

[Twentieth-Century Communism in the Golden State: A Roundtable](#)

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Chair: Glenna Matthews, Independent scholar

Panelists:

- Robert Cherny, San Francisco State University
- Renato Barahona, University of Illinois at Chicago
- Beth Slutsky, University of California, Davis
- Lisa M. Jackson, University of California, Santa Cruz

In Sacramento in 1935 eighteen Communist union organizers went on trial on criminal syndicalism charges. A jury convicted eight--though their "crime" consisted of working to organize those at the bottom of the social ladder--and a judge sentenced them to prison. This shocking episode was not an isolated phenomenon, because the Golden State saw many fierce struggles to organize in the fields and food-processing plants during the Great Depression--and also intense anti-communism.

I began studying these struggles when working on my Stanford dissertation about cannery workers in the Santa Clara Valley (now Silicon Valley) during the 1930s. That research became the germ of a book, *SILICON VALLEY, WOMEN, AND THE CALIFORNIA DREAM*. I subsequently held a Fulbright Chair in Moscow and had the opportunity to use the Comintern archives and examine the reports of CP organizers in the Valley in the early 30s--though this research has been shared only at a conference in Moscow. Still very interested in the role of the CP in California, I am currently awaiting the FBI file of a woman fired as a school principal in a small southern California town for being an unfriendly witness before HUAC.

When I read that the OAH would be in Sacramento, it occurred to me that this would be an excellent venue for a roundtable on the subject of California Communism. I was aware of new work and of projected work on this topic, so I contacted various scholars, all of whom were enthusiastic. This roundtable will examine such topics as these: Does Carey McWilliams's formulation of "California: the Great Exception" work for California Communism? How did CP women fare? How much interest did the CP show in organizing various groups of people of color? The world has heard a great deal about the Hollywood blacklist, but what about other victims of Cold War anxieties? Where in the state was the CP most successful? What other industries other besides entertainment, maritime commerce, and food saw CP organizing efforts? How did the CP contribute to the development of a Left-Labor culture in San Francisco after World War II and what happened to it? What was the impact of the Taft-Hartley Act in California during the late 1940s? What was the relationship between California's Old Left and the New Left during the 1960s?

Besides myself as chair, the other participants would be Robert Cherny, author of two journal articles on the California CP and a forthcoming book on a Communist artist in San Francisco; Renato Barahona, an Iberianist now working on Rose Isaak and her involvement with the San Francisco American Russian Institute, which appeared on the Attorney General's list; Beth Slutsky, author of *GENDERING RADICALISM: WOMEN AND COMMUNISM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CALIFORNIA*;

and Lisa Jackson, a graduate student working on putting California's CP women into an international context.

Recorded in April 2018 at the OAH Annual Meeting held in Sacramento, California as part of the Mellon-funded Amplified Initiative.

Introductions

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Robert Cherny

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Renato Barahona

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Beth Slutsky

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Lisa Jackson

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