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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jennifer Luff. *Commonsense Anticommunism: Labor and Civil Liberties between the World Wars.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xii + 288 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3541-8.

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Published on H-Diplo (October, 2012)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

Goodall on Luff

While it has long been a commonplace among historians that very little of "McCarthyism" originated with Senator Joseph McCarthy, comparatively few works have looked in detail at the development of American anticommunism in the interwar period.[1] Monographs on the topic have tended to focus on ultrapatriotic organizations and the government, rather than less spectacular private groups which nevertheless played a significant role in building anticommunist politics in its early stages.[2] Jennifer Luff's new book, *Commonsense Anticommunism*, which documents the history of anticommunist labor politics between the First and Second World Wars, is therefore a welcome addition to the field and raises interesting observations about the origins of the Cold War in the United States.

Influenced by developments in the historiography of American Communism since 1989 as well as the direction of recent scholarship on postwar conservatism, Luff offers a subtle reinterpretation of the role played by conservative labor unionists in early anticommunist networks. Rather than seeing labor as it has often been portrayed–solely as a victim of businessmen and elites who exploited popular fears of radical conspiracy to destroy American unions–Luff shows that conservative labor leaders were actively involved in promoting anticommunist politics for their own reasons; indeed, they were often more aggressive red-hunters than the government agents. For instance, Luff portrays J. Edgar Hoover as a comparatively moderate force; burned by the backlash to the Palmer Raids of 1919-20, Hoover was often resistant to calls to investigate radical unionists, rightly recognizing that few of them posed a serious national security risk. Luff writes that on occasions the Federal Bureau of Investigation "helped avert civil liberties abuses that HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] and labor conservatives tried to inflict" (p. 171).

Conservative labor anticommunism was therefore vociferous. However, it was also distinctively shaped by unionists' historical experience as victims of state-supported repression. Until the later 1930s, when their politics took a sharp shift to the right, conservatives within the American Federation of Labor (AFL) combined strong support for private efforts to purge American society of radical influence–especially as it manifested in organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO)–with a resistance to state sedition laws, which they recognized could easily be used to subdue union drives and halt strikes whether radical or not. This produced a complex, ambivalent commitment to civil liberties. Supporting the right to speak and assemble when it threatened union interests but suspicious of Left-linked civil liberties organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the AFL quietly collaborated with the Bureau of Investigation in gathering and sharing information, regularly testified as friendly witnesses before congressional hearings into un-American activities, and eventually came to support government employee loyalty programs that they believed would help keep liberal-minded Washington bureaucrats honest. At the same time they loudly proclaimed themselves to be passionate defenders of constitutional freedoms.

Luff's explanation for this behavior begins with the premise that the AFL should not be confused with the worker; nor even should its national leadership be nec-

essarily taken to reflect the views of its member unions. "From the beginning," Luff writes, "the AFL was a political project, not an expression of the popular views of the working class" (p. 3). Groups who sought to mobilize the mass of unskilled and previously nonunionized laborers threatened the image the AFL had carefully established of itself as the sole and authentic voice of the worker. In response to such challenges, the federation often turned to smear tactics to label their rivals as disloyal and therefore illegitimate. Nevertheless, because of their direct access to shop floors, they were able to offer more detailed and accurate indictments of Communism than other, more distant anticommunist groups.

This is principally a book about domestic politics, but H-Diplo readers will perhaps be most interested in the implications of Luff's work for debates about the sources of American foreign policy. During World War One, the AFL wholeheartedly supported mobilization efforts, working closely with the government to target and disrupt anti-interventionists, especially in the IWW. AFL President Samuel Gompers, an energetic convert to President Woodrow Wilson's war, toured Europe in the hope of discouraging European unionists from attending separate peace conferences, and was in 1919 heavily involved in the International Labor Organization that ran parallel to the League of Nations, arguing that "political organization, which had lagged so far behind industrial progress, would shortly involve the whole world in one struggle mass of contestants" (cited on p. 42). Throughout the 1920s, the AFL sustained a strong posture in support for the United States' policy of nonrecognition of Soviet Russia, offering a distinctive critique of the Soviet experiment that particularly focused on the Bolshevik forced labor practices that developed in tandem with the growth of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War. From the later 1930s onwards, their shift toward supporting statutory controls on domestic revolutionary groups and their close engagement with the Dies Committee (the precursor to HUAC) was an important but underappreciated part of the process through which anti-New Deal conservatism consolidated around anticommunist issues, a fact which would have important ramifications for the domestic response to diplomacy in the early Cold War period. Meanwhile, in World War Two, labor conservatives also took on a role policing the defense industry for "un-American" influences and alerting the government to suspected threats of sabotage. However, since these warnings tended to be highly inflated, it is unclear how much real impact this had on the war effort.

In short, the AFL was central from the Russian Revolution onwards in pushing for an anticommunist plank to American foreign policy. This led it, through figures such as Jay Lovestone and Irving Brown, into a central role in the labor front of America's Cold War, working closely with the State Department and, ultimately, the CIA to promote anticommunist unions around the world and supporting American military and economic expansionism up to and beyond the Vietnam War. Testifying to their endurance, Luff points out that Brown was "still working for the AFL-CIO in the mid-1980s, helping to organize anticommunist insurgencies in Central America" (p. 221).

Luff concludes that labor anticommunists were often ineffectual in promoting their foreign policy agenda, and parallels between their views and government policy were as often a product of the AFL responding to a changing national tide than dictating it. They were ignored by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for instance, when he took the decision to recognize Russia in 1933; bowing to the inevitable, the AFL was forced to push instead for what turned out to be meaningless commitments to Communist noninvolvement in the United States' domestic affairs. Notably, the story of Soviet espionage during World War Two and its subsequent discovery was in most cases not an AFL concern since, as Luff notes, spying tended to be a "white-collar business" (p. 171).

However, this is to only look at the direct relationship between union lobbying and policymaking and downplays the broader implications of Luff's work. Conservative unionists' strongest impact was as part of a broader, cross-party, and multiclass alliance of early anticommunists who sought, over generations, to shape public assumptions about the nature of the Soviet threat by drawing often intangible links between party activities in the United States and Soviet maneuvers elsewhere in the world, thereby intensifying fears of both. Moreover, as mass mobilization took on increased significance during the era of total war, great powers tended to look to proxies to influence their rivals' internal politics–whether modern public relations firms working for hire or informal domestic groups who shared their ethnic, religious, or political values. In the case of both Germany and Russia, the AFL's self-appointed role in policing workers' loyalty challenged these efforts to influence the American political environment at the grassroots level. Indeed, their importance was ironically revealed by Vladimir Lenin's denunciation of Gompers in his 1918 letter to the American worker and his efforts to push American Communists into infiltrating and influencing the policy of the AFL rather than practicing a policy of dual union-

ism in the early 1920s. The Soviet leadership, committed to wielding power through working-class institutions, clearly recognized the blocking role that the conservative and nationalistic AFL was playing to their geopolitical interests–and would continue to play for as long as the Soviet Union existed.

Luff designates conservative laborites as "commonsense anticommunists," in order to contrast them to the "armchair anticommunists" represented by ultrapatriotic and radical right-wing groups. This term, she recognizes, offers two "seemingly incongruous" meanings. The first is of level-headed anticommunism, comprising "rational analysis grounded in facts and expressing widely held views." The second is of a particular American anticommunist ideology that *appears* reasonable, but is in fact from it–reflecting particular local prejudices and assumptions and tending to "rationalize existing political and economic hierarchies" in the name of natural and self-evident truths (p. 135). The relationship between these two contradictory interpretations could perhaps have been developed further. In many cases, it was indeed true that AFL anticommunists were able to point to their direct experience in the labor trenches fighting Reds to support their claims, something that the "armchairs" were unable to do; and this gave their views a perspicacity lacking elsewhere. But, as Luff repeatedly demonstrates, their direct engagement also ensured their interpretations were highly partial and shaped in particular by personal rivalries and institutional interests, something that contributed to the growing discredit of anticommunist politics over time. In fact, the AFL's problems were quite similar to those of many "armchair" groups, in that they stemmed from a difficulty separating local and national interests. The federation inflated the dangers of the IWW, German spies, and Communist union activity, often cynically, in order to undermine their rivals and promote their organization's growth; to the point that it even ended up compromising its own stated values by working with long-time rivals in the world of anti-labor espionage. "Before their eyes," Luff writes of the AFL involvement in the repression during World War One, "old AFL enemies were silenced, arrested, and incarcerated" (p. 52). For a book that is so admirably free from simple moralizing in its analysis, then, defining labor conservatism as "commonsensical," even while acknowledging the ambiguity of the term, raises value implications that might perhaps have been avoided.

Fortunately, this does not undermine the excellent archival analysis that comprises the core of this book. Luff's work highlights the often contradictory character of early American anticommunist politics in a clear-headed way that few others have rivaled. In the introduction, Luff suggests that following the end of the Cold War it is finally possible for "researchers to stand down from scholarly combat and dispassionately reconsider the origins of McCarthyism and the Cold War" (p. 5). In one sense, it is amazing that twenty years on it is still necessary to define such statements in aspirational terms. Nevertheless, Luff's subtle, incisive book makes a contribution toward turning this agenda into a reality.

Notes

[1]. The best overviews of early American anticommunism can be found in Robert Justin Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America: From 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1978); M. J. Heale, *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within, 1830-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Richard Gid Powers, *Not without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New York: Free Press, 1995); and Markku Ruotsila, *British and American Anticommunism before the Cold War* (London: Frank Cass, 2001).

[2]. For instance, William Preston, Jr., *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941* (Chicago: Northeastern University Press, 1989); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Regin Schmidt, *Red Scare: FBI and the Origins of Anticommunism in the United States, 1919-1943* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2000).

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Citation: Alex Goodall. Review of Luff, Jennifer, *Commonsense Anticommunism: Labor and Civil Liberties between*

the World Wars. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.

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