available—or at least, moves worth entertaining. A Lovejoyian explanation, for instance, might posit that internal contradictions within the socialist vision gradually came to light over time.¹⁰ An excessive commitment to building internally democratic processes, for instance, might

⁷ See Neu Beginnen, *Der kommende Weltkrieg. Aufgaben und Ziele des deutschen Sozialismus: Eine Diskussionsgrundlage* (Paris: self-pub, 1939).

⁸ Paul Sering [Richard Löwenthal], “Anstelle eines Vorwortes: Ein Auszug aus eine[r] Podiumsdiskussion,” in *Faschismus und Monopolkapitalismus* (Berlin, July 1967).

⁹ Michael Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Anti-Totalitarian Moment of the 1970s in French Intellectual Politics* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

¹⁰ The reference here is of course to Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

result in a self-satisfied petri dish that failed to build mass power; a fetishization of revolution as a personal journey might lead to an intellectualized resistance that had no practical impact on socio-economic realities. What we might call an instrumentalist explanation might posit that the socialists moved to the right in order to gain political power—paradoxically undoing socialism’s identity and its support base in the process.¹¹ And so forth.

A second question is definitional. The rubric “neoleftism” is broad and capacious. This is part of its attraction. However, its analytical utility is not clearly defended; for that reason, it is not evident precisely which individuals and groups belong under this heading and which do not. It was striking that anarchists played almost no role in the story despite the fact that they were among the earliest anti-capitalist “dissident socialists” around and among the first alerted to the anti-democratic impulses within the newly forming Bolshevik experiment.¹² Anarchists were also far-reaching internationalists, sex-positive advocates of free love, and hefty movement builders. When they sought to found their own form of dissident socialism within Spain in the mid-to-late 1930s, they (arguably) most visibly grappled with what Renaud calls the “neoleftist dilemma” of forging a mass movement while maintaining internal democratic practices.¹³ Other leading groups are also missing from the story. The birth of a French New Left that was opposed to the French Communist Party’s subservience to Moscow, for instance, is unthinkable without careful consideration of organs like *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (which receives passing mention), the journal *Arguments* (not noted in the book), or the broader cultural anti-totalitarian problematic.¹⁴ Women and non-white dissident socialists are all but absent. And while major political parties and supranational institutions—like the French Socialist Party, the *Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière* (SFIO), and the Socialist International—show up here and there, the book lacks a sustained argument for the relationship between neoleftism and these larger socialist bodies.

A third issue has to do with the purported internationalism at the heart of neoleftism. While neoleftists certainly saw themselves as internationalists, questions remain. *New Lefts* posits that the involvement of socialists in the Spanish Civil War was “functionally similar to European radicals’ solidarity with Third World anticolonial struggles in the 1950s and 1960s” (103). This seems a bit of a stretch—precisely because there was a distinct variety of anti-imperialist anti-fascism that achieved global importance one year before the start of the Spanish Civil War, in protest of the Italian Fascist invasion of Ethiopia.¹⁵ This important variety of antifascism—whose leading spokespeople were socialists of color—goes almost unremarked. It is unclear what the book’s dissident socialists thought of it or of anti-racism and anti-imperialism more broadly. Similarly, while dissident socialists were thrown in exilic lives in the interwar years, it is difficult to discern whether this obliged internationalism had lasting effects on socialist vistas and praxis. Indeed, one might walk away from *New Lefts* with the understanding that neoleftists actually “saved the nation-state” and exercised a form of neoleftist provincialism, with French and German neoleftists of the 1930s as the key reference points for French and German neoleftists of the 1960s. One wonders: how deep did 1960s third-worldism really run

¹¹ Stephanie Mudge, *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹² Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (1923); Augustine Souchy, *The Workers and Peasants of Russia and Ukraine: How Do They Live?* (Chicago: Educational Bureau of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1922); Luigi Fabbri, *La crisis del anarquismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Argonauta, 1921).

¹³ See, e.g., Robert Christl, “Anarchism in One Country: Diego Abad de Santillán and the Movement Toward National Economic Planning within Interwar Anarchism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, forthcoming.

¹⁴ For a brilliant recent analysis of the importance of the latter, see Stefanos Geroulanos, *Transparency in Postwar France: A Critical History of the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), chapter 10. The classic account of the anti-totalitarianism of the French Left remains Christofferson, *French Intellectuals*.

¹⁵ See Joseph Fronczak, “Local People’s Global Politics: A Transnational History of the Hands Off Ethiopia Movement of 1935,” *Diplomatic History*, 39, 2 (April 2015): 245-74; Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); Giuliana Chamedes, “Anti-Fascism as a Differentially Mobilizing Ideology, From the Popular Front to the Black Power Movement,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, forthcoming.

if the New Left's keywords were still primarily drawn from the European (Franco-German) interwar tradition?¹⁶

Last but certainly not least comes the dreaded question of whether neoleftists won or lost. In place of declensionist narratives that emphasize the left's resounding defeat due to internal or exogenous forces, the book adopts an "analytic of optimism" (87). The self-declared purpose is to celebrate "the most creative attempts to sustain democracy within socialist organizations," and explore "some of the past century's most radical attempts to transcend capitalist, imperialist, and authoritarian domination" (5). *Contra* critics, the book celebrates the ability of alternative socialists to reflect on the past, and to at least *try* to bring about social, economic, and political change. Often, Renaud argues, the most generative moments were moments of crisis; thus, he reads the repeated splintering of the left into myriad forms and organizations as "not a symptom of defeat but rather...a creative sign of renewal" (85).

But is this "optic of optimism" warranted? After all, as chapter five seems to suggest, neoleftists of the 1950s played a role in bringing about their own demise. And as chapter eight indicates, the neoleftists of the 1960s did not build anything close to the world of their dreams. Perhaps the bard of the New Left had it right after all. In 1965, in a track on the album "Bringing It All Back Home," Bob Dylan articulated a depressed time-poetics that winked at itself but admitted defeat. He sang it like this: "Some speak of the future/ My love she speaks softly/ She knows there's no success like failure/ and that failure is no success at all."¹⁷ *New Lefts* makes it clear that the twentieth-century dissident socialist tradition was intellectually vibrant and that it sought to shape the world. But perhaps the book could wrestle more explicitly with the hard truth that dissident socialists, try as they might, ultimately failed to live up to their own ambitions.

¹⁶ In other words, while Renaud's interpretation aligns with the conclusions of books like Quinn Slobodian's *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Christoph Kalter's *The Discovery of the Third World: Decolonization and the Rise of the New Left in France, c. 1950-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2016), and Timothy Scott Brown's *Sixties Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), his book may in fact be corroborating the opposite position. On the limits of socialist internationalism, see Talbot Imlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism: European Socialists and International Politics, 1914-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁷ Bob Dylan, "Love Minus Zero/No Limit," track 4 on *Bringing It All Back Home*, 1965, Columbia Recording. Performed live in 1965: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzkeBOo8x9o>.

Terence Renaud's *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition* offers a detailed study of the German anti-fascist group New Beginning—also known as the Org—and its influence into the 1960s. Its history, the author argues, “was both representative and generative of European new lefts” (55, a claim also made on page 280). More broadly, through his study of New Beginning and comparison with new lefts in other countries, Renaud seeks to illuminate the history of new lefts in general. Although Renaud briefly discusses developments in multiple countries, his main comparative case is France. This review focuses on the book's interpretation of the French case and its broader claims about European new lefts.

Renaud offers two general contributions to the history of new lefts. First, he emphasizes the connections between the new left of the 1960s and new left or ‘neoleftist’ antifascism in the 1930s. Second, this examination of new lefts over time endeavors to reveal “the structural dynamics of new lefts in general” (11). On the one hand, he dwells on the irony of former new left activists joining and then defending the establishment against the next new left generation. On the other hand, he points to the role of postwar left socialists in passing on the accumulated wisdom of the anti-fascist generation's new left to the anti-authoritarian generation of the 1960s. Related to this general intervention in the history of the new left are specific arguments about the history of defeat. By pointing to connections between 1930s antifascists and 1960s new leftists, Renaud claims to revise the notion allegedly prevalent in German intellectual history that German history started from scratch with Nazi Germany's defeat in 1945. He also argues that the common narrative of Western Marxism in terms of defeat fails to take into account the fact that defeat gave birth to new ideas.

Renaud's book centers on the struggle of new lefts with the question of political form. New left politics was above all prefigurative politics in which new leftists sought to prefigure in their movements the direct democracy that was their end goal. The problem that they inevitably encountered was “How does one sustain the dynamism of a grassroots social movement without succumbing to hierarchy, centralized leadership, and banal political routine?” (5). This history of new left prefigurative politics begins with the work of the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács, which Renaud presents as a key reference point for the antifascist new left of the 1930s. The Org itself was formed circa 1930 by ex-Communists who left or were expelled from the German Communist Party (KPD) due to their opposition to Stalinism. Although Leninist and still attached to the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Org argued that bureaucratic tendencies within the party needed to be resisted. The group moved away from Leninism and adopted a more resolutely prefigurative politics in 1935 when the Frank-Löwenthal-Peuke faction took over and expelled its former leading figure, Walter Loewenheim, from the group.

During the Nazi dictatorship, many of the New Beginning members who remained in Germany were thrown into concentration camps by the Gestapo, while those who took the route of exile mobilized against fascism during the Spanish Civil War and then contributed to the Allied war effort against Nazi Germany. During this decade of exile, New Beginning members became disillusioned with Communism due to Stalinist political violence (notably the purges within the USSR and the killing of one of their members, Mark Rein, in Barcelona) and the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Their wartime support of the Allies also moderated their politics in favor of democratic capitalism and the welfare state. After the war, the New Beginning Working Group in Berlin played an important role in resisting the fusion of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) with the KPD to form the German Socialist Unity Party (SED) in East Germany. When that battle was lost and the Cold War began, New Beginning dissolved, with most of its members joining the West German SPD and the fight against Communism. New Beginning members (notably Fritz Erler and Richard Löwenthal) played a key role in paving the way for the 1959 Bad Godesberg Congress of the SPD in which the party abandoned

Marxism and class struggle in favor of liberal, democratic capitalism. When they embraced social democratic modernization they set aside their neoleftist concerns about organizational form in favor of parliamentary politics.

The remaining Marxist left socialists and the radical youth in the Socialist German Student League (SDS) were no longer welcome in the party and “pushed... together into a neoleftist community of the expelled” (205). While most people associated with New Beginning embraced Bad Godesberg, a few, like Ossip Flechtheim and Wolfgang Abendroth, remained true to the neoleftist agenda of 1930s antifascism and transmitted their radical heritage to the 1960s German New Left. SDS contempt for the SPD reached new heights with the formation of the Grand Coalition that brought the SPD into government alongside the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) under the chancellorship of former Nazi Kurt Kiesinger in December 1966.¹⁸ Ironically, former New Beginning members like Löwenthal found themselves defending their current politics against New Left leaders like Rudi Dutschke, who quoted their past neoleftist writings against them. The cycle of the new lefts ends not in Germany, but in France in May 1968, which Renaud presents as “the apotheosis—or *reductio ad absurdum*—” of its prefigurative politics (282).

Renaud claims that the story of New Beginning is both “representative and generative of” the history of the new left throughout Western Europe, and seeks to make this case by examining the transnational history of New Beginning in exile as well as West European comparisons with it (55). The case for influence is circumstantial and weak. Renaud claims that Germany was “a cradle of new lefts” because Marx, Western Marxism, and the first mass socialist party were born there, and because of the particulars of early twentieth-century German history, notably loss in war, economic collapse, and fratricide within the left (3 and 56). Renaud also suggests influence by pointing to the favorable reception of exiled New Beginning members by European socialists. The main problem with this argument is that he does not show any direct influence of New Beginning on neoleftist currents elsewhere. Further, the priority of Germany in this history is doubtful. As Renaud himself indicates, Lukács was greatly influenced in his reflections on political form by the French anarcho-syndicalist Georges Sorel. Would it be any less convincing to posit France as the cradle of new lefts, given its long history of direct democratic political movements from the *sans-culottes* through the “socialism of skilled workers”¹⁹ and anarcho-syndicalism? This long history arguably helps explain why France’s May 68, and not some event in German political history, is the apotheosis of the 1960s new left.

If German priority is questionable, so too, I think, is the effort to uncover the general dynamic of the history of new lefts through a case study of New Beginning. The main problem here is the effort to make French history fit the German model, most notably by arguing that France experienced something equivalent to West Germany’s Bad Godesberg moment, described as “a common destiny for European Social Democracy” in which Social Democrats “retreat[ed] from Marxism in order to appeal to a larger public and adapt to the conditions of democratic capitalism” (175). For Renaud, the Unified Socialist Party (PSU) “represented the French version of social democratic modernization: a forward-looking and ultimately successful movement that dressed the part of neoleftism while limiting itself to reforms within the system” (204). More generally, Renaud claims that

In France, as in West Germany, social democratic modernization replaced supposedly obsolete Marxism with post-ideological pragmatism.This post-ideological turn actually represented the triumph of a new kind of ideology: rigid adherence to liberal democratic

¹⁸ It should be noted Renaud does not mention Kiesinger and plays down the issue of Nazism in his discussion of the 1960s New Left in Germany, which seems inconsistent with his effort to point out the links between 1930s antifascism and the 1960s new left in Germany.

¹⁹ Bernard H. Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement 1830-1914: The Socialism of Skilled Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

norms, denial of class conflict, obsession with totalitarian dictatorship as a foil, praise for free enterprise, and sacralization of individual liberties (204).

The dynamic within the French new left was, Renaud suggests, similar to that in Germany, where former neoleftists who had abandoned the cause for social democratic modernization clashed with representatives of the 1960s New Left. Thus, Renaud finds “another irony of midcentury new lefts” in May 68 leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s rejoinder to criticism from neoleftist luminary Claude Lefort that used Lefort’s former political writings in *Socialisme ou barbarie* against him (269).

This analysis is mistaken on multiple fronts. While a part of the PSU embraced something akin to social-democratic modernization, the formation of the PSU lacks the significance of the Bad Godesberg turn of the German SPD. Although the SPD capitalized on its newfound political moderation to improve its scores in elections, enter the government in 1966, and then lead it by 1969, the PSU remained politically marginal, never managing to win even 5% of the vote in either presidential or legislative elections. Further, the modernizers were only one of the currents of the PSU, which was a sort of compromise between Marxists and non-Marxists in its first years.²⁰ Although modernizers gained the upper hand in a 1963 power struggle, the party was irreparably damaged in the process. After 1968, the revolutionaries eclipsed the modernizers, and the PSU became the party of *autogestion* (self-management), effectively embracing a form of prefigurative politics.²¹

Renaud’s analysis of the exchange between Lefort and Cohn-Bendit is not without error. It is based on a poor English translation of Cohn-Bendit’s *La Gauchisme, remède à la maladie sénile du communisme*, that makes it seem as if Lefort had criticized Cohn-Bendit’s politics when he had not. The English translation of the book has Cohn-Bendit citing Lefort as follows: “For my part, what I find in the speeches of the some of the more rabid students and particularly Cohn-Bendit, is a pinch of realism and a large dose of impudence.”²² But, the original French version of Cohn-Bendit’s book reads: “Pour ma part, ce que j’ai cru entendre dans le langage que tenaient certains enragés et notamment Cohn-Bendit, c’est, joint à une extrême audace, un réalisme.”²³ The use of the word “rabid” in the English version poorly translates “enragés”—a reference to a political current in the French Revolution that was repurposed to describe ‘68 radicals. In line with the slant given to Lefort’s comment by the translator, Renaud considers the words “a pinch of realism and a large dose of impudence” to be a criticism of Cohn-Bendit by Lefort (269). But Lefort was commenting not on Cohn-Bendit’s “impudence,” but rather on his “audacity” or “boldness,” which he clearly found admirable. Likewise, he was favorably impressed by Cohn-Bendit’s realism because he considered it a revolutionary realism born out of a commitment to prefigurative politics that did not fall into “*l’illusion d’une bonne société, délivrée de contradictions.*” Lefort, who had hardly abandoned prefigurative politics himself, concluded that if others followed Cohn-Bendit’s example “*on devrait convenir alors que la révolution a mûri.*”²⁴ If Cohn-Bendit found “irony” in the situation, it is not because, as Renaud claims, he “used Lefort’s own past words against him,” but rather

²⁰ Jean Poperen, *La Gauche française: le nouvel âge 1958-1965* (Paris: Fayard, 1972), 147.

²¹ Tudi Kernalegenn and François Prigent, “La Marginalisation du PSU dans le système partisan français (1967-1975),” in Gilles Richard and Jacqueline Sainclivier, eds., *Les Partis à l’épreuve de 68: L’émergence de nouveaux clivages, 1971-1974* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), 159-71.

²² Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), 18.

²³ [Daniel and Gabriel] Cohn-Bendit, *Le Gauchisme: Remède à la maladie sénile du communisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), 19. <https://archive.org/details/legauchismeremed0000cohn/page/n9/mode/2up>. There are problems like this throughout this English translation, which cannot be trusted. Note that Cohn-Bendit’s citation of Lefort is incomplete. Lefort wrote: “Pour ma part, ce que j’ai cru entendre dans le langage que tenaient certains enragés, et notamment Cohn-Bendit, on lire dans leur style d’action, lors de la première phase de la révolte étudiante, le mot peut surprendre, c’est, joint à une extrême audace, un réalisme.” Claude Lefort, “Le désordre nouveau,” in E[dgar] Morin, C[laude] Lefort, and C[ornelius] Castoriadis, *Mai 68: La Brèche suivi de Vingt ans après* (1968, reis., Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1988), 61-62.

²⁴ Lefort, “Le désordre nouveau,” 62.

because what Lefort found admirable in Cohn-Bendit was exactly what Cohn-Bendit had learned from Lefort (269).

If, as this analysis suggests, there was no equivalent to Bad Godesberg in France and there was little in the way of ironic encounters in which French new left youth chided former new leftists for abandoning the cause for social democratic modernism, what was happening in France that made it different from Germany? The key to understanding the French case in comparison with that of West Germany is in the differential impact of the Cold War. In West Germany, the Cold War made Communism unacceptable, even resulting in the outlawing of the Communist Party there in 1956. In the West German context, so long as the SPD remained Marxist it could be credibly presented as dangerously affiliated with a foreign Communist threat to the German Federal Republic. This is exactly what Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's CDU did, campaigning in 1953 with posters proclaiming "*Alle Wege des Marxismus führen nach Moskau! Darum CDU.*"²⁵ The 1957 campaign slogan "*Keine Experimente!*"²⁶ suggested a bit more subtly that a vote for the SPD remained dangerous. If Bad Godesberg was designed to remove the Marxist millstone that prevented the SPD from winning elections and becoming a party of government, French democratic socialists did not have that option because the French Communist Party regularly won 20% or more of the vote, effectively blocking the path of center-left modernizers to a governing majority. Especially after the Fifth Republic vested power in a directly elected President, the democratic socialist left had little hope of winning the presidency and coming to power without Communist support. Consequently, political realism did not favor social democratic modernization—which helps explain why the PSU modernizers got nowhere. Rather, it favored the Union of the Left, founded in 1972 when the Socialist Party and Communist Party agreed to an electoral alliance and Common Program of Government. To be sure, this alliance was vulnerable to the same sort of criticism that Adenauer made of the SPD in the 1950s. It took the extraordinary political skill of Socialist Party General Secretary François Mitterrand to succeed in the high wire act that ultimately secured the Communist vote without alienating centrists, thereby allowing him to prevail in the 1981 presidential election and bring the Left to power.

Given that social democratic modernization was a dead end in France, the old new left generation generally did not embrace it and replace "obsolete Marxism with post-ideological pragmatism," as Renaud suggests was the case in the late 1950s and 1960s (204). Although commonly discouraged regarding the prospects for revolutionary change after the Algerian War ended in 1962, older "neoleftists" in France were much less likely to abandon their youthful ideals than their counterparts in Germany were. Consequently, there was little ironic conflict between generations when the French student new left's day came in 1968.²⁷

There were consequences downstream from 1968 in the paths taken by the sixties New Left in 1970s France. In discussing this matter, Renaud generalizes from the German case to identify three directions taken by the 1960s New Left. "One group matured into anticommunist pragmatists who accepted the framework of Western democratic capitalism" (286). In France, they are identified as the "new philosophers." "A second group hardened its opposition to capitalism and the democratic state, organized conspiratorial cadres, and even engaged in terrorism" (286). In Germany, this is the Red Army Faction, whose violence culminated in the German Autumn of 1977, after which most former members of the New Left unequivocally rejected terrorism. "Similar turns occurred in Italy and France," Renaud claims (287). Finally, a third group founded the new social movements that championed women's rights, gay rights, environmental causes, and the like.

²⁵ See the famous campaign poster with this slogan: "File: CDU Wahlkampfplakat-kasplo10.jpg," last modified 4 April, 2022, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CDU_Wahlkampfplakat_-_kasplo10.JPG

²⁶ Also the subject of a poster: "File: CDU Wahlkampfplakat-kasplo19.jpg," last modified 15 June 2021, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keine_Experimente.

²⁷ My book *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004) generally supports this conclusion.

I think Renaud's arguments on the first two groups in France are mistaken. They rely upon a misreading of the political dynamic there. The new philosophers like André Glucksmann were hardly pragmatists, and at least initially did not accept the framework of democratic capitalism, which they deplored when they emerged in the media spotlight the late 1970s. Rather, in contrast to Glucksmann's rejection of conventional politics for the championing of popular resistance to the State, the politics of pragmatism was the politics of the Union of the Left as only it could conceivably bring the Left to power through elections. Again, because of the size of the Communist electorate, left-wing pragmatism could not embrace the unconditional anticommunism of the new philosophers.²⁸

Also, contrary to Renaud's suggestion that the history of 1970s terrorism in France is similar to that in Germany, there was no significant new left slide into terrorism in France. Indeed, the only articles on terrorism in one encyclopedic effort to survey the "68 years" in France are on Italian and German terrorism in a section on the 1968-1974 period entitled "*Ailleurs*" (elsewhere [than France]).²⁹ Although the reasons that France escaped such extreme political violence are up for debate, several factors probably played a role. For one, the post-68 French new left was less isolated than that in Germany. Precisely because they had not abandoned neoleftist politics, older intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre gave the younger generation their support and generally discouraged a descent into terrorism. In part due to such support from prominent intellectuals and the lack of anything in France comparable to the Springer Press campaign against the German New Left, the French state was less repressive against the French New Left than the German or Italian ones were, and this discouraged an escalation into terrorism. And, unlike the case in Italy, where the Italian Communist Party's "historic compromise" forestalled radical electoral politics, and the case in Germany where SPD moderation after Bad Godesberg did the same, some members of the French New Left found a way to work for radical alternatives without violence by supporting the Union of the Left. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the extraordinary commitment of the French new leftists to direct democratic prefigurative politics led them to conclude that they could not seek change as a violent vanguard in the absence of working-class support. When they saw that workers were not following their lead, they disbanded their organizations rather than persevere through terrorism.³⁰

In the final analysis, Renaud's argument that New Beginning "was both representative and generative of European new lefts" does not hold for France, the most important comparative case that he considers (55). Nor has the book adequately uncovered "the structural dynamics of new lefts in general" (11). Doing so would require more nuanced and sustained comparison between developments in Germany, France, and other countries. On the other hand, some of Renaud's insights are helpful for those who are interested in the broader history of the new left. Exploring connections between the antifascist neoleft and later 1960s new left is indeed fruitful. Likewise, I think Renaud is correct to see the central problem of the new left to be one of political form, notably prefigurative politics. If *New Lefts* does not achieve its broader ambition, it is most useful as a monograph on New Beginning.

²⁸ Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left* addresses this issue in detail.

²⁹ Pierre Girard, "De 1968 au terrorisme: les Brigades rouges et l'Italie des 'années de plomb'," and Dominique Linhardt, "La Fraction armée rouge et les autres : la guérilla en RFA," in Philippe Artières and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, eds., *68 : Une Histoire collective 1962-1981* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), 462-469 and 470-76.

³⁰ I discuss these issues in Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left*, 57-74. See also the analyses of David Drake "On a raison de se révolter. The Response of la gauche prolétarienne to the events of May-June 1968," in Jan Windebank and Renate Günter, eds., *Violence and Conflict in the Politics and Society of Modern France*, Studies in French Civilization, volume 5 (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 68-72 and Isabelle Sommier, *La Violence politique et son deuil: l'après 68 en France et en Italie* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1998).

With *New Lefts*, Terence Renaud offers an insightful and stimulating history of the Left in Western Europe during the twentieth century. It is also an *histoire engagée*, and Renaud's investment in the political issues involved is palpable throughout. As Renaud explains in the introduction, he builds out from a case study of New Beginning (*Neu Beginnen*), a leftist grouping formed in Weimar Germany, to provide "an alternative history of socialism," one whose protagonists "developed a radical left politics on the margins of mainstream Social Democratic and Communist parties" (9, 3). Above all, he is interested in political organization, in the question of how to forge and maintain a vibrant militant politics. "How," Renaud asks,

does one sustain the dynamism of a grassroots social movement without succumbing to hierarchy, centralized leadership, and banal political routine? For radical small groups, that problem translated into how to prefigure within their own ranks the kind of participatory democracy and popular control that they expected from a future, postcapitalist society. Keeping radical politics forever young is a problem that I call the neoleftist dilemma (5).

In chapter 1, Renaud lays out the basic elements of this dilemma. If Robert Michels, the German sociologist whose pre-1914 critique of the German Social Democratic Party's (SPD) bureaucratization, predictably gets a mention, Renaud is more interested in Georg Lukács, the Hungarian-German Marxist politician and theoretician. In placing the "problem of organization" (47) at the center of Lukács's political activities during and well after the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, Renaud outlines the challenges of trying to instantiate what Lukács called "a permanent revolution against what exists" (33). As Renaud notes, Lukács, as so many others at the time and afterwards, were captivated by the possibilities seemingly opened by revolutionary councils or Soviets for a perpetually renewed militant left politics. Whatever his disappointments on this score, Lukács became a life-long Communist, opting to work from within what quickly developed into a highly top-down movement.

The next chapter examines the Org, which was founded during Weimar and in 1933 became New Beginning. Embodying Lenin's principle that quality trumped quantity, the Org was a circumscribed group (perhaps 100 core members along with several hundred peripheral members and perhaps a thousand sympathizers), whose keen security consciousness sat uneasily with its ideals of internal democracy. Ambiguity concerning the group's purpose did not help matters: did it constitute a counter-group, designed to prefigure future politics, or should it infiltrate existing parties and organizations, seeking to influence them from the inside? In any event, if the enhanced security measures certainly proved useful from 1933 onwards, the Org stood little chance against the Nazi regime's repressive apparatus. By mid-decade many members had left Germany for exile. Interestingly, the chapter casts its gaze abroad, despite Renaud's stated hesitation about the value of transnational history. As he comments in the introduction, an emphasis on cross-border dynamics risk slighting continuities over time within national political spaces (11). Consequently, perhaps, the treatment of non-German cases is somewhat less sure. Renaud, for example, lumps together the two French radical socialists, Jean Zyromski and Marceau Pivert, but this downplays their very real differences, most notably on the conjoined questions of pacifism and resistance to Nazi Germany's expansionist ambitions. Pivert founded a new party in 1938 not simply in protest at the meagerness of the French Socialist Party's (PS-SFIO) Popular Front-inspired reforms, but also to stake out a revolutionary pacifist position whose initial intransigence only hardened as the threat of war loomed ever larger. His revolutionary pacifist position fueled his anti-Communism, as he rightly distrusted the Soviet Union's commitment to peace, while also placing him increasingly at odd with other European left socialists.³¹

³¹ For Pivert, see Jacques Kerogat, *Marceau Pivert: "Socialiste de Gauche"* (Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier, 1994); and Talbot C. Imlay, "Marceau Pivert and the Travails of an International Socialist," in Stefan Berger and Sean Raymond

The next two chapters examine New Beginning in exile. The experience of exile is often portrayed as one of cascading divisions among the Left, evident in the multiplication of groups.³² Renaud, though, applies an “analytic of optimism,” viewing exile as a “positive experimentation in left theory and organization” (87, 109). Although Renaud cannot entirely avoid entering into the factional divides between groups, he provides fascinating discussions of the activities and thinking of several German leftists, for instance of Karl Frank, whose charisma was legendary. Equally intriguing is Renaud’s claim, in chapter 3, that due to Spain’s relative underdevelopment, the participation of new lefts in the country’s civil war during the 1930s can be viewed “as functionally similar to European radicals’ solidarity with Third World anticolonial struggles in the 1950s and 1960s” (103). I admit I am not sure what to make of this claim, which seems a bit of a stretch. That said, it arguably highlights the deep-seated Eurocentrism of so many on the European non-Communist left before 1945 for whom empire was a secondary concern at best.

One exception was Pivert’s sometime ally and rival, Zyromski, but for many German leftists, empire was not issue because Germany was no longer an imperial power, having been stripped of its overseas colonies by the Versailles Treaty.³³ Leaving aside Spain, chapter 4 looks at the development of anti-fascism among the new left, and here Renaud flags two probably interconnected elements: calls to transcend the left-right, bipolar political divide; and an anti-authoritarian discourse which would spur the “wartime process of accommodation” with reformist social democracy (and liberal democracy more generally). The result, Renaud dryly remarks, was to “set many antifascists on a path to become antagonists of future new lefts” (132).

With chapter 5 Renaud moves on to the immediate postwar years in Germany. The Soviet-directed fusion of the SPD and German Communist Party (KPD) in the Soviet zone, which led to the creation of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), provided New Beginning members with an opportunity. In fiercely opposing the fusion, Kurt Schmidt, a former New Beginning leader who survived a Nazi concentration camp, helped to delegitimize the SED in the eyes of many non-Communists on the left, demonstrating in the process the potential to mobilize militants behind a renewed leftist politics in the wake of catastrophe. Yet, as Renaud explains, this success also reinforced the “process of accommodation” with the SPD, whose first postwar leader, Kurt Schumacher, was virulently anti-communist (154). As the non-Communist left united in the defense of democracy against dictatorship, the meaning of democracy narrowed. “Problems of social and economic structure,” Renaud writes, “were pushed aside by an obsession over political forms, which admittedly was a hazard of neoleftist thought” (160).

Chapter 6 looks more closely at several former new leftists who joined the SPD, among them Fritz Erler, who after 1945 would become a leading SPD specialist on defense and European issues. The resulting Cold War socialism, an early manifestation of which was Richard Löwenthal’s 1946 appeal for the modernization of socialism, *Jenseits des Kapitalismus*,³⁴ reinforced the “liberalization of European social democratic parties” and the abandonment of any pretensions to work towards an “alternative economic order” (199, 197). For the SPD, the capstone of this process was its Godesberg program adopted in 1959, and Renaud adds his voice to

Scalmer, eds., *The Transnational Activist* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 141-164. For left socialists, see Willy Buschak, *Das Londoner Büro: Europäische Linksozialisten in der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Amsterdam: IISG, 1985).

³² Ludwig Eiber, *Die Sozialdemokratie in der Demokratie. Die “Union deutscher sozialistischer Organisationen in Grossbritannien“ 1941-1946 und ihre Mitglieder. Protokolle, Erklärungen, Materialien* (Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz, 1998); and Anthony Glees, *Exile Politics during the Second World War: The German Social Democrats in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

³³ For socialists and interwar empire, see Talbot C. Imlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism: European Socialists and International Politics, 1914-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 201-250, and 223-225 for Zyromski.

³⁴ Paul Sering (Richard Löwenthal), *Jenseits des Kapitalismus: Ein Beitrag zur sozialistische Neutorientierung* (Nürnberg: Nest-Verlag, 1946).

the chorus of critics who see Godesberg as symbolizing a regrettable and even fatal development for social democracy in general.³⁵

Chapter 7 amounts to a transitional chapter between the fading radicalism of an anti-fascist new (now old) left and the 1960s anti-authoritarianism. Much of the chapter consists of discussions of two intellectuals, Ossip Flechtheim and Wolfgang Abendroth, with their thinking being framed in terms of socialist renewal. While their work is fascinating in itself, this material arguably leads the reader away from the study's core issue of form/organization. In any case, with chapter 8 on the 1960s' New Left, Renaud returns full-force to this issue. Indeed, one of the chapter's great strengths is the novel perspective it offers on a familiar story. As Renaud argues, the various new Lefts constituted "a rebellion against the organizational definition of the old left. The New Left was organizationally defined, but negatively so. There was form to its formlessness. Neoleftist anti-organization in the 1960s makes sense as a historical process of decoupling antisystemic opposition from the existing left parties and trade unions" (249).

At the same time, as Renaud makes clear, the neoleftist dilemma remained. It was one thing to embrace "spontaneous collective action"; and another to endow it with political shape and purpose (234). And here the possible models all had their shortcomings. If the action committees, which sprouted in France, harkened back to the years of 1917-1921, they proved even less enduring. As for the ideal of the anti-colonial guerilla, its attempted application in Western Europe led to predictable disaster. In the end, the New Left of the 1960s, like its predecessors, could not solve the dilemma.

For Renaud, this is not an argument for failure because the New Left's goals were not external (gaining political power) but internal: "to create a self-perpetuating movement and, through historical ruptures, to preview life in a free and egalitarian society" (275). Perhaps, but one might ask how prefigurative can an ephemeral political phenomenon be. But there is also the question of the New Left's larger political legacy, which involves not simply its effects on the left but also its appropriation and exploitation by various non-lefts.

In the conclusion, Renaud reaffirms his dialectical framework: new lefts become old lefts which are then challenged by new (new) lefts. If the dominant trope is irony, there is also an emphasis on *déroulement*—on unfolding developments. The history of the left becomes one of successive cycles of renewal and challenge, and there is no reason to believe this process is over. Perhaps, as Renaud suggests, the neoleftist dilemma can never be solved, but only taken up anew. If so, his impressive study offers hope for all those who aspire, collectively, to build fairer, less violent and more sustainable societies.

³⁵ A good example is Michael Held, *Sozialdemokratie und Keynesianismus. Von der Weltwirtschaftskrise bis zum Godesberger Programm* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1982). Karim Fertikh has recently questioned whether Bad Godesberg truly reflected a rejection of Marxism. See his *L'invention de la social-démocratie allemande. Une histoire sociale du programme de Bad Godesberg* (Paris : Éditions de la FMSH, 2020).

 Response by Terence Renaud, University of Chicago

I approached this forum with excitement and some trepidation. My book's primary case study, the New Beginning group, as well as most of its theoretical references are German, so I anticipated criticism from non-Germanist reviewers about the book's comparative cases in France, Spain, and elsewhere in Europe. I thank the convener, Michael C. Behrent, and the reviewers Giuliana Chamedes, Michael Scott Christofferson, and Talbot C. Imlay for their scrutiny, because I hope that my concept of neoleftism and description of a radical tradition of new lefts might be relevant beyond Germany and indeed beyond Europe. Along with their praise, the reviewers offer a number of helpful criticisms. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on areas of overlap in their reviews and devote less space to individual points.

The reviewers primarily object to the book's geographic scope, noting problems of interpretation on two scales: the national comparison of German new lefts and other European new lefts, and the global connection of new lefts from the 1920s through the 1960s. On the national scale, Christofferson claims that I do not prove that the German group New Beginning was both generative and representative of new lefts across Europe. New Beginning certainly had an outsized influence on German underground politics and exile politics during the 1930s, and I try to show the special access that members of the group gained to leaders of the Spanish Socialist Party, the French Popular Front, the left wing of the British Labour Party, and the Labour and Socialist International. Several former members went on to prominent careers in postwar politics and academia. In the end, though, since I concede that the group's influence was mostly confined to Germany, my book's strong claim is not that New Beginning was uniquely generative; rather, I argue that New Beginning represented a broader pattern of radical left politics amid crises of democracy in advanced capitalist states.

Christofferson's criticism is as selective as I admittedly was in choosing cases or episodes to demonstrate parallel developments between postwar lefts in France and divided Germany. While his review makes valuable corrections to my interpretation of the Unified Socialist Party (PSU), as well as the exchange between the student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit and the philosopher Claude Lefort, for example, he does not mention my lengthier discussion of the Revolutionary Democratic Assembly (RDR), an umbrella group of nonconformist lefts that formed in 1948 and was suppressed by the traditional party elites of both the SFIO and the PCF. Nor does the review mention my discussion of the anti-imperialist Nouvelle Gauche groups in the mid-1950s that formed in opposition to the Algerian War, and that were likewise suppressed or assimilated by the major parties.

I aimed to show that various nonparty organizational forms were attempted in postwar France, as they were in West Germany. Despite key differences, such as the disparate impact of the Cold War and the relative vitality of French Communism, there were notable similarities between left politics in the two countries. Christofferson's critique stresses only the differences. This of course hardly disproves my account of a general contest between party forms and nonparty forms of left politics in postwar Western Europe. His criticism functions well as an invitation for scholars to think more deeply about the uneven and non-simultaneous history of new lefts. As for his suggestion that France, rather than Germany, might be considered the cradle of European new lefts because of its long history of direct-democratic movements, I would enjoy reading that book if someone were to write it.

Chamedes and Imlay, who have both made important contributions to the global turn in the study of twentieth-century Europe,³⁶ address the transnational implications of my book's history. I do not question the

³⁶ See Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), and Talbot C. Imlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism: European Socialists and International Politics, 1914-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). See also my review of Imlay's book in this publication, Terence Renaud, "The Socialist Minimum," *H-Diplo Essay*, No. 154 (May 25, 2018).

value of a transnational approach to the history of the left. But focusing on a case study from Germany over a relatively long period allowed me to identify other qualities of radical left politics that might have remained hidden if I had instead taken a broader spatial approach. Were there long-term continuities between eras of leftist activism that are conventionally treated as separate? How did generational conflict play out within organizations? Did militants of various currents think of themselves as belonging to a radical tradition? And most importantly, why were the most democratic experiments in new forms of social life unable to sustain themselves? With these temporal questions in mind, I examine the evolution of New Beginning and its afterlives, then supplement that history with other European case studies on the assumption that the structural dynamics of new lefts are not nationally specific.

Chamedes claims that, because the book examines German and French genealogies, it supports “the opposite position” of arguments made in transnational histories by Quinn Slobodian, Christoph Kalter, and Timothy Scott Brown³⁷—namely, that a national framework is most important. That was surely not my intention. My hope is that the book complements rather than contests the global turn. While transnational scholarship has rightly shown that left politics crossed beyond European borders both in terms of diverse personnel and in terms of anticolonial purpose, its broad spatial approach has usually been applied to bounded periods of time. As I note above, my focus on a German case study allowed for a longer-term history.

I do agree with both Imlay and Chamedes that much of my history is Eurocentric; the non-Communist left prior to 1945 was by and large Eurocentric. During the interwar period, New Beginning paid little attention to issues of racism and empire, except insofar as those issues informed Marxist theories of capitalist crisis and helped explain European fascism. The neoleftist tradition should absolutely be criticized for that myopia. The eventual turn toward decolonization and global consciousness among European neoleftists was most evident in my chapters on the 1950s and '60s, although I tried to identify earlier prefigurative moments. I wanted to provoke readers with my analogy between the earlier new lefts' participation in the Spanish Civil War and the postwar new lefts' solidarity with anticolonial struggles in the Third World, but I admittedly could have phrased this more carefully.

In a related criticism, Chamedes writes that “[w]omen and non-white dissident socialists are all but absent” from my book. My history does include a number of important women protagonists, such as the psychoanalyst Edith Jacobson and the journalist Evelyn Anderson. I also discuss Spanish and French radical feminist organizing in the 1930s, and frequently I reference a number of women theorists such as Rosa Luxemburg, Hannah Arendt, and Jo Freeman. That said, radical left politics in the mid-twentieth century was a male-dominated affair. How to reflect that historical situation without perpetuating the inadequate treatment of women in scholarship is a dilemma that I failed to resolve. As for the alleged absence of non-white socialists, the book limits itself to the socialist and labor movements of Central and Western Europe, which were predominantly “white.” But that racial category was heterogenous and contested. Moreover, a large percentage of the book’s protagonists were Jewish at a time when Jews had not yet been admitted into the category of whiteness. I recount their double persecution in the 1930s–40s: as Jews and as leftists.

Finally, the reviewers all mention in various ways the problem of failure in this history of new lefts. Every case that I examine, from the German New Beginning group to the French May Movement, failed to achieve its immediate political goals. No new left could sustain itself for very long before being repressed or assimilated from outside, or before succumbing to internal crises. My concept of neoleftism already contains

³⁷ See Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), Christoph Kalter, *The Discovery of the Third World: Decolonization and the Rise of the New Left in France, c. 1950-1976* [2011], trans. Thomas Dunlap (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Anti-Authoritarian Revolt, 1962-1978* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Brown, *Sixties Europe* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

this problem. I define neoleftism as an organizational rupture with established forms of left politics such as the mass party; as a theoretical dilemma faced consciously by some militants; and as a radical phase through which individuals passed before committing to other forms of politics or exiting politics altogether (pp. 3-5, 11, 274-88). To say that new lefts failed is, in a sense, to say that they were new lefts.

As Imlay asks, “how prefigurative can an ephemeral political phenomenon be?” That is, if immediate political success cannot serve as our criterion for judging the creative and prefigurative dimensions of new lefts, then we need some way of determining whether they were actually prefigurative of a future social order or were just flashes in the pan. We might even want to determine whether new lefts were actively harmful to the progress of the broader left, a charge frequently leveled at them in their own time and in retrospect. I am reminded of Karl Mannheim’s concept of relative utopia and his retroactive standard for determining whether a past idea was truly utopian or merely ideology: if it was eventually realized in a later social order, he argued, then the idea should be regarded as a utopia (a “premature truth”).³⁸ The trouble with Mannheim’s standard of realizability is that one can never know if an idea has not yet been realized—if its time is still to come. The historical new lefts that I discuss in my book engaged in real struggles, had pragmatic aims, and altered the course of left politics from the margins of the mass parties and unions. It feels wrong to label them utopian, but they did serve a utopian function by opening up the possibility of a better social order that may be realized one day. Such a utopian moment is related dialectically to the most institutionalized and hard-nosed forms of “old left” politics. Viewed over the long term, successful old lefts and unsuccessful new lefts in fact need each other.

³⁸ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* [1929], trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936), 203-4.