

# Is a Dream a Lie if it Doesn't Come True (or is it something worse)?

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LET ME BEGIN WITH A CONFESSION: While the 1980s are a blur to me, I recall the 1970s with a crispness and precision that has led me ever since to replaying the mental tape of those years, trying to understand how things ended up as they did. The latter decade to me still means the awful decline of popular music, Reagan's smarmy self-righteous speeches, the horrors of the wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua and seemingly fruitless protests to stop them, the AIDS crisis, homelessness, and most of all the literally physically crumbling infrastructure around us as jobs were lost, factories closed, neighborhoods and cities rotted, a process so well captured in Michael Moore's films.

Jefferson Cowie has given us a wonderfully readable, if necessarily depressing, account of the working class in the 1970s. It turns out that the tape is worth replaying. This was, after all, the turning point; the moment when working class hopes in the United States, and around the world, might have been realized to a greater degree in struggles over control of work and for social justice; or alternatively, the 70s could have been the last hurrah, the point where the illusions of a New Deal and social democratic hopes went down in flames, followed by a renascent capitalist class's arrogant victory lap that seems to still be going on, despite Wall Street's having turned to ashes most of the resources society entrusted to it. How, and why the latter scenario won out over alternative futures is the subject of Cowie's *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*.

This book is the most important work on the U.S. postwar working class since at least John McDermott's neglected *The Crisis in the Working Class* of 1980, and is likely to get more notice than that unsung work did given its unfortunate timing. As a work of history, it might be the most groundbreaking and original national history of a working class since E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, even given its opposite theme which is partly overstated in the subtitle. For Cowie, aside from providing us with a highly readable and very plausible account of the defeat of U.S. working class hopes and projects through that decisive decade, has also overcome a number of the weaknesses that eventually developed in the school of social history that focused on working class studies. These often involved close, highly detailed accounts of the origins and growth of particular groups of workers in specific crafts, cities or regions. The relationship drawn between such workers and popular culture or religion often seemed to try too hard to copy Thompson's seamless weaving together of English popular culture and working class self-making. Thompson had tied together the material and symbolic into a socialist humanism embodied in a class on the move. Instead, later approaches, at times drowning readers in detail more appropriate to Ph.D. dissertations, favored identity politics and then postmodern discourse methodologies, and ended up finding the working class an impossible project in the first place, as though it had never happened. Finally, the school of working class historians emphasizing culture seemed stymied by the challenge of continuing their story past the New Deal without it losing coherence, as an autonomous class with its own cultural expressions no longer seemed discernible. Some stuck with either cultural issues, or politics, or union struggles, or, decreasingly, struggles at the point of production. *Stayin' Alive* instead is able to give readers a holistic account of the life of the class as a whole, and its narrative weaves work, politics, union and workplace struggles, music, film, myth and reality together without once losing its way.

Cowie knows that the working class of the 1970s seems today as if it never happened and indeed points out that the rank and file rebellions of the Miners for Democracy and of the Steelworkers who supported Ed Sadlowski's reform efforts, or the Teamsters for Democracy, or the various wildcat

strikes of the era, seem to have disappeared from all narrative, history, and memory. But even a working class that has disappeared as an independent or effective actor on the stage of national politics is one that existed at least at one time for real, and Cowie has not forgotten that. For this, Cowie's book is indispensable. But perhaps as importantly, despite the pessimism and seeming finality of the subtitle, the book makes clear that class was in the 70s, and remains, the central issue in U.S. political life. That it is also demonstrably less salient in mobilizing people to fight to improve their conditions merely means that one side is winning, or even has won. Race and gender are never absent, indeed are investigated in this book, and are shown to be among the weak points of the working class of the period. The subsequent retreat of white workers into patriarchy and whiteness in reaction to unexpected and bewildering defeat after defeat is not an afterthought, but the basis on which to begin any serious project for overcoming the divisions in the class that have helped paralyze us in the subsequent decades. In short, by treating race and gender not as intellectual categories, but as concrete struggles by black, Hispanic, and women workers, and therefore as subjects of practical political projects whose efforts called for further political projects by working class men and whites and by working class organizations and allies, Cowie moves beyond postmodern obsession with identity and its abstractions, to concrete and practical alternatives that failed, even for good reasons, but did not necessarily need to fail.

Cowie's careful reconstruction of the critical turning points of the 1970s — the deflating of the hopes of the reform movements, the massive corporate unified lobbying campaign to crush labor law reform, the gutting of the social democratic hopes embodied in the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act, and most of all the failure and thinness of every effort at merging the various social movements of the 1960s with the working class rebellions of the 70s — shows that these defeats were not inevitable, even if the odds were against the efforts to forestall them. Postmodernism, with its contempt for any hint of teleology, nevertheless by its very name suggests a teleology, that the "end of grand narratives" or simply of the working class as a political project, has had its own inevitability. *Stayin' Alive* shows that this is not the case. Indeed, a strength of the book is that it makes clear that economic and cultural problems have political solutions — solutions in alliances, policies, organization. The reverse is also true, that economic and political problems become insoluble when they are treated as cultural. The latter is what so many intellectuals, comfortable in their dismissal of working people as subjects of social transformation, have spent their energy doing for many years now, as meanwhile neoliberal capitalism has gutted every basis for democratic citizenship or for social justice.

Instead, Cowie takes us back through the attempts to put together a new whole that might have been, and might yet be, greater than the sum of its parts — from efforts to link civil rights and labor struggles as in the early UFW behind Cesar Chavez and the now forgotten Farah strike, to working class feminist efforts like 9 to 5 and the Coalition of Labor Union Women, to Martin Luther King's support for the Memphis sanitation workers' strike (where he met his death) — though he misses the promise of the Welfare Rights Movement and its links with King's own Poor People's March. Jimmy Carter's failure to appreciate the visionary possibilities of the Humphrey-Hawkins bill — the attempt by two politicians to overcome the fragmentation in the Democratic Party manifested in the McGovern Campaign — and, its idea of planning for full employment as perhaps the last real chance at a social democratic alternative to neoliberal free markets, was Carter's real downfall. The Iran hostages merely drove in the last nail. The book thus, in keeping with its theme of the 70s as the key transitional moment between the glory years of the postwar labor-capital accord and the viciousness of the capitalist 80s through today, also reminds us that we got where we were because specific political projects, each flawed in key ways, but not inevitably so, failed.

But working class possibilities were also lived out through and in relation to the music and film and TV of the era and Cowie's discussions of the presentations of working class life — and of

Hollywood's role in particular in an attack on the working class, often coming from directors and writers with roots in the very New Left that often saw the working class as a bastion of the status quo (*Easy Rider* for instance) are among the liveliest parts of the book. It does not take a lot to have noticed that Rocky, in fighting a black man, is no longer a working class hero against the powerful but against a different foe in a way that fosters division. But *Stayin' Alive* shows the weakness of even a film like *Norma Rae*, which, by emphasizing the development of a feminist heroine rather than the collective ability of her and her fellow workers to bring about change, not only limited the film's impact on working class revival but in fact changed history. I never liked the portrayal of the stereotyped union organizer in that otherwise excellent film, and in fact it turns out that in the real struggle initiated by textile worker Crystal Lee Sutton, her mentor organizer was a coal miner, not a New York intellectual as in the film. Left out of Cowie's book, though, and one of the few limits of its account, is Vietnam, which was admittedly winding down as his story begins. Participation in that war was a major working class experience in the 70s. As shown by Jonathan Neale in *A People's History of the Vietnam War*, the film industry invented the myth of demonstrators greeting veterans returning home from the war by spitting on them, a theme that has been reprised from *Coming Home* to *Rambo* to TV's *NCIS* involving utterly fictional such greetings of veterans of the Iraq war. It never happened, and indeed, one of the few authentic meeting places between New Left and working class were in the coffee houses and other activities set up to provide support for the GI movement in opposition to the war, a movement that, as Cowie does mention, played an important role in the very factory rebellions and union reform movements that his book begins with. This example merely underlines his point though: Hollywood has not been a friend to the U.S. working class. Cowie's title example, the entirely made up story that became the film *Saturday Night Fever* makes this clear, with its theme, later hammered home in film after film (*Pretty Woman*, *Working Girl*, *Officer and a Gentleman*, *Flashdance*) that hope for working class people only comes from getting out and away from their own class roots (and, as these examples all show, from sleeping with the boss, or at least with someone from the upper class).

WRITING OF MUSIC, Cowie shows equal insight, though mostly suggestive, as he points to the inability of various efforts to connect working class interests and countercultural expressions. Bob Dylan's *Nashville Skyline*, the Band's revival of and transformation of traditional instruments and musical themes, Ray Charles' crossover allegedly country album (mostly inspired by country's storytelling), Johnny Cash's reciprocal moves in the direction of countercultural themes, all failed to create a new synthesis. None got the play that Merle Haggard's "Okie" got as its irony was misunderstood and it was taken as a white blue collar anthem against welfare recipients, gays, and antiwar protesters. As Cowie shows, by decade's end, the only integrated music, and one that at least challenged patriarchal and racial categories within the working class, was disco. The problem is that disco quickly fell to corporate control and technological repression of songwriter and musician alike, and was not long after racialized through the "disco sucks" movement, leading to a more highly segregated musical scene in the 80s and 90s than had probably existed since early in the century. Strangely, the book, though stopping nearly at very start of the 1980s, does make one cultural foray into the following decade, and that is to note the distorted message of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA." This mega-hit was actually put to a different music than the original acoustic when the song had been intended for Springsteen's protest-oriented *Nebraska* album. Put to the highly charged chorus, the words became a kind of neo-fascist anthem much to the artist's chagrin, and seemed to many radicals at the time like a part of a perfect Reaganite storm (along with *Rambo*, the Statue of Liberty anniversary, and the 1984 Olympics). Recalling Devo's charming but as Cowie shows, disarming reorientation of working class experience from Akron and Kent State University, prefiguring the 80s move from rebellion to de-evolution and postmodern irony, is another of the unexpected reminders of how things went down, that for those of us who lived through those years

with growing anxiety and disorientation, makes one grateful for the book's appearance now.

The unwillingness of the author to go beyond the somewhat arbitrary border of the calendar line between the 1970s and 1980s limits the work somewhat, though the transition to the Reagan administration and its earthshaking transformations of American life and the U.S. working class is a justifiable boundary. But it means that the discussion of the PATCO strike, the decisive and undeniable moment of working class defeat, is cursory, when it deserves the same full discussion that the author provides for Humphrey-Hawkins for instance. The union movement did not move as one to defend PATCO, and so sealed its fate, but to be fair, every union person I have ever spoken with has pointed out that only one union, the Machinists led by alleged socialist Bill Wimpinsinger, needed to go out on strike in support to close down all the airports and give the strike a chance of success. There is enough responsibility go around for the defeat, as there would be some years later in that of the British miners against Margaret Thatcher. Together, the defeat of these two strikes guaranteed the ascendancy of neoliberal, free market ideas and policies across the Atlantic world, and later, through implementation of the IMF structural adjustment programs, across the planet. In short, the roots of globalization are in the failure of these struggles. Cowie does not bring the international scene in at all, and given the seemingly hermetic parochialism of U.S. political life, this is understandable. But it also means that the extent to which the U.S. working class has suffered defeats in part for not understanding its international position in relation to workers in other countries is left out of the story. But for what is here, for its humanity, its memory, its reminder that political agency can change outcomes, and most of all for reminding us that "those steel mills and their surrounding communities may be gone, but the workers are still out there — part of the new Wal-Mart working class" this book is required reading for anyone looking to revive working class hopes and alternatives to America's disastrous love story with capitalism. Neither dream, nor lie, the working class was, and remains, the majority of people in the United States and rumors of its disappearance have been greatly exaggerated. But any revival of working class politics will need to learn from the failures and limits of the struggles of 1970s, and this book is a good place to start examining those.