interesting here, and perhaps in that sense the countercultural histories recounted so thoroughly might look more up to date.

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Michael E. Brown, *The Historiography of Communism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009, £19.99/$25.95). Pp. 256. ISBN 978 15921 3922 4.

At its most innovative, Michael E. Brown's *The Historiography of Communism* perceptively considers why historical study of the American left is important. A long introductory essay and two-chapter reflection on "Issues in the Historiography of Communism" raise a number of signal issues. Commentator–historians such as Theodore Draper and Irving Howe are foregrounded as exemplars of an "anti-communist" mode of historiography (8), ultimately subject to the logic of the Cold War, and useful only because it indicates how "certain claims to know everything that needs to be known about socialism and communism were made plausible" (89). In opposition, Brown offers the notion of a "critical" historiography of the American left, practiced by historians wary of Werner Sombart's 1906 question, "why is there no socialism in the United States?" (4)

He suggests that there have always been portions of the American population ready to embrace radical politics, the historical significance of which should not be judged purely by their inability to capture power within the institutional structures of the "nation" (91–92). Instead, Brown recommends that historians emphasize "extra-institutional forces and processes," thereby foregrounding the experience of "the people" within "society" (93). As such, the left is registered as "a constant manifestation of something immanent to society," rather than a waxing and waning social force capable of ideological confrontation with the state only in moments of crisis (7). However, it is this opposition to "generational" conceptions of left history that raises the first of a number of problems. Brown encourages scholars not to categorize "deaths," "births" or "interim periods" in the history of radical struggle, suggesting that to see certain movements as episodic is to deny their "rationality" (23–25). Surely, though, historical writing is an essentially periodizing process, and each and every left that emerges attempts to define itself (however truthfully) in opposition to its forbearers? To suggest, then, that scholars must be doing radical politics a disservice by mapping generational vicissitudes seems gratuitously idealistic.

Another drawback stems from the fact that the essays collected in *The Historiography of Communism* were originally written in the period 1978–95. Whilst occasional nods to work undertaken in the intervening fourteen years are included, it is hard to excuse a text on this subject published in 2009 that barely engages with the work of Michael Denning, Van Gosse or Maurice Isserman, amongst others. Furthermore, there are formal problems with Brown's writing that are impossible to ignore. First, he composes jargon-heavy, overly circuitous prose that renders comprehension unnecessarily difficult. Second, the term "communism" is never accurately defined. Often it appears to be synonymic with "left." However, its use

sometimes appears to emanate from the author's proclivity for a radical politics less encumbered by opposition to the Soviet Union than the majority of post-1960s leftist thought. Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with such a position, its linguistic manifestation leads to a sense that Brown never quite lays his political cards on the table.

Overall, then, *The Historiography of Communism* manages to offer persuasive evidence that the history of the American left should be taken seriously precisely because any reflection on the future of progressive politics in the US (or elsewhere, for that matter) will have to reckon on its multifarious and often contradictory past. But the book should ultimately be seen as a missed opportunity. There is much more to be said about this significant topic, and many clearer ways in which to communicate that significance.

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Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008, £24.00). Pp. 253. ISBN 978 0 2520 3298 1.

Anne Valk's *Radical Sisters* offers a compelling account of the interactions between grassroots movements advocating for the rights of women and African Americans in Washington, DC in the 1960s and 1970s. Through vivid and detailed descriptions of the fight for welfare rights and reproductive control, and against homophobia and sexual violence, Valk's cultural history provides a welcome relief from the theorizing that has tended to dominate academic discussion of feminism in recent years.

Valk's challenge to feminism concerns itself not with its possible contamination by essentialism or "quasi-essentialism," but rather with the extent to which it was a movement able to accommodate issues of racial and economic injustice – issues that both touch on and also push beyond feminism's most obvious interest: women. By providing detailed case studies of the ways in which civil rights, student and anti-war movements intersected with second-wave feminism, Valk aims to nuance existing scholarship that she claims has "typically … treated the histories of these movements separately" (4). In addition, Valk's contribution offers a corrective to the tendency of much of this scholarship to perpetuate "a declension narrative that correlates the birth of feminism with the dissolution of other left movements and stresses the decline of radical feminism in the mid-1970s" (4). Instead, *Radical Sisters* demonstrates how feminist coalitions built upon and in turn influenced other leftist movements, anticipating future constellations of radical organizing.

Examples of these new forms of activism that evolved from this period of intense political activity are the "distinct black and Third World feminist movements" that Valk points to in her conclusion (186). Valk identifies the movement against sexual violence as a key precursor for these new developments. This movement surfaced disagreements between black and white women over the position of black men vis-à-vis sexual violence. Rejecting the line that all men are would-be rapists, many