

Where the Rubber Meets the Road for the Indefinite Future: An Interview with Jefferson Cowie

JEFFERSON COWIE is Associate Professor of History at Cornell University and a leading scholar of labor and class in the United States. His works include *Capital Moves: RCA's 70-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Cornell University Press, 1999), the co-edited volume *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Cornell University Press 2003), and, most recently, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New Press, 2010), which has been awarded prizes from the Society of American Historians, the Organization of American Historians, Labor History, and the United Association for Labor Education. In this interview, Cowie discusses these works as well as what led him to become a historian, the complexities of contemporary class conflict and identity politics, the oppressive function of student debt, and the connection between scholarship and activism. This interview was conducted in August 2011 in Greenwich Village, New York City, with some reflections on Occupy Wall Street added in October 2011.

HH: *Can you discuss your upbringing, particularly with respect to how your earlier years contributed to your research interests and political beliefs?*

C: I was raised in the Midwest, and I think that not being from either of the coasts had an important effect on how I thought about things. Starting when I was a little kid, my dad showed a remarkable skill at downward mobility. By the time I was in third grade, he was the custodian at the local high school—a job he held until he retired. Politically, he went

from being kind of an Eisenhower Republican to a Reagan guy. I watched his transformation and his growing intolerance for the changes in the world. He was a political and occupational bellwether: non-union, service sector, and conservative. I also watched what was happening to our community and what was happening to the area around us, and I began to appreciate how class worked in subtle and in obvious ways.

People often talk about "the canon" with regard to class theory, whether it's Marx or Gramsci or Herb Gutman or EP Thompson or whoever. But the book that really resonated with what I had seen growing up, and informed my own work, was Sennett and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. I read that and the light went on: "Oh, class as shame." I got that. That made sense. Class as point of resistance, class as community, I didn't get. I didn't see that growing up. But class as alienation and humiliation, that made more sense.

HH: *You've written about this a bit in an unpublished preface to Stayin' Alive. You note that "as the son of a downwardly mobile and politically conservative father who, for most of my life, labored as a non-union janitor, I found that I approached working-class history from a different angle than those old-school liberals and New Leftists who wrote so much of the history before me."*[1] *Could you talk about what you mean by this? How do you see the working-class history you've written as different from what was written by the earlier generation of liberals and New Leftists?*

C: So much of the so-called New Labor History—Thompson came out in 63, Gutman was taking off in late-60s and early 70s, which are informing a large swath of historians—are really of a particular moment: the emancipation movements of the 60s and also the labor unrest of the early 70s. I think that it was a pretty unique moment that really shaped their consciousness. Like all of us, they tended to see the past through the particular prism of their own times—but such extraordinary times! It could lead to a lot of romance with the past.

I really found a lot of the tools of the New Left useful, but it was shedding a lot of those presumptions and baggage that really helped me to look at things differently. For *Capital Moves*, for instance, I looked at community, which is the cornerstone of the New Labor History and saw that it really had some problems as an analytical category. It's not just a warm and pleasant place of resistance. If you project the power of capital more nationally, regionally, and globally, then community becomes less of a tool of resistance and more of a location that is charged with power relations on a global scale. My ongoing project is to continue to interrogate a lot of the main tools of working class history.

HH: *Your first book Capital Moves, examines the way that one company, RCA, relocated production nationally and internationally seeking cheap and compliant labor, largely in response to worker organizing. Since writing Capital Moves your work has continuously emphasized, at its base, an approach to understanding American history that keeps a focus on class struggle. From what influences have you drawn your interest in the historical importance of class conflict? Are there particular strengths or limitations in emphasizing class struggle in understanding American history?*

C: The term "class struggle," makes me a little uneasy because it's too unified and too complete and too tidy of an answer to an incredibly complicated set of issues. Identity, as we know, is a multivariate, complicated, conglomerate of a thing. The problem today is that the questions of class seem to have hollowed out that complex of identities. There doesn't seem to be any core there anymore, which is what I've tried to talk about in *Stayin' Alive*. By and large, what I'm trying to do is find ways to talk about the issues of class conflict and inequality and material justice in ways that get away from traditional Marxian traps. I think if you talk to working people today about "class struggle," that's a clunker. The words just land on the ground without resonance. There's no

traction. I think part of what we need to do is update our vocabulary around some of those things and think about a broader terrain for discussions.

If there is a cohesive class struggle in this country it's been waged from above. I think that given the violence of American labor relations, the fragmentation of the working class along the lines of race and region and immigration and other things, it's clear that the struggle comes from above more effectively than from below. One thing I try to do with my work is lay that bare in such a way that we can begin to think about new ways of considering how politics might unfold, because clearly—just look around us right now—it's a disaster. And I don't think resurrecting a sort of Victorian Marxist nomenclature is going to help.

You can over-theorize something to the point of it failing itself and failing you. So, for me, I'm more interested in what works and what doesn't than I am in abstractions that hold nothing for me. If an idea doesn't work, modify it, change it, throw it away. Find out what those people are doing that is successful and continually engage in a process of pragmatically assessing it. What kinds of social change that work is more effective to me than is coming up with a massive theoretical construct and saying "okay, this is how it's going to unfold." That was the problem with Marx! Marx was a great sociologist. A great critic of political economy, but a crappy prognosticator of the future. So I am much more interested in what works—a bit of a Deweyan pragmatist, I suppose.

HH: *You've argued that the relatively progressive parts of the New Deal were in fact an exception in American history, and along with others, have also argued that the postwar labor-management accord is more myth than reality. Can you discuss what you see as the causes of the mythologized New Deal and labor-management accords? What impacts have they had on labor as well as the scholarship on post-World War II America?*

C: First of all, I don't want to say that the labor management accord was a myth. I just think that it was smaller and much less crystallized than many historians have claimed. Nobody talked about it at the time. There was the article in *Fortune* that pointed to the "Treaty of Detroit," but that was really about a series of contract negotiations. That phrase the "labor management accord" really emerged in the 80s as people began to realize what they were losing: looking back, they saw a class truce there that was being lost, but I think it became more intellectually reified than it was in real life. The accord was there in a limited number of sectors, but industries that were largely in decline, in terms of employment numbers, by the late 50s. It's also white, mostly male, and very regional—sometimes based as much on who is frozen out as who was in. It was Midwestern and Northeast and West Coast, so it was always geographically limited, always temporally defined, and always racially defined. So, it's a deeply problematic construct but it's not a total myth. So that's point one.

In terms of the New Deal as exception, basically, this is something I don't want to be true, but I think is. The circumstances that gave rise to the New Deal, especially from the Wagner Act to the Fair Labor Standards Act, from 35-38, were pretty extraordinary. And, had it not been for the war, I think even those reforms might have been really short lived. It was exceptional because of the crisis of the Great Depression. It was exceptional because other really problematic issues in America were at bay. Immigration was suspended. We often forget about that. Immigration is one of the most divisive political issues in this country. During the 1930s and 1940s all the way up to the 1965 immigration reforms, we really didn't have to deal with that part of American politics. And I think that's very important. Religion also was not as divisive an issue. Garry Wills called this the era of the "Great Religious Truce." Some of the most divisive issues were kind of on hold from the 40s through the 70s. And,

as I mentioned about the postwar accord, this was a time, as Ira Katznelson put it, that "affirmative action was white." When race broke open in the sixties, the political coalition began to falter.

Therefore, in our own time, to say, "What we need to do is rekindle the New Deal," I think is a bit misguided. The famous picture of Barack Obama in the limousine with a cigarette holder and the toothy grin, Paul Krugman talking of Franklin Delano Obama, and all this kind of stuff makes for bad history and bad policy. I think what we need to do—the project of your generation—is to come up with our own categories. The New Dealers were relying on the groundwork laid by the Progressives. And it was the crisis of the Depression that allowed a lot of the Progressive ideas to get institutional form. Nobody sat around saying "Wow, you know, what we need to do is get the Knights of Labor back." They were trying to think of their own formulas. So I get irritated and have short patience with that kind of stuff.

HH: You begin Stayin' Alive by discussing a wide number of examples of labor militancy, cross-racial labor alliances, feminist labor organizing, and wildcat strikes that were occurring in the early 1970s, but note that by the mid-1970s, what possibilities there were for "a vibrant, multi-cultural, and gender conscious conceptualization of class" had been lost.[2] How did the potentials for class, race, and gender identities and politics coalescing and growing stronger during these years turn for the worse?

C: A class identity emerged from this postwar paradigm that we were just talking about. It did exist—people talked about "the working class." If you look at mainstream journalism of the time, they talked about "the working class." The question that animates Stayin' Alive is, "Why couldn't there be a synthesis between that and the new social movements of the 1960s with old class ideas from the thirties?" Why couldn't what was largely a white, male class identity—and I over generalize

there—from the postwar period merge with the rising consciousness around race, women's rights, democratization, and these other things? There are some very exciting moments when these disparate strands were coming together. You do see it in some very vibrant places—the farm workers, the Memphis sanitation workers, the democratization movements that were really pushing against some very, very stale, authoritarian, sometimes even corrupt leaders—but by and large labor and the new social movements were in separate camps. They even ended up in separate policy streams: the EEOC and the NLRB are completely separate worlds.

Unfortunately, the mainstream AFL-CIO leadership had a disastrous record on the changes swirling all around them. Absolutely disastrous. I tend to give people the benefit of the doubt when I'm doing research on these types of things before doing any kind of indictment, but I was actually shocked how retrograde many of the union leaders were. The war, of course, didn't help. These guys, AFL-CIO leaders, were all hardcore Cold Warriors. Obviously the new social movements were against the Vietnam War, but when it came to something like the McGovern campaign, to sabotage that campaign to the degree that the AFL-CIO went out of its way to do, it's just mind boggling. The degree to which these union leaders thought they were in charge was extraordinary. They thought the game was kind of over after the mid-50s. They knew that they were big. They were powerful. They had achieved that kingmaker role in the Democratic Party, especially by 68, that they'd dreamed of since the forties. And they thought if they could just get rid of McGovern then they could get back to where they were in charge. In fact, however, they were the waning ends of the exception and not the norm; they mistook a period of exceptional power for the new norm. They were really in the midst of this twilight of their own power and needed all of the allies they could get. There was such a moment lost.

The irony of what unfolded after the early '70s is that

the union movement ended up being a diverse, multi-cultural, or as my friend Dan Katz calls it, "mutual cultural" institution. But it's also one of the most shrinking institutions in America.

HH: *You also describe this period as one in which a shift took place: "With class identity growing feeble as the decade wore on, the more powerful draw of individual rights against discrimination gained momentum."*[3] *Can you elaborate on the relation between "class identity" and individual rights/identity politics during these years?*

C: What you can see is a decline of collective economic rights. As I said, there was, at the same time, a failure to link together the new social movements and the old labor movement. The consequences are that that women and minorities end up looking to sort of a classical, individual, constitutional rights paradigm. Now they've achieved tremendous things through group identity: women's rights, rights for African-Americans, gay rights. But by and large these are essentially expanding the notion of what individual rights are. That's a good thing. But when justice becomes defined solely as the expansion of individual rights that becomes problematic.

You know, there was just a big victory in New York with gay marriage. You have the extension of marriage to a group of people who have not had that right socially and politically recognized. That's great. But how many gay people still don't have health care? That's the dichotomy we're left with today. So, a collective claim on the economic right of health care is a different animal. I think we've lost that. I think that's the tragedy of the 1970s.

The culturalization of politics that emerged in the 1970s plays into this, where the culture wars become—not that they're not important—the essence of what politics is. I think one of the tragedies of the left since the 1970s is to lose

the economic argument. Winning the cultural argument by and large—there's still a lot of work to do—but I think the level of cultural freedom is actually pretty high compared to what it once was, while the level of economic rights is horribly low. That is the question at stake now down on Wall Street. The occupiers are, for one of the first times in recent memory, except perhaps Seattle in 1999, demanding economic accountability. The economic questions, and the way economic interests drive politics, are the umbrella for all other questions of equality and justice. I find that very refreshing.

Now we have Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as the centerpiece of employment relations, not the National Labor Relations Act. The EEOC says that you cannot discriminate in the workplace. A good thing. In the book, I point to this case in the early 50s that came up in front of the National Labor Relations Board in which an employer fired some workers and then the employer claimed, "I didn't fire these workers because they were union workers or union activists. I fired those workers because they were blacks." And the NLRB said, "Oh, ok, that's fine, 'cause we don't do race. We do unions." And today, it would be the opposite. You could fire with impunity anybody who wants to make a collective claim on the workplace, but you cannot discriminate against an individual's civil rights. Sometime we have got to get back to being able to talk about both at the same time in this country, but we have not found that discourse.

HH: *You suggest that more than an era of everyday resistance and collective action, working class history after the early 1970s might be better understood as one in which powerlessness became internalized and the class war "raged more within than without."*[4] *But what—if anything—can those continued individual acts of resistance that remained prominent in workplaces during those years through till today tell us about labor power, class consciousness, and the possibilities for*

collective political mobilization?

C: When I made that claim in my book I was basically talking about the main contours of discourse, the main contours of social identity, the main contours of political life. There's plenty of other stuff going on that's really interesting. Granted, most of the labor struggles were defensive from the eighties onward—Clifton Morenci, the Phelps-Dodge strike in 83, the PATCO strike in 81 all the way up through the protests in Madison, Wisconsin. Most of those were trying to keep what they already had. I think if you go back and look at some of the 1970s struggles you'll see that the struggle against the incursions of wage, the incursions of industrial discipline, they were against those things, but it was not always clear what they were for. So that's the project: to sort of move from what we're against to what we're for. I think that's a problem. But that said, I think the richness of experimentation among working people and activists and politicians and scholars is where the rubber meets the road for the indefinite future. Let a thousand flowers bloom. I am not very critical of anything right now because it's from those actions that are taking place all over the world and the coalitions that are emerging, that the new world's going to be born, I hope. So I celebrate those, I honor those. I don't want to be dismissive of those. I think the conclusion of the book comes across perhaps as a little bit dismissive. We also need to be mindful that a lot of the leaders of many of the community-based organizations and the unions made their march through those institutions, through the 70s onward. A lot of those were insurgents of that era who kind of made their compromises and became the leaders today. So, there's more fermentation going on there than perhaps I let on. But I was trying to explore what I do think are the main contours of the way we think of ourselves as a society. That there's a big huge hole in the middle of our civic imaginations about how we think about ourselves. Nonetheless, I still think the "inner class war" is really important to think about. How do we take

those internal, deeply personal anxieties, and drive them out into the open and make them political? That is the question.

HH: *You've also argued that though the working class are everywhere in American society, since the 1970s the identification of "working class" is absent from "how we think of ourselves as a society."*[5] *Given what little today's unions seem to offer in changing this—both due to their own internal calamities and the political and economic structures they are up against—where is the potential you see in reviving class-conscious identity and mobilization in the subsequent years and decades?*

C: Rule 1: Don't ask an historian to predict the future! (laughs) Historical pessimism can be a dangerous framework, which is sometimes why I hesitate to engage in some of the plenary debates about where we're going and what we think we should be doing. But, how and where might things emerge anew? The first place I would look is immigrants. I think that the most exciting stuff, just as it was 100 years ago, is coming from the immigrant working class. But, of course, that speaks to the mighty division between native and foreign-born workers that you see played out on *Fox News* everyday. But I think that's the future. That's really where I would look for harbingers of change. Hopefully others will follow suit. But given the current economic crisis, the rising inequality, the ridiculousness of this budget crisis, the power of finance to rule the economy, all of this—I am kind of amazed if you don't see a stronger emerging class identity coming from this. The very, very rich, the capitalists, are acting in a very coherent way to protect their interests, but there is not any countervailing voice in any kind of unified way. I find this incredibly disturbing. My fear is that if you compound this with a falling empire, you have a very dangerous situation in this country. Crumbling empires are ugly, ugly things. I don't think this country's gonna take it well. The occupiers of Wall Street are certainly raising the right questions, and maybe

the diffuse class identity can be some sort of strength there, but I remain concerned.

HH: *As an academic, professor and dean, you're undoubtedly familiar with the difficulties many undergraduate and graduate students incur. Academic labor is a major arena for low-wage work, and exploitation of graduate students in particular is a serious issue. What do you see as the possibilities for a progressive turn in academic labor exploitation in the U.S.?*

C: Over half of all hires today are not tenure track. I think that the structure of higher ed in this country is in a pretty big crisis when the cost of higher ed outstrips the pace of inflation dramatically at the same time they're increasing the size of classrooms and they're decreasing the accessibility of tenure. Everybody is much less secure and stable. On top of all of that, the anti-intellectual environment that is infiltrating universities as so many universities are becoming business-schools-plus-other-stuff is deeply problematic for the creative intelligence of this country. A place like Cornell? We don't face too much of this. We're fairly insulated. We actually treat our adjuncts pretty well and keep the number controlled pretty tightly. I feel fortunate not to be complicit in a lot of that, but it's hard not to see the proletarianization of so many professions. It's happening in medicine as well. It'll be happening in law before you know it. I think dealing with this shared instability will be part of any future struggle.

HH: *Student debt has become a major obstacle in the life of many working class people today. What difficulties do you think student debt will have on the current generation of students, and on social justice movements?*

C: I think it's a killer. I went to an okay, but not great public school, moved to California, went to community college pretty much for free, and then made the jump to one of the best public universities in the world, the University of

California, Berkeley. I paid \$700 a semester and paid for it with a morning job. I walked out debt free. At that point I could do anything I wanted: I could go to the Peace Corp; I could do community activism; I could go to law school. I did Central American solidarity work around that time because I could do whatever I wanted. You make enough money to put a roof over your head and then you get to explore your ideals. Today, it's the complete opposite. The structure of higher ed prevents you from having ideals. People walk out in debt. You're basically mortgaging your future if you walk out in debt. The economists will say, "This pays off. We know that anybody that graduates from 'fancy pants university' will do better economically than somebody who didn't." But that doesn't really get to the essence of the problem.

I'm always trying to get my students to think about education not as a linear path from here to law school. I'm trying to get them away from "I will do this because Professor Cowie says, but I don't really know why I'm reading this, but I'm gonna do it cause it's an assignment and I know if I get an A in this I know I'll advance to the next square." I'm trying to get them to explore their lives, explore their society, explore their politics, economics, their setting in it, their role in it, their complicity in it. But they're scared to death of those questions because if you start pulling at those threads you're eventually left naked, because they've literally put themselves on the auction block in order to get an education in order to advance themselves.

Your question was about activism. For my students, it's one step before activism. It's consciousness. It's ideas. It's free thought. People are so paranoid now about not getting into the "haves." And this has become more problematic. It used to be that a public school teacher was here and a lawyer was here. And so if you made your choice and you want to be a school teacher, a respectable professional job, or you want to go for the big bucks the difference was "this much," but now

it's like many times that much because those guys are making astronomical sums and these guys [teachers] are under attack. So the emphasis for students in elite universities, which is more of the students I'm around, is to make sure you're in that wing of things that "wins." And the winner takes all. Otherwise, these guys are the losers, and you don't want to be there. I find that very demoralizing actually.

HH: *Many labor scholars have been directly involved with labor struggles—the legacy of scholar-activists like C.L.R. James, Sheila Rowbotham, Marty Glaberman and Angela Davis is awe-inspiring. How do you see the connection between scholarship and movement work, today? Do you feel there is responsibility on the part of left scholars to directly contribute to social justice struggles?*

C: I think there is often an inspirational linkage. However, I actually think some of the best work of scholarship comes from a cooler detachment from the issues. There is a difference between scholarship and an extension of politics. I know a lot of people, myself included, who at one time would have said "Everything's political and there is no way to separate scholarship from politics." I still agree with that, but I think there is a place—and the university is actually supposed to serve this role, despite the many incursions upon it that we've already talked about—where you get to step back. I think good scholarship can get at a truth that might actually transcend immediate political questions. For instance, some people might celebrate the decline of working class identity, others like us might bemoan this as a tragedy, but on some level there is a truth there that is important that I think we all need to begin to talk about. So I try to avoid my immediate political concerns impinging upon my scholarship.

For instance, *Capital Moves* happened to come out a few years after the North American Free Trade Agreement passed. Obviously, I was informed by NAFTA and the anti-NAFTA struggle, but my conclusions transcended the nature of the

immediate politics of NAFTA. I found that, "wow, this is really a complicated question that's been going on a long time and it has this deep pattern in global history." If the book were a diatribe against NAFTA, it would have been ephemeral. I'm not saying it's not ephemeral! (*Laughs*) But it would have been more ephemeral. If you can be informed by political questions, but not have your work narrowly answer those questions, but try to engage some of the deeper currents in history and social life, you're gonna be a better scholar. And that may make you a weaker activist. But I think you gotta kind of make a decision a little bit. Not that I haven't had my activism or still do. But our goal as scholars is to mine those deeper veins, not just the stuff that's right on the surface. To the degree that those immediate political concerns prevent us from digging deeper, I think it's a problem and we need to be very, very aware of it. I know a lot of people want to hear "Oh, they're one and the same and good scholarship is good politics!" But I'm more cautious about that.

HH: *Is there a personal side to that as well? I wonder a bit about time and family or even more broadly about the personal dimensions of this question.*

C: There is, there's a life course dimension to it, for sure. I think that's the case for a lot of people. Young people have a sense of immediacy and urgency that is full of energy and possibility. You get toward your middle age and you worry about the next generation, and what's wrong with them. I think that's important but I also think that my politics have become deeper in a way because I think about legacy, about my kids and the unstable world that they inherit. I end up saying, "well, the system's not gonna take care of my kids, so I better make sure that I do." So it breeds, on the one hand, a radical critique of the system, but on the other hand it becomes "Alright, clearly the message is every person for themselves. I better take care of my own." And I hate that. It makes you sort of schizophrenic in a way about how you

approach contemporary problems. But fundamentally, it doesn't change the way I see the solutions.

Footnotes

1. Jefferson Cowie, [Autobiographical Reflections on the 1970s](#)," (an unpublished preface to *Stayin' Alive*).

2. Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 72.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Jefferson Cowie, "Autobiographical Reflections on the 1970s."

5. Jefferson Cowie, "Red, White, and Blue Collar" [DemocracyJournal](#) Issue #20, (Spring 2011), 84.