

## **Interview Part Two: Monsters and a Critique of Everyday Neoliberalism**

Wednesday 23 July 2014, by [ECHEVERRIA Tessa](#), [McNALLY David](#), [SERNATINGER Andrew](#) (Date first published: 4 July 2014).

**This is part two of an interview with scholar-activist David McNally on the current economic crisis. The first part [\[1\]](#) focused on the crisis itself, its causes, the way in which working life has been reorganized, the perspective of ruling elites in managing the crisis and pursuing austerity policies, and how this should help inform our stance as movement activists.**

**This second part will concentrate on McNally's book, *Monsters of the Market*, asking why the monstrous has captured popular culture. This will lead us into a critique of everyday life under neoliberal capitalism, discussing how the experience of waged labor has created an affinity for monster stories, particularly zombies, vampires, and Frankenstein's monster. The second part ends with McNally's thoughts on building a renewed socialism-from-below.—AS**

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**Tessa Echeverria: It's of course important to understand how capitalism works and how the current crisis came to be in order to use that information to mobilize our social movements in a forward trajectory and not just see it as crazy people instituting this plan that's not good for the economy. I was hoping we could transition into talking about *Monsters of the Market*. In the introduction, you talk about how people say capitalism is a monstrous system and that's what we're up against, but we need to recognize the real monstrosities that capitalism has brought about and the way it forces us to live under the system every day. I was wondering if you could go into why you wrote the book—tell us why you thought this was an important book and what was your process?**

David McNally: It's interesting because we've been starting, I think appropriately, from the economic side of the equation in terms of the most basic thing that people talk about in their lives: paying the bills, paying the rent, paying the mortgage, can they find a few more hours of work and so on. But there's a danger in that, and I say that as somebody who writes a lot in the area of political economy. There's a danger that we don't pay attention to so many other dimensions of experience in a capitalist society. Here I think the image of monsters and monstrosity is really important.

There is something very unsettling about what goes on in modern society. We've created a society in which the mass of humankind is dispossessed of land and any other means of making a living except to go out onto the market and sell your capacity to work to an employer. That experience is one that I don't think we reflect on much, and I think it's a problem. It has become so normalized. We treat it as such a natural fact of life that we often forget that you can't sell your ability to work, your

creative energy, your talents and so on, without physically turning yourself over as well.

On one level we all know this: whether you punch a time clock at a factory or you log on to a computer as soon as you get to work to indicate that you're present the fact is that there is a rigid, orchestrated routine for most of us governing hours of work: when we get breaks, what kind of communication we can and cannot have with our coworkers, with management, never mind with our loved ones and so on. Literally we surrender control over our body and our wills for a significant part of our waking lives.

Of course we always try to steal a little bit of that back: sneak off and email someone or send a text message, or whatever. But the truth is that most of our time we are doing something that we don't think of as living. We think that our lives begin when we leave work. That's why we get all those expressions, like referring to work as "dead time," for instance.

What a remarkable expression to think of a part of our lives as if we are living dead! And of course the living dead is the classic image of the zombie. My own view is that one of the things that's happened under neoliberalism, that the power of employers over workers has become so significantly greater as a result of the defeat of unions, the reorganization of work on shop floors and the basic restructuring of labor that's gone on, that we are in fact more dominated than ever before. We are generally more sped up and stressed in our work than ever before.

The idea of being a living dead, and very often feeling "zombie-fied," as we leave work and all we're good for is opening up a beer, having a bite to eat and watching some mind-deadening stuff on our laptops or what have you, all of that I think is part of the social-cultural reality of what it feels like day after day when we're working. Your life energies are stolen from you. They're taken; they're appropriated by somebody else who treats you simply as a means to an end, which is the profitability of their firm in whatever good or service it is that they're producing.

I think that within our culture there is a very deep hostility, but worse often after a very deep depression, about that reality. Part of what's happening with the proliferation of zombie images in our culture is self-recognition in the zombie. There's recognition that a lot of the times we shuffle around like the slow moving creatures: awkward, kind of ugly, not looking very uplifting. In some ways the zombie captures a part of our lives that we don't like to talk about. One of the things that I was trying to do in *Monsters of the Market* was to really reflect on the ways in which our popular culture is saturated with these images.

Having said that I think that too often in the Hollywood and the North American genre of the zombie we've lost what was once at the heart of it, literally, when the zombie image originated in Haiti. We've lost the image of the zombie laborer. That's what the Haitian image was about, living dead laborers for others. For a whole variety of historical reasons, Hollywood has fallen in love and the mass media in North America has fallen in love with the zombie consumer. You see it even in the idea of zombies as flesh eaters. That's very new imagery, which probably goes back to George E. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, which was one of the most powerful critical uses of the zombie as flesh eater. Interestingly, Romero didn't think they were zombies! They only got called that later. That idea that something monstrous where our life energy is captured and we are turned into something less than fully human is I think part of the story.

The other side of it, and the one that is very interesting, and one I think some of the best treatments of zombies sometimes get at, is the idea that the zombies might wake up. This is a central part of the Haitian story of the zombie, and the Haitian image is sometimes picked up in sub-Saharan Africa as well. Zombies can awaken.

Zombies most of the time lack memory, they lack identity and subjectivity, but under certain conditions they awake. This is the image of the zombie rebellion. The carnival of the living dead, who all of a sudden maraud through the streets, scaring polite society and showing them in some ways that those who've been downtrodden, those who've been zombie-fied and monsterized by this system actually have a monstrous power. Once they get it together, they can use that power in carnivals of revolt, insurrection, and rebellion. There's one really nice film from the 1990s by Wes Craven called *The People Under the Stairs* that really gets that image of the zombie revolt.

There's also a story of zombies coming up against big business, the bankers. The real zombies are those in life who have no purpose in life except to exploit others for ever swelling amounts of money in bank accounts somewhere. The zombie image can therefore be turned around or inverted to one in which we are criticizing zombie capitalism as a system on life support by governments, pumping trillions of dollars into keeping a certain kind of necrophiliac capitalism going and sucking our life energies to do it. *The Monsters of the Market* is how we all experience being zombie-fied in some ways when we become workers in a capitalist society and live at least part of our lives as the living dead. There are these other sides, the potentially radical usages of the zombie images where zombies awaken, recognize who they are, they come to a capacity for action in their society against those who are a different kind of zombie, another living dead.

**Andrew Sernatinger: Everyone I've talked to that's seen or heard about this book has already been fascinated by it, and I think that's a remarkable success. Here we just had this fantastic conversation about *Global Slump*, which I think is probably one of the best books about the crisis that I've read, but for a lot of people looking at that sort of political economy is intimidating. But then here you have something that seems almost fun and subversive in this way that everybody can relate to. Everyone has a story or something they want to talk about with the mythology of zombies and vampires and things like that. It's a brilliant delivery on that.**

It's really interesting that you talk about the different ways that the zombie myth has been deployed because we're so used to thinking of the zombie as something you don't want to be or that you try to escape from. You're right that there is this kind of small current about the zombie that becomes awakened and transcends being a zombie. You brought up a Wes Craven movie, but even George Romero in *Land of the Dead* has that same zombie rebellion sequence. People have a discomfort about it, but then you can only take the zombie idea so far before it has to have a resolution. The rebellion motif is one of the places people have taken it to.

To some extent, the fascination with the zombie myth has changed with the arrival of this crisis and slump. The perception isn't about alienation as much as it is about survival, it seems. Here you are against a wave of people and you're competing for your spot. Literally, the alternative is death. That seems to be something that's really gripped the popular imagination.

DM: Yes. I basically wrote the book before the explosion of what I would call the "Zombie Apocalypse" idiom that you're describing there and I think it's very powerful and I'll come back to that in a moment.

On your first point, I think that one of the things that we need to be very careful about on the left is that we are able to talk about the quality of every day experience. Sometimes as huge as issues like employment, wages and so on are, the danger is that those of us on the socialist left may seem to project the idea that all we want is a society with full employment and better pay. Of course I want full employment and better pay, but that can be appropriated to the mythology of perfect full employment capitalism. We wouldn't be addressing alienated labor, the degradation of work, the fabric of our daily lives, and the exhaustion of people by mundane, boring, incredibly dreary and

tedious labor processes without any diversity or creativity to them.

One of the nice things about coming into this discussions about monsters and zombies and vampires is its one of the ways in which we do get to talk about what daily life experience is like being at work or searching for work in our society. It forces us to think if we really want to imagine a better society then full employment and better wages aren't enough! We've got to be talking about the very qualitative features of everyday life, the fabric of social existence, the question of human creativity, of dis-alienating labor, of finding entirely different rhythms of work and life.

Those are the kinds of discussions—particularly in a period where we've been retreating all the time—that we're not even having in a serious way in left circles. And yet in my experience if you really want to get across to people the idea of a socialist alternative to how our society operates, one of the things that is most attractive and captivating is the idea that we're talking about changing the very rhythms, the sensuous fabric of everyday life and creativity. That's one of the things that I've enjoyed about some of the conversations that the book has opened up.

I think you're entirely right on your point about the zombie apocalypse. The zombie was there as this incredibly adaptable image that when the crisis hit there was the idea that we could in fact be moving into a stage of capitalism where—forget all these stories about technological progress, which are the old fantasies of ever expanding capitalism—we could be in a meat grinder of a system! It could just chew things up as it rots; as cities rot; as disease spreads; as hordes of homeless people simply move about the land looking for a place to live.

All of those are just extrapolations of some of the trends of this crisis. The zombie image was highly resonant with that perception. It can also then get married to a certain kind of deeply conservative survivalism. I would suggest that a lot of that is going on in the very popular series *The Walking Dead*. If you go through the roles played by actors of color in that series it seems to me that you see a certain kind of white survivalism that runs through.

It's important therefore to think about how we discuss and analyze why these kinds of images have such powers of attraction: there is something that people really do identify with in the collapse of civilization image, there is a sense that the growth phase of capitalism seems to have disappeared. That's important to connect with. But at the same time, if collective responses designed to remake the world in radically new ways just don't seem to be out there then the survivalist mode can kick in. Here I think that Frederick Jameson's pithy little comment tells us an enormous amount: "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." I think that's what we're seeing in these zombie apocalypse stories and scenarios: civilization is collapsing, but all kinds of capitalist modes of survival in the most elemental and brutal sense start to fill the void; you just beat your competitors into the ground. It's a scenario in which collective solutions to remaking the world tend to disappear. That's why I think the zombie rebellion idiom becomes really important in a political and historical moment like this. That's a subversive side.

There are these little events, the "Zombie Marches," that you get in a number of cities, that I think are really interesting because zombie marches increasingly have all these financial and capitalist symbolism about them. At the last zombie march in Toronto, I would say half of the zombie marchers had dollar bills pasted all over them and that sort of thing. That way of turning the imagery and talking about capitalism as the living dead system, the idea of zombies who are actually breaking through it, is something that is very difficult to sustain right now but has really huge creative possibilities. I find people responding to some of the better zombie rebellion type images really interesting in that regard.

**AS: One of the things that we like about this discussion about why people are taken with**

**zombies is because it is in a way difficult to grasp everything that's been happening. But I think you made the point in *Monsters* that the popular imagination can explain things in capitalism sometimes only through the fantastical. When things like crises happen, sometimes only the monstrous can really describe it. And that is something that Marx gets to also.**

The zombie wasn't really around when Marx was writing *Capital*, but *Capital* is full of all kinds of allusions to vampires and monsters, how there's a life-force sucking energy in capitalism. On the one hand I think that it's really interesting that you have to engage with this mythology and that it seems like even Marx was very aware of deploying popular mythology or creating a literary element to his analysis of capitalism. Also the vampire is the counterpart to the zombie in nearly the opposite way.

DM: There's no question about it. One of the things I really enjoyed about working on the book was exploring and recuperating what Marx was doing with those monster images. People often talk about Marx's political economy writings as so difficult and intimidating, and of course *Capital* is a big fat book and the opening chapters are just full of new concepts, dizzyingly so.

One of the things that we sometimes forget is that Marx was struggling to find a language with which he could express what was going on in capitalism. The existing theoretical languages (philosophy, political economy) that he had really weren't fully serviceable. He tried to use them to the extent that he could, but once he gets to the chapters on the working day and what it feels like to be in a factory, or his chapter on machinery and what that is like, Marx has got the whole Charlie Chaplin Modern Times-thing right there! The worker becomes a cog in the machinery; the machinery drives the worker.

But how does he express it? Chaplin can do it in a filmic way, with these incredibly powerful visual images, but Marx has to generate the imagery through the word. I find it just fascinating the way that he returns over and over to the vampire as an image: the vampire who will not let go until every bit of blood has been sucked dry from the worker. He also returns to the image of giants. He's got the factory and machinery as Cyclops at one point. Production is just so overwhelming in the massiveness of the operation that the worker is reduced to mere insignificance in relationship to it.

I really find it interesting the way in which he's struggling to bring together all these narrative strategies: yes he's using some philosophy; he's using some political economy; but Shakespeare is in there! Faust is in there! Vampires are in there! When he hits the limits of some of the existing theoretical discourse of his day, he goes for the only thing that he can imagine can convey what he's trying to describe, which is a whole series of literary images. I think we need to appreciate that aspect of Marx.

In all the ways we think about rebuilding a radical left culture today, we need to put a much greater emphasis on the literary and the cultural as ways of communicating or expressing what it is we're trying to say in our society. There's a danger that we become kind of monotonal: we get a certain left discourse that was honed in a particular historical period and we imagine that that discourse and its vocabulary has magical effects because once upon a time the masses mobilized behind those images and that rhetoric. Well, if they're still effective and there are ways that they still speak to people, that's fine. But we need to be honest about the cultural transformations that go on in our society and I think it's important to find the resources within popular culture, in film and literature and so on, that allow us to communicate these sorts of things. That's why I loved your example from Romero's *Land of the Dead*, where there are fascinating scenes where zombies are learning to use weapons! It's not true that they can't learn, that they're uneducable. There's a learning process happening. There is the de-zombification happening, or what I was calling the "zombie awakening." I find it's really interesting the kind of discussions you can get into about our society by using those

kinds of cultural reference points as well as the political economy that we absolutely need, as well as the historical understanding. That's what I mean by not being monotonal: we can draw upon a lot of different languages, visual and imagistic systems to communicate what is going on in our society and how it could be different.

**TE: I wanted to go into vampires a little more. We've talked about how zombies have changed in their cultural significance and how they've fit into a various stories as capitalism has changed. Talking about vampires the same way, vampires of old were Dracula or Nosferatu; they were terrifying, evil creatures that destroyed every life force around them. Nowadays vampires are majestic and something to aspire to be, instead of something to fear. I was wondering if you could go into this development a bit.**

DM: If we go back to Bram Stoker's original Dracula story, it's an aristocratic image to begin with. It's deeply parasitic and frightening: these vampires do you damage! What we've got today is this fascinating romanticization of the vampire. One of my hunches is that, of course, in all kinds of ways the vampire image has lots of different sexual overtones expressed in different cultural artifacts. It particularly speaks to young people discovering their sexuality, and that's part of what's there.

But I find the analyses that only get that far to be a little superficial. I say that because it seems to me that part of the resurgence of the romanticized vampire actually is a kind of anti-alienation theme. It's speaking to a society in which people feel incredibly atomized, incredibly dissociated from each other; the sense that social connection is at an all-time low. Communities and their resources have been so eroded in the neoliberal era.

The idea of isolated, self-sufficiency and everything that's really unsettling and disquieting about that is also running through that image. At the most powerful level, the vampire is an image of incredible closeness. Literally bodies become interconnected in the most intimate ways, and I think that's picked up again in the mobilization of vampire tropes as love stories, stories of closeness, passion, and belonging; the idea of being infinitely desired and inseparable from others. Sure, we can see various gendered tropes at work there that we'd want to be aware of and critical towards, but just as I was saying before we need to see what it is about the zombie apocalypse image that really is speaking to people's fears, so I think we need to see the romantic vampire as speaking to the really frightening sense of aloneness that is so pervasive in our society. We need to understand that the desire for an escape from other isolation is something that good politics and social movements of the left ought to be able to speak to.

There's a cultural barometer, a kind of reading of the social temperature of our times that we need to do there. All of this is speaking to the huge amount of experience of everyday life. Very often, saying in public something like, "My profound sense of aloneness is really frightening and it scares me"—that's not something that people do very readily! Those films or novels that capture this particular construction of the vampire I think give people permission to recognize those feelings and then have a fantasy-based projection of a world where they would be desired, where they would belong, they would have togetherness and communion with others. Seeing that side of it, I find it to be really significant.

**AS: One of the things I like about these discussions is that there is no singular "correct" answer when you're analyzing culture. There's a lot of room for thinking about all of the different things at work here and trying to pin down what people are really concerned about.**

Part of the reason why we brought this up is because we have these conversations from time to time where, for example, there are progressive institutions and all of their social funding has dried up.

Now they're talking about the need for patrons, essentially, where some wealthy donor will hold up their progressive ideal. I almost see that in the new vampire: the vampire is the image of power, and if someone needs to be lifted out of their situation they can get this vampire-patron, who's a "good vampire" that helps them out. To me, it doesn't have to take away from what you were saying before, I think it speaks to a sense that the way to get out of working class life is that you're lifted out externally.

DM: I think you're absolutely right. It connects back to something that is the flipside of the aristocrat image. The aristocrat is a dangerous individual in the Bram Stoker story, but on the other hand the aristocrat is not capitalist. Aristocrats operate according to a different social and cultural code, and one of the characteristics of that code—and I think you've nailed it in that description—is noblesse oblige. You have patrons, people upon whom you confer some of your wealth and beneficence. I think the fantasy for that, as you say the idea of someone who will rescue us from the fears, the dreariness of a life of wage labor is also probably part of that story in wages that deserve to be thought more about. So yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense.

**TE: I just love the story of Frankenstein and you mention it in Monsters of the Market. I was hoping you could go into the significance of that quintessential monster story. We talked earlier about how with wage labor, you're selling your body and giving up so much of yourself—talk about how that plays out in the story of Frankenstein.**

DM: It's such a wonderful story and it's a shame that people often know the story largely through later adaptations through film and elsewhere and in some ways don't get to appreciate what an interesting novel Mary Shelley wrote. In the early nineteenth century, Shelley created that whole resonant set of images of the creature and of Dr. Victor Frankenstein and all the interactions that the two have with each other.

The context is really interesting. Among other things, Mary Shelley is the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, the writer of *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, one of the original modern feminist texts of the late eighteenth century. At the time of the French Revolution and its slogan of the rights of man, she wrote on the question of the rights of women. Then Shelley marries the great radical left poet, Percy Shelley. In conversation with others, Mary Shelley is exposed regularly to discussions around the so-called "Luddite Riots" in Britain in the period 1813-1820.

These rioters, machine wreckers, were basically poor workers across the small industrial towns of Britain who, when they were going to be displaced by various pieces of machinery for spinning and weaving, would show up at night under cover of darkness and burn down the mills or smash the machines. They were being hugely persecuted: they were being arrested and hanged and so on for their crimes against property. The circle of friends that Mary Shelley ran in was opposed to this treatment of poorer people who were trying to preserve their livelihoods.

What she does is incredibly interesting. She has her isolated scientist, Victor Frankenstein, decide he wants to create a living creature. How does he do it? He raids graveyards. He goes and gets pieces of human body parts and he melds them together with animal body parts. This was a constant theme for the working class in London at the time, because corpses were regularly raided from graveyards. Really only the corpses of the poor because the rich were buying these heavy lead vaults that couldn't be blasted open. The bodies of the poor were just being stolen from graveyards and sold for medical or anatomical experiments. This spoke to a working class fear that even in death your body could be chopped up and turned into a bunch of saleable commodities. Bad enough in life that you'd have to sell your body to survive, but then to have it chopped up in death was the ultimate indignity.

Mary Shelley is picking up on that to begin with. But also, she's imaging the proletariat, imaging the working class, in this notion of grabbing different bits and pieces of random, disparate individuals and cobbling them altogether. Well, that's what happens when you go to the factory! That's what happens when you go to the mill or the mine. Bunches of people who have had no previous human contact with one another all of a sudden are thrown together as one creature, one entity: the workforce. She's imaging all of that and depicting all of it in the construction of this creature, the working class, by this one individual, Dr. Frankenstein.

I find all of that just incredibly powerful in the way in which it's depicting both anxiety about grave robbing that workers have—their bodily integrity was regularly being assaulted, and here was the worst possible imaginable result that they even get you as you lay in your grave—and also this idea of being thrown together and becoming one monstrous mass, an enormous creature capable of feats beyond what any one individual could do. Of course, that's what we are like when we're all assembled together in a workplace: we can do things that no one of us could do on our own, in terms of the amount of Big Macs we can produce or the amount of automobiles we can produce.

Contrary to the way in which Hollywood later turns the creature into a slow shuffling zombie without the capacity to speak, particularly in the Boris Karloff movies, that's not there in Shelley. What's so fascinating is that once the creature rebels and heads out on his own, he moves through the world quickly, but more than that: he learns to read! There is this amazing set of scenes where the creature sits outside the cottage of a poor family, one of whose young men has married what I can only describe as an Arab feminist. This is a literate, Arab woman and she reads to him the most radical, revolutionary tract of the day by a guy named Volney called *The Ruins*. It's about how humanity began in Africa, and it's still considered by Africanists to be one of the greatest anti-racist texts ever written. So you've got an anti-racist theme, a feminist theme, and a working class theme all running through this novel. This is how the creature learns to speak. He learns by hearing an Arab feminist read the greatest revolutionary tract perhaps of the late 1790s or early 1800s.

Then of course, we know that it has to culminate in a great conflict between the inventor and the creature, the monster that the inventor has created. We get an ending that leaves everything hanging: we don't really know where things lie. We know that Victor Frankenstein has died and the monster has disappeared. The creature has won a victory, it wanted Frankenstein's death for the murders he committed, but at the same time it's unclear whether the creature has killed himself or if he will live to rise another day.

This to me is one of the most powerful literary imaginings of how capitalism brings into being a monstrous creature that could be its own undoing. What I really am attracted to is that this is not a zombie. The creature learns to read and what it craves throughout the whole story is communion and association; it wants a partner. Victor Frankenstein's crime is that the creature wanted a partner. Frankenstein started to create it, and then he killed the female companion he was making for the creature out of the fear that a new race of creatures would be bred. Well, if that isn't the capitalist class's great fear of the multiplying masses of the proletariat, of the working classes, I don't know what is.

There's so much happening here. This is in my mind the original monster story about capitalism, but also the one that leaves open the idea that this monstrous creature of the working class might just be capable of educating itself; might just be capable of putting an end to this insane, alienating society; it might just be capable of starting something different. But that's left as a question mark. We're dangling and there are no easy answers. In some ways of course that is very attractive to me, because if the left ought to have learned anything in the nearly 200 years since Mary Shelley wrote that text, it's that there are no easy answers. Nevertheless, there are huge and explosive tensions in this society that she just captures so wonderfully.



**AS: That's a good place to finish with a conversation about the left. You're talking about, in the literary sense, an antagonism within capitalism but at the same time an uncertainty about capitalism being overcome. We wanted to talk to you a little bit about your thoughts on the left right now, because as far as I'm aware you've written a couple of essays but it's something you haven't commented very much on recently. Maybe you want to start by telling us a little bit about your history on the left?**

DM: I was in university in the United States and I focused quite a lot on anti-racist and anti-war activism, particularly with the Committee to Free Angela Davis. When I later returned to Toronto for family reasons, there was a kind of radical leftwing that had just emerged in the social democratic party in Canada, the New Democrats. That left wing split off from the New Democratic Party and tried to launch a new kind of radical left party, and I joined it in my teens because it was the one place I could see a left group that actually had really significant working class membership: nurses, steelworkers, teachers, autoworkers and so on. That particular group, known ironically as The Waffle, self-destructed in the mid-1970s and a handful of us had gotten attracted to the "Socialism From Below" politics of the International Socialist groupings at the time. We found that much of what they were trying to do, particularly the rank-and-file labor organizing but also a rank-and-file organizing that was very open in terms of the feminist and anti-racist dimensions of that work; we found that very attractive.

I became a founding member of what became the International Socialist group here in Canada. I put a lot of years into trying to do activism in that guise. For a whole variety of reasons, that International Socialist current began, I think, to politically degenerate in the later 1970s: it became increasingly bureaucratic, increasingly fundamentalist in the sense of "we have the truth" and we don't need to ask any questions, and increasingly intolerant to feminism and anti-racism. This eventually, in the early 1990s, drove a bunch of us out and into the political wilderness. We then were involved in creating the New Socialist Group.

That organization continues today, and what really distinguishes it is that it begins from the premise that first we have lived through a period of the decomposition of the radical left of a previous era. That historic left in virtually all of its forms is effectively over: the social democratic, the Communist Parties, but also the far left versions. That history is basically done, not in the sense that we don't need to learn from it, but in the sense that I don't believe those organizations can be the basis for the next new left. Therefore, we need to be thinking about a longer-term process of recomposing the left. That is going to mean a process of socialist renewal in which the socialism that we develop is completely transformed by and shot through with the lessons of theory and practice from the queer movements, the socialist feminists, the most important strands of anti-racist and anti-colonial politics (in Canada of course this means of indigenous liberation politics), and also of eco-socialism.

Yes, there are very important inheritances from the past. As you can tell, Marx remains central to me for how I think about the world in which we live, but it's got to be a renewed, extended, developed socialism for the twenty-first century that is going to have a lot of new and unique characteristics that I think are informed by radical participatory democracy, more so than any left we have seen up until now. That's a big challenge to think about recomposing and renewing the left in those terms and breaking from all the vanguardism of little grouplets that think they are the center of a next left composition. They're not. If they're healthy, even semi-healthy, they'll have a role to play but it's going to be something very different.

Of course, it all presupposes a return of large-scale social movements: movements that can produce tens of thousands and sometimes even hundreds of thousands of people in the streets. As we get that, just like the last new left, people are going to look for different kinds of socialist traditions and approaches that can allow them not to have to reinvent the wheel. So the work of small circles and

collectives of activists today who are trying to think about what resources can we help preserve and develop for a new left will be really very important. That was true of the last new left, for good and for ill. Having a sense of what ailed the last left, and in particular the small group party-building projects, is important. They can produce fanatical energy, but they all hit a wall because that model has inherent limits. It doesn't matter if the group grew to a few thousand, as some of them got in France or Britain, because none of them proved capable of moving beyond that and most of them have disintegrated in one way or another since then.

That's a very daunting process, but it's nevertheless something that is our responsibility today. Those like me, and I think of myself as a 1970s radical, I think we have a responsibility to try to preserve and develop a kind of living tradition which has some roots in what we think has been best about past lefts but also a very high allergy to those sectarianized tendencies that did great damage to the last left. Yes, we need organization, that's absolutely true, but the organizational forms will be different, they will (I hope) be more open, democratic, participatory and thoroughly feminist, pro-queer, and anti-racist in ways in which our spaces weren't in the last left. It's a big task, but the truth of the matter is we're talking about what small groups, circles, collectives, networks and so on can do now just by way of trying to provide some resources for the next left. Those resources will get inherited, edited, deleted, transformed, and re-worked and so on by real social forces and real social movements.

But it is important that democratic, from-below socialist politics be out there and be available, because one of the problems is that neoliberalism also destroys historical memory. The sense that we have certain continuities that are precious to us and that go back to the great past struggles that people have waged, these are a part of our history, they're a part of our heritage and we need to make them part of our memory, but in that open-ended way that we know we're reworking the left and not trying to mimic and repeat as if that could be something good. That's where I see the kind of task that I'm involved with, with New Socialist in Toronto, but also just staying in touch with all the currents and people I can. We need one another, we need dialog, and we need ways of exchanging experiences and reflecting together. If history has taught us anything, of course mass struggles will emerge again but we can never predict how. When they do, we could have kept resources that will be absolutely precious to the next left.

**Interview done by Andrew Sernatinger and Tessa Echeverria**

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**P.S.**

\* From New Politics, July 4, 2014:

<http://newpol.org/content/monsters-and-critique-everyday-neoliberalism>

\* Andrew Sernatinger and Tessa Echeverria are socialists based out of Madison, Wisconsin. They produce the podcast Black Sheep, available at [www.blacksheepod.org](http://www.blacksheepod.org), where the audio of this interview was first aired.

David McNally is a scholar-activist based in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* and *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*.

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## Footnotes

[1] Also available on ESSF (article 32583), [Interview Part One: Capitalism, Global Slump & the New Normal](#).