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Comparative History of a Very High Standard, But It Is Still Tough to Make It Work

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Historians as well as social scientists aspire to write comparative studies because we know that all societies are both exceptional and similar in one sense or another and that there is no developmental trajectory destined to be followed by any society, polity, or fragment thereof. It is hard to do because the writer and scholar is always comparing oranges and apples to some extent. Societies are messy, so it is hard to hold one thing or another constant so as to determine which variable is dependent and which independent.

Given all these difficulties, Barry Eidlin deserves our hearty praise for writing one of the most comprehensive and compelling comparative studies I have ever come across. He knows the history of both countries and their labor movements and is deeply immersed in the history of both Canadian and US labor-relations regimes. A great deal has been written about labor and the polity in both nations, and often by such towering figures as Seymour Martin Lipset and, somewhat more indirectly, by Louis Hartz, who in a very different era also sought to explain why and how Canadian—or European—social politics differentiated from those in the United States.

But Eidlin does not take Lipset or any other historian or social scientist at face value, and it is hard to imagine a bit of received wisdom that Professor Eidlin has not put under his analytic microscope. He is fair-minded to a fault, conceding when and where evidence seems to contradict his thesis, but then demonstrating that the comparative variable under examination, be it government policy, national values, employer strategy, racial division, trade union structure, or any other has to be historicized and dialectically deconstructed to fathom its real operative meaning. And of course, he is relentless in pushing forward his thesis: that the existence of a Canadian political party, first the Canadian Commonwealth Federation and then the New Democrats, aligned with and expressing labor's class interest has much to do with the divergent fates of the labor movement north and south of the border. Eidlin demonstrates quite convincingly that the disparate fate of trade unionism in Canada and the United States is rooted in politics, not culture, economy, or even the shifting character of labor law. Canadian unions articulated their class interests through an independent political party, while in recent decades those in the United States did not. *Labor and the Class Idea* is indeed comparative history of a very high standard.

Let me just list a few things I think he gets very right.

First, he demolishes the idea so long identified with the work of Seymour Martin Lipset that Canada had a different set of "Tory-tinged" national values that made the populace as well as the governing and employer class more amenable to collective action or social democratic principles. This Lipset frame cannot withstand the very concrete history that Eidlin reviews, pointing out the basic fact that in the 1930s and even into the 1940s Canada was a far more repressive country when it came to workers' rights and union organization all during the same era when organized labor in the United States was making its most dramatic push forward.

And his main thesis is correct: an independent party at least oriented toward or substantially controlled by labor, even when it never quite achieves state power, is a powerful instrument that can do much to thwart reaction and advance labor's organizational interests. No disagreement here, but the issue is why did this prove so impossible in the United States, at least during the last 70-odd years.

And Eidlin is right on some other key points, pulling together much scholarship that has otherwise remained inside academic silos. McCarthyism had much less bite in Canada than in the United States, in part because the unions that were tinged with Communism were shielded from the full force of state repression by their capacity to offer a political and partisan as well as an ideological rejoinder to those who would destroy them. This had lasting consequences, not because the Communists were any kind of lodestar, but because when the New Left era came along in Canada and the United States, the cross-generation/cross-pollination of old and new lefts, in the unions and without, proved more creative and robust in Canada than below the border. But I hasten to add right here that Eidlin sometimes gets carried away in advancing his thesis. In the United States many New Leftists were either red or social democratic diaper babies. The Port Huron Statement was enacted at an AFL-CIO/UAW summer camp; and as we have pointed out in the book that Dick Flacks and I edited on the history of the Port Huron Statement, there was much intercourse and agreement between early Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and United Auto Workers (UAW) in the first part of 1960s (Flacks and Lichtenstein 2015: 95–106). But Eidlin's point still stands: New Left currents flowed more easily through the Canadian labor movement than that of the United States; although one could argue that by the 1990s, that was no longer the case, but then in the 1990s the New Left was but an historical artifact.

And a final and related point: the militancy that characterized Canadian labor, Anglo and French, in the 1960s and 1970s, was in part based on an assertion of either Canadian or Quebec nationalism. US radicals and trade unions have tried at various points to do the same—in the 1930s, American unionists "captured the flag" to use a phrase first coined by Gary Gerstle. But for the most part, nationalism, even an assertive patriotism, comes hard for American radicals and it is often a point of conflict with their more parochial trade union allies. Especially in moments of international crisis, it remains vexatious on the American side of the border in a fashion not evident in Canada. Remaining a cultural and economic colony of the behemoth to the South may well have generated a few dividends for the Canadian Left.

Now I want to turn to some things about the book that I find either ambiguous or an overreach. First there is the title of Eidlin's book. He deploys the phrase "class idea," which is so encompassing as to lack precision, to mean almost anything the author wants. What is the meaning here and who is using, defining, or acting in such a way that the class idea comes to the fore: workers, unionists, intellectuals, jurists, government officials, even capitalists? If we take the word "idea" with any seriousness, we can find plenty of people, some influential, in the United States who thought and still think in terms of class. Would another phrase, such as class politics or class policy or class consciousness or class struggle generate a different set of questions and answers? Although Eidlin does not spell it out in quite these terms, I do think there is a dialectical quality to the phrase "class idea" because it is not just class consciousness nor a set of class institutions, but some combination of the two.

To get concrete for a moment: In the United States Eidlin finds postwar industrial pluralism subversive of the class idea. It's true that a pluralist understanding of labor relations could easily legitimize a rank kind of interest group politics and in the process downplay the state's role in regulating labor-capital relations and thus do little to buttress labor's institutional or ideological legitimacy. But here much is collapsed, both chronologically and ideologically. Voluntarism arose in the late nineteenth century out of an ideology generated both by trade unionists and the judiciary. As Willy Forbath has shown, it was coercively rammed down labor's throat by the reactionary, injunction-happy Lochner Court and then naturalized by the likes of Samuel Gompers (Forbath 1991). While the Wagner Act stripped industrial pluralism of some of its antistatist flavor, the concept was nevertheless reified and ratified by administrative practice, court decisions, and ideas of an influential set of industrial relations scholars and practitioners in the post–World War II era. But contra Eidlin, the idea and practice of collective bargaining in the United States only became hegemonic in the mid-twentieth century because the social democratic corporatism that had been the de facto ideology and practice of US labor, from the era of the National Recovery Administration until well into the 1960s, had been coercively remolded into a privatized set of collective bargaining arrangements that bred insularity, parochialism, and depoliticalization. For at least two or three decades, from the early New Deal through the Korean War, industrial pluralism was a purely formalistic ideology; far more important—and grabbing most of the headlines—were the corporatist, tripartite panels, negotiations, and bargains that really determined class conflicts and compromises in the United States. But this statification was potentially dangerous as politics turned rightward. As Walter Reuther, who was a labor corporatist par excellence in the World War II era, put it during a later period when government policy was more hostile toward his social and economic vision: "I'd rather bargain with General Motors than the US government. GM has no army" (Lichtenstein 1995: 261).

A second phrase Eidlin uses a great deal is "co-optation," sometimes substituted for "incorporation." What does this mean and, if true, when was it most true? During the heyday of labor power in the United States, in the 1940s, C. Wright Mills argued that labor had been seduced by the sophisticated conservatives to

become part of "the main drift" toward a polity in which corporations held power in a fashion that Gramsci would recognize (Mills 2001 [1948]: 230–38); and in that same era many more traditional industrial relations scholars argued that labor was functional to capitalism and the proper functioning of the firm. The Democratic Party did have a labor-liberal wing that many laborites thought gave them access to influence and power. George Meany could boast that he had never walked a picket line, meanwhile taking money from the Central Intelligence Agency. I guess that is co-optation.

But that era is long over. Even the most conservative US unions, like the building trades and the police and firefighter unions, face fierce resistance. No wing of American capitalism wants to co-opt American labor. Things are much the same in 2019 as in 1919, if you subtract the militancy of the latter year. A new generation of American historians, including Elizabeth Shermer, Kim Philips-Fein, and Mark Wilson are making the same point.

In 1982 I published *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II*, sometimes used by Eidlin, which argued that US labor leadership was indeed co-opted or incorporated by the state during World War II (Lichtenstein 1983). Eidlin makes use of that history to argue that while the leadership effort to suppress wildcat strikes in the United States bureaucratized the unions and pushed both the CIO and the AFL toward the Democratic Party, in Canada the wartime strike movement proved useful to trade union leaders seeking to generate a crisis that could only be resolved by much greater state recognition of labor's institutional interests. But I am now convinced that much the same thing was taking place in the United States: Trade unionists like Walter Reuther, John L. Lewis, and even Philip Murray used the wildcat strike movement to leverage government policy and practice, and the postwar strike wave arose organically out of that movement. It was not, as Eidlin asserts, a mere effort to allow the rank and file to blow off steam.

In this regard Eidlin takes pains to make the point that employer hostility in Canada has been just as vociferous as in the United States and as he shows at various points in his book, both the Crown and Canadian employers delayed at least a decade before the equivalent of the Wagner Act was enacted in Canada. But I stand with Sanford Jacoby, Kim Moody, Steven Greenhouse, and other historians and journalists who have emphasized the particular antiunion hostility of employers and managers in the United States. Eidlin cites a number of polls and surveys that find managers in Canada and the United States equally hostile, but I don't think this is a question of polling or sentiment; rather it is a structural issue, not divorced from other issues like regionalism, race, the increasingly rightward drift of the courts, and the fact that in the United States giant corporations arose before the American national state achieved the kind of centralized power that existed north of border, embedding into the American corporate DNA a rejection of any and all institutions that might curb managerial power. Added to all this has been the Jim Crow legacy in the United States. It requires little explanation. Suffice it to say that whatever the discriminations against Francophone or Indigenous populations in Canada, nothing exists north of the border to compare with the

centuries-long political and legal existence of a low-wage region in the United States based on a system of unfree labor whose legacy marches on and on.

A third phrase deployed by Eidlin is "interest group." Sometimes there is no hard and fast line between a social movement, one based on either class, race, gender, or a well-defined policy preference such as being antiwar or prochoice, and an interest group. Certainly, in the United States, and I think in Canada as well, trade unions can function as both a stolid interest group and as an insurgent social movement. And they can do both at the same time, as when teachers go on strike or a state labor federation mobilizes to raise the minimum wage, or when an electoral campaign takes place and labor puts on its most expansive working-class colors.

I am not a big fan of Michael Harrington, who really did advocate that labor incorporate itself into the Democratic Party. But he did make an important point in arguing that by its very nature, trade unionism more often than not speaks for a larger class interest, especially in eras of social turmoil. In 1965 he recounts the time when George Meany rejected Republican Senator Everett Dirksen's proffer of a trade: repeal of the Taft-Hartley's Right to Work Section 14b in exchange for a watered down civil right law designed to protect management's authority to hire and fire at its own discretion. Meany rejected the idea, an example in Harrington's telling, of the way the labor movement functioned as the responsible leader of a broad social movement and not as a parochial interest group. And today, as Eidlin well knows, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) pushes forward the $15 campaign, not out of any lofty ideology, but because a raise in the general wage level is the most effective way to sustain SEIU organizational power, if only because that large union knows that such a social movement is essential given the dysfunctionality of labor law and so much of American politics.

However, I might add here that I heartily agree with the Eidlin critique of labor's hesitancy to adopt a straightforward working-class vocabulary: instead of the term working-class, the AFL-CIO deploys the phrase "working families" or "hard-pressed middle class." All this leaves the door open for the populist right to capture for itself working-class nomenclature and identity.

And finally, Eidlin vastly overstates the idea that class interests in the United States have been understood in individualized terms, emphasizing concepts like alienation and individual discrimination, some advanced by social psychologists channeling ideas first put on the Left's agenda by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. To advance this argument Eidlin cites Canada's 1966 "Task Force on Labour Relations" report, which highlighted the rise of worker militancy and discontent. The Canadian solution: a more effective labor law, extended to the public sector and those occupations not otherwise unionized. He contrasts this with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's now forgotten report, "Work in America," researched and written in the early 1970s by a generation of New Left influenced social scientists. They found plenty of alienation and discontent, but devoted just a couple of pages to trade unionism as a solution to the problem. Eidlin thinks this a telling contrast, but the late 1960s and early 1970s were also an Indian summer of worker militancy in the United States, an era during which

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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Nelson Lichtenstein is Research Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. An historian of labor and political economy, he is the author or editor of 16 books, including a biography of the labor leader Walter Reuther and *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (2013). With Gary Gerstle and Alice O'Connor he edited *Beyond the New Deal Order*: *From the Great Depression to the Great Recession*. (2019); and with Roman Huret and Jean-Christian Vinel he edited a companion volume, *Capitalism Contested: the New Deal and Its Legacies* (2020). Other publications include, *The Right and Labor in America: Politics, Ideology, and Imagination* (2012), edited with Elizabeth Shermer, and *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave New World of Business* (2009). Lichtenstein is currently writing a history of economic thought and policymaking in the administration of Bill Clinton. He writes for *Dissent*, *Jacobin*, *New Labor Forum*, and *American Prospect*

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