

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London and New York: Verso 2019)

Boyd Cothran

Volume 86, Fall 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074493ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2020.0057>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Cothran, B. (2020). Review of [Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London and New York: Verso 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 86, 214–216. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2020.0057>

Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London and New York: Verso 2019)

THE DAY I BEGAN reading Nick Estes' provocative *Our History is the Future* was first day of protests in Toronto in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en community in British Columbia. Moved from their original homelands to a reserve, the Wet'suwet'en now face the potential consequences of an oil pipeline running through their community and ancestral lands. With hundreds of other Torontonians, I marched in protest, placing my body on the train tracks, setting-up a blockade in Toronto's west end that forced a suspension of service along a vital stretch of rail. The day I finished this book was the opening day of an exhibit at York University titled "Shades of our Sisters," a dynamic and moving tribute to the lives of Indigenous women, girls, transgender and Two-Spirited Peoples who have been murdered or are missing in Canada. I took one of my undergraduate classes to the exhibit, and we discussed the importance of understanding the past and the present to realize a different future.

Our History is the Future is the product of a different though not dissimilar historical moment. Born out of the 2016 protests at Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota over the construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline and the various consequences surrounding its establishment, Estes provides, through powerful prose, a passionate and controversial narrative of the events and their antecedents that stretches all the way back to the early 19th-century colonization of the plains by a fledgling United States. His focus is on the history and tradition of Indigenous resistance, which he claims led to the #NoDAPL movement.

He is also concerned principally with how "settler colonialism, a key element of US history, continue[s] to inform our present" (40) and the efficacy of looking to the past to build an intergenerational tradition of resistance to both colonialism and global capitalism (44). Thus, Estes' book purports to offer a viable alternative to the dominant world order of capitalism and settler colonialism through decolonization with a heavy focus on a historically grounded tradition of resistance.

Fundamental to Estes' manifesto is a theory of history. "Settler narratives," Estes claims, "use a linear conception of time to distance themselves from the horrific crimes committed against Indigenous peoples and the land." This mindless linearity, according to Estes, stands in stark contrast to the supposed non-linearity of Indigenous conception of history as "Indigenous notions of time consider the present to be structured entirely by our past and by our ancestors" (14). Setting aside the fact that we live in an age when white supremacist nationalists have hijacked the Republican party and risen to power in the United States while chanting the decidedly non-linear historical slogan of "Make American Great Again," these kinds of essentialist claims would be more believable if Estes practiced what he preached. But instead, *Our History is the Future* follows a predictable and predominantly linear historical narrative with only perfunctory gestures towards connections between the past and the present. After an introductory chapter on the 2016 protests, Estes' involvement in them, and the response of local, state, and federal authorities to the encampments, the book turns to the first encounters between Ojibwe, the so-called "Great Sioux Nation," and the United States in the 19th century. From there, the book moves chronologically with chapters dedicated to the Indian Wars of the 19th century and the

establishment of the Reservation system, the damming of the Missouri River by the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation in the early 20th century, the rise of the urban-centered American Indian Movement and the subsequent 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and the 20th-century turn to Indigenous internationalism, which culminated in the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Throughout this mostly chronological narrative, Estes presents little new information, relying instead almost exclusively on established secondary sources. Despite his claim that he is providing a radically new historical narrative, there is little original research to support this assertion.

One of the most intriguing claims Estes makes is that *Our History is the Future* will rescue Indigenous history from the parochial confines of US History. "Indigenous history is not a narrow subfield of US history...Rather, Indigenous peoples are central subjects of modern world history" (21), he writes. Estes pursues this line of argumentation most effectively in chapter six on internationalism. But, in positioning Indigenous resistance within a more global framework, Estes makes some questionable statements along the way. For instance, he suggests that the Holocaust was a relatively contained historical event with a clear beginning, middle, and end, compared to the continued practice of settler colonialism with its "wholesale destruction of nonhuman relations" (90). It's not the continuing nature of settler colonialism that is controversial here but rather the suggestion that anti-Semitism hasn't been a structuring force in European societies for over a thousand years. Similarly, when discussing the Treaty Council's 1977 tour of Eastern bloc countries, Estes quotes without commentary or context, Sherry Means saying, "In contrast to the

United States' treatment of Indigenous peoples, 'these countries believe strongly in human right,' she reported" (234-35). This is a staggering statement given the widespread and recent use of gulags by the Soviets at the time. Finally, there are occasional errors of fact such as when Estes suggests that the Federal Indian policy known as the Peace Policy was in place in the 1850s (100). These are just a few examples among many. Taken alone, each is excusable. Considered as a whole, they represent a rushed or even lackadaisical approach to historical evidence and analysis. But then, again, Estes has a response to this line of criticism. As he states in his acknowledgments, "Any and all mistakes contained therein are also not solely my responsibility. That is pure bourgeois individualism" (259).

Our History is the Future is a powerful text, and many readers who are already convinced of the author's conclusions will find much to agree with. It also may help some readers better articulate their support for Indigenous sovereignty. In particular, Estes offers scholars of Indigenous history some important interventions, especially around relationality, embodied ways of sharing and creating knowledge, and, most importantly, Indigenous futurity. These are the scholarly and intellectual strengths of the book. But, as a text largely written for a more general audience, this reviewer wishes the author had spent more time trying to convince the unconvinced and educate the uneducated. Such a strategy might have made the text more appropriate for undergraduate classroom use or could have widened the reception and engagement with the book's central arguments by a general audience. That is not the tack Estes has taken here, and the result is a book that will change few minds about the importance of respecting Indigenous sovereignty. I guess we'll have to wait for a slower, more careful,

and more considered history of this important movement and its antecedents. After all, Estes claims he wrote this book in four weeks, while sitting on a couch (260). It shows.

BOYD COTHMAN
York University

Andrew Feffer, *Bad Faith: Teachers, Liberalism, and the Origins of McCarthyism* (New York: Fordham University Press/Empire State Editions 2019)

ANDREW FEFFER HAS written a history of organized anti-communism in New York City at the onset of World War II. Now forgotten, the Rapp-Coudert Committee was one of the best organized and most far-reaching interwar witch hunts. Created by the New York General Assembly, Rapp-Coudert hounded about 50 accused Communists out of their jobs in public schools and colleges. Contrived by conservative up-state Republican legislators and down-state anti-communist Democrats, the lion's share of work was undertaken by a sub-committee chaired by Senator Frederic R. Coudert (R-NYC). Coudert took private and public evidence from hundreds of witnesses lacking access to any form of legal defense. Claiming to have revealed 69 suspected Communists, Coudert spent more than \$500,000 compiling the names of over 600 suspects.

Feffer argues Rapp-Coudert was not concerned about the Soviet Union but with labour militancy in New York City's educational institutions and the two labour unions that represented them. By normalizing "countersubversive myth-making," Rapp-Coudert helped to shift public discourse in a less class-oriented direction. (33) While Assemblyman Herbert Rapp (R-Genesee County) was putative committee chairman,

conservatives played little active role. Coudert's investigators were anti-Tammany Democrats and Republicans who promoted limited social reform. A generation before McCarthyism, the sub-committee and anti-communist liberals in teacher unions laid the groundwork for the Cold War consensus. Conflating good citizenship with loyalty to authority, they surpassed Communists in the practice of "bad faith." (12)

Part I covers the authorization of the Rapp-Coudert Committee and its first public hearing in late 1940. Coudert supervised a staff of Ivy League-trained clean-government reformers. Chief of staff Paul Windels saw political dissidents as corrupt lawbreakers. But aside from not allowing subpoenaed witnesses to invoke Fifth Amendment protection, Coudert and Windels used authoritarian and dishonest tactics, even flimsy evidence. Since the Party was legal, the main goal was giving it and leftist teachers as much negative publicity as possible. The sub-committee could only recommend that governing agencies take disciplinary action. Furthermore, although Coudert managed to have complete political autonomy and had free reign to coerce uncooperative witnesses, his public hearings did not run smoothly. The first witness, Brooklyn College English professor Bernard Gebanier, was cooperative but less than enthusiastic. College president Harry Gideonse was staunchly anti-Communist, but Coudert lost interest in that institution when no one there could be found to corroborate Gebanier's testimony. New York Teachers Union (NYTU) president Charles Hendley, a non-Communist leftist, strongly defended his union under oath. Despite backing from liberals, Socialists, and anti-Communist labour leaders, Coudert's use of union records ultimately hurt organized labour.

Part II is devoted to the institutional and intellectual context. Feffer argues