

## Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations



*Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada*, By Barry Eidlin (2018) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 362 pages. ISBN: 978-11075-14416.

Étienne Cantin

Volume 75, numéro 4, automne 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074569ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074569ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Cantin, É. (2020). Compte rendu de [*Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada*, By Barry Eidlin (2018) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 362 pages. ISBN: 978-11075-14416.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 75(4), 839–842. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074569ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 2020

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

sont analysées au prisme de ce croisement. Cette approche permet de comprendre les différentes teintes et colorations dans la manière de manager (p. 13). Cette analyse procède par axe du PODC (un chapitre par axe), où Agogué et Sardais déclinent finalité, modalité, caractéristiques et limites des formes technique, charismatique et organique de management.

Cette conceptualisation s'appuie sur de nombreuses références à la série, très détaillées et souvent accompagnées d'extraits de dialogue. Les guerres et intrigues omniprésentes dans *Games of Thrones* constituent un terreau fertile pour décorer un management de la conflictualité. Par exemple, le « planifier » est illustré par trois batailles préparées très différemment selon les personnages : la bataille de la Neva et le plan détaillé de Tyrion; celle de Meereen, où Daenerys réalise sa vision et change le cours des événements avec ses dragons; celle du Mur, où Jon rappelle à ses compagnons leur raison d'être (tenir la porte du Mur coûte que coûte).

### Retour d'expérience pédagogique

Pour conclure cette recension, nous souhaitons souligner la clarté et la minutie de l'ouvrage qui le rendent accessible au plus grand nombre, que l'on soit ou non familier de la série. Il s'agit autant d'un petit manuel que d'un petit traité.

Nous avons eu l'opportunité d'expérimenter l'ouvrage auprès d'un public d'apprenants durant la session d'hiver 2019/2020 — avant que *L'Hiver* nous ait tous ébranlé — sur deux publics d'étudiants, en formation initiale et en formation continue, pour un cours de théories des organisations (pour un total de 67 étudiants). L'identification des personnages au cadre wébérien est un succès incontestable pour éclairer des phénomènes organisationnels complexes. Quand on connaît l'appréhension de certains étudiants à l'égard des théories des organisations, le livre d'Agogué et Sardais est donc aussi un outil péda-

gogique susceptible de susciter des débats animés dans les organisations et dans les salles de cours. *A Dream of Spring ?*

**Celine Berrier-Lucas**

**Stéphane Deschaintre**

**Emmanuel Coblenze**

Institut Supérieur de Gestion

Paris, France

### Note

- 1 R. Déry, A. Pezet. et C. Sardais (2015) *Le Management*, Montréal : Éditions JFD.

### Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada

By Barry Eidlin (2018) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 362 pages.  
ISBN: 978-11075-14416.

Barry Eidlin, a comparative historical sociologist at McGill University, has written a painstakingly researched book that seeks to explain how and why the fortunes of the labour movements in the United States and Canada diverged beginning in the mid-1960s. In a nutshell, this book's "central argument is that understanding US-Canada union density divergence in the 1960s requires understanding the different processes of political articulation that occurred in the United States and Canada in the 1930s and 1940s, as the working class was fully politically incorporated" (p. 157). Professor Eidlin explains how, in response to the crises of the Great Depression and World War II, farmer and labour groups were incorporated "in different ways" in the United States and Canada over the course of the 1930s and 1940s (p. 167). Here, incorporation refers to process "whereby workers and their organizations switched from being a problem for the state to address through ad hoc legal and police repression, to being a constituency for state actors to address and mobilize via formalized channels" (p. 11).

In the Introduction and Part I, the author criticizes previous explanations for differences between the American and Canadian

labour movements—including “the idea of the United States as a classless society”, which “continues to be a powerful part of the national mythology” even though it “diverges sharply from reality” (p. 18, 19). Eidlin also picks apart the complementary ‘exceptionalist narrative’ to the effect that the two countries have dramatically different national cultures, arguing instead that “what we now recognize as significant differences in US and Canadian class politics are the product of a relatively recent political *divergence*” (p. 25). Specifically, he argues that the “key difference driving divergence in both countries was that US labor was incorporated as an *interest group* over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, whereas Canadian labor was incorporated as a *class representative*” (p. 17). In a mere 99 pages of text, Part II presents a generally robust narrative and theorization of class politics since the 1930s that is deeply grounded, despite its brevity, in two national literatures.

In Canada, there was a “coercive response to the upsurge” of farmers and workers during the Great Depression (p. 162), which left these constituencies available for an independent left coalition. Although the Liberal government of William Lyon Mackenzie King “reversed some of Bennett’s most egregious anti-labor policies upon returning to office in 1935”, it “rebuffed calls for a Canadian *Wagner Act*” (p. 184). The King government only acceded to labour’s demands for legal recognition under duress in the mid-1940s, as “wartime labor unrest and the growing electoral threat of the CCF [Co-operative Commonwealth Federation] forced their hand” (p. 12). This led to *P.C. 1003*, which remained in force until it was replaced by the ‘*Wagnerian*’ *Industrial Relations and Disputes Investigations Act* (IRDA) in 1948—“the basis of the postwar labor regime and became the template for analogous provincial legislation” (p. 234). Eidlin argues Canadian labour’s class representa-

tive identity made addressing labour relations issues part of a ‘tripartite’ bargaining process to enforce industrial peace—leaving the labour regime more legitimate and stable over time (p. 230-232, 238-240).

In case of the United States, Eidlin argues that President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democrats “adopted a *co-optive* response to farmer and labor insurgency”, taking the form of “policy offerings that absorbed some working-class and agrarian fractions” (p. 161). Roosevelt’s election created “the conditions to absorb labor into a broadened liberal Democratic Party coalition” (p. 171). Unfortunately, a focus on Roosevelt as single-handedly crafting a ‘co-optive’ New Deal tends to overlook the contributions of members of Congress such as Senator Robert F. Wagner, who was the key politician behind the 1935 *National Labor Relations Act* (NLRA), bearing his name. Arguably, to ‘coopt’ the labour movement was not the known objective Senator Wagner had when he introduced the NLRA in Congress. Instead, the *Wagner Act* is better understood as stemming from the conclusion drawn by the Senator and his allies that without collective bargaining as a means of improving wages and hence mass ‘purchasing power’, the American economy might never fully recover from the Great Depression; and that without more effective state intervention, American employers would continue effectively to resist unionization.<sup>1</sup>

It is also important to remember that what Eidlin terms American “pluralism” and “Democratic Party liberal hegemony” (p. 220) were only possible once the ‘social democratic’ forms of corporatism characterizing the ideology and practice of American organized labour had been defeated during the immediate postwar years. For better or worse, American unions were subject to and dependent on a labour law that would be revised in a conservative fashion when Congress passed the 1947 *Taft-Hartley Act*.<sup>2</sup> As Eidlin explains,

the unions had by then become "structurally dependent on hostile or unreliable coalition partners within the Democratic Party", especially the "reactionary, racist Southern Democrats" (p. 109-110). The defeat of the CIO's postwar 'Operation Dixie' preserved the South as a political and economic bulwark against the New Deal and labour (p. 149-50). Over time, an "interest group" labour movement that had decisively rejected a labour party in favour of an alliance with the Democratic Party (p. 109-110) was de-radicalised by left purges under Taft-Hartley and then McCarthyism (p. 203-204). It was often distant if not outright hostile to New Left social movements (p. 209-210) and sought to tamp down labour militancy, which did not escalate to the levels seen in Canada. Eidlin argues that in contrast, the "continued presence of the CCF/NDP as a class-based political party retained a stronger link between the Left and the working class, mitigating the excesses of the post-war Red Scare and retaining a class-based political infrastructure" (p. 220). Perhaps this helps to explain why the concerted and largely successful campaign of American employers to portray labour unions as corrupt, undemocratic, and unduly powerful had "no equivalent campaign in Canada, even though the Canadian labor movement continued to be dominated by U.S.-based internationals and was subject to some of the same red-baiting tactics".<sup>3</sup>

More dubious is the contention that the basic explanation of the defeat of labour law reform is to be found in the fact that state actors under the American "pluralist" labour regime "perceived and processes and working-class issues" in terms of "individual alienation" by the late 1960s and 1970s (p. 251, 254). Indeed, rising labour militancy beginning in the mid-1960s convinced an increasing number of industrial relations experts and Democratic politicians that reforms liberalizing public sector labour laws would provide the best means

of bringing order to government labour relations. In Eidlin's interpretation, however, the "fact that it was sympathetic politicians granting public sector collective bargaining [...] reinforced the political perception of labor as a narrow special interest" (p. 246). Whereas Canadian public sector unions were "movement-oriented and built up enough votes to influence the broader labor movement, the movement-oriented faction of public sector unions in the United States remained small and marginalized. US labor remained committed to its role as a broker and interest group within the Democratic Party" (p. 215).

Eidlin spells out clearly how, "as the economic boom of the 1960s gave way to the crisis of the 1970s", labour's isolation from the nascent social movements of the period "gave bite to the charge that it was a narrow 'self-interest'". This was increasingly frequent amidst the ascendancy of conservative politics during a 'neoliberal' era' marked by "attacks on unions and broader working-class movements [that] have taken a toll in both countries" (p. 257). Although both labour movements continue their efforts to secure union recognition from employers through innovative forms of organizing, and US labour's "tactics and messaging may have changed over the past few decades, [...] the overall ideological framework has not". Indeed, the "class idea" remains elusive in the United States as even unionists and labourites now talk essentially of 'defending the middle class' or 'working families'—"murky terms that both obscure the power relations underlying class differences between workers and employers in the workplace, and exclude marginalized segments of the working class like the poor and unemployed". Eidlin argues that American "[l]abor remains stuck within its role as an interest group, reliant on influencing sympathetic politicians and negotiating ever-less-favorable terms with emboldened, aggressive employers" (p. 263).

As any casual observer of the labour movement knows, there is more than enough blame to go around for the steep decline of organized labour in the United States. The culprits include that sizeable group of US employers who, in the 1970s and 1980s, having bided their time for decades, successfully toppled one mighty industrial union after another through the use of permanent striker replacements, which Canadian law moved to limit unlike in the US.<sup>4</sup> In other words, labour's decline arguably cannot be pinned on any single factor, be it "political articulation", the resulting divergences in labour law or any other. Nor will its revitalization be spurred by attention to any single factor. As Professor Dorothy Sue Cobble puts it, there is "no silver bullet, and the sooner we stop looking for one, the better our analysis of the problem will be."<sup>5</sup>

#### Étienne Cantin

Professeur  
Département des relations industrielles  
Université Laval  
Québec (Québec) Canada

Campaigning from the 1950s." In G. Gall and T. Dundon (eds.), *Global Anti-Unionism: Nature, Dynamics, Trajectories and Outcomes*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 21-38.

- 5 Dorothy Sue Cobble (2010) "Betting on New Forms of Worker Organization." *Labor: Studies in the Working-Class History of the Americas*, 7 (3), p. 18-20.

## Notes

- 1 Kenneth Casebeer (1989) "Drafting Wagner's Act: Leon Keyserling and the Precommittee Drafts of the *Labor Disputes Act* and the *National Labor Relations Act*." *Industrial Relations Law Journal*, 11, p. 77.
- 2 Nelson Lichtenstein (2002) "Politicized Unions and the New Deal Model: Labor, Business, and Taft-Hartley." In S. M. Milkis and J. M. Mileur (eds.), *The New Deal and the Triumph of Liberalism*. Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, p. 135-165; Lichtenstein, Nelson (2013) *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Labor*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, p. 79-99.
- 3 John Godard (2009) "The Exceptional Decline of the American Labor Movement." *ILR Review*, 63 (1), p. 94.
- 4 John Logan (2008) "Permanent Replacements and the End of Labor's 'Only True Weapon'." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 74 (1), 171-192; John Logan (2013) "Employer Opposition in the US: Anti-Union