

Call for Papers

Conference: “Transition and Renewal: Progressive Utopias and Leftist Reorientation, 1970s–1990s”

- Date: 12–14 May, 2027, Venue: University of Copenhagen
- Organizers: Knud Andresen (Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg), Mads Jedzini (University of Copenhagen), Detlef Siegfried (University of Copenhagen)

The pervasive sense of ongoing economic, political and everyday crises in contemporary Western societies has prompted attempts at reorientation within the political left. While the Left has traditionally drawn its legitimacy from the promise of progress, the visions of the contemporary Left today seem largely informed by and rooted in the past. What has become of the labour movement's once-radiant future?

To contextualise the transformation of the European Left's visions of the future, it is worthwhile examining the long 1970s. Following the end of the Trente Glorieuses (Jean Fourastié), whose consequences for the party system were encapsulated in Andrei S. Markovits's and Philip S. Gorski's study *Red, Green, and Beyond*, utopian visions of the future and perspectives of social progress lost much of their appeal, and the 'utopian energies' (Jürgen Habermas) were exhausted. Whether interpreted as the emergence of a 'presentist present' (Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht) or a time when 'the world fell out of joint' (Aleida Assmann), the political left became increasingly characterised not by hope for a radiant future society, but by a desire to preserve the status quo. This conference will explore the strategies and practices through which the European left responded to the loss of its social utopia, and the extent to which comparable attempts at reorientation can be observed during this period.

We proceed from the assumption that scepticism about the future did not entirely replace the progressive utopia; rather, reorientations varied across social domains and milieus. Our focus encompasses the entire spectrum of the left, including left-liberal currents, social democracy, trade unions, communism and the radical left. As well as Western European countries, we also consider reorientation processes within state socialism. The temporal scope extends from the 1970s to the 1990s.

We invite scholars interested in the history and present of the Left to exchange ideas on this significant yet underexplored transnational phenomenon. We welcome national case studies as well as broader comparative and analytical contributions from transnational and European perspectives. Relevant approaches include *inter alia* intellectual history, the history of social movements as well as economic, social, and cultural history.

Contributions could address (while not being limited to) the following thematic areas:

- The influence of the new social movements on the formation of left-wing political fields since the 1970s is unmistakable. What visions of the future were represented in these movements, for example in the women's movement? Were overarching societal utopias formed, and how widespread were they? How did left-wing parties respond to these new challenges?
- How did the semantics of the term "progressive" change since the 1970s?
- In the 1990s, a resurgence of nationalism can be observed. How did left-wing groups react to this development? Was a left-wing nationalism strengthened? To what extent can anti-national counter-reactions be observed?
- How did the developments of the 1990s – the collapse of state socialism and the dominance of neoliberalism – influence left-wing conceptions of progress?
- In 1979, the first European Parliament was elected, and the European integration process was intensified after the collapse of the socialist states. To what extent were demands for a "social Europe" implemented, and was the integration process generally welcomed or rejected?
- Technological progress in the form of automation and computerization, which had promised of a future without physical toil, lost its appeal during the long 1970s. Instead, scepticism towards technology prevailed, especially on the Left. To what extent did this coincide with nostalgic tendencies and "*Heimat*" discourses?
- Was the emergence of history workshops ("*Geschichtswerkstätten*"), that emerged primarily from the Left and dealt with the history of the labor movement, resistance against National Socialism, Jewish history, etc., a reaction to the erosion of the utopia of progress, or did it reinforce it?
- The Left fundamentally understood itself as internationalist. European labour migration as well as refugee migration influenced societies in their own countries. What conceptions of the future arose from this? How did, for example, trade unions react to the increasing relocation of production sites to non-European countries?
- To what extent can solidarity with liberation movements in countries of the Global South (e.g. Nicaragua, El Salvador, South Africa etc.) be seen as compensation for the loss of utopias in European countries?
- On these and other thematic areas, the earlier semantics of progress of the labour movement seem to have been redefined. What forms and variations can be observed? How did the balance shift between the "old" and the "new" Left?

We kindly request the submission of abstracts of up to 2,400 characters by January 15, 2026, to Knud Andresen (andresen@zeitgeschichte-hamburg.de) and Mads Jedzini (mje@hum.ku.dk). Submitters will be informed of the results by mid-February 2026.

We will seek external funding for the conference to cover travel and accommodation costs. In case of any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the organizers via email.

Overview:

Deadline for abstracts: January 15, 2026

Length of abstract: max. 2,400 characters

Decisions by: Mid-February, 2026

Conference date: 12–14 May, 2027, Conference venue: University of Copenhagen

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