

# Red chicago a review book review examples

[Politics](#), [Communism](#)



**Storch, Randi. Red Chicago: American communism at its grassroots, 1928-35. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.**

Randi Storch's 2007 book *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots* details the subversive movement in Chicago at the time, when there was a vast upswing of Communist thought stemming from the worker's revolts of the time. The American Communist Party had a substantial presence there, and the book describes their struggle for relevancy and to have an effect on the outcomes of political action at the time. The book attempts to reconcile the thought processes of these people with two very different, contradictory ideas: "one of an organization that celebrated Soviet leaders, co-opted Soviet symbols, and embraced revolutionary Marxist-Leninist ideology, and the other a somewhat popular American social movement comprised of a wide array of otherwise ordinary people?"<sup>1</sup>

In this review, the book's content, relevancy, and overall approach will be critiqued. In essence, Storch's account of the American Communist Party in Chicago is detailed, powerful, and provocative, as she claims that despite Communist control, it was still the locals that truly determined their ideology instead of some sort of Soviet control. Her overall research question was to determine how ordinary people can become radicalized in this fashion.

For a brief time in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Chicago was the center of radicalism in America. In fact, since 1886 there has been a very large platform in this city for radicals and revolutionary thought; Communists and leftists have staged a number of protests and demonstrations meant to

shake up the political system. Not the least of these protests was the 1932 International Worker's Athletic Meet, also called the 1932 Chicago Counter-Olympics. At the time, the Olympics were being held in Los Angeles, but Chicago radicals held their own counter-event at Staff Field, on the campus of the University of Chicago.

Despite the rapidly advancing American Communism, they were very much taking their cues from foreign leaders. American Communists would take whatever steps they could to emulate Lenin and Stalin, even down to their appearance. They would often turn their shirt collars up, turn their caps backward, and position themselves during conversations which would be visually reminiscent of these two Communist figures. While many people had an honest desire to make change for the better in America, there were those who became disillusioned with the ideas put forth, and simply saw the posers for what they were. Storch uses this perspective to showcase the cancer that ended up growing at the heart of the movement, and what potentially led to their downfall.

The ultimate destruction of the American Communist Party came with the advent of McCarthyism in the 1950s. Given all of the spy scandals and the identification of Communism with the Soviets, it suddenly became unpopular and very, very dangerous to identify oneself as a Communist. As a result, not only did the movement fail, but its existence has more or less been erased from the memories of future Chicagoans - no one wants to be associated whatsoever with such a radical movement. However, its overall effect was to establish the ability to let African-Americans and the poor become suspicious

and raise eyebrows at the behavior of white politicians, due to the influx of white Communist dialogue that was taking place in predominately black neighborhoods.

Compared to the thesis of *Making a New Deal* by Liz Cohen, *Red Chicago* focuses much more on the misconceptions of the movement, and the ways in which the local people still won out. The primary difference between the two movements was that, unlike the worker movement, the American Communist movement was successfully crushed by the powers that be - in that case, the government. While the first labor unions managed to get what they want, the radical movement detailed in Storch's book was slowly but surely crushed. There is one thing both the worker movement in the 1920s and the American Communist movement in the 1930s had in common: they were comprised of local people who came together to overcome authoritarian odds by doing surprising things. The workers during the New Deal overcame their own racial prejudices to unite as a common force and overpower the faces of American industry, while American Communists became radicalized. Both forces were railing against an establishment they felt was unfair, inequitable and detrimental to their human rights; though the labor unions got what they wanted, American Communists eventually failed.

There was an element of racial integration and solidarity in both movements; just like with the labor unions, Storch describes the many different ways in which blacks and whites would come together in this movement. Given the Communist Party's aversion to Jim Crow laws, it made sense that the party's followers would start to talk to black Americans, something which most white

Chicagoans, most particularly at the time, would be reticent to do. Interracial crowds gathered around people shouting from soapboxes, sharing the labor union's message that the bosses were just using racism to keep everyone separated and powerless. The phenomenon of interracial dialogue was so prevalent that " Growing up on Chicago's South Side, [Dempsey Travis, Chicago historian] believed that any white person who talked to a black person was a Communist" 2.

Randi Storch, as a student of history, has a great deal to say about the context of radical movements and social movements in this book. The purpose of examining Communism in this work is to place it within the greater scheme of overall working class dissatisfaction in Chicago at the time; this was merely one symptom that showed how bad it got. Poverty and disenfranchisement were so high so as to radicalize even the most red-blooded American, leading to a strange contradiction of ideas that was quickly crushed in the wake of McCarthyism.

Storch uses interviews with people who lived there at the time, as well as extensive documentation and press coverage, to gain a true profile of cultural attitudes during that era of American history, and of Chicago history in particular. According to her research, the retreat of Communism in Chicago was nothing so simple as becoming scared of blacklisting; " Chicago's local records do not reveal espionage. Instead, they record Communists' daily struggles facing police repression, mobilizing mass organizations, and raising workers' political consciousness" 3.

One of Storch's most important methods of research was the community study, which provided a better " understanding of American Communism than is possible using other methodologies" 4. Due to the nature of a community, one can gain a wide variety of perspectives on the same experience; different genders, races and industries can all weigh in on the single experience they share. This is no less true or effective with Chicago and the rise of the American Communist movement. Chicago, due to the fact that it had the second largest industrial area in America, was a prime breeding ground for subversive thought stemming from disenfranchisement with the way workers were being treated. The American Communist movement, Storch argues, was effectively started in the union stockyards, factories and plants of Chicago.

Storch's work helps to create a much more comprehensive view of the time period than is normally covered in American history. While there remain whispers of the labor unions and the striking at the time, the Counter-Olympics and other subversive efforts by Chicago radicals in the 1930s remain obscure footnotes in the city's history. With the help of this book, these events can be brought into the light and reinserted into the canon of Chicago events. The insertion of this movement into the context of 1920s Chicago and American as a whole lends Storch's book a needed sense of importance and weight, as it becomes clear just how big the movement got in its prime.

Storch also details how the various changes that were made within the New Deal, creating greater connections between industry and government; this

made the workers angry, but they would often fail to reconcile going radical with the Communist Party: "Excellent studies examine how America's workers responded to these changes but often dismiss as less viable their most radical choices" 5. This serves to show just how difficult the start of the movement proved to be. The overall presentation is exciting and interesting, with various events in the movement being given their own weight, and outlined in terms of their significance. The movement itself was a slow burn, but the feeling of anticipation leading up to a revolution is felt in Storch's writing. This, of course, makes it all the more tragic that the movement fizzles out before it has a chance to truly explode.

In conclusion, Red Chicago is a detailed, well-researched foray into the radicalization of the American working class into the American Communist Party during the 1920s and 1930s. From Storch's perspective, the movement had good intentions, but ended up being sabotaged from the beginning by being such a directly radical idea, having disingenuous members in its ranks, and the sting of McCarthy witchhunts scaring many people off due to Communism's association with the USSR. All in all, however, it proved the need for change in America's workers, and the call to arms of the Communist Party was a somber reminder of industry's need to care for the people who support it, lest they rise up against you. In the end, the rise of radicalism showcased just how much America was changing at that time, and Chicago became a perfect microcosm for that change.

## **Works Cited**

Cohen, Lizabeth. Making a new deal: industrial workers in Chicago, 1919-1939. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

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