

Janell Watson

## Writing to Change the World

An Interview with John Rees

British writer and activist John Rees cofounded the Stop the War Coalition in 2001. He also cofounded the revolutionary socialist organization Counterfire. He regularly writes for the print and online venues of both organizations, in addition to organizing demonstrations and rallies. Rees studied Marx and Hegel at the University of Hull, where he led a student occupation against the imposition of fees for overseas students. He was elected a member of the National Executive of the National Union of Students in the early 1980s. His academic work at Hull culminated in *The Algebra of Revolution: The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition* (Routledge, 1998). Combining writing with politics, he worked as a reporter for the *Socialist Worker* and served as editor of the party's quarterly journal, *International Socialism*, before leaving the party in 2009. Books that directly address leftist political organizing strategy include *The ABCs of Socialism* ([Bookmarks, 1995] Counterfire, 2014) and *Strategy and Tactics: How the Left Can Organise to Transform Society* (Counterfire, 2011). His more scholarly and analytical books include *Imperialism and Resistance* (Routledge, 2006) and *The Levellers' Revolution* (Verso, 2016). His experiences in Cairo during the so-called Arab Spring resulted in *The People Demand: A Short History of the Arab Revolutions*, with Joseph Daher (Counterfire, 2011). The television series that he wrote and presented for the Islam Channel [London] was later published as a book, *Timelines: A Political History of the Modern World* (Routledge, 2012). With Lindsey German, he cowrote *A People's History of London* (Verso, 2012), which celebrates the city's long lineage of revolutionary pamphleteers and agitators. Rees is currently a visiting research fellow at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he is continuing his research on the Levellers.

This interview took place online on Tuesday, August 9, 2016.

**Janell Watson** Your father was an activist in trade unions and in the Labour Party. Did his activism inspire you?

**John Rees** I guess the environment at home sort of gave me a certain set of values. I think it was probably not until I started becoming political

that I became more aware of what my father had done. He was a Labour Party member and trade unionist, as you say. He was standing as a local councilor even when he was in his eighties. So, he was pretty committed. He came from South Wales, so he had that kind of Left background that's pretty unique in that country. So I guess that influenced me in some ways.

**Watson** Many activists do not engage in academic argument, but you do. You've published books with Routledge and Verso, presses that of course target an audience beyond universities, but they still require a certain rigor in argument, detailed examples, and data as appropriate. Your book *Algebra of Revolution* is a fairly technical examination of the Marxist theory of dialectic. *Imperialism and Resistance* includes not only names and dates but also footnotes, data, and tables. In November your book on the Levellers will come out with Verso. What's the relationship between this scholarly facet of your writing and your activism—assuming there is a relationship?

**Rees** I would say my relationship with academia is not particularly that I engage with academic argument. Over my lifetime, academia has become much more separated from activism. I'd say that the current discourse, especially after the postmodernist linguistic turn, has become much less useful for politically engaged people. So my attitude towards academia is a kind of guerrilla-raiding-party attitude; I find it very useful in Hull and more recently at Goldsmiths to be able to have access to, and some of the academic discipline that comes with, that level of research, but I'm not primarily interested in the current academic debates. I'm much more interested in using the resources that academia allows you to access to try and formulate theoretical or historical philosophical ideas at a reasonable degree of sophistication but in a way which I hope that activists—let's put it this way: with a particular interest in those areas—would find useful. So my imagined audience is never in the first instance academics. It's always politically active people who want to theoretically or historically investigate a subject in some depth.

**Watson** Some of those readers will be academics and graduate students but not necessarily.

**Rees** Yeah, with the Levellers book. Now, this wasn't the case, wasn't anywhere nearly so back in the 1970s and early 1980s, but now the

standard way of publishing a piece of research is to publish it with a university press. If not, if you can't get it placed with Oxford University Press or Cambridge University Press, there is a kind of scholarly imprint which will publish the book and it will cost sixty or seventy pounds. Its intended circulation will be very small—libraries plus some academics—and that's a standard way of publishing. I'm very happy to have it with Verso because that means it will, like the *People's History of London* book that I wrote with Lindsey German, it will turn up in the Tate Modern bookshop or the National Theater bookshop. It will have a very wide distribution. It won't be priced prohibitively—or any more prohibitively than most books are—for a general readership. And I wouldn't want that to be otherwise, really.

**Watson** You studied Hegel and Marx at the University of Hull with Bhikhu Parekh, who is now a Labour member of the House of Lords. Are you two still in touch? As an American, I find it mind-boggling that you have a Marxist political theorist in the House of Lords. We would never have a Marxist scholar in the US Senate, for example.

**Rees** Well, before I was at Hull, I did my undergraduate degree at Portsmouth, and it was a politics degree, and I really began to learn about Hegel from one of my tutors there called Steve Bosworth. And as a result of that, then I applied to do research on Hegel and Marx at Hull, which I did under Bhikhu Parekh. I wouldn't say that Parekh was a Marxist, but he did have a very deep knowledge of Hegel and Marx, and the reason he got into the House of Lords was he'd been chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, and the Labour Party made him a peer. So, as you know, you don't have to be elected to get into the House of Lords. So the mystery of his appearance is due to a political appointment by the Labour Party. That's how that happened. But it was a very interesting period of time. It was an MPhil. I never completed that because there was a huge student movement against the first introduction of fees for students, at that time just for overseas students, but we said, and we were proved to be right, that if they'd introduced them for overseas students, they'd end up introducing them for everybody. So there was a massive student occupation of Hull University, which I was part of the leadership of at that time. There were something like two thousand students in occupation. We occupied a third of the university buildings. We had a court injunction taken against us to chuck us out. So that was definitely a moment where the activism interrupted the studies.

But then I came back to it later on and, in a much elaborated and changed form but rooted in the work I'd done at Hull, I published it as the *Algebra of Revolution*. Hull gave me a chance to read the whole of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which I can't say I would have been able to do under any other circumstance. And a lot else of Hegel's.

**Watson** You are currently a visiting research fellow at Goldsmiths. Are you working on a particular project there?

**Rees** The visiting research fellowship came out of the research on the Levellers. Mainly through the good offices of my former supervisor. It's not a paid or teaching position, but if you are attached to an institution, then the paywall that now exists between most people and archives and online material doesn't exist. And so [I was a fellow there] while I was completing the Levellers book, and I'm also working on what will, unfortunately, be a much more academically priced book, a series of essays I'm editing which came out of the John Lilburne 400 conference, which I ran in 2015 when it was the 400th anniversary of Leveller leader John Lilburne's birth. That's going to be with Routledge in about a year's time. So the continuing work with that is much, much easier if you're attached to an institution, so that's the sort of main purpose of that, really.

**Watson** Some of your other books are more like manifestos or how-to manuals, in that they directly address leftist organizing. I am thinking of *The ABCs of Socialism* and *Strategy and Tactics*.

**Rees** Yes, well, they are directly and immediately interventions in the political environment. They are, as you say, kind of pamphleteering in a way. They are short books, but they are pamphleteering in design and lineage, I would say. *The ABCs* is now an old book. The current edition is a second edition. It was written some time ago in the early 1990s and did very well, selling about twenty thousand copies of that first edition. And the second edition is also going well. So it's a sort of primer, and I wrote it for people who were becoming engaged in activism, coming into contact for the first time with socialist ideas and socialist organization, to try to lay out in short compass a particular view on what socialism is. And it seems it's sustained itself, so I guess that's one sign of success. And in a way, *Strategy and Tactics* is a kind of partner to it in the sense that it then carries the argument on about what a specific form of revolutionary organization is for, where it

comes from, what it's supposed to do, how it's supposed to work. So that would be a kind of step on from the sort of more general socialist arguments in *ABCs*.

**Watson** With your book *The People Demand: A Short History of the Arab Revolutions*, you branch out into international revolution, tying in the international aspect of Marxist organizing.

**Rees** Yes, that's always been a huge part of the antiwar movement. February 15, 2003, was a huge international movement. It was planned as a huge international movement. We planned it at the European Social Forum in Florence. I was already involved with the Left in Cairo at that time. The Cairo Conference, which ran all the way through the 2000s. I was the European vice president of that organization. So by the time the Arab revolutions came, I had more than a decade, in the Egyptian case, of working with activists in Egypt. And anybody who had the background knew as soon as Tunisia happened, you knew it was going to kick off. So the minute it started in Egypt, I rang my friends and I got out there. I was in Tahir Square for nine out of the eighteen days that overthrew Mubarak. I made two films while I was there. So yeah, that stemmed out of work that had been going on for a long time in the actual movement through the Cairo Conference.

**Watson** You were also in Berlin at the fall of the wall?

**Rees** Yes I was. I was reporting for the *Socialist Worker* newspaper then, and I was in Berlin for three days in the demonstrations in East Berlin before the wall came down. I was at Gethsemanekirche, which was one of the organizing centers of those protests, so yeah I was involved in reporting on that. In Egypt I knew much more, and I was much more involved in organizing in Cairo over a long period. That wasn't the case in Germany.

**Watson** How did you develop your skills as a reporter?

**Rees** I think the same way that everybody does. You just do it. Copy subbing actually is very important. You know if you learn to copy sub you can learn to write. I used to work on the industrial pages of *Socialist Worker*, and the industrial reports would come in on a Monday afternoon. And it would probably be three to four thousand words of

different reports, but the pages in the paper would only take about two thousand words of text. And before you could get out of the building that night, you had to cut the copy back to half its length, and that's a considerable motivation to learn to write and sub quickly, and when you can cut and reorder other peoples' writing, and you do it often enough, it's like learning to ride a bike, or learning to type, or learning to drive. It becomes second nature, and you apply it when you yourself write. I was lucky that I knew Paul Foot, who was a very, very good tabloid journalist. He used to work on the *Daily Mirror* when it was a serious labour paper in this country. And he was a very good tabloid writer. And so I learned that any idiot can write long; the real skill is writing short. And tabloid journalism is the best form of writing because it's written for working-class people who don't have a lot of time, who are reading on the tube, or on the public bus, or after they've been at work all day, or before they collect the kids from school. So if you haven't got their attention straight off, you haven't got their attention. And if you write long, wordy sentences with incomprehensible words in them, you haven't got their attention. So if you look at tabloid journalism, the sentences very rarely have parenthetical clauses in them. They are very short. The paragraphs are rarely longer than two sentences, but they're very effective. And that's not the only style of writing. And I couldn't write the *Levellers* book like that. But if you understand that and you can do that, it's really easy to do the other stuff. If you don't understand that and you try and work back, you can't do it. That's why many academics can't write well. And so I was very lucky to have that kind of tabloid journalism training—the copy subbing. Paul Foot used to tell me that on the old *Daily Mirror*, on the subs bench, there would be twelve copy subs. What the journalists wrote was given to the head sub. They would cut it, reorder it, sharpen it up. It would go to the next sub and the next sub and down the bench. And what came off the end of it was a whole lot shorter and a whole lot tighter than anything the journalist had given them. Now that's what you need to learn. It's like Blaise Pascal's thing where he said I'm sorry I wrote you such a long letter. I didn't have the time to write you a short one. And that's, that's the art, really.

**Watson** And of course tabloid originally just meant the size of the paper. Instead of the large newspaper, it's folded. It's cut in half.

**Rees** Yeah, exactly. It's like the *New York Post*.

**Watson** Did you move into writing screenplays the same way?

**Rees** Well, those were just scripts, so they were done for camera. They were just like writing a Counterfire article or a magazine article, that kind of length. About two thousand to twenty-five hundred words. But that too, that's the same skill. Because if you're reading off an auto-cue, you can't have a long sentence on an auto-cue. It just isn't on the screen in front of you. You have to do the same thing. Because even if you've written it yourself, when you're standing and reading it to the camera, you can't remember quite where it goes. So if you can't see the end of it, it's very disconcerting to read. So it's the same skill, really, as tabloid journalism.

**Watson** You did a television series called *Timelines* that was originally produced for the Islam Channel. Now it's a Routledge book. How did that come about?

**Rees** Well, a while back I made the Timeline series for the Islam Channel as a case in point. It's a privately owned channel [in the United Kingdom], a satellite channel. Obviously, as you can tell, it has some religious programming. But by and large its current affairs output is kind of left of center and not particularly, not at all, really, religiously determined. And it was one of the first channels that would have Stop the War Coalition on. Way before the BBC or anybody else. And so we kind of got to know the people in there and the CEO, Mohamed Ali Harrath. He is a former political exile from Ben Ali's Tunisia. So he is from a Left background as well. So a while back I went to him and said I've got this idea for a documentary series where we start with something that's in the news, like Palestine, then we go back to the origins of this, the Balfour Declaration, the creation of the state of Israel, and run the history forward, and that would be the timeline. And because I could write and present it, and because the channel had access to the Reuters film archive and therefore had access to enough archive, historical archive to illustrate it, and because we had a very good graphics designer and producer, it kind of worked. So we did twenty-seven episodes of that in the end. And then I turned the scripts into essays that made up the *Timelines* book for Routledge.

**Watson** And the episodes are available online too?

**Rees** I think most of them are now.

**Watson** A multiplier effect. You were able get these stories, this kind of history, out there. This kind of history doesn't come straightforwardly out of the textbook.

**Rees** I wrote those, you know, and this is a tribute to the channel, I wrote those just as I would have written them for the Counterfire website, the scripts. And I never had any editorial interference with that whatsoever. So essentially they are a series of Marxist-influenced films about current affairs. And you know you're lucky if you can do that. You're lucky if you can find space to do that.

**Watson** You also write speeches to be given at rallies or conferences.

**Rees** Yeah, I don't write those. If I've got thirty-five minutes or forty minutes on whatever on Marx economics or something, then I might make some notes for that. But generally, I used to make notes more, but during the height of the Stop the War I would be doing four or five meetings a day. So it's just like anything else, you do it frequently enough, it becomes second nature. So now certainly for big rallies or big meetings which are relatively short speeches anyway, I don't use notes. And if you can get to that point, I think that's good. I think it's a more natural and effective way of speaking if you can do it without notes.

**Watson** You do reporting, you do pamphleteering, you make TV programs, you do public speaking, and you also do analytic Marxist work. All of this seems to be very closely related for you.

**Rees** Yes it is. You know it all stems out of political activism. Quite a lot of what I do is simply political organizing, in Stop the War and in Counterfire. So it all revolves around political activism. You know I think the longest-standing sensation I have really is that you wake up in the morning and it's pretty obvious that there's a lot wrong with the world and you can decide to do something about it or you can decide to do nothing about it. Once you decide to do something about it, then it's just as well to find out at as deep a level as you possibly can how that world is structured, how it works, so that what you do is as effective as it can be. So as far as I'm concerned, there's a kind of lineal descent from understanding Hegel and Marx to what the next demonstration is or what the next slogan is or what the next leaflet could contain. And I think that is the oldest and best part of the Marxist tradition. I think this is what Marx and Engels were trying to do. I think it's what Lenin

and Trotsky were trying to do. I think it's what Rosa Luxemburg and Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci were about and that's informed their, analytic studies, what they did and wrote. What they did and wrote wasn't academic; it was about trying to change the world in the most effective way they could imagine.

**Watson** These dense, rich texts are useful in trying to figure out how to change the world because you have to figure out how it works, how it has worked, what's happened?

**Rees** Every time I look at something, I've got the framework that I worked out relatively early. The Hegelian, Marxist, the Lukácsian framework of understanding political consciousness, transformations in consciousness, the relationship between consciousness and organization. I bring that framework to bear every single time in all the work that I've done, even the Levellers thing, which doesn't have a massively present philosophical framework within it. But when I came to look at that thing, that's the framework that I'm using. Certainly in the imperialism book that's the framework that I was using.

**Watson** You and your group founded the Stop the War Coalition in September 2001, and it's still going fifteen years later. What did you do to enable it to continue, other than the war on terror continuing? The continuation of the organization wasn't a given.

**Rees** No it wasn't a given. We got the period right. The stuff that eventually went into *Imperialism and Resistance*, I'd been writing articles and material about that since before the Berlin Wall. And one of the things that being there and thinking about that gave you was a very strong sense that it wasn't going to be a peaceful new world order, that US imperialism was going to exploit the end of the Cold War, that it would mean an aggressive expansion of it, so we'd analyzed that. Not just us. Some other people, some other comrades actually in the Communist Party as well. We understood what was happening with American imperialism and therefore when 9/11 happened, we automatically assumed that this would be used as a trigger by the Bush administration to enact the project for a new American century. So we were, if you like, intellectually and theoretically in the right place before the event happened. So we reacted very quickly. The first meeting of the Stop the War Coalition was held—I think 9/11 was a Tuesday and on the Friday of the following week we had the first Stop the War

rally. I wrote the first leaflet. It was called *Stop the War before It Starts*. And the leaflet said they are going to use this to attack Iraq and Afghanistan. We need to launch a movement to stop that happening. We could have fallen flat on our face, definitely. But it turned out to be the biggest political rally in London for ten years. And so it started off. It just went and that was because—we thought this, but we didn't know it until that worked—we thought that there would be at least as many people terrified by what Bush was about to do as there were horrified by the twin towers themselves. And then we started launching demonstrations and they were very big demonstrations. And then right up until February 15—this is all very well documented, by the way, in Amir Amirani's *We Are Many* film, which is a brilliant film. You don't very often get people who make a major kind of studio film about your own history, but he has made a terrific film about it, where this story is told, basically. And as you say, it sustained itself because the enemy is still doing what it did. It's failed. We're now living not in the war on terror but in the failure of the war on terror. But we certainly didn't expect it to last this long. But so long as they're doing what they're doing, we'll be doing what we're doing. I mean, that was the virtue of bringing to bear the kind of united-front history. We constructed it carefully. We didn't let it run out into a thousand other issues. We focused it. We built a very strong coalition of Labour Party, trade unions, Communist Party, Greens—as many progressive forces as we possibly could. We made a strategic alliance with the Muslim community, which was very, very important. So it had a very powerful basis, and that sustained it, really. And that was what was deliberate. We deliberately constructed it that way.

**Watson** There doesn't seem to be any alliance in France between the Left and the Muslim community.

**Rees** No. It's the exact opposite. The French Left have gone along with the *laïcité* republican tradition which has prevented them from building that kind of alliance. It has marginalized and ghettoized the Muslim community. It's allowed the Right to tell the story about the Muslims that it wants to tell. And we see the consequences.

**Watson** The intellectual analysis that you've been working on for years, as manifested in your various writings, comes out of this tradition of leftist organizing.

**Rees** We couldn't have done it if we hadn't understood the basic framework within which we were operating. The geopolitical framework, the nature of modern imperialism. We couldn't have done it without that. But that on its own wouldn't have been enough. If we hadn't actualized that, so to say, in a specifically constructed and very strongly constructed movement as well, then it wouldn't have lasted. And I think you can see there were many, many movements that sprang up as a more spontaneous reflection of the same mood, but they didn't mobilize on the same scale, and they didn't sustain themselves for the same period of time. And in some cases in France, they contained fatal weaknesses in terms of their relationship to the Muslim community, which allowed them to be—not just them—but it allowed them to have very serious setbacks to take place. And some of this is in the imperialism book. Some of this was written a couple of years in, and a lot of this thinking is in the latter chapters of that book.

**Watson** The recent version of *The ABCs* and *Strategy and Tactics* are both published by Counterfire, a leftist political organization. You're a founding member. Counterfire is very interesting. It publishes a newspaper, website, and books. How did Counterfire come about?

**Rees** Well, you know, for a long time I was a member of the Socialist Worker's Party [SWP] in Britain, and we did some very good work. Well, myself and Lindsey German, who is the convener of the Stop the War Coalition, and Chris Nineham, a group of us, we launched the Stop the War Coalition and we did some very effective work in that organization. But after the 2007–2008 financial crash, we put an argument that there needed to be a broad labour movement response to that crisis in a way modeled on the kind of united-front model that we'd used for the Stop the War Coalition. And we put that argument inside the SWP. But we lost it. And so we thought that was a sufficiently important question, whether or not there was a kind of broad labour movement response to what most people would describe as the most serious economic collapse in the postwar period, that we left and set up Counterfire as a revolutionary organization, one that could take that kind of initiative. And we did do that. We launched, first of all, something called the Coalition of Resistance, and that then enlarged itself to become the People's Assembly Against Austerity, which is now the major anti-austerity organization in this country. It involves most of the trade unions in Britain, people from the Labour Party, people

from the Greens. And it's been able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people and have a national presence. So that was a risk and a gamble to leave an organization that we'd been in for some time and to start up a small revolutionary group, but we think in terms of the major objective that we had, the major reason why we did, we've had some success. And we want to use Counterfire as a kind of small network of revolutionaries that's capable of working with other people in the movement and launching those kind of, we think, very necessary broad organizations and to relate to other things. Now obviously, the Jeremy Corbyn campaign for leadership of the Labour Party. We're revolutionary socialists; we're not in the Labour Party, but we've worked for a very long time with Corbyn in the Stop the War Coalition. And before that, on many other things. So we're very supportive of that, to work very closely to make sure that the organizations that we're a part of—the antiwar movement, the anti-austerity movement—are as supportive as possible of that as well.

**Watson** What is the connection between Counterfire and Stop the War Coalition?

**Rees** Well, as I said, we're a small revolutionary organization, and we're certainly not a majority inside in the Stop the War Coalition or the People's Assembly. The trade unions in this country are very happily bought into those. Lots of Labour Party members are happily bought into those. The Green Party, which is much bigger than we are, is involved in those. So those are united-front organizations. We're not the engines making these vehicles move, but we are perhaps the spark plug that makes the engine fire. We, in both these cases, came up with this conception, drawing on Trotsky's writings about the united front in the 1930s, the Comintern's writings on the united front, applying them, we hope creatively and differently, obviously, than their point of origin. Things have changed significantly since those experiences were current. But the basic principle of defining a specific area of agreement and generating action around limited programs, with other forces on the Left with whom we don't agree on more general politics but can reach a strategic agreement on particular subjects, that's the model we're using, and we've used it twice now in the antiwar movement and in the anti-austerity movement to some effect. So we're kind of confident that it's a model that has worked and that we've managed to kind of refurbish for our time, really.

**Watson** I've of course had a look at both of the websites—Counterfire and Stop the War Coalition. Both include a lot of really good writing, very smart writing, with a lot of information on different topics and in different voices. How has social media been valuable for the kind of organizational strategy you've just described, where you're smaller, sharper, taking action around specific issues, forming coalitions?

**Rees** Yes, we're living through a communications revolution, probably the only communications revolution that's as big as the invention of print itself. Certainly as big as the invention of television or radio. So I don't think that all sections of the Left grasp this or grasped it very early. But, in a sense, we were lucky that we were setting up a new organization, Counterfire, in the very middle of this. So we started with the website. Historically, I'm sure you're aware, organizations would start with a newspaper. That just didn't make sense to us. It wasn't the easiest, the fastest, or the best way for us to start. So we started with a website, and our basic thought was, can we make the website do what many describe the newspaper doing for an early generation—can it become an organizer? Obviously, it purveys information, carries theoretical ideas, but can it actually organize a network of support? And we found that if we used it properly we could do that, or begin to do that, on a sort of relatively small scale. Obviously, we always thought it was a silly debate—online or print? We always thought there was going to be a combination of both but just differently than the past. That's where *Strategy and Tactics* came from, it was a kind of founding pamphlet for Counterfire. So we always knew that we would try to publish material as well as have an online presence. And eventually we came to the question of a newspaper as well. We thought, the days of the paid newspaper are disappearing with the bourgeois press, and I think they're pretty much dead for the Left press as well. But we noticed that the free newspaper was having a pretty good time. In London, the *Metro*, and now in other cities as well, is a newspaper that is given away free at the tube stations. And it's massively successful. The *Evening Standard* in London, which used to be a paid-for newspaper, has turned itself into a free newspaper and is massively successful. So we thought, well that's an interesting idea. If we were a mass party, we'd produce a paper like that. We'd produce a paper that could be given away at tube stations. Now obviously we're not a mass party, so what's the kind of appropriate version of that for us? So we thought, okay, first we can produce, first of all a four-page, now an eight-page paper that comes out monthly that we give away free at demonstrations,

at meetings, leading cafes, distributed at stations. And that's added a sort of agitational element. The only thing you can't do through a website is you can't give it out at a demo. So we find now that we have a combination of printed book material, not as much as we'd like; quite a strong online presence, not just through the website itself but through its extensions—the Facebook page, Twitter feed, and so forth and so on; and a quite successful physical paper at a time when most Left papers are in trouble, really.

**Watson** I should have mentioned that the websites are sophisticated—the way they link up, so that you can sign up, you can buy the print books, you can download the newspaper, or a copy of the newspaper.

**Rees** Both in *Stop the War* and in *Counterfire*, Adrian Cousins, who started the *Stop the War* site—not doing it now, but he started it in the beginning or was instrumental in it—he designed the whole *Counterfire* website, he's a brilliant editor. I've never seen him get a picture or a headline wrong and he was also right on the cutting edge on the thought that the Left could use the online presence to perform a function that more traditional forms of print had formed in the past. And we couldn't have done it without him. He had a particular combination of the technical skills to build the site and the political presence of mind to be able to edit it. And we just wouldn't have been where we were without that.

**Watson** The online components connect up with the physical demonstrations, being in the street, agitating in person. That seems not obvious to have gotten that right, but it seems like you did.

**Rees** Well we still make lots of mistakes and we still get lots of things wrong. But one of the interesting things is that while we've been doing this, the sort of social media world itself has kind of moved in this direction. So you do now get action-alert things that are on Facebook. You have had the whole growth of a very old form, which the Levellers would have recognized instantly, of petitioning, on Avaaz and 38 Degrees, and so in a way, it isn't just us. Other people have now been developing very powerful tools to combine online activity and real-world activism.

**Watson** The online petitions can go straight to your political representative. Straight to the party.

**Rees** In Stop the War, we used very successfully in the last Syria vote, the last two votes on bombing Syria, we used our online lobbying tool, which I think in the space of forty-eight hours, there were thirty-five thousand messages sent to MPs off the site.

**Watson** That gets attention, I'm guessing.

**Rees** You know, MPs are like anybody else. If you open up your email, or in their case their secretary opens up their email, and there's you know two hundred emails from an organization that is lobbying you on a particular issue, that registers.

**Watson** I love the way you call it the bourgeois press. How do you interface with the bourgeois press?

**Rees** Well, we found with Stop the War, really, there's all sorts of media training courses. I sometimes get asked to speak on them. The NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and lobbying campaigns will give you enormous amounts of detail on how this is done and so forth and so on. Some of that's valuable but most of it is, in my view, secondary. The real thing that you have to do to break into the bourgeois press is to have a big enough movement that they can't ignore it. You know, at a certain point with Stop the War, the demonstrations and the protests were so big. First of all, the kind of more marginal TV stations, and then even the BBC, had to at least pay some lip service to it. So I think it's a question of building a strong enough movement to kind of slam into the political establishment so that it begins to register even in those corners, really. I think that's become slightly easier now because there is an interface between social media and the mainstream media. They pick up things from Twitter and Facebook, and they begin to notice things that are trending. So that's an additional lever that you can use to get into the mainstream press. I think also in this country, certainly the monopoly of the main broadcasters of the BBC and ITV has broken down because of the satellite stations. So now we will routinely get interviewed by Russia Today, because obviously the editorial line of Russia Today is looking for voices that are critical of the British government. But once you start appearing on Russia Today and Press TV and other channels like that, that also in a way registers with the mainstream channels. And even if it doesn't, campaigns tend to snatch the TV interview that you did, and it will be sometimes be watched more times after being posted on Stop the War than it would have been when you originally appeared on the TV.

So there's now a kind of dialectic running between social media, satellite channels, and the mainstream channels which opens up some more avenues than existed even when we began Stop the War, when, you know, Facebook and Twitter came after. We began Stop the War back in the early 2000s.

**Watson** What's next for Counterfire at the moment? The rally around Corbyn tops the headlines at the moment. What for Stop the War Coalition?

**Rees** Well I think that by the time either Trump or Hillary Clinton is in the White House, I think they will get past the kind of interregnum period that they've had under Obama. I mean, I read Obama as a kind of attempt to stabilize the situation after the failure of the Iraq War by turning to the proxy wars, drone attacks, targeted assassinations. I think it seems to me likely that either Trump or Clinton would try to refurbish a more aggressive interventionist stance once again. I think we need to prepare for that. Obviously we've got government in this country at the moment, unless it changes, which would be more than willing to assist once again in that kind of project. So that, I think, is kind of the shape of things likely with Stop the War. But in Britain at the moment, it's a fantastically dynamic political situation. Brexit has broken a forty-year-long alliance between the British establishment and the European state system. Obviously, Washington is not keen on that. It's always relied on Britain as being a platform for Atlanticist ideas inside the European Union. What it means domestically is that a very large section of the working class just decided to kick the political establishment. The level of support for Corbyn is pretty unprecedented inside the labour movement in this country. And that's now going to interact with the crisis created by Brexit in some quite powerful ways. So I think we're entering a very turbulent and very interesting moment in British political history, really.

**Watson** Let's hope for the best in both countries.