

# Barry Eidlin, Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada

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## REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Barry Eidlin, *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2018)

THIS BOOK IS A FINE piece of historical sociology dealing with differences in the labour movements of Canada and the United States. More specifically the book deals with union density in the two countries, and why it diverged after the mid-1960s. Barry Eidlin makes the point that this issue has major importance because of the impact unions have: in giving workers voice, winning better conditions for their own members and for the broader working class, and reducing inequality.

Though more narrowly focused, his book stands in a rich tradition of comparative works on Canada and the US including those by Seymour Martin Lipset, Louis Hartz, Mildred Schwartz, and Gad Horowitz.

Eidlin's basic thesis, outlined in detail in Part 2 of the book, is that the way major political parties articulated farmer and worker unrest in the 1930s and 1940s shaped the subsequent divergence in union strength. The "class idea" was better represented in Canada than in the US and this enabled Canadian labour to remain stronger than its American equivalent. US labour was incorporated into the political system as an interest group; Canadian labour as a class representative.

Before getting to the development of his own thesis, Eidlin conducts a systematic and rigorous interrogation of rival explanations. First are structural factors like the growth of the service economy

and the decline of manufacturing, and geographical shifts in location of manufacturing industries away from union heartlands. Eidlin considers that neither explain higher density in Canada as the structural shifts were broadly similar. Then there are individual worker and employer attitudes to unions. Citing various types of evidence he shows that employer hostility on both sides of the border is comparable. Individual surveys are used to determine workers' demand for union representation; the data shows similar and declining levels of approval for unions. Eidlin is conscious of the limits of individual survey data. Still, if his thesis of a stronger class idea being present in Canada is valid, one might have expected it to be reflected in individual attitudes.

Another chapter maps out the labour regimes in the two countries. Based on an evaluation of macroeconomic frameworks, including trade policy, and the details of labour legislation covering union organizing, collective bargaining, union security, and use of the strike weapon, his analysis shows that the labour regime in Canada is much more favourable to unions. These differences in the state's stance toward unions "have led to union density decline in the United States, and relative stability in Canada." (104) On the face of it, this seems a relatively robust institutional explanation for the developments of interest to Eidlin. However, he notes that over the long term the Canadian labour regime strengthened whilst that in the US weakened. So pushing back on the convenient statist view

he asks why these trajectories have occurred, a question that becomes focused as: “why did working class power erode less in Canada than in the United States?” (105) This leads to a review of four competing explanations for this phenomenon focused respectively on political institutions, national characteristics or culture, internal characteristics of unions, and the role of race. Of these, Eidlin disputes the cultural differences hypothesis most vigorously. Opinions will vary on this issue but the question of whether the right indicators have been chosen to gauge this divergence will likely feature in any discussions. As far as the others are concerned, Eidlin concedes some explanatory power to them – institutions matter, union characteristics matter, and race matters. But, in each case, he poses the question of why they matter, how, and why they changed over time. Part 2 of the book is devoted to a fuller exploration of these issues and to spelling out his own interpretation of the political articulation of class interest and the greater strength of the class idea in Canada.

Concretely the class idea is embedded in labour’s connection with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the New Democratic Party, and with social movements that enable it to articulate its demands and policies in class terms. No equivalent connections exist for US labour. As well, he argues that class representation was built into Canadian institutions enabling the state to understand labour issues in class terms, rather than as in the US, in terms of special interests. Here Eidlin puts considerable emphasis on the conciliation functions and tripartite representative structures of Canadian labour boards in contrast to their more adversarial and quasi-judicial equivalents in the US.

These linkages were established in the 1930s and 1940s and the claim they exert influence to the present is based,

although not explicitly, on a path dependency approach. Once institutions and policies are established they tend to persist, as they determine how problems get framed and identify the acceptable range of solutions.

As is the case in the earlier part of the book, the argument is based on a deep and systematic reading of the evidence. That said, the argument is open to criticism on a number of grounds. One is that the nature of the political vehicle with which Canadian labour is allied has, over time, become less and less likely to articulate a class perspective on Canadian politics. Does it really still function, as it may have done in the past in a way that enables a *working-class* voice? Union leaders seem just as likely to talk in terms of the “middle class,” average Canadians, or just “Canadians,” as the Democratic Party and US unions are to express middle class, “American” values perspective rather than a class perspective. According to data presented earlier in the book, such values are much the same on both sides of the border. Similarly, Canada’s tripartite representative institutions may contribute in the way that Eidlin suggests. But are they a product of the class idea, or of institutional and cultural factors associated with the top down Parliamentary system with its roots in an organic concept of society?

The great strength of the book, apart from its detailed and impressive research, is its pursuit of important questions about the nature of our society and the role of labour within it. Its conclusions will have many supporters (and some critics).

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Karl Heinz Roth, ed., *On the Road to Global Labour History: A Festschrift for Marcel van der Linden* (Leiden: Brill 2018)