the organization of the United Automobile Workers Union at the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant (Talking Union). Other research (with Caleb Southworth) analyzes unions' and churches' impact on their neighborhoods and the relevance of rival unionism for change in union density. She also has co-authored articles on the AFL-CIO's Union Summer program and the role of autoworkers' workplace networks. With Jasmine Kerrissey, she is working on a book to synthesize and analyze data collected through an NSF funded project on union density throughout the entire 20th century.

Several of her publications have been recognized with awards, including those from the American Sociological Association, the Society for the Study of Social Problems, and the University of California, Irvine. The National Science Foundation, the American Sociological Association, the UC Institute for Labor and Employment, and the University of California, Irvine have funded her various projects

Response to Critics for *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada* Book Symposium

Barry Eidlin

First, I would like to thank Cedric de Leon, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Judith Stepan-Norris for their deep and thoughtful engagement with my book. I benefited tremendously from their work and mentorship as I developed this project, so it is particularly gratifying to have them discuss the finished product.

Naturally I appreciate my discussants' plaudits, and perhaps even more the way each placed my book in dialogue with their own research agendas. However, the purpose of an author's response is to answer their criticisms. Unsurprisingly, each discussant managed to zero in on precisely the elements of my analysis over which I struggled the most in the course of researching and writing the book: labor-Left relations, the character of labor's relation to the state in both countries, and of course, the question of race. While space does not allow a systematic response to every single criticism, I will do my best to address the most salient points.

In writing *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada,* I tried to create what Bill Sewell calls an "eventful history" of labor's divergent trajectories in both countries (Sewell 1996). That means a history in which events matter, both in the sense that they are not predetermined, and that they are shaped by past events, while also shaping subsequent events. This is particularly important in the context of the US-Canada comparison, where there is a tendency to point to deep, lasting differences between the countries to explain their diverging trajectories.

All three of my discussants offer exemplary models of eventful history in their own work. Indeed, the work of all three was central in helping me develop my own eventful analysis. And yet, we see in their responses to my book how hard it is to resist the appeal to enduring divides, or to neglect the relation between previous and subsequent events.

We see this in Lichtenstein's discussion of employer hostility. Echoing seminal work by Susan Jacoby (1991) and others, he emphasizes the singular ferocity of US employer hostility across time. I present evidence in the book suggesting that Canadian employers were exceedingly hostile as well, except that they ultimately

https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2021.11 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were hemmed in by a more interventionist state. Lichtenstein remains skeptical of any attempt to establish an equivalency with US employer hostility.

While I remain committed to disabusing US audiences of their stereotypes about Canadian niceness by informing them of Canadian employers' vicious streak, I am prepared to grant that US employer hostility may have surpassed that of their northern counterparts. But doing so in no way undermines my overall argument. Indeed, it only contributes to what needs to be explained. If we grant that US employers were more hostile, why then was union density so similar in both countries up until the mid-1960s, and only then diverge? Did an already-aggressive employer class suddenly get even more aggressive in the 1960s?

Here the most plausible interpretation would focus on the worker upsurge and employer backlash following World War II, in which, as Howell Harris (1982) documented, management reasserted its "right to manage" after the Great Depression and New Deal had thrown it on the hind foot. This employer backlash was codified in the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which hamstrung labor—although not enough initially to dislodge the commonly held view among Canadian labor experts that "the Canadian policy is not as favorable to the promotion of collective bargaining relationships" (Woods et al. 1973 [1962]: 219). Still, it marked a significant step in the erosion of US labor policy.

Meanwhile, in Canada, a similar postwar spike in class conflict led to the codification into law of wartime Order-In-Council P.C. 1003 as the Industrial Relations and Disputes Investigation Act of 1948 (IRDIA). Combined with the Rand Formula of 1946, this laid the foundation for Canada's more restrictive and interventionist, but ultimately more protective and resilient labor policy regime.

The key question then, is not about employer hostility per se, but rather about how it translated into labor policy in the context of the events following World War II. This is where the timing and character of labor's political incorporation matters. US labor's early incorporation as an interest group in the New Deal coalition polarized postwar class conflict along partisan lines, while the Wagner Act's focus on articulating rights created a tension between "balancing" novel collective bargaining rights and more entrenched individual and property rights. This Left labor policy more vulnerable to erosion over time and weakened labor. Meanwhile, Canadian labor's later incorporation as a class representative separate from the main ruling parties helped ensure that class conflict was recognized as such, while the policy focus on containing industrial conflict ensured that even those opposed to labor saw the benefit in maintaining a functional labor regime. The result was Canadian labor's relative long-term strength.

Lichtenstein is absolutely right that the CIO leaders of the time did not embrace their "special interest" position. They were not much different from their Canadian counterparts in terms of what they wanted, and fought hard to strike a more tripartite postwar bargain where they could negotiate as class representatives. The problem is that they lost. And they lost because the framework for labor policy based on interest groups trying to balance competing sets of rights and interests meant that employers could refuse to engage in the entire idea of class-representative negotiations after the war, and the state did little to challenge them. Meanwhile, in Canada, the state was more willing to impose a class representative framework in the name of enforcing industrial peace.

https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2021.11 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Another case of reliance on enduring divides involves de Leon's discussion of race. He (along with Du Bois) is absolutely right to emphasize the persistent inability to connect struggles for economic and racial justice in the United States. This was not a new development in the 1930s and 1940s. Still, it is vital to take seriously de Leon's point that this inability to connect these two struggles constitutes an "emergence and foreclosure" of the promise of a united multiracial working class. That is, we must resist the tendency to view racism as a genetic defect, a *sui generis,* transhistorical force that inherently sows division at all times and in all places.

As de Leon is well aware from his own careful research, racism is an ideology arising from historical processes, and its contours are shaped by events. There have been many moments of cross-racial class unity in US labor history, and although these moments fell short, their failure was not preordained. Rather, it was the outcome of social struggles in specific historical contexts. It is crucial to analyze and explain these specific turning points in the organization of racial divisions in the United States, both to get the history right and, from a normative standpoint, to leave open the possibility of dismantling systems of racial oppression.

That is what I attempted to do in my book. I focused on the specific events of the 1930s and 1940s because they were most germane toward explaining the particular outcomes I was trying to explain, but of course they built on what Mike Davis (1980) called the "sedimented historical experiences" of past failed efforts at racial unity. That past weighed on the organizers of the 1930s and 1940s, but did not doom them from the outset. We still must explain why the CIO, the best hope for building a powerful, multiracial working class, ultimately failed.

As for considering the relationship between past and subsequent events, a good example of this involves the relationship between strikes and union density in both countries. Stepan-Norris rightly notes that strike rates have fallen precipitously in both the United States and Canada, and asks "[w]hat is the mechanism by which the right to strike builds union density even in the absence of the exercise of that right?"

Here we must return to a point I raised in discussing Lichtenstein's criticisms, which has to do with how class conflict is translated into politics and social policy, although in this case the temporal focus shifts to the 1960s and 1970s. Both countries experienced massive strike upsurges in this period, an "Indian summer of worker militancy" as Lichtenstein correctly characterizes it. The key difference lies in the state response. With worker protest in the United States psychologized as the "blue-collar blues" and labor law reform blocked amidst charges that it was payoff to a narrow Democratic Party "special interest," the upsurge did not translate into policy reforms. As strikes subsided and the employer counteroffensive intensified, union density went into free fall.

In Canada, the state recognized class conflict as such, and sought to control it. This led to policy reforms, including several that scholars identify as protecting workers' labor rights more than in the United States. So even as strike rates subsided, the policies enacted in response to the 1970s strike wave protected Canadian workers and their unions more in subsequent decades, as union density remained relatively stable. Of course, the question remains as to how long Canadian unions can coast on reforms won more than 40 years ago, and many Canadian labor scholars are concerned about crisis and stagnation north of the border. But these different

https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2021.11 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relations between class conflict and policy reform in the 1970s help explain much of the union density divergence of the past few decades.

Beyond this broad point about taking an eventful approach to history seriously, I have brief responses to a few other issues my discussants raised.

I'm glad that de Leon raised the issue of colonialism, particularly in the Canadian case. He is right to point out the double-edged role that colonialism has played in Canadian labor's development. The peculiar adaptation of dependency theory to US-Canada relations did contribute to many Canadian unions declaring independence from their US-based parent unions. As a result, between 1962 and 1995, US-based "international" unions fell from two-thirds to 29 percent of Canadian union membership (Akyeampong 2004). This contributed to greater labor militancy in Canada, as best illustrated by the formation of the Canadian Auto Workers out of a rejection of the United Auto Workers' concession bargaining. But it also elided Canada's own position as a settler colony, and side-stepped labor's complicity in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

This analysis holds for English Canada, and to some extent for Quebec. I will only point out here that the anticolonialism of the Québécois labor movement of the 1970s was much more genuine. They explicitly drew linkages between their struggles and the decolonization struggles unfolding around the world at the time. As I describe in the book, the CSN Montreal Central Council became a hub of anticolonial activity, providing a home for supporters of national liberation struggles in Angola, Mozambique, Palestine, and Vietnam, along with opponents of fascist regimes in Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Amilcar Cabral and other Third World liberation leaders came to address the council at various points. This was qualitatively different from the US-focused nationalism of English Canada.

Stepan-Norris takes me to task for failing to offer empirical evidence to document what I argue are generational continuities across Left movements prior to World War II, as opposed to the generational break between the Old and New Lefts. She is right that this is more of an interpretive than an empirical claim in the book. There is no systematic data presented in the book to buttress this argument, and I am somewhat heartened to know that Stepan-Norris tried but failed to document these linkages empirically, as it suggests the degree of difficulty involved in tracking down such data. Instead I base my claim off my reading of the history (both primary and secondary sources), as well as my interviews and interactions with former New Left activists over many years.

While I agree that more systematic research is needed on generational linkages across Left movements in the United States, I still think that the interpretive claim regarding the distinctive character of the generational gap between the Old and New Lefts holds up. First is simply the question of timing. From the Civil War through the Great Depression, major waves of working-class protest erupted roughly every ten years: 1877, 1886, 1894, 1903, 1917–19, then a gap until 1933. There were parallel waves of working-class organization, sometimes in alliance with farmers: the Knights of Labor, the Populists, the IWW, the Socialist Party (SP), the Communist Party (CP), and the CIO.

These organizations all overlapped with each other temporally, so some movement cross-pollination would be expected. There are well-known examples like Eugene Debs, who traveled among the Populists and IWW before becoming the

https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2021.11 Published online by Cambridge University Press

standard-bearer of the SP, or William Z. Foster, who made his way from the IWW to the SP to the CP, but there were almost certainly others like them.

By contrast, there was a roughly 15-year gap between the collapse of the CP in the late 1940s and the emergence of SDS in 1962. Importantly, this temporal gap was accompanied by an even sharper organizational gap. While there were some interactions between Old and New Left organizations like those Lichtenstein mentioned in his comments, overall virtually no Old Left organizations survived in a form that would allow them to participate in the New Left. That is why many New Leftists felt that they were starting from scratch. Granted, there was more organizational continuity within the civil rights movement, which emerged earlier, but even there, scholars like Manning Marable and Robert Korstad (along with Lichtenstein) have noted that the organizational center of gravity shifted from the CP and the CIO in the 1930s to the Black church in the 1950s (Korstad and Lichtenstein 1988; Marable 2007). The defeat of the Old Left not only delayed the emergence of the civil rights movement, but reconfigured its organizational ecosystem.

In sum, there is good reason to believe that the gap between the Old and New Lefts was qualitatively different from the generational gaps that existed between previous Left movements, but Stepan-Norris is right that more systematic research is needed.

Finally, Lichtenstein cautions that the core concept at the heart of my book, the "class idea," is "so encompassing as to lack precision, to mean anything the author wants." I recognize that the concept is encompassing, deliberately so. Still, I contend that it has analytical value, rather than being a catch-all term that can mean anything at any given moment. As I mention in the book's acknowledgments, I built the concept off of a casual remark that Canadian labor law scholar Harry Arthurs made to me in a Toronto coffee shop—that "the class idea" is simply more present in Canadian labor relations than in the United States. What he was trying to get at, and what I tried to show in my book, was that US-Canada differences could not be reduced to different institutional arrangements, nor to different sets of values or ideologies. Rather, they are a result of different sets of ideas being organized differently into politics and social policy. Lichtenstein ultimately seems to grasp this when he concludes that "it is not just class consciousness nor a set of class institutions, but some combination of the two," although I would hesitate to call such an approach dialectical.

Thanks again to all three discussants for your critical yet constructive engagement with my book.

References

Akyeampong, Ernest B. (2004) "The union movement in transition." Perspectives on Labour and Income **5** (8): 5–13.

Davis, Mike (1980) "Why the US working class is different." New Left Review I/123 (Sept./Oct.): 3–44.

Harris, Howell J. (1982) The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s. University of Wisconsin Press.

Jacoby, Sanford M. (1991) "American exceptionalism revisited: The importance of management," in S. M. Jacoby (ed.) Masters to Managers: Historical and Comparative Perspectives on American Employers. Columbia University Press: 173–200.

Korstad, Robert, and Nelson Lichtenstein (1988) "Opportunities found and lost: Labor, radicals, and the early civil rights movement." The Journal of American History **75** (3): 786–811.

https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2021.11 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Marable, Manning (2007) Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945–2006. University Press of Mississippi.

Sewell, William H. (1996) "Three temporalities: Toward an eventful sociology," in T. J. McDonald (ed.) The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences. University of Michigan Press: 245–80.

Woods, H. D., Sylvia Ostry, and Mahmood A. Zaidi (1973 [1962]) Labour Policy in Canada, 2nd ed. Macmillan of Canada.

Barry Eidlin is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at McGill University. He is a comparative historical sociologist interested in the study of class, politics, social movements, and social change. His book, *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2018. It explains why, despite many socio-economic similarities, unions have weakened in the US, but much less so in Canada. Other research has been published in the *American Sociological Review, Politics & Society, Labor Studies Journal, Sociology Compass*, and *Labor History*, among other venues. Writing for broader audiences has appeared in the *Washington Post* and *Jacobin*, and other outlets. He also offers frequent media commentary on labor politics and policy. Current research focuses on the problem of democracy in the workplace and in labor unions, as well as on the trajectories of New Left student activists who went to work in unionized workplaces in the 1970s.

Cite this article: Lichtenstein, Nelson (2021) "Comparative History of a Very High Standard, But It Is Still Tough to Make It Work," *Social Science History* **45**:418–439. doi:10.1017/ssh.2021.9

https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2021.11 Published online by Cambridge University Press