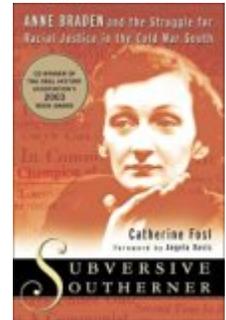


Catherine Fosl. *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South.* New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. ix + 418 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-29487-8.



Reviewed by Pamela Tyler

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We live in a country in which our government can demand that libraries reveal both the titles of books that are circulated and the identities of their readers. Since September 11, 2001, issues of civil liberties have assumed new urgency; our present struggle to combat a mortal enemy without surrendering our essential freedoms gives new meaning to past campaigns of repression.

In the icy years of the Cold War, reading, thinking, or socializing "Red" inevitably branded a person as un-American and frequently led to investigations, indictments, and convictions. Fifty years ago, Anne Braden, a privileged white southern woman, born in 1924, learned with a vengeance just how fragile freedom of thought, expression, and association could be.

Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South, by Catherine Fosl, is much more than a biography; it is a careful examination of the chilling effects of charges of un-Americanism on the civil rights movement. Most southern historians know the arc of Anne Braden's story, but it is less well known than it deserves to be. In May 1954, only a

week before the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Braden and her husband, Carl, acted as fronts in a real estate transaction in Louisville, Kentucky, purchasing a home in a white subdivision, then reselling it to an African-American couple who would have been unable to buy it themselves. The Bradens' reputation as genuine Old Left liberals had led the couple, Andrew and Charlotte Wade, to approach them; Anne Braden noted later that it would have been unthinkable to refuse.

The Bradens' action caused an uproar in Louisville. In late June, a dynamiting tore the Wades' house apart; fortunately, no one was injured. Protests from the Wades and their allies led the district attorney to act, but, amazingly, his action was to indict Carl and Anne Braden, and others, under a 1920 sedition act. He charged them with conspiring to damage property in order to achieve a political end--Communism. The prosecution probed Carl and Anne's reading material, Communist Party friends, and organizational links, revealing that the Bradens' beliefs were un-

der investigation; their true "crime" was subverting the racial hierarchy.

On the strength of questionable but explosive testimony from a paid informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Carl Braden was found guilty and sentenced to fifteen years. Charges against Anne were dropped, reflecting the potency of white female gentility in the South. While Carl endured solitary confinement in prison, Anne took to the road to publicize this outrage against civil liberties. Fosl details Anne's growing network, emphasizing that her bedrock of support lay with the southern wing of the Old Left—Myles Horton, Virginia Durr, Clark Foreman, Jim Dombrowski, and Aubrey Williams. In 1956, the Kentucky Supreme Court invalidated the sedition law and overturned Carl's conviction, but the scarring experience had radicalized both Bradens. Thereafter, they dedicated themselves with intense single-mindedness to educating southerners about the importance of civil liberties, aiming to create conditions in which the near-fascist South would learn to tolerate dissent.

The power of anti-Communism, however, resulted in the demonization of the Bradens. Even the civil rights movement feared to associate too closely with them and barred them from meaningful leadership roles after they were branded as "Red." Being held at arm's length by the civil rights community was hurtful, but other slights bruised even more deeply. Anne, a native Kentuckian with roots going back to colonial days, became an outcast in Louisville; she sought community with what she called "the other America" and found a spiritual home among those who believed in the class struggle, sought to end racial inequities, and promoted peace and justice everywhere. Her parents inflicted the deepest pain of all, as they criticized her choices and questioned her parenting skills, never failing to assail her chosen path for the price it exacted from her young children. Because of her commitment to

justice, Anne fought a continuing emotional war with her mother and father.

After their *cause celebre*, Anne and Carl worked as field secretaries for the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), attempting to identify and motivate whites dissatisfied with the racial status quo. Anne edited the *Southern Patriot* for the SCEF and boosted the publication's circulation threefold. She also encouraged the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. In the Sixties and after, Anne Braden became a role model for young white women in the movement. Unlike many women of the Old Left, in addition to backing racial and social justice, Braden had lived her life as a feminist.

Fosl is skillful at examining the role of gender in Anne's life. She probes the impact of strong female role models during Anne's college years and notes the unconventional contours of the Bradens' marriage. Because her subject is still living, Fosl elected to avoid a real discussion of the toll Anne's choices took on her two surviving children, accepting without comment Anne's perhaps self-serving explanations for sending them away during their childhood to stay for extended periods with their then-elderly grandparents.

Fosl sprinkles excerpts from her interviews with Anne Braden throughout the text, always highlighting Braden's words in italics. This device is useful as it allows the reader glimpses into Anne's thoughts and experiences. Nowhere, however, does Braden reveal the answer to the question that has dogged her ever since 1954: are you, or were you, a Communist? Fosl chose not to force the issue, arguing that to focus on the answer, whether affirmative or negative, would trivialize Anne Braden's entire career. Whether before grand juries or the press, Anne has always refused to answer this question, arguing that it was not a valid one. "I surely wouldn't want ... to establish a principle that it's all right for un-Americans [i.e., members of the House Un-American Activities Committee] to investigate Communists if

they'll leave the non-Communists alone. I think we'd all feel guilty as hell if that happened," she commented (p. 236).

Anne Braden has worked with single-minded dedication for her goals for nearly seven decades, even as ugly Cold War politics forced her to struggle for legitimacy. Though a pariah in her homeland for years, she never exiled herself from the South, and though her activism carried significant personal costs, she has never wavered. "Subversive southerner" must be a label that Braden wears proudly, with pride in both the adjective and the noun. Catherine Fosl's fine book is solidly grounded in an understanding of the Cold War, the Old Left, the New Left, the civil rights movement, and southern history. *Subversive Southerner* is above all a feminist biography. Anne Braden's compelling story has found a worthy interpreter.

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