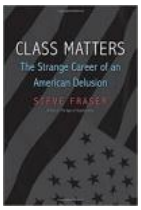
Class DOES Matter

written by Paul Buhle | July 31, 2018



Steve Fraser is a weathered veteran of the New Left and many subsequent movements, author of shrewd books on the acquisitive ruling class and also of the outstanding biography of famed left-leaning labor giant Sidney Hillman, among other works. Here he once again ranges far, but also comes close to home, his own personal home space.

In short, this is about as autobiographical as Fraser is likely to get, and he does so for a reason. His own background, in a lower-middle class corner of Brooklyn now inevitably gentrifying, has offered him a clue to the larger mysteries (more like, mystifications) of class in the United States.

What we have here is a series of vignettes stretching from the white settlement of New England to the civil rights movement (he missed the first by several centuries, but was part of the second) and beyond. Herein, Fraser shows the considerable erudition of a deep-thinking social historian facing a stubborn, collective denial of facts that, objectively speaking, should have been obvious.

Why, then, was the obvious so successfully rejected or suppressed? Race is at the center of this picture, but so intertwined with class that one cannot be separated from the other. The theme that reaches back to white colonization will be familiar to readers of Fraser's generation and mine as associated perhaps most clearly with William Appleman Williams, the much-attacked (by the liberal mainstream of the contemporary history profession, that is) scholar of American empire. According to Williams, expansionism offered a trade between democratic principles and the gains of conquest, by land mass and market. Williams himself was not so keen on class, especially working-class, details, and here Fraser moves ahead, again and again.

I am not at all convinced, as he is, that the disavowals of class conflict and socialism during the 1950s by Daniel Bell and other erstwhile socialists contained sentimental regrets of any kind. The "end of ideology" proclaimed by Bell anticipated "the end of history" after the collapse of the East Bloc, and rang just as false in the light of renewed social conflicts. Liberals and conservatives alike have spent centuries proclaiming the United States free from Old World troubles and ready for business, in a humane way, naturally.

But Fraser is on solid ground when he comes to his own story, intertwined with the civil rights movement and the reality that no Great Society program could withstand the demands of the Empire. The War On Poverty would be abandoned for the War On Vietnam and no Democratic Party leader—except perhaps Robert Kennedy in the months before his assassination—would want it the other way. Fraser ends with the heavy thought that the "American utopia is a house divided against itself," a myth with too much real weight to carry. This is poignant, indeed. I am not sure that the wealthy and powerful, of both political parties, liberal or conservative, are ready to agree.