

Themes in New Left Histories

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Abstract:

This article discusses some of the themes in the New Left's approach to history, highlighting common themes, addressing criticisms of the movement's approach to history, raising certain issues with the New Left's approach to history, and suggesting ways forward given the rise of importance for the New Left's approach given modern social movements. The four common themes are 1) a rejection of corporate liberalism, 2) approaching history from the bottom up, 3) a rejection of U.S. power projection in international relations, and 4) a rejection of a certain form of intellectualism, and an appreciation for Marxist interpretations of history that focused on class, economics, and bourgeois society inside and out of the academy.

Keywords: historiography, New Left, scholarship, history, social movements

This article discusses the common themes in New Left history in order to understand what constitutes the New Left approach to history. The New Left was a complicated philosophical school prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, which also resonates today in the understanding of modern social movements.¹ The themes central to New Left historiography are a rejection of corporate liberalism (the conjoining of capitalist and government interests), approaching history from the bottom up (including the study of social movements and the inclusion of voices typically excluded from historical study), a rejection of U.S. power projection in international relations (ranging from post-colonial and decolonial politics to protesting U.S. involvements in wars), and a rejection of a certain form of intellectualism, and an appreciation for Marxist interpretations of history that focus on class, economics, and bourgeois society inside and out of the academy.²

This article is significant because it organizes thought about what New Left historiography is, hopefully making it easier for historians to understand New Left historiography and its lasting impact. This should be the goal of all leftists, to understand the history of New Left history both as a way to understand how the study of history progresses as well as to understand what relevance older approaches to history may have in the present day. As Brian Thill argues, "every committed leftist is necessarily interested in the genealogy of leftism: its key figures and concepts; its historical traditions of protest, revolution, and liberation; and its accounts of the complex

relationship between theory and praxis.”³ Thill is arguing that leftists have a unique responsibility for and interest in their history. This article, then, is a part of that genealogy.

It will also highlight absences, like historians who happen to be women or Black, and provide for a better understanding of the New Left that focuses less on certain names or certain institutions, and more on what ideas and interests occur in the New Left’s historical scholarship and treatments of the New Left movement. I will also suggest new avenues for the New Left and ways that historians might continue to utilize the New Left in their work.⁴ Given the continued relevance of the New Left in publications like *New Left Review*, which is a journal that reads very different from what others classify as New Left history, understanding the New Left approach to history remains relevant today.

The New Left found a home in several graduate programs at the University of Wisconsin, and notably in the history department where there were many professors and graduate students unsatisfied with how history was done as well as with politics in the United States.⁵ While there has been considerable writing about the New Left and history as well as historiography, there has not been much scholarship on the themes common across New Left histories save for Staughton Lynd’s early treatment of the New Left.⁶ Lynd’s essay is an important contribution to defining the New Left’s approach to history and social science, but it should not be the last word. Common treatments of New Left history often assign the label New Left to historians, but fail to explain what that means or defend the application of this label.

Much of what might be considered historiographic research on the New Left was completed contemporaneously with the New Left movement, but this research lacks the value of time or separation from that which it studies or represents.⁷ It can be difficult to be reflective in the middle of completing one’s scholarship, so there are opportunities now to assess what the New Left did for history beyond generic claims of disrupting the discipline and the writings in *Studies on the Left* (1959-1967). Also, in order to honor the New Left’s historic focus on pragmatism, historians would benefit from an understanding of New Left historiography that provides a method or theory that they might be able to use today.⁸

The New Left grew out of dissatisfaction with the conservatism of the preceding decades as an attempt to counteract the disempowerment of women and people of color.⁹ There was widespread interest in Black rights and the rights of women, as well as a radicalizing feminist movement. Interest in critiquing United States involvement in other countries was also on the rise as the folly and violence of U.S. involvement in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii fell under increased scrutiny. As the late 1970s and early 1980s returned to political conservatism, the New Left seemingly vanished, or at least lost much of its momentum.

One of the major criticisms of New Left historiography was that it was revisionist, which was a criticism often levied by conservative writers and historians, yet resisting the negative connotation of revisionism, one finds that New Left historiography was revisionist in the best sense because it sought to tell a more objective history, one that included all who participated in

the long course of history.¹⁰ If history did not include the many voices that made up the American historical experience, it could, as the New Left historians argued, hardly make a claim for objectivity or truth. The New Left's political bent was a cure for the political bent of current historical writing.¹¹ It challenged the underlying assumptions about who and what mattered.

One of the New Left's concerns was the conjuncture of capitalism and government. Based in part on a rise in anti-capitalist and anti-government sentiment expressed by a wide range of student groups and young people.¹² The New Left took aggressive anti-capitalist stances, often tying these positions to their support for marginalized populations around the world.¹³ This also made the New Left suspicious of the corporatization of the university and the increasing number of defense contracts given to university researchers. New Left historians would call into question the assumed benefit of capitalism in the United States and beyond. In terms of on-campus activism, New Left historians would also put their anti-capitalist beliefs to the test by questioning the close ties between universities, businesses, and governments.

New Left historians also focus on telling stories from the bottom up, with a particular interest in marginalized groups. This emphasized the conflict New Left historians found in U.S. history that was often obscured by the focus on wars and the country's great leaders.¹⁴ The New Left rose with the student protests in the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Power Movement, Free Love Movement, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other like-minded organizations and movements. These organizations clearly influenced the New Left and are almost always included in the discussions of the context that gave rise to the New Left. This approach to history, focused as it was on marginalized groups, is best characterized by Howard Zinn's wide-ranging work.¹⁵ Zinn focused much of his historical study on raising awareness about people that many historians had failed to cover. He wrote about common people, everyday interactions, and marginalized groups to build a history of the United States that looked much different from the "great men and great wars" approaches to history.

The New Left rejected U.S. involvement in foreign countries, critiquing this involvement as militaristic, colonialist, and decidedly political.¹⁶ While these arguments are fairly commonplace today, they were radical in the 1960s. The New Left historical approach was anti-militaristic. As such, the New Left has been critical of Vietnam, involvement in Central America, and Iraq. For New Left historians this means that many have been critical of U.S. foreign policy and have resisted the urge to glorify U.S. involvement in wars and overseas affairs. Concepts like democracy promotion, humanitarian aid, and other "do-good" justifications for U.S. foreign policy are all subject to critique, which allows New Left historians to challenge traditional beliefs about the benevolence of U.S. involvement abroad.

New Left thinkers also reject several scholarly norms, most importantly that history could only come from the winners or the powerful.¹⁷ While this practice resonates with the idea that history should come from the bottom up, it also serves as a critique of how scholarship is done. Scholarship should not be confined to citing the same sources, using the same theories, and

following the traditional Anglo-pragmatic tradition of argumentation.¹⁸ It is not a discipline where one must cite the same canonical scholars in every essay. This also includes a rejection of empiricism and the scientificity of history, not necessarily because these concepts are bad in and of themselves, but rather because they often fail to value individual people and collective organizations.¹⁹

The New Left also draws considerable theoretical influence from a range of Marxist thinkers prominent in the 1950s and 1960s including Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, and Jean Paul Sartre.²⁰ While versions of Marxism are as plentiful as versions of feminism, a general concern for class interests, suspicion of the bourgeois, especially in the university, and an interest in the empowerment of marginalized peoples fueled New Left projects. Marxist interpretations of history that focused on class, economics, and bourgeois society inside and out of the academy have all resonated with New Left historians. Howard Zinn though has warned that the New Left was always susceptible to theoretical irrelevance if it followed Marxist dogma too closely.²¹ Conservative commentators have also argued that a central difficulty with the New Left is that it adhered too closely to various Marxist principles, which hurt its ability to succeed (in the space it was critiquing), but does however explain why the New Left matters so much for current leftists political struggles.²²

Of course, there was also disagreement among New Left historians about what and who mattered. Social history grew out of the New Left, and social historians took widely different views on who needed to be included in history, and what the political function of history was.²³ This was to be expected, no doubt, as scholars attempted to find their way in a new version of history, and world turned upside down with radical political ideas. It is not shocking then that there have been internal struggles in the New Left political or historical project.

New Left historiography has a troubled relationship with marginalized populations. First, New Left historiographers certainly did not tend to include marginalized scholars. Although the New Left's focus on marginalized populations certainly helped the advances of women historians and historians of color, it was not the diverse all-inclusive movement that we may imagine it is today. Put another way, while the New Left writ large may have been more diverse than its traditional history counterpart, and while New Left history certainly took up the study of marginalized populations and rejected U.S. actions that put marginalized peoples at risk, it did not always appear as the multicultural populations it was writing about. This tension certainly casts doubt of the New Left as potentially not realizing the importance of the scholars from the communities about which the New Left wrote.

The New Left has had a troubled relationship with the Black Power Movement, and if it is to matter today then we must think about how the New Left can be relevant to the current racial struggles around the world. Both the Left and Right seem to agree that the New Left's relationship with the Black Power Movement was complex at best, and at worst dangerous and unhelpful for Black Americans involved in the Black Power Movement.²⁴ As Rossinow put it: "Black power advocates argued that white radicals should work on their own 'thing.'"²⁵ The New Left was

largely a white-led movement, and as such what it could, should, and did do for Black people in the United States remains open for debate.²⁶ Rossinow further argues that it was Black radicalism that encouraged whatever may be termed as radical from the New Left, thus reversing the question of what the New Left did for Black people.²⁷

Likewise, the New Left struggled with women's support because feminism while clearly benefiting from the agitation of the student movements, struggled to fit in to the New Left's radical reconfiguration of democracy.²⁸ It is not that the New Left sought to actively exclude women, but rather that its socialist agenda did not seem to sufficiently address women's issues, and women were weary of the student movements because of their difficulty finding leadership roles in much of the Civil Rights Movement. Put simply, there were many leftist groups pursuing a wide range of issues, but many suffered from the gender-based discrimination still prevalent at this time in the United States. The New Left did not avoid society's patriarchal tendencies. Indeed, much of the scholarship cited in this article is written by men about male historiographers and activists because this was the New Left's makeup.

The logical next question is: How radical was the New Left?²⁹ While historians seem to agree that it represented a challenge to the way history was done, there is quite a bit of debate about how radical it was. Opinions vary, including leftist critics who argue that the New Left might have been politically charged and a challenge to how history was done, but it was not radical.³⁰ It matters, however, how one defines what is radical. In the sense that the New Left critiqued what history was and how it had been written, the New Left certainly challenged prevailing orthodoxies. But, at the same time, New Left historians were publishing in many of the same places those they critiqued did, and many were employed by the same universities on which their criticisms focused. Many New Left historians earned their doctoral degrees from the same places that produced their conservative or centrist colleagues. The New Left wanted a history written about marginalized peoples, but did not easily welcome in to its fold marginalized scholars. One hates to reduce a complex social movement and a new perspective on the study of history to the trite notion of "a mixed bag," but the New Left did struggle to do what it set out to do and despite its long legacy never really broke free from the system it was critiquing.

There is always a danger in understanding whatever then-radical movement existed as not radical by today's terms. John Lewis Gaddis writes, "To reconstruct the real past is to construct an accessible but deformed past: it is to oppress the past, to constrain its spontaneity, to deny its liberty."³¹ Criticisms of the New Left seem too quick to judge the New Left by today's standards while also failing to appreciate that historical study always limits history. In this sense, historical study is always bound up with the conservatism of the scholarly moment. The New Left was no more guilty of this than any other theory or method of history. If the question of the New Left's radicalism is whether or not its politics limited history then this is arguably what historical study must definitionally do.

The New Left was also co-opted by the conservative tendencies and actors it critiqued.³² Of course, many movements were, and various forms of co-option, sabotage, and infiltration characterized many of movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including the Black Panther Party. One might arguably conclude that the infiltration of the Black Panther Party was so destructive that a theoretically robust Black radicalism struggled to gain a permanent and prominent hold in U.S. society until the birth of critical race theory in the mid-1980s, which is now subject to wide-ranging political attack. The New Left then suffered too as conservatives claimed to be leading various forms of revolution, and the culture wars of the 1990s made significant headway in demonizing leftist approaches to scholarship. Despite the themes around which New Left historians focused, and their resilience in today's radical scholarship and activism, the New Left struggled to endure conservative attacks.

There are also themes with respect to what the New Left got wrong. These themes go beyond the New Left's approach to history and include wide-ranging critique of the movement. These criticisms include "the absence of effective organization, the growth of militancy and violence, a lack of discipline, and a purportedly foolish utopianism."³³ It is relatively easy to understand how these problems would hamper a social movement, but less clear how they apply to New Left history, although some extrapolation makes the critiques more relevant. Absent organization, social movements often struggle, as do movements in academia. Now it is common for new journals to form as well as new associations, but the New Left historians struggled on these fronts. The flagship journal *Studies on the New Left* lasted only eight years and the *Radical History Review* would not carry the leftist political history flag until nearly 10 years after *Studies on the New Left* failed. While militancy and violence are not commonly associated with historical study, one can imagine how the perceived political extremism of the New Left historians alienated many of them from institutional and public support. A lack of discipline might partially explain the trouble New Left historians had in promoting their work and earning tenure at some universities. Likewise, utopianism is a complicated political commitment that would have been difficult to actualize in the politically divided 1960s and 1970s, as it is in today's complicated and divisive political climate. Yet, there are still reasons to think about the New Left's legacy today.

The New Left is relevant today because it takes up issues that still matter in our study of history and beyond historical study to the present day. In a time riven with political extremism, racism, police violence, dis- and misinformation, decreased voting rights, threats to intellectual freedom, and more, New Left historiography emphasizes the role of scholars in challenging the norms of their universities and the communities around them. That New Left history was decidedly political, makes it an important focus for those scholars who understand their work as political and who want to enter the public sphere. As our students ask questions about how their majors can impact the lives of their communities, it behooves us to investigate and reevaluate the currents of historical study that can help answer these questions and empower students and

instructors to reform the study of history and make history relevant outside the classroom to current political dramas.

Breines argues that despite these struggles and reasons for failure the New Left remains relevant at its time and today because it nonetheless challenged orthodoxies in liberal American politics.³⁴ That a movement or new way of thinking has issues does not relegate it to the dustbin of history. Everything from various forms of feminism to Occupy Wall Street have had issues, but nonetheless affected how people thought about important issues of the day and improved understanding. The lessons of the New Left for history suggest “we still have much work to do.”³⁵

The New Left approach to history can be fruitful today, especially as concerns over racism, police violence, and identity politics dominate the news, our campuses, and our communities. New Left history’s continued interest in social history, violence, and discrimination warrant reading them in the present day. In fact, what we call identity politics may be the most obvious outgrowth of the New Left. As Farred argues, “The movement to define the contemporary public self...owes more to the emergence of the new Left than any other political movement.”³⁶ Perhaps this alone warrants continued investigation into what New Left historiography was. With the increasing amount of scholarship focused on race, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity published in history, understanding one of the intellectual roots for these new studies is a worthwhile project.

While a better New Left history would have encouraged more historians of color and women historians to participate, there is certainly much it can contribute to the present moment. The history discipline is also fortunate to have many more historians of color and women in its ranks than in years past, and an increasing interest in the history of marginalized peoples, which stems from the New Left’s push decades ago to include these groups. A New Left history in this moment would include Indigenous voices and authors. It would add to its agenda the importance of intersectionality and representation that were a focus of feminists, especially Black feminists, throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It would continue its capitalist critique and reference the ongoing expansion of Marxist thinking that has taken up a range of racial, gender, and religious issues. It would resist Marxist orthodoxy and consider the expanding theories of communicative labor, informal economies, and affective labor. New Left history would be, in essence, more inclusive and less dogmatic. The foundation is there, but more must be done to make New Left history relevant to historical study today beyond generic orthodox Marxist criticism. This is not to indict that orthodox Marxism does not have its place, but rather to suggest that as our understanding of Marxism has moved beyond the class-based understanding of society originally promoted by Marx to a more complex understanding of the nature of power, the economy, and economic position.

Lastly, the New Left must fight back against the perception it failed, which is far too extreme a claim.³⁷ The New Left in history has certainly had a lasting impact, and spurred new types of research on new topics for at least half of a century. While criticisms of the 1960s leftists will always revolve around strategies and objectives, and for every success one can easily find a difficulty, the New Left contributed greatly to the study of history. By rejecting corporate liberalism, or what we

might now refer to as neoliberalism, emphasizing history from the bottom up, opposing U.S. interventionism, rejecting certain elite forms of intellectualism, and committing to the possibility of Marxist insights into a range of older and current struggles, the New Left expanded the theoretical and methodological approaches historians continue to use to the present day.

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