and case study analysis will be valuable to activists, practitioners, and scholars.

*Mark Anner*
Lecturer
Department of Government
Cornell University

## History

*State of the Union: A Century of American Labor.* By Nelson Lichtenstein. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. xi, 336 pp. ISBN 0-691-05768-0, $45.00 (cloth); 0-691-11654-7, $18.95 (paper).

In *State of the Union*, which won the Philip Taft Prize as the best labor history book of 2002, Nelson Lichtenstein critically assesses the American labor movement's shifting fortunes from the New Deal era to present times. Although his wide-ranging analysis is sensitive to the economic, political, and cultural circumstances that have affected union strength, he especially wants to understand why "solidarity and unionism no longer resonate with so large a slice of the American citizenry." Therefore, a major preoccupation of this book is tracing the complex forces that have relegated the labor question and what Lichtenstein calls the "union idea" to the margins of American public life.

The union idea, whose principal components Lichtenstein defines as industrial democracy, working-class solidarity, and the allocation of resources on a social rather than a market basis, was most perfectly realized during the New Deal and World War II eras. The need to boost purchasing power was seen by political leaders and intellectuals as vital to the nation's economic revival, and unions were granted a prominent role in ensuring that this objective was met. The idea of industrial democracy dovetailed with public disgust over corporate malfeasance and galvanized intellectual support for strong unions that could extend citizenship rights from civil society into the workplace. Lichtenstein cautions against romanticizing the 1930s, citing continuing racial and ethnic conflicts that undercut solidarity and the limited scope of New Deal social legislation. However, he hails this period, especially in contrast to the rest of the twentieth century, as a time when "elections, legislative battles, strikes, organizing campaigns, and labor negotiations were seamlessly interwoven," thereby making unions a full participant in public policy formulation and social deliberation.

The remainder of Lichtenstein's account outlines a steady erosion in the social acceptability of the union idea. Reflecting the thrust of recent scholarship, he persuasively debunks the notion of an extended, mutually negotiated post–World War II accord between management and labor. In contrast to the corporatist stance adopted by their European counterparts, American business leaders pursued what Lichtenstein calls a "managerial exceptionalism" that was deeply committed to circumscribing existing labor power and fiercely resistant to its expansion. Lichtenstein is dismissive of the purported achievements of the social compact, suggesting that firm-centered negotiations and grievance/arbitration systems led to the depoliticization of collective bargaining, the dampening of shop-floor activism, and the declining expression of solidarity. Labor itself contributed to the dilution of the union idea, not only through highly publicized cases of corruption, but also by committing a strategic error of the first order: the contractual negotiation of generous company-based health insurance and pension plans that resulted in a skewed distribution of fringe benefits and a reluctance to press for government-provided universal coverage. Lichtenstein reserves some of his sharpest criticism, however, for intellectuals who promoted industrial pluralism. By characterizing unions as an interest group and suggesting a false parity between the relative strength of labor and capital, industrial pluralists seriously undercut the union idea by blunting social support for displays of solidarity and inhibiting a broader social debate about emerging issues such as automation and capital flight.

Although some unions during the 1960s made common cause with the New Left and public employee unions registered impressive growth, the labor movement as a whole reacted defensively to social insurgencies and lost an opportunity to revive the union idea. As a result, the field was left open for the federal government and the courts to advance a "rights-based model of industrial justice" that addressed race and sex discrimination on an individual basis but further undermined notions of solidarity and collective action that were so vital to the union idea. With some of their most powerful tools dulled, Lichtenstein contends, unions were ill-equipped to deal with the challenges posed by globalization and corporate restructuring. The responses of unions to the anti-labor backlash of the Reagan years, most notably protectionist

proposals to curb imports and a proliferation of labor-management cooperation schemes, proved ineffective in resuscitating the union idea. Lichtenstein concludes on a somewhat optimistic note, finding in the Los Angeles labor movement an approximation of the politicized bargaining and labor-community alliances needed to return the labor question to center stage. Yet he also notes the episodic character of union expansion, acknowledging that a special set of historical circumstances is needed in order to create an atmosphere in which the union idea might fully re-emerge.

This is an important, timely book whose focus on ideas and ideology offers a fresh perspective that is sure to generate useful debate over labor's historical choices and current status. At times, however, Lichtenstein gives too much weight to ideological influences in explaining the erosion of working-class solidarity, an integral element in his conception of the union idea. For example, it was not industrial pluralists or the courts that prompted workers to think of themselves as homeowners, taxpayers, and consumers rather than as industrial citizens. When private sector workers have seen their interests as antithetical to those of public sector workers or unionists have allowed racial or ethnic identifications to trump their union or working-class sensibilities, intellectuals and policy makers were by and large not responsible for this unwillingness to demonstrate solidarity. Although Lichtenstein recognizes these tensions within the working class, his eagerness to blame intellectuals and social critics for the decline of the union idea understates the complicated ways in which American workers have historically processed the issue of class and approached the practice of solidarity.

Another area where Lichtenstein seems to overreach is his analysis of the post–World War II era. He minimizes labor's collective bargaining achievements, regards grievance and arbitration machinery as suffocating to rank-and-file activism, and chides unions for failing to aggressively pursue a social democratic agenda. Yet collective bargaining was often a creative, dynamic force during this period that helped propel many unionized workers into the middle class and also benefited workers in related nonunion sectors. Although the grievance/arbitration system could be cumbersome and bureaucratic, it was still seen by many workers as a vehicle by which management's hand could be stayed on the shop floor. Finally, to accuse labor of a "strategic error of the first order" for not pressing for government-provided benefits seems unduly harsh in light of Lichtenstein's acknowledgment, a page later, that "the revival of postwar conservatism had blocked any expansion of the welfare state." To be sure, Lichtenstein is right to point out the limits of collective bargaining and the postwar accord. However, by undervaluing labor's achievements during this period and the genuine difference they made in many working-class lives, he presents too bleak a picture of the union movement's standing and impact during this critical period.

Still, Lichtenstein has performed a most valuable service in his astute delineation of the specific historical circumstances that have both advanced and eroded the union idea during the twentieth century. *State of the Union* should be required reading for those who share his conviction about the social necessity for a strong labor movement and are attempting to make the labor question a matter of mainstream concern.

*Robert Bussel*

Director, Labor Education and
Research Center
Associate Professor of History
University of Oregon

*From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question.* By Robert Castel; translated and edited by Richard Boyd. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2003. xxvii, 468 pp. ISBN 0-76580-1493, $49.95 (cloth).

Robert Castel, Director of Studies at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in Paris, has written a monumental study that reconstructs the development of the "social question" from the fourteenth century to the present day. In the style of Marx, Durkheim, and Foucault, Castel uses the disaffiliated vagabond to show how our concept of social worth has come to be associated with "work" and with "wage labor." He argues that as capitalist society emerged from feudalism, it established a clear line separating the worthy poor, those who worked as wage laborers, from the unworthy, who chose "idleness" over disciplined wage work. This social standard supported capitalist growth and profitability by forcing the poor to choose between wage labor and starvation. But the mix of capitalism and compulsory labor has been unstable. As wage labor has become the social