Labor, Loyalty, and Rebellion: Southwestern Illinois Coal Miners and World War I. *By Carl R. Weinberg.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005. xiii + 246 pp. Photographs, maps, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, $55.00; paper, $27.00. ISBN: cloth, 0-809-32634-5; paper, 0-809-32635-3.

Reviewed by John H. M. Laslett

In the early hours of April 5, 1918, while U.S. troops engaged Germans on the Western Front, a lynch mob dragged German-born Robert Prager from the city jail in Collinsville, Illinois, marched him out of town and hanged him from a tree. At their subsequent trial the perpetrators of this crime, several of whom were local coal miners, justified their act by alleging that Prager was a German spy who intended to blow up a nearby mine, and they were acquitted by the jury.

Carl Weinberg is not the first person to analyze this incident. Articles about the Prager lynching were written some years ago by Donald Hickey, Frederick Luebke, and other scholars. Why, then, does this event—rather than any comparable incident of hysterical mob rule during World War I—deserve book-length treatment? One reason stems from its national and international ramifications. Weinberg demonstrates more clearly than his predecessors how the Prager lynching influenced the debate then underway in Congress about the content of the Sedition Act (1918), as well as its effect on U.S.–German relations. He also shows how President Wilson's administration, by artificially whipping up anti-German sentiment, compromised its own principles and became partially responsible for the wave of vigilante actions that swept across the country. Of course, this became a matter of even greater concern to African Americans, far more of whom were threatened with lynching at this time, than to German Americans. Weinberg also tells his story very well. For example, in chapter six, entitled "White-Hot Mass Instinct," he describes in compelling detail the sequence of events that occurred when Prager was forced to kiss the American flag, made to sing patriotic songs, and then marched out of town under cover of darkness while the local police stood aside. At first the intention of the crowd, which also contained several German Americans eager to demonstrate their wartime loyalty, was simply to tar and feather Prager. Failing to locate

any tar, one of the participants discovered a towing rope in a car trunk. It was at this point, according to Weinberg, that "the crowd became a lynch mob" (p. 126). This remark is a little too facile. Was it the discovery of the rope, or something more complex, that turned the crowd into a lynch mob? Here, the author might have gone a little more deeply into the literature on the psychology of lynch mobs.

But the main value of *Labor, Loyalty, and Rebellion* is Weinberg's discussion of the rising tensions experienced by the Collinsville miners between their patriotic loyalties, on the one hand, and their desire to advance their interests as class-conscious workers, on the other. It is the treatment of this subject that elevates his book beyond local history into a work of considerable historical importance. Both before and after the Prager lynching, the miners appeared torn between their American patriotism, which mandated the highest possible coal output, and their socialist convictions about the need to advance their economic interests as a class. District 12 of the United Mine Workers of America, to which the southwestern Illinois miners belonged, was a leader in the 1919 strike wave that came close to crippling U.S. industry. For 1980s historians such as Sean Wilentz and David Corbin, this apparent paradox posed no difficulties of interpretation. For example, Corbin, in analyzing a similar conflict of interest in his study of coal miners in West Virginia, argued that the national and class loyalties of the miners were not irreconcilable but could be subsumed under the aim of achieving "industrial democracy." Both the workers who supported the war and those who struck for higher pay were taking on a common enemy: the greedy "Kaisers" of German imperialism and of U.S. industry.

Carl Weinberg rejects this argument as spurious, and argues instead that the divide between loyalty to class and loyalty to the nation-state during World War I was real, not imaginary. "My study," he writes, "has concluded that [fusing class with national loyalties] was an impossible dream" (p. 199). In one sense, this approach reaffirms the views of an older generation of World War I interpreters. In the 1960s James Joll, along with many other European scholars, saw the clash between socialism and nationalism as the Achilles heel that destroyed working-class internationalism. In another sense, however, Weinberg's book poses a challenge to the currently fashionable view, held by historians such as Gary Gerstle, who believe that the idea of "working-class Americanism" contains within it a critical dimension that resembles the socialist critique

of capitalism. I find Weinberg more persuasive than Gerstle on this issue. It is one thing to uncover common ground between some of America's democratic war aims and the desire of U.S. workers to secure a better life for themselves once victory was achieved. It is quite another to fly in the face of common sense by suggesting that the idea of "Americanism" is so amorphous that it can include loyalty to both class and nation as parts of the same phenomenon.

Despite its narrow focus, Carl Weinberg's excellent book makes a major contribution to a long-standing national historical debate. It would be refreshing to see other historians take up his challenge and run with it.

John H. M. Laslett is emeritus professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has written widely on the history of American socialism and labor, and on the issue of American exceptionalism, including Colliers Across the Sea: A Comparative Study of Class Formation in Scotland and the American Midwest, 1830–1924 *(2000). He is currently writing a history of the working class in Los Angeles.*