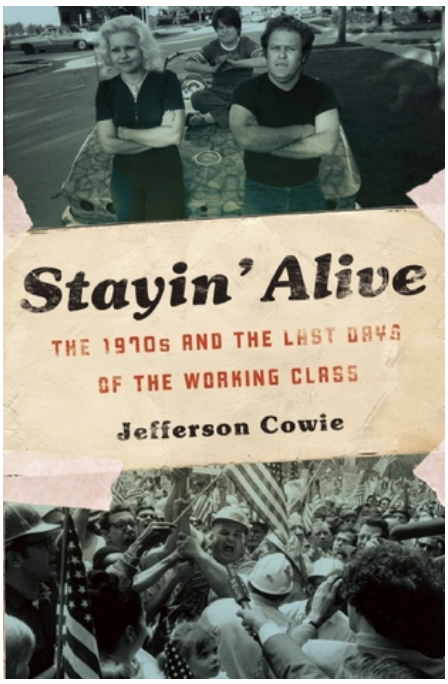

Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class

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An epic account of how middle-class America hit the rocks in the political and economic upheavals of the 1970s, this wide-ranging cultural and political history rewrites the 1970s as the crucial, pivotal era of our time. Jefferson Cowie's edgy and incisive book—part political intrigue, part labor history, with large doses of American musical, film, and TV lore—makes new sense of the 1970s as a crucial and poorly understood transition from New Deal America (with its large, optimistic middle class) to the widening economic inequalities, poverty, and dampened expectations of the 1980s and into the present.

Stayin' Alive takes us from the factory floors of Ohio, Pittsburgh, and Detroit, to the Washington of Nixon, Ford, and Carter. Cowie also connects politics to culture, showing how the big screen and the jukebox can help us understand how America turned away from the radicalism of the 1960s and toward the patriotic promise of Ronald Reagan. Cowie makes unexpected connections between the secrets of the Nixon White House and the failings of George McGovern campaign; radicalism and the blue-collar backlash; the earthy twang of Merle Haggard's country music and the falsetto highs of *Saturday Night Fever*. Like Jeff Perlstein's acclaimed *Nixonland, Stayin' Alive* moves beyond conventional understandings of the period and brilliantly plumbs it for insights into our current way of life.

Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class Details

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From Reader Review Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class for online ebook

Bill Talley says

I had often felt that the Democratic party received a 100 year reprieve from the loss of its Southern wing in the 1970s. Now I have an idea why. The thesis of this book, in my opinion is that the labor movement lost steam for three reasons: 1 they failed to include minorities and women among their ranks during their heyday, groups that could have helped insulate them from the attack on unions by business in the 70s, relying instead on white working men to continue to be the backbone of the country as a whole and unions in particular; they failed to expand past their industrial base when they had a chance as labor leaders became more concerned with protecting their position and to a lesser extent the position of the rank and file membership; and third - by not doing one and two they allowed business and the Republican party to change the discourse about labor from an economic discussion to a cultural one. Thus, George Wallace and Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan were able to decimate the labor union by taking away the collective responses that working people showed during the depressions and other times of labor upheaval. In the 70s, because so many were left out of labor's calculations, there was no country to call upon to decry the immoral way in which organized labor was treated by businesses and politicians.

Hani Omar says

Beyond the bell bottoms, butterfly collars, and ruffle tuxes, lay perhaps the most unintentionally consequential decade of the modern era. There are a lot of common tropes of the 70s, but only now is the utter decimation of the American manufacturing sector getting its proper due. Cowie attacks the issue from every available lens: politics, economics, foreign policy, race, and (most enjoyable) popular culture towards one of the most exhaustive and engaging surveys available on the subject.

Craig Werner says

One of the most significant and flawlessly executed works of history/political analysis I've read in a long time. Dividing his attention roughly equally between economic, political and cultural history, Cowie tells the tragic tale of the demise of the American working class from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. It's a story of lost opportunities, poor decisions, and occasional heroic if ultimately futile resistance. He doesn't sugar-coat the internal problems of the labor movement (though I'd recommend consulting Crash Course for additional detail on just how big a hash the UAW made of what might have been a winning hand), but he's clear that the collapse originated in and was orchestrated by an unholy alliance of corporate issues and Republican politicians determined to distract working people from their own issues with appeals to race and "cultural" issues (the infamous Amnesty, Acid and Abortion trinity used to attack George McGovern). Cowie does a very nice job weaving music, film and television series into the story. I was particularly taken with his discussions of Merle Haggard, Saturday Night Fever (opening into disco generally), and Bruce Springsteen. In the conclusion, built around Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A.," Cowie does his best to imagine a new kind of coalition linking workers in a post-unionized world. Juxtaposed with the current upheavals in Wisconsin, it's a useful beginning to a conversation which has been short-circuited for almost forty years.

George says

From a labor perspective, this is an incredibly depressing read, as it shows grass-roots risings vastly more powerful than anything we have today being not so much defeated as simply running into the sand. And it does a disservice to American punk by reducing it to the Ramones (apolitical) and a one-sentence nod to the Dead Kennedys (political). But, so far, very informative (just keep the valium handy).

I think the most fundamental question Cowie raises (albeit implicitly) is whether post-New Deal working class power might have been doomed by the brutal fact that even decently paid and secure (i.e. union) working-class jobs/lives still sucks so bad (under capitalism(that the American working class couldn't or wouldn't defend itself against the ruling class's counter-attack in the 70s and 80s. Put another way, it's hard to defend a way of life that you wouldn't choose for your kids (and your kids wouldn't choose for themselves). Put yet another way, the existential crappiness of assembly line work becomes all the more apparent when the pay's alright.

Dan Gorman says

Strong history of the 1970s. I appreciate the agonies of the working class, and why white blue-collar Democrats defected to the Republican Party, better than before. National union leaders' complacency, the government's focus on fighting inflation instead of unemployment under Ford and Carter, and unease about racial, gender, and social change drove white workers to support populists like George Wallace and genteel conservatives like Ronald Reagan. I wish Cowie had included more material on African American laborers in the second half of the book, but the first half includes a fascinating chapter on Cesar Chavez and black machinists in Chicago. The cultural analysis is sharp. Cowie exposes the individualism and criticism of labor that suffused many iconic 1970s films, even the ones like "Norma Rae" that tried to be pro-labor. I don't agree with all of Cowie's cinematic interpretations (he stretches credulity trying to turn "Jaws" into a parable about the death of the working class), but then again I always quibble with historians' movie interpretations. This is a masterful work of history, written from a liberal (if not democratic-socialist) perspective, but well sourced and displaying a strong sympathy for blue-collar voters.

Nils says

Brilliant book. Starts slow, with a lot of inside-baseball detail about the coming apart of the labor movement in this country in the 1970s, against the shoals of post-60s cultural fractures on the Left (in a hutshell: white working class hatred for hippies and blacks), macroeconomic crisis (stagflation), institutional corruption (or at any rate perceptions thereof), and political revanchism (read: Reagan). The book really hits its stride in the last third when it then uses this broad panorama to read many of the key pop cultural texts of white America in the 1970s, from television to movies to music. As such it provides a compelling and highly timely account of the beginning of what Bill O'Reilly has recently labeled "the end of traditional America" -- e.g. the end of low-brow, masculinist white supremecism.

Would have benefited from some consideration of the broader international context for these changes. Many of the structural issues facing the US economy were similar to those faced in other parts of the global industrial core in the 1970s, and a comparative look at the cultural and political responses to that crisis would have further highlighted the distinctiveness of the American experience.

Kris says

This was a pretty good book. He makes a strong argument that the 1970s were a period of transition between the New Deal and the current one – New Gilded Age? – with a lot of emphasis on culture, presidential politics (and organized labor's role), and white blue-collar workers (union and not). The early 70s were a period of "insurgencies" which "failed to make lasting imprint on American life" (70) for at least five reasons which "all fit together in a single frame" that "the seventies were the ragged edge of the political shadow cast across the postwar landscape by the crisis of the 1930s and 1940s": 1) "uprising and organizing" were "too fragmented and dispersed to constitute anything close to a single or unified movement" (71); 2) social forces outside of the labor world also tended to be centrifugal" (71); 3) labor leaders did their best to resist the pleas, attacks, democratization movements, and criticisms coming from many corners"; 4) recession; and 5) a general "change in the national mood" and "in the nation's sense of identity," "despair" (73). This last part is perhaps the weakest part of the book - the idea that there were "wildly recognized moods of malaise and self-absorption" during the 1970s. Though he does discuss stagflation and the declining economic situation for workers, unfortunately he mostly leans on cultural analysis in two full chapters on film/TV/music of the 70s for this discussion. A stronger argument in the book is that there never was a unified working class, and the 70s saw the complete collapse of what there was of it: "Class, always a fragile concept in American civic life, died the death of a thousand cuts in the 1970s, but few problems sliced as deeply as how race and class were set against each other" (236).

Jonny says

This is a fantastic exploration of the culture and politics of the 1970s and how the concept of the American "working class" was never able to transcend the labor/liberal political coalition and image (i.e., white men with lunch pails at their industrial factory job) that made the New Deal so politically successful from the 30s until the early 70s. Cowie finds thinkers that articulated a new conception of class that included a synthesis of race and gender, but those ideas gained prominence as American industry began its decline and a resurgent right and business community began organizing as a class in a massive campaign to discipline labor. This campaign was basically successful by the time Reagan sacked all the PATCO air traffic controllers.

Like any good history, Cowie explores the contingencies of the period he examines. For example, in the 70s the Humphrey-Hawkins bill calling for full employment almost passed in the Senate. Now, this would be considered fringe lefty stuff and only get a vote from Bernie Sanders.

If you want to examine the new right's appeal to the white "working class" this work explores the complexities (and the role of race and gender)way better than What's the Matter With Kansas? Although, nonspecialists will probably want to skip the detailed studies of labor organizing in the 70s and the McGovern campaign.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humphrey...

Johanna says

Well written but depressing history of the decline of the working class in the 1970s.

Andy says

A really excellent, insightful overview of the splintering of the New Deal coalition in the period between Nixon and Reagan, through the prism of the blue-collar worker. Sympathetically written, without going easy on anyone. Cowie does a great job in particular of connecting popular culture to the broader political environment without seeming flip: there's even a half-chapter on the early works of Devo in the context of blue-collar Akron.

If you're the sort of person that reads every book about the culture of the 1970s the week it comes out (and, uh, I am), it's worth noting that Cowie's book covers much of the same territory as Kevin Mattson's recent examination of Carter's "malaise" speech, "What the Heck Are You Up to, Mr. President?" quite a bit more convincingly.'What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?': Jimmy Carter, America's 'Malaise,' and the Speech that Should Have Changed the Country

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Cole says

To be brutally honest, the first two chapters of this book put me to sleep. I despised the beginning, it wasn't even that bad, I believe that the flow of it and myself were not jiving. And just when was ready to write it off, this book completely hooked me. I've met junkies that were less addicted to their drugs than I was this book when I finally was hooked. And I logically know why.
Jefferson Cowie completely answers the question that has been stagnating around this country for the last forty years: what the hell happened in the 70s that completely changed and restructured our social, political and cultural lives by the 80s that was a precursor to where we are today? By examining legislation, social movements, historical documents, and popular culture, Cowie is able to seamlessly sew together an argument that appears to have a solid foundation in fact. I will probably read this book over and over again as continue to examine my own culture and try to find logic in how we came to where we currently exist.

Antonia says

"Workers lost their union cards in the seventies just in time to pick up their credit cards for the eighties." "By shifting to the right, [the Democratic Party] gave ideological ground to the opposition, especially by conceding that high wages, full employment, and deficit spending caused inflation.... In the name of short-term political gain,... they discredited their own [macroeconomic] policy history and therefore their future."

A fantastic exploration of the profound political and economic shift that took place in the United States

during the 1970's. A great addition to my library, and a great learning tool written by a skilled historian who knows how to weave politics, the labor movement, and popular culture together to capture the public zeitgeist. The chapters surrounding the Nixon administration's strategy for wooing white, working-class voters who traditionally sided with labor, the Carter administration's failure to back the labor movement and its technocratic approach to government that primed the country to list to the right under Reagan (focusing more on fighting inflation than on curbing unemployment), and the separation of individually-focused civil rights concepts from a labor-oriented shared economic vision that led to a sense of disenfranchisement among many working-class voters are definitely worth a careful read. I'll be using this as one of my reference materials for a while!

Mark says

This is truly an amazing and informative book, one that everybody with an interest in American history should read.

Margaret Sankey says

Reading like the operational outcome of Perlstein's _Nixonland_, this study follows the breakup of the old New Deal Coalition through economic pressure, internal problems of the unions, identity politics and generational fractures and the deliberate leveraging of those issues to push working-class whites to the populism of George Wallace or the Moral Majority. Although Cowie's epilogue linking this to the political ancestry of Joe the (Turns Out He's Not Really A) Plumber is a little forced, the point is well taken that the current political situation has been 35 years in the making and that there's not much new under the sun. With cogent analysis of Archie Bunker, Taxi Driver, Disco, and Presidential candidates in hard hats.

Ilya Gerner says

Unemployment is high, gas prices are kinda high, a reactionary political movement is afoot, and there’s a Democrat in the White House, so by the conventions of lazy historical analogy it must be the late 1970s again with Barack Obama reprising the role of Jimmy “Malaise Forever” Carter. Except these analogies obfuscate more than enlighten, doing an injustice to a decade when New Politics met the old New Deal and everything went to hell. If you’re interested in labor history, working-class politics, or a historical account of how the post-war liberal consensus blew apart, I recommend Jefferson Cowie’s Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class.

One takeaway lesson for contemporary politics is the degree to which the success of the liberal project is dependent on maintaining full employment. This was made especially clear in the section on the rights revolution in the workplace, when institutions like the EEOC strengthened the enforcement of anti-discrimination and affirmative action statutes, allowing women and minorities access to the economic pie. Unfortunately, it was a rapidly shrinking pie, at least within basic industry. The result was politically and socially explosive: it’s one thing for affirmative action programs to answer the question “who gets hired?” during the expansionary 60s, quite another when “who gets fired?” becomes the question in the recessionary late ’70s.

The DC-focused part of the book centers on the debate over the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Bill and the failure of progressives to overcome a Senate filibuster during the 1978 attempt to pass labor law reform. Readers of Hacker & Pierson's will recall this episode from Winner Take All Politics. One can think of Cowie's work as a narrative companion to the more analytic Hacker work.
