

Autobiographical Reflections on the 1970s
Jefferson Cowie

(unpublished outtake preface from *Stayin' Alive*)

The 1970s shaped my life, but probably not in any way that a textbook might readily explain. My Midwestern youth was mostly about climbing trees, riding stingray bikes, and failing in seasonal efforts to build a raft that could actually get us across the Fox River. The resignation of Richard Nixon or the coming of OPEC barely registered. More tangible than trends in national politics was an older sister who, along with a bunch of hippie friends, painted a retired school bus and headed onto the road. To me, the bus was a little bit of exoticness of the Partridge Family (except my sister's was painted discount brown) parked next to my father's red flatbed truck that was decorated with three-dimensional drippings of roofing tar and an unbearable stench. When another older sister announced her retreat from a corrupt society to a yoga ashram, it seemed that the spirit of the sixties could only be kept alive underground. Once in a while, my shaggy brother would hitchhike home with a heart full of stories of the world beyond—as well as some book I urgently had to read. At some point the women around me started hurling the term “male chauvinist pig” akin to the way we kids threw rocks at each other across the alley. The violence in my sister's short-lived marriage to a returning Vietnam vet revealed that there was probably a lot behind whatever it was they were demanding. Then when another sister dated, and later married, a black guy from the city—and brought him out to our lily white town—I recall a very fast and combative introduction to how race worked in the United States of America.

The subjectivity of popular culture helped shape the reality of the decade. Try as I might, I cannot remember Jimmy Carter getting elected or giving his famous “malaise” speech, but I vividly recall Chevy Chase doing Gerald Ford on a new show called *Saturday Night Live*. Rarely did a week pass without the entire family being glued to “All in the Family”—a show with enough divisiveness to be a rare source of cohesion for our shaky kinship unit. Later it was laments about favorite rock bands “going disco” and the daily news reports of the great captivity narrative unfolding in Tehran. When I started

working, doing the grunt labor on a roofing crew at the end of the decade, we had our own downsized versions of the culture wars, haggling over whether it would be Waylon Jennings and Merle Haggard, like the old guys with disfigured hands wanted to hear, or the Cars and Elvis Costello, as the young and energetic preferred. Musically, my own liberation from the prison of stadium rock (manifested in my first stage dive at a Dead Kennedys show in college) still remained far in the future and half a continent away—not manifest until I finally busted out on my own and went to California.

The only time that the grime, the work, and the violence of the seventies seemed to meld with the hope, the youth, and the sense of mission was a brief instant on the cover of the local paper. Who knows what the news photo really looks like, as I was only in second grade, but I recall one of the strikers, a huge guy, in the process of slamming a large oil drum through the windshield of a strikebreaker's car as the hapless scab tried to inch his vehicle across a picket line outside the local Sun Electric plant. The historian in me has always wanted to search back and find the photograph in order to check the fallibility of memory against the historical record. The humanist in me, however, has won out, preferring to let the light of history continue to be filtered through the dusty haze of my own life. The seventies then cascade in my mind into cars that never seemed to start, the smell of the roofing-tar kettle simmering in the backyard, my dad pushing a broom on the nightshift at my high school, and everything simply rusting.

By late adolescence I became convinced that my hometown was a trap—a place where my friends and I began to joke about who would be the first to fall victim to a kid, a mortgage, and a job at the local machine works, Precision Twist and Drill. Being young and contemptuous, I had only the slightest inkling at the time that the economic and political transformations gripping the country in the late 1970s and early eighties were very quickly transforming what we most feared in life—a good job and an affordable home—into the most coveted trappings in America. Bruce Springsteen's cautionary tales of despair, entrapment, and unwanted pregnancy clarified the need to get out. In the title cut to his 1980 album, *The River*, he moaned, “And for my nineteenth birthday, I got a union card and wedding coat. We went down to the court house and the

judge put it all to rest. No wedding day smiles, no walk down the aisles, no flowers, no wedding dress.” Like Bruce, we saw the security of a union card, which I later learned had been the fight of a generation, as little more than a ticket to a lazy-boy version of complacency. What some cherished as a sense of place and community, I, like my rock and roll hero, understood as being “judged and handed life.”

Months after Reagan paid homage to the nation’s workers in his 1981 inaugural address, I rolled out of town in a Volkswagen Rabbit conspicuously detailed with cancerous rust and crammed with a set of possessions that only an adolescent male might deem essential. I slipped into the battered tape deck the anthem that served as the bedrock of my psychic survival, a warbling cassette made from a friend’s much-coveted vinyl copy of *Born to Run*. The opening cut, “Thunder Road,” evoked all that I sought to leave behind—front porches, tentative girlfriends, and Roy Orbison’s lonely ones. In exchange, I believed myself to be embracing “faith” and “magic in the night.” Following groundwork laid by dissenting wanderers from Whitman to Kerouac, I pointed the car toward the west-bound side of the interstate. Rolling down the on-ramp toward California, I punctuated the last line of the song, as we always did, with head out the window and my voice straining to compete with Bruce’s: “It’s a town full of losers and I’m pulling out of here to win!” When I made it to California, however, I quickly found that the cost of double-digit unemployment surpassed the salience of adolescent rock anthems.

Like so much else at the age of eighteen, this all seemed so lonely and tortured, a voyage that nobody else could possibly understand. I was fueled, however, by parents who believed in the power of education, an adventurous and encouraging mother, and worldly siblings who had, by osmosis, introduced me to a much larger universe of ideas and people. The lingering heat of the last dying embers of the sixties that drifted into to my hometown played a role too. But once I began to look at the stories people had constructed to explain the late seventies when I wrote this book, it was obvious that I was embedded in a much larger social narrative. People had been getting out of town since well before Huck Finn lit out for the territory, but there was something more—something

more desperate—about the crossroads of the late seventies, which heightened the urgency to escape or be forgotten, abandon or be abandoned. The hope and possibility that had been tangled together throughout the first half of the decade was dissolving and taking control of one’s own fate and psychic survival seemed like the last open road. Much of that sense of survival took the form of wandering around in a van with a merry band of friends in search of sun and rocks to climb in Yosemite, Joshua Tree, and other west coast climbing Meccas. Dropping out of Berkeley on a revolving basis to major in what we euphemistically called “vertical technology,” it was on rock walls that I learned everything I need to know about faith in self and others.

Later, in dog eared books, drawn out grad seminars, and extended conversations at the bar, I learned about an American world simultaneously alien and familiar: of working-people’s politics, strikes, coalitions, radicalism, and social movements—almost always in defense of some version of community I longed to leave behind. Looked at from the right perspective, my mentors explained, you could see how the struggles of working-class people had shaped the world. The blue-collar America I knew was a universe without romance or agency, yet in my studies I encountered a literature replete with it. 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. Very little of what I read of the potential of collective action dovetailed with my subjective experiences in which there was precious little about movements or protest or anything of the sort. We knew that the jobs at the unionized grocery stores were the ones to get, and that fact, mind you, was a very important thing.

Wandering through a used bookshop somewhere en route to my Ph.D., I found a book called *The Hidden Injuries of Class*—one of the classic contributions to the seventies explosion in white, blue-collar studies that permeate this book. The title said it all. While I found the empirical execution of the book wanting, I found the psychological insights compelling in a way that all of the Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, E.P. Thompson, Herbert Gutman, and the rest of the pantheon left me a little uneasy. The individualized,

torturous inner class struggle—now that made sense. In most of the historical literature I had been enthralled to uncover a deep history of workers sticking it to the bosses, of solidarity, of strikes for what was right, of community as an enabling not a crushing thing. But in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, I found answers that made more sense: an American class war that raged more within than without. I then had a better idea of why my family’s response to the inequities of occupation and status seemed nothing like resistance and a whole lot more like shame.

This book, therefore, has little to do with my direct participation with major issues confronting workers in the seventies. Instead, everything I offer has emerged from my journeys through archives across the country or from journalism of the day now buried deep in the library or stored as electronic bits who knows where. I am convinced, however, that I, like the nation as whole, inherited the mood of the era in ways we cannot shake. Along the way, I have come to realize that the transformations of this decade were more than simply the roots of my own coming of age, but they were also the foundation for a new world being built. To cite another writer’s ambivalence, it was neither the sixties nor the eighties, but the seventies “that brought you modern life—for better or worse.”

In this study, I have tried to work out a complicated narrative in three-part harmony—social history, politics, and popular culture—that together offer a shared argument about how white, male working-class America revived in civic life in the seventies and then all but disappeared. The first half of the decade was infused with a conflicted sense of hope and possibility for working people of all colors and genders. The second half, however, was marked by despair in the emerging new order, as the “working class,” even in its restricted pale and male postwar incarnation, lost much of its narrative punch, existential weight, and political draw. By the time of the opulent new world of the eighties, the American story was re-cast and re-edited, and those who did the nation’s work were left out of the discussion. I hope this narrative serves a small part in rekindling some of the big questions and rediscovering the most significant loss of the seventies: a sense of open-ended possibility.