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Subterranean Fire: A History of Working-Class Radicalism in the United States (review)

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demonstrates that gang culture in New York was not only about boozing and brawling. It also fomented certain radical political thoughts. Adams adds to the understanding of New York's Bowery Boys.

Lucas Richert

University of London

■ *Subterranean Fire: A History of Working-Class Radicalism in the United States*

Sharon Smith

Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006. 377 pp., ISBN 193185923X, \$16.00

In this book Sharon Smith asserts an appreciation of and argument for the relationship among radicals, effective strategy, and the labor movement. Her book recounts some of the most dramatic moments in labor history, all with the purpose of supporting an appeal to the possibilities for the future if American workers can understand their inherited past, a past that is still largely hidden from view despite the vast social history that has been uncovered in the last generation or so.

Like Jeremy Brecher's classic *Strike!*, Smith concentrates on the contentious battlegrounds and stories, mostly of industrial workers. But she rejects the notion of spontaneity and puts the politics of the movement back in, bringing forward Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky and the many variants of organized and politicized radicals into a discussion of the labor movement's history. She is a socialist who favors Trotskyist theory, and she has selected engaging narrative stories to back her argument that a significant percentage of the American working class has been inclined toward radical visions and mass action on par with that of many other countries with vibrant labor movements. Her main thesis suggests that, for a variety of peculiar circumstances, radical concepts that used to be part of the "subterranean fire" of working-class life were snuffed out of the dialogue within the labor movement. The McCarthy era is a decisive moment from which the U.S. working class has never recovered. Her book wants to alert activist workers to the relevance of radical ideas and theory in order to inspire the next generation of radical leaders of the working class to guard against misleaders and union bureaucrats. These factors, along with a toll of employer repression and racial division, are the key explanations given for why the United States does not have a vital labor movement that can contest power effectively.

Much of Smith's book ignores the more recent research on the history of the 1930s, the period she singles out as pivotal. The book is based on secondary sources and in this chapter favors older works such as those by Sidney Lens and Art Preis. The 1930s here is presented in a narrative that has been rehashed many times: the Communists in the labor movement sold out the the U.S. working class because of their subservience to Moscow, prevented the establishment of a labor party, kowtowed to the CIO bureaucracy, and turned a revolutionary working-class moment into a base for the Democratic Party dominance of the labor movement. But there is little in her narrative that explains *how* the movement was built during the period she considers pivotal in U.S. history, and this results in a somewhat one-dimensional portrayal of working class movements: worker radicals grow in strength because they facilitate mass action, and workers are inclined toward mass action if the radicals help facilitate it at the appropriate moments.

Smith suggests that most of the problems for the working class in the post-World War II era derived from the decline of radicals in the labor movement and the emergence of a union bureaucracy that had little understanding of the capitalist forces that were arrayed against workers. This is the key theme of the second part of the book, and its rant against union bureaucrats, however justified, leaves less room for criticism of the lack of effective strategy by the radicals who have devoted themselves to the labor movement since the 1970s. There is no criticism of missed opportunities, wasted resources, or ineffective models by radicals, and each story ends with the squashing of worthy labor struggles and radicals by union bureaucrats. The kind of harsh assessment of the Communists of the 1930s in the earlier chapter is absent here. Modern radicals seem satisfied to blame union bureaucracy for their problems rather than develop effective mass strategy for the labor movement—something that the Communist Party did do in the 1930s. This is certainly the case when Smith profiles of the “war zone” struggles in Illinois in the 1990s that ended in defeat. Jerry Tucker's inside strategy at Staley/Tate and Lyle was brilliant, but when the workers got locked out, a tailspin effect from ineffective strategies that focused on national campaign and marches, while neglecting the community base or figuring out how to stop production, was as much of the cause for these workers' defeat as any sellout by the union bureaucrats. Smith quotes Kim Moody's brilliant statement that “modern socialism as anything more than an idea or theory is a creature of the labor movement.” But how to build the meaning of and desire for an alternative system within the labor movement using examples from the past cannot be gleaned from the book. Aside from a reflexive mantra that only class struggle, open dialogue about

the meaning of socialism, and an independent labor party will revive the labor movement, few of the stories of the recent past give an understanding of how to rebuild the movement that Smith so deeply cares about.

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What's Right? A Review Essay

■ *Where Have All the Fascists Gone?*

Tamir Bar-On

Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007. 232 pp., ISBN 978-0754671541, \$99.95

■ *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right*

Paul Edward Gottfried

New York: Palgrave, 2007. 208 pp., ISBN 978-1403974327, \$39.95

■ *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*

Cas Mudde

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 404 pp., ISBN 978-0521616324, \$34.99

We live in an era when the political spectrum has become fairly confusing. Terms like “Left” and “Right” no longer seem to have any clear, widely accepted reference points or definitions, and political actors themselves have not helped matters. One finds on the putative Left variants of libertarianism, while on the putative Right in the United States, one observes the advent of “big-government neoconservatism”—to give two examples. What is going on? Those who claim that Right and Left are distinct or that either of them has a generally agreed-upon meaning often seem themselves to have an ideological agenda, overt or occluded, of defending some particular position. The putatively Right-wing end of the political spectrum seems especially garbled today, but we have several quite interesting books whose authors seek to make sense of it, including one on the European New Right from Canadian scholar Tamir Bar-On and one on American neoconservatism by Paul Gottfried. Each of them has its particular merits, but here we will look at them in relation to one another to draw larger conclusions