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INTRODUCTION

The Origins of Neoleftism

THE WHITE-HAIRED German theorist Herbert Marcuse, whom the *New York Times* labeled foremost philosopher, hero, idol, and prophet of the New Left, took the stage at the Fillmore East in New York City on December 4, 1968, to deliver a talk titled “On the New Left.” Addressing a packed theater, he began by disowning those labels: “I never claimed to be the ideological leader of the left and I don’t think the left needs an ideological leader. And there is one thing the left does not need, and that’s another father image, another daddy.”¹

Marcuse sympathized with the student activists and other youth militants around the world who rallied under the banner of the New Left in the 1960s. His philosophy of revolution inspired many of them to devise alternatives to the repressive politics and culture of advanced capitalism during the Cold War era. But he refused to play the role of intellectual leader for an anti-authoritarian movement that was in principle leaderless. Activists of the New Left, he claimed, must behave as “models of what may one day be a human being” in a liberated society. That meant their mode of organization had to anticipate or prefigure the kind of social relations that they desired

1. Marcuse, “On the New Left,” 469. For coverage by the *New York Times* of Marcuse and the New Left, see Andrew Hacker, “Philosopher of the New Left,” March 10, 1968, BR1; Philip Shabecoff, “The Followers of Red Rudi Shake Up Germany,” April 28, 1968, SM26; Lionel Abel, “Seven Heroes of the New Left,” May 5, 1968, SM30; and the interview by Jean-Louis Ferrier, Jacques Boetsch, and Françoise Giroud, “Marcuse Defines His New Left Line,” trans. Helen Weaver, October 27, 1968, SM29. The young lawyer and US New Left activist Bernardine Dohrn introduced Marcuse at the December 4 event by claiming that the *Times* had called him “the ideological leader of the New Left,” an exact phrase that the newspaper seems never to have used. The event commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the US radical left paper the *Guardian* (originally *National Guardian*). Murray Schumach, “Guardian Marks 20th Birthday: Radical Publication Looking for Ways to Grow,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1968, 26.

for the future. Marcuse noted the difficulty of persuading a majority of people to join the revolution, since industrial workers had become ideologically and materially integrated into the system and mass media remained outside activists' control. There were no revolutionary masses, so it made no sense to organize a centralized revolutionary mass party. Because the capitalist state had at its disposal such overwhelming military and police force, the New Left should stop dreaming of a revolutionary seizure of power. At the same time, activists should expect nothing from popular parties that played the electoral game of liberal democracy, which in his view served to reinforce the system.

Instead, Marcuse called for a "diffuse and dispersed disintegration of the system, in which interest, emphasis and activity [are] shifted to local and regional area[s]." Riots, uprisings in poor urban neighborhoods, and grassroots action of all sorts would produce a new sensibility to counter the conformism of existing society. Unlike the parties and unions of the old left, the New Left of the 1960s had "an entirely overt organization, diffused, concentrated in small groups and around local activities, small groups which are highly flexible and autonomous." These autonomous groups functioned as a "political guerrilla force in peace or so-called peace." In their abolition of hierarchy and institution of direct democracy, Marcuse likened these networked small groups to the councils or soviets that sprang up during the Russian and Central European revolutions. They shared an evanescent form of (dis)organization, embodying what he called organized spontaneity.²

He was correct to link the 1960s New Left organizational form of anti-authoritarian and extraparliamentary opposition to the council form that peaked in the revolutionary years 1917–23. In fact, sixties militants young and old recognized an affinity between their decentralized alternatives to seemingly obsolete party politics—whether electoral or vanguardist—and earlier moments of nonparty left activism. In terms of organization and aspiration, a continuity existed between new lefts present and new lefts past. As a young man, Marcuse himself had participated in a soldiers' council in Berlin at the end of World War I. He became a philosopher during Germany's tumultuous Weimar Republic, witnessed the rise of fascism, was betrayed by his doctoral supervisor Martin Heidegger (who joined the Nazi Party), and emigrated after the Nazi seizure of power, fearing for his life as a person of Jewish descent. The solidarity between Marcuse and the militant youth who set the world on fire in the late 1960s symbolizes this book's long-term, multigenerational history of new lefts.

2. Marcuse, "On the New Left," 472.

The origins of neoleftism as a distinct organizational phenomenon date to the two decades following the end of World War I, when Western Europeans and particularly Germans developed a radical left politics on the margins of mainstream Social Democratic and Communist parties. Germany was for various reasons a cradle of new lefts. Germans had created the first socialist mass party between 1863 and 1875. Their capitalist class and aristocratic elite helped engineer two world wars. The Nazi regime turned fascism into an existential threat for the left everywhere. Afterward, divided Germany functioned as the main European front in the Cold War, freezing already frigid relations between Social Democrats and Communists. A densely organized German workers' movement endured two totalitarian dictatorships in the shape of a fascist racial state and a communist authoritarian state. And according to neoleftists, post-war West Germany endured an authoritarian restoration of capitalism. German philosophy had moreover produced Karl Marx and inspired so-called Western Marxism, which provided the theoretical impetus behind so many new lefts.³

The German group New Beginning serves as this book's main case study. It was founded in Berlin around 1930, when fascism was on the rise and the global economic crisis had just begun. Back then the city was a hotbed of revolt and cultural experimentation. Nazis and Communists fought street battles by day, while by night wild parties at jazz clubs raged into the small hours. Social misery coexisted with sexual freedom. Forming a coalition government for the Weimar Republic was like a game of musical chairs. Social Democrats struggled to maintain a moderate position, while everybody talked about the crisis of democracy. The workers' movement and the political left were divided, and the right only gained momentum. A circle of renegade Communists and frustrated Social Democrats began meeting in secret to discuss what could be done to unite the left and seize the opportunity for a new revolution. They called themselves the Org, short for Leninist Organization, which owed to their strategy of using a conspiratorial vanguard to infiltrate the major left parties and unions. In that way they hoped to steer the left toward united action. Beyond subterfuge, however, members of the Org hoped to fundamentally reshape left politics for the better. They thought that Social Democrats limited themselves to piecemeal reforms within parliament and placed too much faith in existing institutions. They thought that Communist apparatchiks wielded too much authoritarian control over the rank and file, subordinating workers

3. Possibly the first person to identify a Western Marxist tradition in contrast to Soviet Marxist orthodoxy was the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his book *Adventures of the Dialectic*, ch. 2.

and the party to the caprice of Moscow. They also thought that Communists' theory of "social fascism," which treated moderate socialists and actual fascists as objectively the same, was tragically stupid. Other left tendencies such as anarcho-syndicalism, the Org thought, misunderstood immediate political tasks and had no realistic long-term strategy. The Org carefully recruited the brightest young workers and intellectuals, training them in revolutionary Marxist theory and preparing them for the coming struggle to define a new left for Germany and Europe.

The sudden Nazi takeover at the end of January 1933 complicated their plan, to say the least. Under increasing pressure and police surveillance, the Org nonetheless wove a transnational web of resisters in multiple cities, industries, and social milieus, all committed to forging an antifascist new left. The group's founder Walter Loewenheim wrote an illegal pamphlet under the pseudonym Miles in late 1933. Titled *Neu beginnen!*, it called on the young generation to wrest control over what remained of left party and union organization from the older, discredited leaders. Within circles of resistance underground and in exile, many heeded that call and imagined themselves as linked, at least in spirit, to the New Beginning group.

This book identifies an overlooked current of interwar German and Western European antifascism. New Beginning belonged to a cohort of small groups on the fringes of mainstream labor organizations, a cohort that often cooperated to reorganize the left under the banner of radical antifascism and a revolutionary new culture. Organizational problems preoccupied these militants in Germany, France, Spain, and elsewhere. They suspected that the hierarchical party and union structures themselves might pose an obstacle to grassroots mobilization. So they experimented with alternative forms: councils, assemblies, action committees, discussion circles, networks, and even militias. Interwar neoleftists were not pacifist and did take up arms against fascism, for example, during the Spanish Civil War. But usually their small size and internal ends within the workers' movement precluded violent means. Their activities varied from country to country, but in general these neoleftists disrupted the monopoly over progressive politics exercised by the Social Democratic and Communist old left.

Compared to the wholesale organizational realignment of the left caused by the Bolshevik Revolution and the spread of communism, the neoleftist realignment in the 1930s was marginal. Even the Popular Front, which unified diverse currents of the left against fascism, did not satisfy neoleftists' niche desire to break with all existing party and union forms. That desire would survive World War II and grow in the context of the postwar welfare state. In West Germany and throughout Western Europe, left socialists from the late 1940s through the early 1960s challenged the "modernized" parties of the

center left. By the time an anti-authoritarian movement emerged in the late 1960s among militant youth who openly identified as the New Left, neoleftism had moved from a marginal to a central phenomenon of antisystemic opposition in the advanced capitalist world.

In reverse gear, this book could operate as a prehistory of the sixties New Left. It traces the phenomenon of neoleftism back to its origins in the 1920s and 1930s and chronicles the most creative attempts to sustain democracy within socialist organizations. It also unearths some of the past century's most radical attempts to transcend capitalist, imperialist, and authoritarian domination. For midcentury new lefts, the form your organization took determined the fate of your politics.

Fundamentally this is a book about form, and about leftists who grappled with it. Through a collective biography of New Beginning and its Western European counterparts, the book offers the first long-term history of neoleftism. The proper name New Left went mainstream only in the 1960s, but a succession of lowercase new lefts had been confronting the same problem for decades: How 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.

From around 1918 to around 1968, several generations of German and Western European activists rejected the party structures of Social Democracy and Communism. They self-consciously rebelled against what the sociologist Robert Michels dubbed the iron law of oligarchy, or the supposedly inevitable process by which democratic movements harden into elitist cartels. Their chief opponents were fascists, conservatives, and authoritarians, but as new lefts they also opposed reactionary tendencies within the labor and progressive movements themselves. Eventually, however, each neoleftist generation would experience the irony of backing institutions and values that a younger generation of radicals wished to subvert. Formerly radical organizations thus became institutionalized as part of the existing system.⁴ Meet the old left, once the same as the new left.

4. On processes of rationalization, bureaucratization, and homogenization within social organizations, see Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983): 147–60.

This book explores the intersection of class and generation in the history of radical politics. It focuses on milieus that the German poet Bertolt Brecht once styled a “superficial rabble, crazy for novelties.”⁵ At first still bound to the industrial working class, neoleftist demographics gradually shifted over the mid-twentieth century into an affair of the educated middle-class youth. This change owed in large part to the material transformation of advanced capitalism into a postindustrial society, a transformation that the final chapter will survey through the lens of neoleftist sociology. At historical neoleftism’s decisive moments, however, generational consciousness tended to outweigh class consciousness.

The Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim, whose 1929 book *Ideology and Utopia* served as an inspiration for *New Beginning*, published an essay one year earlier on “The Problem of Generations.” He started by pointing out the weaknesses of two prevailing approaches to understanding generations: the positivist-biological school and the Romantic-historical school. The former approach tried to quantify a regular rhythm in human group reproduction that broke down into fifteen- to thirty-year intervals. The latter tried to qualify the spiritual essence of a given age group, linking it to national awakenings or great cultural achievements. According to Mannheim, neither school alone could account for the decisive role of social forces. In emphasizing the social construction of generations, he drew on his characteristic synthesis of Max Weber’s positivist sociology and Marx’s critical social theory.

Mannheim developed his conception by analogy to class formation. A generational unit forms when individuals not necessarily of the same background are galvanized by some historical event or common experience that has a strong age component—like, for example, going to war. Generational consciousness functions like class consciousness, he argued. Just as individuals who have jobs in different industries may nevertheless join the same union and recognize one another as fellow workers, so individuals from different class backgrounds may join organizations or movements based on a shared generational consciousness. He observed that “it may sometimes happen that a feeling for the unity of a generation is consciously developed into a basis for the formation of concrete groups, as in the case of the modern German Youth Movement.”⁶ *New Beginning* and the plethora of midcentury new lefts

5. Bertolt Brecht, “Everything New Is Better than Everything Old” [1929], trans. Christopher Middleton, in *Poems, 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (New York: Methuen, 1979), 159–60.

6. Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations” [1928], in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 276–320 (at 288). The historian Robert Wohl argued that Mannheim’s concept of generation was irreconcilable with

constituted just such groups. Generational units could attract earlier or later age cohorts to their ideological message and political style. Mannheim advanced a concept of generation that was not age-determinist. Accordingly, while it focuses on young radicals at several historical moments, this book never excludes neoleftists at heart.

Class, generation, and ideology blend in the composition of social movements, especially the labor movement. Mannheim recognized the link between the physical rejuvenation of a movement's personnel and the intellectual revitalization of its theory. But young versus old did not always map stereotypically onto progressive versus conservative: the European far right between the world wars was a case in point. The youths' "being young" and the "'freshness' of their contact with the world," he wrote, "manifest themselves in the fact that they are able to reorient any movement they embrace, to adapt it to the total situation." Young socialists thus always sought an up-to-date formulation of socialism, while young conservatives sought a renewal of conservatism.⁷ It is worth noting here an analytic and historical difference between new lefts and new rights. While similar in terms of their rebellious style and counterculture, only new lefts have sought out democratic forms that contradict the hierarchical, inegalitarian, and disenfranchising institutions of existing society. New rights can mimic external hierarchies within their own organization without contradiction. Unlike new lefts, they face no dilemma of prefiguring or sustaining new forms. They are "new" only by virtue of articulating views of natural inequality and ethnic difference historically after the defeat of old nationalisms or fascisms.⁸

Usually, youth have provided the energy behind new lefts. Although not yet identifying as "Sixty-Eighters," the young radicals of the late 1960s did

class analysis. Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 73–84.

7. Mannheim, "Problem of Generations," 297n1. Translation revised slightly. For a generational history and collective biography that partly inspired my own, see Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*. See also Hartmut Berghoff, Uffa Jensen, Christina Lubinski, and Bernd Weisbrod, eds., *History by Generations: Generational Dynamics in Modern History* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012).

8. See Terence Renaud, "Leftist Guys on the Right: From National Bolshevism to the Post-'68 New Right," paper delivered at the annual conference of the German Studies Association in Portland, OR, October 2019, accessed May 2020, https://www.academia.edu/40560262/Leftist_Guys_on_the_Right_From_National_Bolshevism_to_the_Post-68_New_Right. On the difference between left subversion and right "eversion" of existing institutions, see Agnoli, *Subversive Theorie*, 14–15. On the related Frankfurt School concept of conformist rebellion, see Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* [1947] (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), ch. 3. See also Kolakowski, "Concept of the Left," and Weiß, *Die autoritäre Revolte*.

think of themselves as a generational force that threatened all institutions of the adult world.⁹ The American mantra “Don’t trust anyone over thirty” expressed a fear shared by European militants that existing institutions and outside forces might co-opt the energy of the nascent movement. The militants’ new culture had to stay forever young. This politics of youth went beyond short-sighted ageism. Youthfulness in body or spirit did conceptual work. It foregrounded consciousness of new forms and the difficulty of sustaining them. It turned ephemerality itself into a political problem—or even a conscious goal.¹⁰ For anti-authoritarians in the 1960s as well as for radical antifascists in the 1930s, this temporal consciousness influenced neoleftist strategy and tactics.

Not only people in power but also abstract social structures exuded oldness. Everything about capitalist market logic, technocratic administration, and middle-class conformity struck sixties rebels as antiquated and repressive. A new society required permanent revolution, or what Marcuse called the Great Refusal: no to institutions, no to bureaucratic rules, no to fixed social relations, and no to any compromise with existing reality.¹¹ As a result, Western European neoleftists viewed traditional parties and trade unions as obstacles to change. In order to transform society, the left first had to transform itself.

The Sixty-Eighters rebelled against their parents’ generation, just as some of those same parents had rebelled in their youth against an old left incapable of combatting fascism. Both generations learned the hard way that formal political organizations often betray the original goals of grassroots movements. In that disjuncture between political representation and social forces, antifascist and anti-authoritarian new lefts invented strategies for breaking the deadlock of the capitalist state. They perceived that even existing organizations of the left had succumbed to bureaucratic sclerosis. Neither Social Democratic reformism nor Communist dictatorship held much appeal for them. Instead, neoleftists tried to form nonhierarchical associations based on direct democracy. Sustaining internal democracy over time constituted their main challenge, a dilemma without a solution.

Permanent renewal on the left could degenerate into compulsive repetition of past defeats, as if no lessons were learned. However, new lefts during the antifascist era and later on combined their desire for new beginning with an

9. On the contested nature of that generational consciousness, see Von der Goltz, “Talkin’ ’bout My Generation.”

10. See Scott, *Younger than That Now*, and Nehring, “‘Generation’ as Political Argument.” For a political theory perspective, see Elizabeth F. Cohen, *The Political Value of Time: Citizenship, Duration, and Democratic Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

11. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 256–57.

effort to work through the tradition of past defeats. Anti-authoritarian and nonhierarchical ways of organizing cropped up alongside reinterpretations of the young Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Wilhelm Reich, and other theoretical lodestars. But the “new” for midcentury new lefts was never static. It shifted constantly and produced scenes that pitted former neoleftists from older generations against the latest avant-garde, which rejected all previous definitions of the new. Each moment in this book’s fifty-year history had its own material conditions, yielding new lefts that looked different from one another across time. For example, in contrast to the antifascist new left, the sixties New Left introduced new ways of being political on the terrain of everyday life, ways that derived from the arts, youth culture, and consumer culture characteristic of the postwar decades. Such epiphenomenal differences in content belonged nonetheless to the same formal dialectic of renewal, which often devoured its children.

In order to weave the moments of radical antifascism, left socialism, and anti-authoritarianism together into a continuous narrative, this book combines methods of intellectual history, social history, and critical theory. It intervenes in four areas of scholarship. The first three are historical fields, while the final area concerns the political theory of left organization.

The first and most obvious area is the history of the European left, which tends to be overly compartmentalized. Historians have studied either interwar antifascism or sixties anti-authoritarianism or, less often, postwar left socialism, but almost never all at once. A few large syntheses exist, such as the landmark histories by Geoff Eley and Donald Sassoon, but these books privilege mass movements and the electoral politics of Social Democratic parties. They rarely emphasize the role of marginal groups, extraparliamentary action, or new lefts. For example, Sassoon dismisses out of hand “small organizations and sects” that never had to face “the problems and constraints of political power.”¹² *New Beginning* was one such small organization, and my book uses it and other Western European examples as case studies in an alternative history of socialism. Organizational creativity took place on the periphery of mainstream Social Democratic and Communist politics, and a fixation on elections or seizing state power obscures that phenomenon.

There is another reason to address the subject of interwar antifascism now. Antifascism’s legitimacy as a political cause has fallen under suspicion. Long

12. Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, xxiv. Eley includes more nonparty examples, especially the women’s movement, but his book nevertheless favors mainstream left parties. Eley, *Forging Democracy*. For what he does say about marginal groups, cf. Eley, “Reviewing the Socialist Tradition.”

after the Cold War, debates about antifascism still revolve around whether physical resistance can ever be justified, even to counter violent provocation by the far right. That question presupposes liberal norms of behavior: peaceful, orderly, electoral, and at most “progressive.” So, many commentators today banish antifascists and far-right activists together from the realm of acceptable politics. Seen as morally equivalent, the left and right extremes supposedly meet.¹³

Such an equation of fascism and its opposite is both politically irresponsible and historically inaccurate. The global resurgence of the far right in the early twenty-first century has enabled the worst sort of neo- or quasi-fascist adventurism, racism, Holocaust denial, and complacency about social injustice. At the end of May 2020, amid national protests against the racist police killing of George Floyd, the US president even declared the loosely affiliated antifascist network Antifa a terrorist organization.¹⁴ In association with Antifa or not, antifascism draws on a legacy with great emancipatory potential. Its occlusion by decades of Cold War posturing, liberal myopia, and conservative fearmongering ought to end. As the editors of a recent volume argue, we have now reached a point where it has become necessary to rethink antifascism “not in terms of what it turned into after 1945, but as the various things that it was, and the ways in which it was perceived and lived, at the different times and places in its evolution since the 1920s.”¹⁵ A return to the sources of antifascism parallels this book’s fresh look at neoleftism.

From the other direction, this book revises standard accounts of the sixties anti-authoritarian left. Recently, the fiftieth anniversary of the French uprising of May 1968 and the world events symbolized by that year prompted reassessments by a diverse array of commentators.¹⁶ A frequent observation about the New Left was that it played a central role in fashioning the Global Sixties. In that decade, neoleftists raised public awareness of the Third World and Europe’s global entanglements. Young militants criticized imperialism and the Vietnam War at every opportunity. As studies by Christoph Kalter, Timothy S. Brown, Quinn Slobodian, and others have shown, neoleftists actively sought out revolutionaries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the process they

13. For example, see Will Yates, “America’s Extremist Battle: Antifa v Alt-Right,” *BBC News*, February 20, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-39004753>. For the classic historical treatment, see Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left*.

14. Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Sandra E. Garcia, “What Is Antifa, the Movement Trump Wants to Declare a Terror Group?” *New York Times*, May 31, 2020.

15. García et al., *Rethinking Antifascism*, 3.

16. For scholarly reassessments, see for example “AHR Reflections: 1968,” *American Historical Review* 123, no. 3 (2018).

forged transnational alliances. The historians Jeremy Varon, Gerd-Rainer Horn, and Martin Klimke have demonstrated how a network of mutual aid and influence formed between radical students in West Germany, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Britain, and the United States.¹⁷

Together these examples represent a spatial turn in scholarship on the sixties. While I welcome that turn, I worry about what gets lost if we focus on transnational connections at the expense of long-term continuities in midcentury left politics. My book argues instead for a temporal turn in our understanding of the New Left in particular, one that goes beyond forays into the so-called Long Sixties, a periodization that expands the decade from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s. What I propose also goes beyond identifying an overlooked “first new left,” as Michael Kenny and others have done.¹⁸ By exploring the pre-World War II origins of neoleftism and the formation of an antifascist new left in the 1930s, my book reveals the structural dynamics of new lefts in general. Over the long term, neoleftism describes a formal process that generated nonparty theory and practice in a discrete historical moment, then negated that theory and practice in the next moment. More than simply a series that repeated the same phenomenon, midcentury new lefts involved a self-reflexive and critical overcoming of past organizational forms: each new left abolished new lefts past and prefigured new lefts future. This is what I mean by a temporal turn, which technically speaking is a dialectical turn in the history of the sixties New Left. My book dwells on the irony of situations in which old radicals ended up defending the very establishment that their younger selves would have rejected. That irony comes to the fore in the history of left socialism, a political tendency in between Social Democracy and Communism that dated back to the interwar years but really took shape in France, Britain, and West Germany during the 1950s. With the notable exceptions of Gregor Kritisidis and Sean Forner, historians have mostly ignored the role of left socialists as mediators between the antifascist and anti-authoritarian generations.¹⁹

The second area of scholarship to which this book contributes is German intellectual history. Several books have appeared in recent years that challenge the conventional timeline over which modern German ideas about politics

17. Kalter, *Discovery of the Third World*; Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties*; Slobodian, *Foreign Front*; Varon, *Bringing the War Home*; Horn, *Spirit of '68*; and Klimke, *Other Alliance*. See also Chen et al., *Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties*.

18. Kenny, *First New Left*.

19. Kritisidis, *Linkssozialistische Opposition*, and Forner, *German Intellectuals*, ch. 8. For France, see also Kalter, *Discovery of the Third World*, and for Britain, see Kenny, *First New Left*, and Hamilton, *Crisis of Theory*.

developed. In popular memory the year 1945 has long served as zero hour for contemporary German history, or the rupture between the Nazi regime and the postwar reconstruction of two separate states in the East and West. Through the work of historians such as Udi Greenberg and Noah B. Strote—despite their disagreements—we can see important continuities between interwar political thought and postwar ideologies. German history did not start from scratch in 1945, a fact that is evident in the history of concepts such as responsible elites, militant democracy, totalitarianism, and social market economy.²⁰ Neoleftism counts as another theory and practice that had interwar roots.

Recent histories have also emphasized the role of exile and transnational knowledge exchange in the construction of German political thought. Scholars such as Forner and Daniel Bessner highlight the importance of social networks for the dissemination of midcentury ideas.²¹ Their studies emphasize the institutional reception of ideas and alter our assumptions about the type of intellectuals who gained the most influence. Instead of “great thinkers” working in isolation, we see how ideas were made within concrete institutions, such as university institutes or the national defense establishment. Often it was not the famous philosophers who succeeded in implementing the most consequential ideas about the German social order. What I call insider intellectuals did the majority of mental labor by publicizing political ideas, writing constitutions, founding radical groups, and constructing the ideologies and counterideologies that shaped, among other things, the history of new lefts in Western Europe.²²

From the perspective of insider intellectuals who were engaged in politics, the development of leftist theory in Europe looks different. My book’s third area of intervention is the history of Western Marxism. Scholars such as Susan Buck-Morss, Martin Jay, and Enzo Traverso have defined Western Marxism as that alternative body of cultural and aesthetic theory that grew chiefly under the aegis of the Frankfurt School. Philosophers associated with that school include Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno. Besides the Frankfurt School, other Western European intellectuals

20. Greenberg, *Weimar Century*, and Strote, *Lions and Lambs*. On his disagreements with Greenberg, see Noah Benezra Strote, “The Intellectual Migration and the ‘Other Weimar,’” *Modern Intellectual History* 14, no. 2 (2017): 597–606. See also Chappel, *Catholic Modern*, and Nicholls, *Freedom with Responsibility*. On the problematic concept of “zero hour” and the need to treat the mid-1940s as a broader transition period, see Hoffmann, “Germany Is No More.”

21. Forner, *German Intellectuals*, and Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

22. Renaud, “Insider Intellectuals.”

experimented with nonconformist Marxism, such as the Italian Communist theorist Antonio Gramsci and the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Conventionally, histories of Western Marxism present us with a narrative of defeat: In the wake of failed revolutions, Western Marxists studied authoritarian reaction, psychological repression, alienating effects of mass culture, and strategies for building an alternative culture (e.g., what Gramsci understood as counter-hegemony or Marcuse as a new sensibility). The Germans in particular operated in a melancholy mode, reassembling the pieces of the great historical catastrophe caused by industrial modernity, the world wars, and the Holocaust.²³ In the 1930s and again in the 1960s, Western Marxism served as a beacon for new lefts. But the standard narrative of defeat does not do justice to the breadth of experience among militant leftists. Insider intellectuals succumbed less often to despair than the high theorists, so they continued actively to combat the tide of reaction. For them, defeat always generated something new. My book highlights the resilience of neoleftist theory and practice in moments of crisis, without of course ignoring the real losses suffered. Instead of just melancholy, I perceive among neoleftists a recurrent alternation between revolutionary hope and despair.

Finally, my book engages with political theorists who have moved the question of organization back to the center of debates about democracy. The catalyst for this renewed interest in organization was the 2008 financial collapse and the remarkable series of popular uprisings that followed around 2011: the Arab Spring, Indignados in Spain, anti-austerity protests in Greece, riots in London, Occupy Wall Street, and so on. Observers noted that the uprisings lacked recognizable leaders and much prior organization. They looked like spontaneous assemblies of the multitude, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri would put it. Some commentators spoke of horizontalism, a concept that arose from the alter-globalization efforts of the late 1990s and early 2000s and refers to social movements that resist vertical hierarchies. But the problem with such movements is that they disappear as suddenly as they appear.

Some commentators, like Joshua Clover and the late David Graeber, have celebrated the riotous ephemerality of the 2011 uprisings and various disruptive actions since. Others want to find ways to sustain their antisystemic energy and build a new left that lasts. Neocommunist theorists like Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Jodi Dean call for a return to the centralized vanguard party.

23. Traverso thinks that melancholia lay at the root of Western Marxism and its concern with the cultural and psychological mechanisms of counterrevolution. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*. See also Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat*, 4–5, and P. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 42–43.

The sociologist Manuel Castells believes that social media could be a technological solution to the problem of horizontalist organization. Meanwhile, Chantal Mouffe and her late partner Ernesto Laclau have demanded a robust left populism. All of these theorists agree that the big question facing the anti-capitalist movement of the early twenty-first century is which organizational form it should take: party, union, council, assembly, *rassemblement*, *Sammlungsbewegung*, or something else. Which form could channel the movement's radical democratic content while still offering the best chance at success? And does anything below the high bar of seizing state power qualify as success? Just as neoleftists did in the middle of the last century, radicals today face the internal dilemma of how to break free from modes of left politics that preserve rather than transform existing society.²⁴

If fascism, imperialism, and authoritarianism were the main targets of new lefts past, then now it is neoliberalism. A strange symmetry exists between the phenomena of neoleftism and neoliberal capitalism. Neoleftist-style formations such as Occupy always end in entropy and decline, much as neoliberalism has atomized social communities and decimated public services around the world. Every radical magazine, study group, and encampment devolves into its own idiosyncratic new left, much as neoliberalism lionizes the solitary, entrepreneurial self. Sooner or later, every new left succumbs to the assimilatory new spirit of capitalism. Just as entrepreneurs disrupt markets with new products, neoleftism ironically turns back on itself, creatively destroying its prior forms. Advanced capitalism demonstrates a remarkable ability to reinvent itself in response to new challenges, and new lefts have responded by reinventing left politics. Transcending capitalism may actually require a strategic mimicry of capitalism's own structural logic. Yet a contradiction arises between new lefts' planned mimicry of creative destruction and their unplanned obsolescence, a contradiction that makes neoleftism sometimes look like self-indulgent rebellion. While neoliberal and neoleftist goals differ considerably, anxiety about whether neoleftism subverts or sustains the dynamics of advanced capitalism animated the work of many protagonists in this book.

New lefts' self-defeating yet perennially hopeful dynamic is expressed by Brecht in the playful lines quoted in this book's epigraph, "Everything new / Is better than everything old." The dilemma of new lefts lay precisely in their unplanned obsolescence: against intentions, everything new becomes something old. New lefts strove to break this vicious cycle of innovation and

24. For a compelling defense of the council form as a solution to this dilemma, see Popp-Madsen, "Constituent Power and Political Form."

assimilation. Thus we might judge neoleftism according to a different metric of success than we usually apply to electoral politics and mass movements. Achieving power or governmental control was never new lefts' chief aim. Instead, they looked inward in an attempt to maintain their own capacity to begin anew. The theorist Hannah Arendt may have been correct when she observed that beginning anew is what saves human affairs from natural ruin.²⁵

The primary sources for this book consist of personal papers of New Beginning members; meeting minutes, memos, and other internal documents of diverse radical groups; official records of state security services; university archives; newspaper reports; leaflets and other movement ephemera; published and unpublished memoirs; and the many books and articles written by neoleftist intellectuals. I draw on sources in German, French, Spanish, and English, and I rely on translations of material from wherever else my subjects operated. My geographical focus is Germany, but just the history of New Beginning alone requires a transnational framework: its members regularly crossed borders, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and they always conceived of their project in international terms. Beyond the inherent transnationalism of New Beginning, I have added as many Western European comparative cases as possible without disrupting the narrative or exceeding the scope of a monograph.

The first chapter begins by dividing the concept of a new left into its constituent parts, each with its own history: newness and leftism. Notable attempts to conceptualize radical newness occurred at the turn of the twentieth century. The young Georg Lukács, a Hungarian Marxist whose ideas exerted an outsized influence on later new lefts, wrestled with the problem of creating new forms that were uncorrupted by the existing bourgeois society. Bureaucracy, institutionalization, and cultural stagnation were his bogeymen. He and his friends in the Budapest avant-garde explored the theme of radical newness in art before transposing it into politics. For a brief period, leftists like the early Lukács fixated on workers' and soldiers' councils as an alternative to party politics. They faced their first serious criticism from within the international left in the form of Lenin's 1920 pamphlet "*Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. That pamphlet provided a blueprint for all subsequent criticism of neoleftists as childish, immature, individualistic, inexperienced, romantic, and naïve. Even before the novelty of the Soviet experiment had worn off, European leftists in the early 1920s sensed that official Communism might pose an obstacle to radical politics in the future.

25. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 247. For a postmodern take, cf. Groys, *On the New*. See also Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 59–63.

The German group New Beginning appears on the scene in the second chapter. New Beginning would come to embody the élan of the antifascist new left. That current resided on the fringes of mainstream antifascism, which we typically associate with the Popular Front and its appeals to reason, democracy, freedom, and human dignity in the face of fascist oppression in Europe. Mainstream antifascists were sincere in their politics. The Popular Front did improve everyday life for millions of workers and expand the horizon of possibility for progressive social change in the future. From a neoleftist perspective, however, mainstream antifascists made a troubling compromise with liberal democrats, moderate socialists, and Stalinists that postponed revolutionary tasks until after fascism's defeat. Radical antifascists believed that the twin crisis of democracy and capitalism, of which fascism was only a symptom, offered a unique chance to reshape left politics. Defeating fascism required nothing less than new revolution, they believed. Around 1933, when fascism grew into a general European and global threat, New Beginning joined other experimental small groups like Socialist Battle in France, Justice and Liberty among Italian émigrés, and the Left Book Club in Britain to form a loose network across national borders. Through this network, novel ideas entered left politics that pushed the boundaries of traditional working-class concerns. Wilhelm Reich's theory of sexual revolution, for example, made private life into a terrain of social contestation: the personal became the political. Neoleftist small groups sought to understand why the masses, including many workers, had been won over by fascism, a movement that contradicted their own class interests. Charismatic leaders like Karl Frank and Marceau Pivert emerged from the shadows cast by the paralyzed left parties. The antifascist new left that they represented agonized over organizational forms. With its analysis of historical antifascism, this chapter provides some context for debates today about how to resist racism and far-right violence.

In the third chapter, the book turns to the organizational experiments conducted by neoleftists in the émigré capitals of Prague, Paris, Barcelona, and London. Exile politics provided the impetus for sizeable neoleftist formations, such as the Spanish Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM). New Beginning's influence increased considerably in exile. The Spanish Civil War gave antifascists an opportunity to expand left politics beyond the working class and forge the international solidarity of marginalized groups. Spain functioned as a sort of Third World unto itself, a proxy for Europe's colonial periphery and a laboratory for a new culture. Radical democracy was palpable within the POUM and anarchist militias. As a neoleftist microcosm, the militia form resisted incorporation into the disciplined army system. There women especially experienced liberation to an unprecedented degree, which contributed to a neoleftist feminism during the interwar years.

The fourth chapter recounts the dramatic break with Soviet Communism undertaken by New Beginning and other neoleftist small groups in the latter half of the 1930s. They tried out different ways of working productively with the Communists, such as Popular Front collaborations and various iterations of a left united front. But the murder of dissidents by Soviet agents in Spain, the Moscow show trials in 1936–38, and the infamous Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939–41 proved to the antifascist new left that Stalin had betrayed the revolution and threatened the survival of the international labor movement. This break with Communism proved essential for future new lefts and their ability to imagine radical democracy apart from existing pseudorevolutionary organizations. Left-wing anti-Communism had less to do with opposing the Russians than with rejecting the authoritarian party form. During World War II, New Beginning members stayed active in British and American exile. As they provided invaluable services to the Western Allied war effort, however, they assimilated into the genteel liberal democracy of their host countries. So began the internal and external taming of the antifascist new left, which transformed it into a pillar of reconstruction in postwar Europe.

Many neoleftists survived in Europe for the duration of the war. The fifth chapter returns to their stories, reconstructing their hopes and uncertainties during those first few months after the fall of Nazism. For example, New Beginning survivors maintained an underground network in Berlin that emerged from the ruins to play a key role in the struggle against the Communist effort to forge a Socialist Unity Party. They retained their commitment to internal democracy and a radical new culture. But in their increasing identification with anti-Communism, German neoleftist survivors lost sight of revolutionary goals. Like their counterparts in British and American exile, they soon assimilated into a democratic establishment that aimed to reform rather than abolish capitalism. Circumstances were different in France, where small groups such as David Rousset and Jean-Paul Sartre's Revolutionary Democratic Assembly now came to the fore. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, radical journals like Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort's *Socialism or Barbarism* appeared that altered the intellectual terrain of the left in Western Europe. They tested new theories of bureaucracy and subjected all forms of left organization to critique.

The flipside of neoleftism in the 1950s was social democratic modernization. Many veterans of the antifascist new left now assumed leading positions in the reconstructed center-left parties. Against neoleftist visions of a new culture, they fashioned a rival aesthetic of modernization in order to appeal more to middle-class voters in a growing consumer society. Former New Beginning members such as Fritz Erler and Richard Löwenthal rose to prominence in the German Social Democratic Party, lobbying for pivotal reforms at the Bad

Godesberg party convention in 1959. There it became clear that social democratic modernization would require abandoning Marxism for good. A similar process occurred in France around Édouard Depreux and the Unified Socialist Party, which after the collapse of the social democratic French Section of the Workers' International as a result of Guy Mollet's vacillating Algeria policy became that country's most important current of moderate socialism. The sixth chapter demonstrates what happens when left renewal takes place without enough attention to organizational form, prefigurative politics, and internal democracy. Despite using the rhetoric of modernization, this left renewal occurred only at the level of ethical ideals and electoral messaging. As the price paid for political success especially in West Germany, social democratic modernization conformed to advanced capitalism and the postwar welfare state.

The seventh chapter concentrates on the chief opponents of both Stalinism and social democratic modernization in the 1950s and early 1960s. Those whom I call left socialists, such as the social scientists Wolfgang Abendroth and Ossip K. Flechtheim, reluctantly broke with the postwar parties of the old left, which at first they viewed optimistically. In France, a *Nouvelle gauche* formed as early as 1954 in reaction to existing left parties' failure to oppose imperialism in any meaningful way. British Marxists who went on to found the *New Left Review* likewise broke with Communism after observing in 1956 the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Uprising and their own government's invasion of Egypt to secure the Suez Canal. Both French anti-imperialists and the British New Left belonged to a transnational current of left socialists who functioned as transmitters of the antifascist tradition and mentors of the rebellious youth. Together with left socialists in West Germany, they bridged the divide between antifascists and a new generation of discontents. Universities became a battleground for radical politics because the postwar youth came to see them as factories for the reproduction of middle-class consumers and managerial elites. At issue for left socialists in the late 1950s was the welfare state's ability to "deliver the goods." How should the left respond to the prospect of a postscarcity economy based on capitalist consumption? Why did existing parties and unions of the left continue to prop up the system? Abendroth insisted that visions of a leveled middle-class society obscured real social antagonisms, while Flechtheim urged the West German youth to look to the US civil rights movement and Third World anticolonial struggles for models of decentralized, grassroots action. In the early 1960s, breakaway new lefts evolved into the anti-authoritarian core of the coming insurrection. During this transition period, usage of the term "new left" shifted from an indefinite noun (a new left) to a proper name (the New Left).

The final chapter unpacks the older radical currents and Third World liberation struggles that made up the sixties New Left. Works by interwar theorists

such as Lukács, Reich, and Gramsci were rediscovered. From Rudi Dutschke to Daniel Cohn-Bendit, young activists all attempted to keep fluid neoleftism from hardening into fixed organizations or dogmas. The group to which Dutschke belonged, Subversive Action, assumed leadership of the Socialist German Student League, paving the way for radical campus politics in 1967–68. And Cohn-Bendit helped steer a movement of student rebels in Paris that sparked the street battles and general strike of May 1968, a high point of European neoleftism. Characteristic of that revolutionary month was the proliferation of action committees, a nonparty form of organization that briefly exercised direct and radically democratic control over everyday life. The history of new lefts came full circle: Cohn-Bendit could now subvert Lenin's critique of leftists' "infantile disorder" in a book called *Leftism: Remedy for the Senile Disorder of Communism*. The extraparliamentary opposition was the New Left's answer to the sclerosis of party politics. Like the antifascist new left, however, activists of the anti-authoritarian New Left again confronted the same dilemma. The exuberance of the action committees could not last, and the history of new lefts once again ended in defeat.

But defeat was always relative for midcentury new lefts, not absolute. It inhered already within the neoleftist dilemma. The epilogue brings this book's history up to date. After the French general strike of May 1968, which eroded the postwar welfare consensus, the cycle of new lefts broke down. In the 1970s people on the left grew weary of radical experiments, which sometimes devolved into isolated acts of terrorism. While neoleftism continued to thrive in theory if not in practice, neoliberalism was ascendant as both a structural change in advanced capitalism and a hegemonic ideology. New social movements such as environmentalism, feminism, human rights, and the Greens gave up on building a revolutionary new society, focusing instead on equality and participatory democracy within the existing system. In the 1980s and 1990s, membership in left parties and unions declined, and postmodern apathy wormed away at militancy. Left-alternative lifestyles kept radicalism alive, but it was only after the 2008 financial crisis that a large number of people again mobilized against social inequality and corporate power. The defunct parties of the old left were ill equipped to mobilize this discontent. Instead, an incredible series of popular uprisings, anti-austerity actions, and wildcat strikes began around 2011. Various left populist and democratic socialist movements have cropped up since then. Starting in 2018, further antisystemic mobilization has occurred in the name of climate justice. Can this anti-capitalist energy be sustained, especially against a rising authoritarian tide? Will it catalyze a new left for the twenty-first century? Either way, mobilizing the left today requires serious thought about organization. The radical question of form is back on the agenda.

Drawing on select examples, this book presents a historical interpretation of new lefts and the organizational continuities that existed between interwar antifascism, postwar left socialism, and sixties anti-authoritarianism. The book's focus on insider intellectuals and "low theory" makes it accessible to people who have only a basic familiarity with Marxism and the history of the left. Anyone who is curious about what can be done now to combat neoliberalism, capitalist-driven climate change, and right-wing authoritarianism would do well to explore the history of European new lefts. The past is rich in examples of inspired protest, perhaps especially those that failed in their immediate goals. Walter Benjamin once urged historians to redeem the vanquished by brushing history against the grain. The historian Reinhart Koselleck even thought that "if history is made in the short run by the victors, historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run from the vanquished."²⁶ This book strives mainly for historical gains in knowledge. However, as the last century's most vanquished radicals, new lefts perhaps also deserve a redemption song.

26. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257, and Reinhart Koselleck, "Transformations of Experience and Methodological Change: A Historical-Anthropological Essay," in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 45–83 (at 76).

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