

INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A SCHOLARSHIP OF
THE “WHOLE LEFT”

STEVEN ROSENDALE

THE ESSAYS IN THIS VOLUME PRESUPPOSE A DISSATISFACTION WITH THE CONDITION of the contemporary left in the United States, and with the role of the academic left within that condition. Despite marked differences in the analyses presented by each thinker represented here, most agree upon a broad portrait of the American left as sadly diminished in numbers, efficacy, and presence in public political discourse. Whatever measure one uses—membership in left organizations, electoral results, influence in public debate, and so on—the American left is currently more notable for its weakness than its vitality as a force in American society. The familiar debates about the relative virtues of the old left versus the new left are beginning to give way to a more pressing question about radical and progressive movements for social change in America: “what’s left?”

The precise answer to that question remains a subject of debate in this volume; indeed, the approaches to the problem represented in *Radical Relevance* range so widely that it would be futile to attempt a detailed synthesis here. The essays presented here do, however, share an interest in identifying broad external factors in the diminishment of the left: the historical suppression of traditional left organizations; the failure of potentially viable historical models for the “good society” (exemplified variously by certain periods in Chinese communism, the Soviet Union prior to the Hitler-Stalin pact, or prior to the Moscow show trials, or prior to the fall of the Soviet bloc, or as never historically realized); the homogenization of national political discourses under the two-party system (exemplified and exacerbated by the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election, during which Al Gore’s narrow defeat in Florida was frequently blamed on votes lost to Ralph Nader’s Green Party); and the virtual elimination of left

discourses from public debate in the major media (exemplified by the stunningly univocal nationalism and suppression of dissenting voices in the major media outlets during the terrorist attacks of September, 2001, and the ensuing—and by now years-long—U.S. military operations abroad).

In addition to their agreement regarding the importance of expansive external factors such as these, an internal criticism of the left also emerges as a strong theme in all of the essays contained in this volume. Each essay, that is, scrutinizes problems intrinsic to left organizations and discourses for their contribution to the reduction of left influence. Although each essay builds a distinctive portrait of these problems, all participate in the recent resurgence of attention to the left's potential culpability in its own diminishment. Among recent texts to explore this issue is Harvey Teres's 1996 book *Renewing the Left*, which offers a useful distillation of several related issues that continue to occupy the center of debate in the essays collected here. Teres's introduction to that book builds a powerful indictment of the left for failing to address "certain perennial internal problems" in left organizations, problems that have predictably led to the left's failure to achieve its aims (or even sustain member support). Reflecting upon his own experience with radical groups in the early 1970s, Teres suggests that their failure was due to the left's stubborn attraction to "sectarian and even authoritarian trends"—to the "odor of orthodoxy" that permeated both the political goals and the entire culture of the left. Richard Flacks supports a similar indictment of left organizational goals and ideological rigidity in *Making History: The American Left and the American Mind*. Flacks argues that for left activists in both the old and new American lefts, "organizational commitment tended to undermine activist effectiveness rather than aiding it" (200). He cites two reasons for this difficulty:

First, the organizational need for ideological consensus and closure contradicted members' continuous discovery that the society they had to deal with was more complex than any organizationally serviceable ideology could encompass. Second, the organizations' orientation toward the development of their power fundamentally conflicted with the members' efforts to act in either principled or effective terms. (200)

In the accounts given by both Teres and Flacks, the left's historical devotion to centrist organizations forged in an atmosphere of ideological rigidity thus predictably gave way to a contemporary left characterized by the disintegration of major left organizations, the failure (or rejection) of Marxism and other focalizing discourses, and the correlative dispersal of left constituents across a large number of minor activist groups.

Flacks finds much to admire in the decentralization of the left, but this organizational shift has also introduced a set of urgent problems. First, while Flacks is suspicious of the ability of rigid "focusing ideologies" to account for the complexity of American social reality, the more recent dispersal of left

focus into discrete issue-groups fails to reflect the actual interdependence of social categories like race, class, gender, and others. Even more importantly, the fragmentation of the organized left into dozens of issue-domains and independent organizations has resulted in a kind of internal balkanization of the left that has inevitably reduced its political clout. Contemporary advocacy groups tend to maintain a relatively narrow focus and constituency, and this focus can sometimes aid groups in achieving specific goals. However, no single group carries a sufficiently large constituency to effect comprehensive change, and coordination of the various goals and resources of individual groups has proven extremely difficult in the absence of a unified left culture. Indeed, one is more likely to observe competitive relations between left groups than effective cooperation: Fred Rose's recent sociological study of environmental, peace, and labor groups, *Coalitions Across the Class Divide*, for example, exposes how the "struggle for political advantage between several just causes" (1) has historically hampered the efficacy of each of these advocacy groups. Flacks usefully formulates the defining tension that has still to be negotiated by the decentralized, fragmented left:

The problem is to create sufficient structure to facilitate coordination; sharing of resources and information; mutual clarification of vision, strategy, and program; the maintenance of collective memory and identity—while avoiding the encapsulation, rigidity, intellectual deceit and distortion, interpersonal abuse and personal alienation that have been the plagues of the organized left throughout its history. (277)

How can the academic left contribute to the negotiation of these difficult demands? The essays that comprise this book differ, sometimes sharply, in their prescriptions for addressing the condition Flacks describes. Many thinkers on the left would agree that the drive toward diversity in university curricula includes a healthy desire to bring otherwise marginalized voices and issues into the center of inquiry, and that important advances (for example, in institutional recognition of interest groups and issues through the establishment of programs in ethnic, women's, and environmental studies) have been made under the auspices of diversity discourses. However, it is also apparent to most contributors to this volume that the discourses of diversity that permeate academic social-justice initiatives have largely failed to truly coordinate the broad range of issues and organizations that make up the contemporary left. Although the emphasis on diversity is ostensibly in line with progressive criticism of monolithic understandings of Western culture, diversity discussions have generally not, unfortunately, provided grounds for left intellectuals to articulate a shared agenda for social change. For an increasing number of left scholars, enthusiasm for the apparent pluralism of diversity initiatives needs to be tempered by a realization that, in an arena of limited resources, all too often diversity discussions devolve into struggles for political advantage between equally

valid causes. Academic leftists are all too often oddly forced, against their better judgments, to draw difficult lines about which identity category or issue-domain counts more when curricular decisions or funding for student advocacy groups are at stake: Should a diverse curriculum mean supporting ethnic and racial diversity over gender or class diversity? Is it possible to articulate race, class, and gender issues together with equally urgent environmental ones? Which issue-domain should gain primacy, why, who gets to decide, and what are the consequences? Even with institutional resources now available to traditionally left groups concentrating on rectifying gender, race, class, ethnicity, environmental, and disability inequities, the bureaucratization of diversity has in practice led left intellectuals to fight against each other for a slice of the pie. In practice, the diversity concept too often parades in the guise of an inclusive pluralism that masks the actual internal divisions between discrete interest groups. To date, the radical alternative—a true articulation of joint agendas for social change in curricula, funding of student groups, hiring decisions, and more—has remained largely unthinkable in scholarly research and in the everyday lives of left intellectuals in the academy.

The scholars represented in *Radical Relevance* all share a common desire to change this situation by looking squarely at the fragmentation of American movements for social change, by thinking rigorously about what critical scholarship might contribute to the task of renewing (or creating) a more unified and efficacious left, and by examining the left's possibly inadequate dealings with many marginalized groups. Representing a diverse range of theoretical perspectives within several textual disciplines, the essays collected here each assess historical, practical, or speculative models for a "whole left"—a left not divided but rather constituted by a broad range of interests, including issues of class, environment, gender, sexuality, disability, race, and ethnicity.

What the outcome of this emerging effort to rethink the left will be is uncertain, but the scholarship collected in *Radical Relevance* does suggest that a relatively small cluster of very large issues will likely be central to the ongoing project. These issues are generally reflected in the subsection titles for *Radical Relevance*: "Legacies of Marxism," "Left Coalitions Beyond the Triad," and "The Academic Left, Critical Theory, and the Global Context." This division into subsections is meant to suggest the primary thrust of the essays contained therein rather than an absolute demarcation: in fact, many of the essays investigate several of the large topics identified in the section titles simultaneously, and can usefully be read in conjunction with essays from other sections. Indeed, all of the essays in the collection are most profitably understood not in isolation but in relation to each other—as a complex and mutually enriching exchange of ideas that, considered together, clarify the situation of the intellectual left in the textual disciplines better than any individual essay could alone.

As they “rethink” the role of intellectual discourse in addressing left fragmentation, many of the contributions to *Radical Relevance* attend to the legacy of prior left discourses and practices, especially Marxism. Some essays are explicitly and thoroughly critical of the practical and theoretical history of American Marxism, regarding these histories more as a cautionary lesson than a current resource. Others find a partially usable past in lost histories of Marxist attempts to comprehend social categories outside of class, in the speculative articulation of categories in Marxism-feminism, or in the lessons afforded by attempts to articulate theoretical bases for coalition within specific disciplines. Essays in the first section, “Legacies of Marxism,” provide perspectives on the resources for the contemporary left available in new literary-historical research on left culture, in the critical analysis of specific literary texts and traditions, and in attempts to articulate Marxist rhetorical theories.

Alan Wald begins this section with “Black Nationalist Identity and Internationalist Class Unity: The Political and Cultural Legacy of Marxism.” In this essay, Wald is concerned to recover a largely repressed history in which the U.S. communist movement emerges as a partially worthy model for left cooperation across the issue-domains of class, race, and ethnicity. Wald contends that U.S. communism comprised by far the most sustained and coherent left-wing American cultural movement of the twentieth century—a movement far more successful at enlisting and sustaining the principled allegiance of oppressed racial and ethnic minorities across several decades than has been properly recognized. While considerable attention has already been devoted to the impact of the Great Depression on writers and artists during the 1930s, Wald demonstrates that the central role of African American, communist culture-workers extended far into subsequent decades as well—a cultural history that has largely been obscured by the legacy of 1950s anticommunism. Emerging from the communist-led radical cultural tradition were among the most prominent U.S. writers of the 1940s and 1950s, along with scores of lesser-known figures who made signal contributions in a wide range of cultural sites, including film, popular culture, science fiction, detective and mystery fiction, modern poetry, theater, television, and children’s literature. The surprising, unrecognized extent of interacting African American contributions to communist-led American culture that Wald briefly sketches in this chapter suggests that the traditional left’s ability to enlist the sympathies, interests, and allegiances of varying interest groups may be seriously underestimated by a contemporary left more influenced by anticommunist historiography than it ought to be.

Complementing the broad historical sketch Wald provides, Barbara Foley’s “Race, Class, and Communism: The Young Ralph Ellison and the ‘Whole Left’” offers a closely focused analysis of how the history of U.S. anticommunism has distorted the contemporary left’s grasp of its own history. Like Wald, Foley’s focus is upon the historical record regarding the CPUSA’s ability to incorporate the interests of identity groups like racial minorities. Glossing her innovative

work on Ralph Ellison's career, Foley offers a close analysis of the composition history of Ellison's most influential work, *Invisible Man*. While Ellison's biting portrayal of the CPUSA as manipulative and racist in *Invisible Man* is usually understood as a fair representative of Ellison's own relation to the American communism, Foley's reexamination of the historical record shows that Ellison actually had a sustained and overwhelmingly positive relationship to the left for at least eight years. Documenting this relationship and tracing the successive drafts of *Invisible Man* that illustrate Ellison's changing representation of communism between 1945 and 1952, Foley complicates the entrenched view of *Invisible Man* as an "anticommunist" novel, and demonstrates that the hostility toward American communism manifested in the novel is properly attributed to sources other than Ellison's own experience with the CPUSA. More than a specialist's revision of Ellison's biography, Foley's essay reveals that the reductiveness of our received cultural histories of the 1940s and 50s has obscured an inclusive history of American communism that might serve as a relevant contemporary model for left coalition.

Wald and Foley each argue that the contemporary left's fragmentation is at least in part due to its neglect of positive precedents available in the actual cultural history of American Marxism. Victor Villanueva's "Toward a Political Economy of Rhetoric (or A Rhetoric of Political Economy)" applies a similar critique to the discipline of rhetoric itself. Sketching a brief disciplinary history of rhetoric in the United States, Villanueva suggests that contemporary rhetorical theory generally fails to conceive of discursive practices as integrally connected with political economy. Villanueva proposes a return to the discourses of political economy as a corrective to what he describes as rhetorical theory's overinvestment in the purely "superstructural" functions of discourse. The need to radically revise rhetorical theory in order to accommodate the Gramscian perspective that Villanueva favors, however, is only a necessary rather than sufficient step toward rhetorical theory's potential contribution to unifying the left. Rhetorical theory, Villanueva concludes, is presently only beginning a rigorous discussion about the intersecting theories of discourse, power relations, and economy.

Like the work described above, essays in the second section, "Left Coalitions Beyond the Triad," insist upon the importance of efforts to develop coherent theoretical and practical models that can facilitate the coordination of multiple issue-domains. The common theme of this group of essays is a close focus upon the need to expand the established triad of race, class, and gender—to develop scholarly discourses that can better accommodate the pressing issues of ethnicity, environment, and disability that have in recent decades engaged the expanded sensibilities of left constituents.

Scott Richard Lyons's "The Left Side of the Circle: American Indians and Progressive Politics" reveals how the leftist community has in many ways failed

to adequately address Native Americans' needs and experiences. Lyons traces his own role as a member of the Anishaabe and as a teacher of Native American students at Leech Lake Tribal College. In doing so, he exposes the actual material conditions faced every day by many people who make their homes on reservations, conditions that too often fail to get discussed by leftist scholars. Lyons also investigates the suspect history of "progressive politics" and its relationship to Native peoples. Lyons exposes the troubling 1980 exchange between American Indian Movement leader Russell Means and the Revolutionary Communist Party, an exchange that makes clear the rhetorical tactics that the left has utilized historically in order to assimilate Indian people. In the end, Lyons remains somewhat skeptical about whether people on the left are willing to give up the comfort of their political identities in an effort to create the coalitions that would adequately address these concerns. Yet Lyons has hope that strides can be made. He closes with several specific recommendations—namely that we should better "affirm and respect the sovereignty of indigenous nations" and "the Whole Left should bring this commitment to sovereignty and respect into the university curriculum" (82). Lyons's essay demands that leftists not make the American Indian an "add-on," yet one more marginalized group. Instead, Lyons contends that leftist scholars need to start "by locating their work not on the 'frontier' but on *Indian land*, not as 'pioneers' but as *settlers*" (74). The first people, he articulates, need to be made the first priority of all leftists.

Michael Bennett's "Reconciling Red and Green" offers a similarly expanded model of issue-articulation on the American left, this time through a discussion of the connections between multi-issue activism and scholarship. Bennett traces his own journey as an activist in antiapartheid, antiglobalization, and environmental movements, as well as his parallel journey as a scholar from African American studies to ecocriticism (the study of the mutually constitutive relationship between culture and the environment). In sketching his own development into an urban, socialist, antiracist, feminist ecocritic, Bennett suggests that the ecocritical focus on issues of environmental justice offers a useful model for the integration of these multiple issue-domains. Bennett directly challenges the left's proclivity to sideline environmental issues, and dismantles the left's three main contentions against ecocriticism: "1) Ecocriticism is all about wilderness and wildlife and so is irrelevant for understanding the sociopolitical dimensions of humans and their habitations; 2) Ecocritics only care about the Thoreauvian tradition of nature writing and thus are unable to say anything interesting about most of our culture; 3) The environmental movement is the domain of privileged white males who are uninterested in issues of race, class, and gender" (87). In the end he reveals the positive ways in which both the environmental justice and the antiglobalization movements can build coalitions around confronting the ecological plight of the poor and of communities of color.

Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Wendy L. Chrisman, and Marian E. Lupo's "A Monstrous Emerge-agency: Crippling the Whole Left" argues that "disability" should be a key term that rebuilds the familiar traditional triangle of difference composed of the categories of race, class, and gender. After providing a close analysis of the concept of disability as an identity category, the authors examine the impacts on radical theory that might result from taking disability seriously as a theoretical construct as well as an advocacy issue. The authors contend that, in refiguring the critical space of difference, the concept of disability can offer a variety of crucial insights that might usefully reform a number of other radical discourses, correcting an inadequate theorization of social categories like class, gender, and race in ways that might bolster possibilities for coordination of left concerns. Tracing a series of "classroom moments" that throw these ideas into relief, the authors suggest the kinds of new pedagogical choices that must be made in order to better highlight the connections between different forms of oppression as well as to better denaturalize the concept of disability itself.

Like the essays that precede it, Derek Owens's "What the Left Left Out" concentrates upon the limitations of the "left triumvirate" of race/class/gender. Owens suggests that despite progressive efforts to widen the purview of left discourse and activism, the left has still typically "left out" serious attention to environmental issues. Central to Owens's argument is a critique of the left's anthropocentric humanism, which while clearly providing a motive force for progressive social change, has also largely obscured the environmental systems in which human societies and cultures participate, and the environmental health upon which they depend. Tracing some of the reasons for and consequences of this conspicuous blind spot in left discourses, Owens argues that "sustainability" might usefully serve as a corrective metaphor that, far from simply *superadding* an environmental dimension to existing left concern, might serve as a useful—if not essential—reorganizing term on the left. Owens contends that left intellectuals must, "if they are to remain relevant in an age of catastrophic local and global environmental crises, embrace orchestrating metaphors like 'sustainability,' 'conservation,' 'preservation,' and 'survival' as viable catalysts for furthering the objectives of progressive teaching and learning" (134).

Essays in the final section, "The Academic Left, Critical Theory, and the Global Context," provide especially focused and explicit explorations of a third theme: the role of the academic left within the context of the growing globalization of the political arena. Despite marked differences, each essay deals with a phenomenon that Fredric Jameson calls the "paradox of totalization," in which the social critic's apparent power to change conditions decreases as her grasp of the scale of those conditions grows. How to maintain a focus on the global context of oppression while avoiding becoming intimidated by questions of scale (or the opposite danger, an inappropriately optimistic sense of the importance of

scholarship and pedagogy in addressing the larger context) is an issue that exercises each of the thinkers in this section.

Henry A. Giroux's "Globalizing Dissent and Radicalizing Democracy: Politics, Pedagogy, and the Responsibility of Critical Intellectuals" begins this section. In this essay, Giroux suggests that the political potentiality of the academic left has been largely hamstrung by a limited sense of the true range of pedagogical sites. Giroux explores what it means to make the pedagogical more political by refusing to reduce pedagogy to "schooling," suggesting that left intellectuals expand their sense of the sites in which education actually takes place. Giroux argues that we must focus on the actual educational force of culture, reclaiming sites like television and other mass media from neoliberalism, and constantly reaffirming the responsibility of intellectuals in addressing those pedagogical practices that are actually central to a pervasive dominant cultural politics. Drawing from emerging, innovative forms of activism, what Giroux finally tenders in this essay is a provocative working model for reconnecting learning to social change, and theory to a variety of concrete public spheres in order to "take on the task of regenerating both a renewed sense of social and political agency as well as a critical subversion of dominant power itself" (149).

Noah De Lissoy and Peter McLaren's "Toward a Contemporary Philosophy of Praxis" also suggests that intellectual discourses and practices can and must intervene in the fragmentation of the left within global as well as smaller contexts. These authors focus on how the concept of imperialism, rearticulated and redeployed, can help to specify the particularity of "globalization" in a way that explains the linkages between multiple forms of oppression. Without denying the crucial differences between class, race, gender, and other oppressions, De Lissoy and McLaren trace the affinities between them. Ultimately, the authors contend that these categories (race, class, gender) do not simply *describe* forms of oppression, but are actually *used* to reproduce an economy of violence that structures continuing cultural and economic exploitation. De Lissoy and McLaren analyze recent events as a crystallization of these processes, but they also contend that these events provide an occasion for the elaboration of an "anti-imperialist pedagogy." The centerpiece of this pedagogy is the naming of, not a single root of exploitation (for example, understanding all oppression as ultimately class-based), but rather a nexus and coherence of multiple forms of oppression under imperialism. Their hope is to make possible a strategy of liberatory education that can bring together various left movements in coordinated struggle. By redefining pedagogical practices and intellectual discourses about pedagogy, they seek to enact a different logic of production of meaning and relationships, one that in initiating forms of sociality not premised on exploitation could project a path toward the construction of an authentically socialist counter-future.

In contrast to the relative optimism of these essays, Wendy S. Hesford's "Global/Local Labor Politics and the Promise of Service Learning" cautions

that, given the institutional realities of the American academy, intellectual discourses that purport to work on behalf of leftist political agendas are easily co-opted by conservative, corporate interests. Hesford begins by setting the context for this assertion through a discussion of Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins*, which argues that economic globalization and the subsequent decline of the status of the nation-state as a reproducer of national culture has led to a shift in the university's sense of mission. Hesford suggests that the university no longer envisions itself as a producer of cultural capital but functions instead as a bureaucratic consumer-oriented corporation defined by the needs of global economy. Examining the current trend toward service-learning programs in American universities, Hesford balances her admiration for the progressive intent of such initiatives with a critical view of their ultimate social implications. Indeed, service-learning initiatives might, she suggests, be more properly understood through a series of more critical questions: How are we to understand the gendered labor politics of service learning in the context of global capitalism and the corporate university, namely the trend toward client-oriented education? Is the current interest in service learning simply nostalgia for the university system's now defunct claim to a national cultural mission separate from that of capital? Does the push to institutionalize service learning represent a resurgent nationalism? And if so, how is this resurgent nationalism shaped by the feminization and/or privatization of service? Is service learning functioning as an alibi for the corporate university? Hesford considers how a global analysis of the "corporate university" might help teachers develop programs that counter rather than comply with the exploitation of student, faculty, and local/global labor.

Like Hesford's essay, Evan Watkins's contribution advocates a close and even skeptical scrutiny of left intellectual discourses within the academy. Watkins begins his chapter, "Between School and Work: Classroom and Class," by offering an overview of the contemporary academic left's uneasy relationship to communities outside the institution, weighing alternately how we perceive ourselves and how people working outside the walls of academe perceive us. Watkins's aim is to suggest a more exacting degree of attention to the terminology that typically structures debates over the public role of education, especially the left's own advocacy of idealistic, democratizing forms of education over against the ostensibly increasing trend toward viewing education as job training—the "vocalizing" of the university. Watkins suggests that much discourse on the public role of education—on the left as well as the right—is too constrained by such dichotomies, and contends that it is the responsibility of critical intellectuals to resist the attractions of discourses that hold out only a false promise of unity on the intellectual left.

Mark Wood's "Another World Is Possible" offers an enthusiastic appraisal of critical pedagogy's potential relation to international movements for global justice. Noting an increasingly ecumenical spirit of cooperation among diverse

international movements for social change, Wood argues that critical pedagogy can and must encourage student activism in ways that can highlight structural connections between class, identity, and ecological issues that once may have seemed disconnected. Reiterating the basic critical mission of the left intellectual, Wood implores the academic left to renew its commitment to “clarify the conflicting perspectives that compromise the movement for global justice,” to “help forge a counterhegemonic culture of international solidarity by teaching our students about other cultures and by linking our students to students, organizations, and movements around the world that are working to build a just mode of socioeconomic organization,” to help students “analyze capitalist social relations” in complex ways, and to encourage students to “develop the pedagogical skills they need to teach others what they know and the organizational skills they need to teach others what they know and the organizational skills they need to mobilize friends, co-workers, and community members in the fight for global justice” (126–217).

In the closing piece of the volume, “Feminism(s) and the Left: A Discussion with Linda Martín Alcoff,” Laura Gray-Rosendale invites Linda Martín Alcoff to consider the potential of feminism’s relation to the left. Alcoff outlines the current state of feminist studies in the United States, describing how she views the history of the specific relationship between the women’s movement and the left, and how this relationship has played itself out in her own life and scholarship. In her conversation with Gray-Rosendale Alcoff cites a variety of difficulties in historical efforts to integrate feminism and the left, including internal sexism in left organizations, inadequate attention in many left movements to the development of plausible, nonreductionist accounts of women’s oppression, and the dilution of truly radical feminist agendas in favor of partial gender reforms for the middle class. Despite the troubled historical relationship between feminism and the left, Alcoff sees genuine progress in strides taken by labor unions during recent years and in the emergence and growth of new organizational models in antiglobalization, antiwar, as well as other movements.

In closing, let me return to the portrait of the contemporary left proposed by Richard Flacks in *Making History: The American Left and the American Mind*. Flacks’s indictment of the American left stems in part from his sense that the social reality now faced by the left is a highly complex one, one not easily comprehended by the ideologies that have traditionally served the organizational needs of centralized left groups. Equally problematic, Flacks suggests, is the failure of left organizations to appeal to the full range of interests (political and more) that are likely to motivate potential left constituents. This difficulty, it must be recognized, has not been resolved by the decentralization of the left. As Flacks has it, single-issue advocacy groups and theories are no more effective than the organized left at integrating the multiple and complex investments that together make up the human life of left constituents.

Flacks acknowledges the existence of a “rather well-established intellectual left in America,” but this fact offers, in his view, little hope for the renewal of the left:

Instead, the intellectual left . . . seems increasingly to be reproducing the established institutional and cultural structures. Such organization as now exists among radical intellectuals is entirely specialized. Such groupings, networks, journals, and conferences provide frameworks of support for sustaining professional careers and intellectual work within particular disciplines. But they do not cross-fertilize very much—and like the diffused and fragmented left as a whole, they do not advance an alternative vision. Moreover, internally, such groups increasingly resemble the formal character of conventional professional organizations, failing to encourage an atmosphere in which the practice of individuals is reflected on, or in which members can find intellectual or emotional community. (282)

Flacks’s influential book closes by calling for the formation of a “collective intellectual” left that can begin to correct the fragmented situation of today’s activist intellectuals and restore the left’s historic functions “of socialization, of cultural renewal, of prophecy” (279). The potential of such a network of social movements is suggested by historical precedents, including that of the American Popular Front in the 1930s. During this period, the communist-led American left was transformed from a narrowly sectarian group to a movement encompassing a variety of radical and liberal political groups in common cause against fascism. As cultural historian Michael Denning has shown in *The Cultural Front*, the time of the American Popular Front evidenced what was a radical change in the left’s formerly limited appeal and public relevance. As a result of this coalition across what had previously been seen as divergent political investments, the left was for a short time able to exercise what Denning calls a “powerful, indeed an unprecedented, impact on U.S. culture” (xvii).

The challenge facing the intellectual left today is how to create a new *and sustainable* “cultural front” that can heal the fragmented situation of contemporary left interests. Before the intellectual left can hope to make a real contribution to this effort, however, it must squarely face its tendency to focus myopically upon narrowly circumscribed issues and disciplinary discourses. As Flacks has it:

what is needed—in every milieu that is linked to the left tradition—is that at least some members consciously operate in terms of the “gentle power of reason,” fostering an atmosphere in which ideas can be freely expressed and tested, in which individual needs can be voiced without fear of recrimination, and criticism offered without the taint of condemnation, and in which local action can be openly discussed in its global, historical relevance. (283)

Can the intellectual left in the United States begin to open the peripheries of specialization through the “gentle power of reason”? Can it begin to articulate an appealing and coherent shared agenda for social change across disciplinary, identity, and issue-domain boundaries? The answers to these questions are, of course, uncertain, but the essays in *Radical Relevance* suggest that the intellectual left continues to build upon earlier efforts to move toward precisely such a project. Although the scholarship proffered in this volume comes out of a wide and differentiated array of disciplines, theoretical stances, and political interests, all of the essays converge upon a common project that must continue to urgently occupy our intellectual, creative, and political lives: envisioning the interdependence of left causes in an effort to move toward the realization of a “whole left.”

WORKS CITED

- Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. London: Verso, 1996.
- Flacks, Richard. *Making History: The American Left and the American Mind*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.
- Rose, Fred. *Coalitions across the Class Divide: Lessons from Labor, Peace, and Environmental Movements*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000.
- Teres, Harvey. *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.