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A Reply to Colin Gordon

At important junctures, Colin Gordon's essay seems to ignore the plain meaning of my words and to impute to me views I do not hold. For example, I do not include Colin Gordon or Thomas Ferguson among those I characterized as "ideologically driven" or "ahistorical." Indeed, I separate Gordon from those holding these views and link him to the views of Stanley Vittoz, though I do find the latter's rendering of the theme of business response to Wagner more nuanced than I do Gordon's in *New Deals*. In another instance, Gordon indicates that I accused him of believing that the Wagner Act "*was drafted* by 'shrewd corporate interests.'" He protests that "I make no such claim." In fact, however, I said no such thing. What I *did* say was that debate among scholars still persists "on the degree to which shrewd corporate interests might have regarded the National Labor Relations Act as a positive instrument of industrial stabilization." Regarding the law "as a positive instrument" and drafting are quite different matters. I believe that my formulation was a fair characterization of Gordon's views, as outlined in *New Deals* and in his rejoinder to my essay.

With respect to other points raised by Gordon, nothing in my essay posits that "workers got what they wanted in the 1930s." I actually don't know what "workers" wanted from the New Deal, though their overwhelming electoral support for FDR and their responses to public opinion polls do provide some clues, which I weigh in my book *The CIO, 1935–1955*. I am skeptical of the usefulness in writing so generally of "workers'" goals and aspirations as if the working class of the 1930s did not have many divisions along racial, ethnic, sectoral, gender, regional, and skill lines.

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I don't actually believe that "all of the alternatives to the New Deal legislation lay to the right" because I know that some people, including some in Congress, advanced more radical ideas than those finding legislative expression in Wagner, for example. On the other hand, I do believe that there were no enactable alternatives to the left of Wagner. I believe that "workers could not have done any better . . . and they might have done considerably worse." I do not find anything in Gordon's response to my essay to cause me to change my mind. Indeed, it is *he* who stresses the great power of corporate interests to establish the boundaries to public discourse and public policy. I would only add that corporate interests had powerful allies among the southerners who dominated key committees in New Deal congresses.

I *am* guilty of believing that "American politics is a *relatively* open, pluralistic arena," but with a strong emphasis on the adverb. At the same time, I agree with Gordon that the distinctive American system of corporate private ownership and media control sets severe limits around what is possible. In fact, this understanding of the constraints of corporate power and influence is one important reason why I think that Wagner was about as much as workers and unions could have achieved in the 1930s. I don't think that anything I wrote in my essay provides warrant for Gordon's imputation to me that I would characterize the view he expresses with reference to business influence on public policy as especially "ideological." Nor do I believe that "the Wagner Act was . . . a heroic liberal challenge to the power of business." Like Gordon, I believe that it was "a complex legislative response" to the economic, legal, and social circumstances of the period. I'm less convinced that "it made sense to important fragments of the business community," and I am less impressed with the "fragmented, anxious, and often contradictory" influence of business in the forging of national labor relations legislation than I am with the virtual unanimity of the business community in opposing the real existing Wagner Bill in the legislative process and through at least its first half a dozen years of implementation.

Gordon agrees with me (and Gross, Dubofsky, et al.) that "Wagner was a significant victory." And I agree with him that the question of what workers wanted is indeed "complex." I remain unclear as to the grounds on which he appears to think he *knows* what workers wanted. This problem relates to his apparent belief that "there . . . were meaningful alternatives of a New Deal system characterized by workplace contractualism, pattern bargaining by industry, close reliance on federal regulation and protection, and political alliance with the Democratic Party." I agree that serious and principled people did advance more radi-

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cal programs, but I am not at all sure that any broad segment of the working class supported these agendas. Nor do I believe that the constraints under which the American polity operates—constraints imposed in good part by the strength of large-scale corporate interests—would have permitted enactment of such a program. I wonder how Gordon, who stresses the power of corporate interests to shape public discourse and influence public policy, could be sanguine about the legislative chances of legislation more progressive than Wagner.

Gordon believes that "At issue . . . [presumably between him and me] is not really the immediate history of the New Deal but the degree to which the dismal trajectory of postwar labor relations confirmed or challenged the premises of the Wagner Act." Sorry, but that is *his* issue and not mine. I do believe that "the immediate history of the New Deal" is very much "at issue" and I don't believe that the post-1950 decline of organized labor or the post-1970 decline in important aspects of working-class material life necessarily tells us a lot about the premises under which the Wagner Act was passed. In this response, as in *New Deals*, Gordon cuts loose from his informative and provocative analysis of the historical dynamics of New Deal policies to sweeping, even apocalyptic, judgments about the character and trajectory of the post–World War II American polity.

If I am a liberal pluralist (a label assigned to me by Gordon, but one that I do not necessarily assign to myself), probably the best indication of it lies in what I thought was the main point of my essay, namely, an appeal to historians to examine the actual workings of the post–World War II industrial relations regime within the context of American politics. I believe that the postwar labor movement sensibly eschewed third party politics and struggled, albeit with only limited success, to achieve economic security for workers and institutional advantage for itself in a system heavily weighted toward corporate power. I also believe, however, that other factors—the racialization of politics; the relative affluence among blue-collar workers; the success of big business in fostering a hegemonic "free enterprise" ideology; the resistance of large segments of the working class to organization and to the liberal political agenda of the labor movement have also played a large role in shaping the political environment in which labor and workers have operated. I do not think any of these factors are in any sense traceable back to the Wagner Act per se in any direct or linear way.

My goal in the essay was to call attention to the lack of historical literature on the postwar industrial relations regime and to urge historians to expand upon the impressive beginnings made by James Gross and

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to profit from, while avoiding thralldom to, the much more extensive work emanating from legal scholars. I appreciate the kind words Colin Gordon awards the historiographical aspect of my article. I believe that when it comes to recognizing that corporate interests play a crucial role in shaping the content of public policy, he and I are actually in broad agreement.

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