

## BOOK REVIEW

**New lefts: the making of a radical tradition**, by Terence Renaud, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021, 343 pp., £25 (pb), ISBN 978-0-691-22081-9

Anyone who has a passing familiarity with left-wing activism will recognise the dilemma that Terence Renaud outlines in the first few pages of his book: “how does one sustain the dynamism of a grassroots social movement without succumbing to hierarchy, centralized leadership, and banal political routine?” (5). Indeed, the entire history of the left can be read through this prism, as a permanent struggle to retain the thrilling potential of an emancipatory project that is always threatening to run aground. Yet Renaud makes a compelling case for considering the new left as uniquely troubled by this problem. More than any other group on the left, neoleftists believe that the “form” of an organisation determines the “fate” of its politics (5). They therefore feel intense pressure to embody revolutionary values, not in some distant future, but in the present, in the very structure of their movements.

Partly because of the earnestness with which new left activists have attempted to adhere to their own values, it has been difficult for historians to write about them in an objective manner. Orthodox left-wing activists and intellectuals, as well as right-wing critics, have frequently denounced the new left as disorganised, narcissistic, and congenitally unable to achieve mass political success. By contrast, current or former neoleftists, many of whom have written the canonical histories of their organisations, see the new left as the purest manifestation of the left-wing cause. As a result, they have tended to indulge in extensive mythologisation, if not irritating self-congratulation.

Renaud is to be commended for steering well clear of these pitfalls. He is obviously sympathetic to the new left – and he says so quite explicitly. But he is careful to situate his subject within the entangled histories of the left and of political activism. While the book appears to be little more than a careful study of a single German left-wing organisation (*New Beginning*), it is in fact a much wider examination of a particular form of left-wing engagement and the narratives that underpin it. The aim is to provide an alternative chronology for the new left, which has traditionally been understood in narrow terms as a response to the crisis of European communism in the 1950s and 1960s. Renaud paints a different picture. He shows that what we understand to be the new left has much deeper roots in left-wing intellectual debates in the interwar years (especially in the writings of György Lukács), and the anti-fascist politics of the 1930s.

Renaud adopts a chronological approach across the eight chapters of the book. We follow *New Beginning* and its members through the anti-fascist moment of the late 1930s and the Spanish Civil War; their trajectories of exile during World War Two; their struggle to restore the left in post-war occupied Germany; their battle with the S.P.D. for supremacy over the (West) German left; and their influence on the self-styled New Left of the late 1960s. Throughout the book, the ideas of *New Beginning* are brought into conversation with parallel traditions and tendencies on the left, from the French Popular Front to the action committees of 1968 radicals. What emerges is, ultimately, a story of failure. *New Beginning* and its members achieve relatively little. They ask the right questions at key junctures in Europe’s turbulent mid-twentieth century – questions about authority, power, fascism, or social democracy – but they have almost no impact on the way these social and political forces develop. For the most part, their legacy takes the form of thousands of pages of

essays and manifestos, now scattered across the many archives that Renaud visited over the course of his research.

Nevertheless, Renaud makes a persuasive case for the historical importance of this motley crew of German neoleftists. Through them, we see unexpected links between the generation of the 1930s and the generation of 1968, which runs against the grain of most interpretations of 1968 as rooted in the specific generational and ideological politics of the early 1960s. We also gain a much clearer sense of the internal dynamics of the German left in these same decades, a period too often seen as dominated by the clash between social democracy and communism. As this book makes clear, the provocations and interventions of the new left played a key role in shaping the possibilities of the German left, especially in the post-war S.P.D. in West Germany.

Finally, and most importantly, this group intellectual biography of New Beginning's members exposes the complex relationship between activism, elitism, and revolutionary utopia in the history of the left. As Renaud reminds us, this tension has resurfaced again in recent years in the wake of left-wing mobilisation against globalisation, the power of corporate lobbies, and the world of finance. Those involved in this contemporary movement would do well to read this book. Its story of repeated failure is unlikely to provide much immediate cheer, but Renaud's penetrating and sympathetic analysis of what the European new left was about in the twentieth century offers a rich canvas on which to sketch out the future of left politics.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2022.2088926>

