

public-sector workers were on the march and many women saw trade unionism as a solution to their own gendered problems. It was in these years that Congress finally extended collective bargaining to hospitals and other nonprofit institutions. Whatever, the gloss journalists and others put on the blue-collar blues of that era, the working-class response in the United States, when unfettered by either management or the state, came along lines not unlike that in the 1930s.

My takeaway point: there are a multiplicity of reasons why Canada has a more progressive labor relations regime than that in United States. The class idea, however expressed, is part of that, but it is backstopped by all those other variables that Eidlin has too often taken such pains to marginalize.

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## What's Left for the Left? A Commentary on Barry Eidlin's *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada*

Cedric de Leon 

In this rigorous and impressive book, Barry Eidlin takes aim at existing accounts of the divergence in union density and labor third-party support in the United States and Canada, which often point to differences in political culture. Such theories offer an account in which cultural and institutional forces exert themselves over time to prevent socialism and militant trade unionism from taking hold in the United States while enabling the same in Canada. The problem with these accounts, he says, is that union

density and third-party support were similar in both countries until the 1930s. The puzzle that orients the book, then, is why the divergence happened after the 1930s despite a long history of convergence.

Eidlin provides a two-step answer anchored in the theory of political articulation, according to which parties naturalize and denaturalize social divisions such as class inequality in their attempt to build and unbuild hegemonic blocs. First, the New Deal Democratic Party in the United States co-opted the working-class insurgencies of the 1930s, bringing them into the party fold as an interest group. By contrast, the ruling Conservative and Liberal parties in Canada chose a course of violent antilabor repression, a move that pushed organized labor into the waiting arms of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), later the New Democratic Party (NDP). Second, once labor became institutionalized in these competing ways, labor was split off from the Left in the United States, thus making it increasingly difficult to pose class as an organizing principle of party and labor politics. The Democratic Party and its allies in labor officialdom then channeled the movement away from militant direct action and independent third parties toward the two-party system and a highly bureaucratized form of collective bargaining. Meanwhile, in Canada, labor's alliance with the NDP encouraged a posture of independence from the political establishment and allowed class politics and labor militance to flourish more than it did in the United States. Though the NDP and organized labor assisted in purging the Communist Party, labor and the Left never severed ties, Eidlin argues, in part owing to radical political tendencies within the NDP. The result was a program of mass mobilization that redounded to the benefit of organized labor in the form of prolabor regulatory policies and higher union density.

In my view the book has three key strengths. The first is that it is notably systematic in accounting for nearly every alternative hypothesis. Over the course of several chapters (not just in the introduction), Eidlin explains why each competing approach, despite telling some part of the story, falls short in one particular or another. In a sea of squooshy and unserious books, *Labor and the Class Idea* is a refreshing counterexample. Second, and this is only a bit self-serving I promise, he mobilizes the theoretical framework of political articulation in a convincing way, showing how attention to the intersection of party and labor politics is the only plausible way to explain the divergence that begins in the 1930s. I would hasten to add, however, that he does so with a greater sensitivity to economic structural factors than I ever have, and that is a key intervention as political articulation grows as a paradigm. Third, I resonate with his diagnosis of what ails the American labor movement. It is its status as a captured constituency inside the Democratic Party that continues to stand in the way of an alternative strategy built on mass mobilization. Overall, at the risk of inviting charges of nepotism, because Eidlin is a friend, I think it is safe to say that *Labor and the Class Idea* has now finally, at long last, evicted Seymour Martin Lipset from his place as the authority on the Canada-US comparison. It's about time.

The book's considerable strengths notwithstanding, I would like to offer a critique that is anchored in the Black freedom struggle and the experience of

colonialism, which Eidlin addresses at some length in the second half of the book. A good theory is like a good camera—it brings the target object into vivid focus but blurs or conceals that which is out of frame. Eidlin’s focus on critical turning points of divergence, which he shares with comparative historical sociologists in general, obscures from view the *persistence* of racial dispossession across multiple so-called turning points within the case of the United States and the *convergence* of American and Canadian labor in their silence on White settler colonialism, even most shockingly when the Canadian labor movement advances an anticolonial critique against American and English capital. This necessarily implicates Eidlin’s stirring call for resurrecting the class idea as a basis for the resurgence of the labor movement in both countries. Given the contemporary resurgence of feminist and antiracist movements, not to mention the ascendancy of ethnic nationalists and Neo-Nazis, it is clear that what is left for the Left is not just the recuperation of the class idea but also an intersectional vision of labor solidarity.

In a section titled, “The Role of Race,” and later in the chapter on the Red Scare, Eidlin argues that whereas the Canadian labor movement was able to connect anti-colonial and labor struggles in a coherent political program, the American labor movement was not. This is because the US civil rights and labor movements were deradicalized by their incorporation in the Democratic Party, and because civil and labor rights became institutionalized as two separate policy domains.

But of course, as some of us know, the inability to connect the struggles for economic and racial justice is ancient. In *Black Reconstruction*, W. E. B. Du Bois criticized the labor and abolitionist movements of the 1830s thus: “The abolitionist did not sense the new subordination into which the worker was being forced by organized capitalism, while the laborers did not realize that the exclusion of four million [Black] workers from the labor program was a fatal omission” (Du Bois 1992: 25). Before Malcolm X ever said, “You can’t have capitalism without racism,” Du Bois lamented the lost opportunity to advance an intersectional vision of labor solidarity in the nineteenth century. He wrote,

Here, then, were two labor movements: the movement to give the black worker a minimum legal status which would enable him to sell his own labor, and another movement which proposed to increase the wage and better the condition of the working class in America, now largely composed of foreign immigrants, and dispute with the new American capitalism the basis upon which the new wealth was to be divided. Broad philanthropy and a wide knowledge of the elements of human progress would have led these two movements to unite and in their union to become irresistible. It was difficult, almost impossible, for this to be clear to the white labor leaders of the thirties. They had their particularistic grievances and one of these was the competition of free Negro labor. (Du Bois 1992: 20–21)

The emergence and foreclosure of this promise occurs over and over again throughout the history of the labor movement and the Black freedom struggle, including but

not limited to the co-optation of those movements into the Democratic Party that Eidlin documents.

Moreover, as First Nations scholars Glen Coulthard (2014) and Audra Simpson (2014) remind us, for all the divergence between the mainstream Canadian and American labor movements, both to varying degrees fail to explore, beyond a thin “politics of recognition,” what an Indigenous-labor alliance might be built upon. For example, if in the Marxist imaginary the exploitation of labor entails the theft of time, the Dene Nation of the Northwest Territories visualizes a spatial dispossession akin, though not identical, to primitive accumulation in Europe (Coulthard 2014: 62). What would a mass movement based on these interrelated aspects of racial capitalism look like? Apart from the shared critique of capitalism that these relations imply, the silence on this question is especially deafening given that the Canadian Left was heavily influenced by anticolonial and Black Power movements. But instead of looking inward to contemplate their complicity in dispossessing their aboriginal sisters and brothers, English-speaking union activists focused their anti-colonial and class rage against American capitalism, while the Québécois underscored their colonial subjection to the English. Being from Toronto, I believe I have earned the right to say, that is so annoyingly Canadian.

In sum, with respect to racial subordination and violence, there is more persistence and convergence than there is rupture and divergence. I am no expert on gender and labor, but I would be willing to bet that not enough has changed on that side of the ledger either even if the Canadian labor movement may have been more reliably feminist over time. This then brings me to the question of what’s left for the Left. Put another way, is “the class idea” enough to articulate all those left behind by the promise of organized labor? I ask this seriously as the director of one of the last remaining union-side graduate labor studies programs in the United States. My instinct, based on my analysis of the current conjuncture, is that we require an intersectional vision of collective struggle.

Consider now the prospects of an intersectional mass movement from the point of view of the American Left. The hegemonic political project of contemporary American politics is what I call postracial neoliberalism. That project is animated by two claims: that racial equality was achieved long ago and that the surest path to shared prosperity is the free market, unencumbered by state regulation and unions.

Color-blind racism and neoliberalism are not just two separate pillars of the same political project, however: They are linked by deindustrialization. To win the votes of whites, the major parties promised to preserve their privileged access to social benefits. As more and more White union members joined the ranks of the unemployed, taking up a greater proportion of both welfare benefits and service-sector jobs, there was a simultaneous push to remove unemployed *Black* workers from the welfare rolls and from the labor market. According to a report from the Congressional Budget Office, the poorest fifth of American households consumed 54 percent of social benefits in 1979; by 2011 they consumed only 36 percent, while the lion’s share went toward what the CBO characterized as “maintaining the middle class from childhood through retirement” (Congressional Budget Office 2011). At the same time, as Michelle Alexander (2010) and Loïc Wacquant (2002)

demonstrate, law-and-order initiatives from Nixon to Clinton inverted the proportion of White and Black inmates in America's prisons. The dispossession of unemployed Black folk, which recalls in its historical brutality the aforementioned dispossession of First Nations, deepened further as states passed laws stripping ex-convicts of their right to vote, denying access to social benefits such as interest-free college loans, and limiting their access to the job market by mandating that job applicants list whether or not they have ever been convicted of a crime.

Modern American politics through the Obama administration had become a fight over who could best safeguard the racial and economic privileges of whites under increasing pressure from deindustrialization. Donald Trump's nativist politics, which Steve Bannon has referred to as "economic nationalism," must therefore be understood as a promise to *alleviate* that pressure by accelerating mass deportation, canceling or modifying free trade agreements, expanding the takeover of Indigenous lands for energy development, and intensifying a law-and-order strategy in the nation's Black neighborhoods. Economic nationalism is, however, a dead-end street especially for White workers seeking relief from the scourge of neoliberalism.

White men, now as in previous centuries, must compete in the labor market with women and people of color as the workforce becomes increasingly feminized and racially diverse. The way backward is a program of social closure not unlike economic nationalism and the nineteenth-century labor program, which ignores the linkages among race, class, and gender that are now fully on display with the movement for Black Lives and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women, Indigenous peoples, and other communities of color both as patients and workers. The only way forward is an intersectional program that builds power by explicitly connecting these overlapping struggles. It is a matter of utmost urgency that in this crisis of hegemony, in which no political actor has the mass consent to rule, the labor movement and allied movements for social justice join forces so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the Black freedom struggle and organized labor documented by Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction* and now in Eidlin's *Labor and the Class Idea*.

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