

### **Spider Web: The Birth of American Anticommunism.**

Nick Fischer

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In a recent review in the journal *Labour History* ('Review of Little "Red Scares": *Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946*', *Labour History* 109 [2015], 221), Nick Fischer argued that the history of anticommunism before the McCarthy era required a sustained and "thematically integrated" historical synthesis to show why the events of this earlier period were important, and "why they should lead historians and the general public to reassess the significance of Cold War anti-Communism." In *Spider Web* he seeks to deliver upon this request. Fischer offers a clear and punchy account of the history of anticommunist politics in the United States reaching back to the later nineteenth century, with early chapters on the Gilded Age, the First World War, and the Great Red Scare, before turning to its primary focus of the 1920s, and concluding with chapters that speculate on the cultural impact of anticommunism and the larger connections between anticommunism and "paranoid authoritarianism" (248).

Fischer makes three key claims for his book: that it draws attention to the deeper roots of anticommunism in the United States, which were often overwhelmed by the drama of the McCarthy era; that early anticommunism was driven by a network of actors that put the developing-used the developing apparatus of the state to task-aiding key private sector interests, especially in efforts to weaken the labor movement; and that studying this longer history shows the relatively minor role played by the US-Soviet rivalry in fuelling US anticommunism. In developing these points, Fischer argues that early anticommunism was overwhelmingly driven by a consistent and persistent anti-labor orientation. He has no time for arguments such as that made recently by Jennifer Luff; in (*Commonsense Anticommunism: Labor and Civil Liberties Between the World Wars* [Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2012]) that presents anticommunism as a more complex and contested ideology, in which liberal and labor groups, most notably the AFL, played an important role alongside the more headline-grabbing reactionaries. In Fischer's account, He also argues that international politics only intercedes-interceded when it provides provided motive force for the anti-labor impulse, as with the First World War and Bolshevik

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Revolution, which so dramatically fuelled fears of revolution at home and intensified the drive toward the repression of the working class, especially its foreign-born component. {au: I'm a little confused by this since Luff also emphasizes the domestic origins of American anti-communism, though as you say, she doesn't think the labor movement was innocent. How do we get from Luff to the international context you raise in the last sentence of the paragraph?}

**Commented [AG1]:** The two points are not supposed to be directly related. The paragraph was intended to summarise the major points of his view, not suggest that his criticism of Luff was connected to his view on the irrelevance foreign policy. (Though, indirectly, it is.) I hope the edits above clarify that they are separate points.

On the first claim, there can be little disagreement: the need for extending the chronology in this field has been a staple of the literature since Michael Heale's *American Anticommunism* made the point a quarter century ago, and the volume of research on this subject has grown noticeably of late, particularly in the last five years. On the second and third points, Fischer's argument is powerful, passionately made, ~~powerful~~, and in some ways persuasive. He reminds us emphatically that there can be no serious consideration of early American anticommunism without due attention being given to its anti-labor component, and points correctly to the vital importance of the intersection of public and private sector in explaining why-how (au: correct?) a numerically quite small anticommunist movement was able to have such an outsized impact.

**Commented [AG2]:** Yes

Nevertheless, there is not a lot of room for nuance in this account, and little focus on parts of the early anticommunist milieu that might have complicated his interpretation. The ways that countersubversives, a notoriously fractious group, diverged and conflicted over matters of ideology, personality and interest is not a central concern of the book; tensions between key elements of the larger movement, such as between international capitalists and ethno-nationalists, or between liberal, left-wing and conservative anticommunists, are mentioned only in passing; the complex interaction between domestic anticommunism and arguments over foreign relations is deemed insignificant; and the varying fortunes of anticommunist politics in general are not analysed in any systematic way. His choice of subjects produces a rather circular conclusion: by dismissing the AFL as a patsy for capital, and by taking few anticommunists seriously beyond those found on the pro-business Right (no mention here of the many former communists who became vocal anticommunists, for instance), it is not surprising that he finds interwar anticommunism conforms more or less exclusively to an anti-labor mould. By co-opting the metaphor of the spider web, an idea originally used by his subjects to demonize and stereotype left-wing radicalism, as his central descriptor for interwar anticommunism, he risks

overstating the coherence of his subject group and drifting towards reductive generalizations about their goals and impact. “Anticommunist conspiracy theory, anticommunist propaganda, and the actions of many anticommunists ultimately encouraged the destruction of democracy and its replacement by a system of government by kinship group or tribe,” he concludes, sweepingly (244).

This is largely a synthetic work, ~~and its primary research component relies based on primarily secondary on and~~ published ~~primary sources rather than archival researchal sources.~~ Large sections of its content, especially in the first three chapters, will be ~~known~~ familiar to scholars of the field. However, the work is well executed and offers a clear line through a complex and sometimes messy subject. The most valuable contributions are to be found in the chapters on John Bond Trevor and Jacob Spolansky. Trevor provides a critical link between Red Scare repression, the eugenic-influenced immigration restriction politics of the 1920s, and later conservative resurgence in the late 1930s and 1940s. Spolansky, meanwhile, was a colourful example of the type of self-appointed patriotic investigators who oscillated between public bodies charged with countersubversive intelligence and investigation activities at state and federal levels, and those groups in private industry who concerned themselves with weakening union influence. Both chapters add valuable information on these illustrative nodes in the interwar antiradical network and highlight the continuity such individuals gave to anticommunist politics over several decades.

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**Commented [AG3]:** I'm sorry: the suggested edits here changed the meaning of the sentence from what was intended. The points I was making were that he mostly uses secondary sources, and that the primary sources he does use are published ones – especially books and pamphlets from the time – not sources only available in archives.