Imprisoned by A Dream
Will the Giant Awake?

Prisoners of the American Dream

By Joel Rogers

THE AMERICAN working class is notoriously disorganized. Most evident perhaps, at least during the present period, is the economic power of workers is constrained by the limited scope and fragmented structure of union organization.

As regards scope, U.S. unions have never claimed more than a quarter of the total working population as members, and their share of the non-agricultural wage and salary workforce, which climbed to more than 35 percent by the end of World War II, has dropped steadily since the mid-1950s. At present, only about one American worker in six belongs to a union or employee association.

Regarding structure, collective bargaining in the U.S. is highly decentralized, most commonly by local and employer-specific. Unions are numerous, and typically organized along relatively narrow jurisdictional lines.

Negotiations are usually uncoordinated, with unions only rarely engaged in cross-employer, let alone cross-sectoral, concertation of demands or economic force. And as might be expected, given the level of bargaining, the number of unions, and the particularity and heterogeneity of their activities, the major national federation of unions is relatively weak.

Even more profound, however, is the political disorganization of U.S. workers. In comparative perspective, what is striking here is not the failure of revolutionary socialism in America; that failure is common to all advanced industrial capitalist democracies. Rather, it is the failure of U.S. workers even to form their own reformist political institutions, capable of competing in electoral arenas and waging policy struggles in the state.

In contrast with the countries of Western Europe, there is no major labor, communist, or social democratic party in the U.S.—no party deriving its organizational form and programmatic identity from organizations of workers as workers. Business dominated political parties fully occupy the electoral field, which is consequently marked by a general absence of class-based partisan competition.

Reflecting these conditions of party competition, and the comparatively pro-business public policies that result, American electoral participation is comparatively low and "class-skewed." Only a little over half the eligible electorate participates in national elections, and rates of participation vary directly with income and education levels.

Composed largely of poorer and less educated workers, the ranks of America's largest political party—the "party of non-voters"—rather closely resemble the constituency that in other systems is actually represented by a labor party.

Weak Reform Movements

It would be a mistake, of course, to distinguish too sharply between the characteristic pattern of American workers' economic action and their failure to forge more global political organizations. In fact the two are closely related, and have several interactive effects.

Lacking a party of their own, American workers have been relatively unsuccessful in securing class-wide gains through the state. In comparison to Western Europe, the U.S. features a low "social wage," and a striking lack of generic (as opposed to means tested) entitlements or claims that workers can make on employers or the state during their working lifetimes.

The absence of encompassing social legislation, in turn, has tended to sharpen concentration on achieving more particular short-term gains in narrow arenas. This is the material basis of both "business unionism" and the ideology of militant "economism." Reciprocally, however, the particularity of both the gains sought within those arenas and the organizations that seek them makes the articulation of general (e.g., class-wide) demands more difficult, while limited success in the achievement of particular demands tends to consolidate patterns of organizational isolation.

Small units of organized workers can be persuaded to "go it alone," with the result that workers as a class are cumulatively weakened. As the last several years indicate, the "local rationality" of such decisions may eventually become self-defeating; divided from unorganized workers, and each other, unions may find themselves incapable of resisting attack.

Yet even such disasters need not lead to a rejection of narrow calculations of advantage and gain. More commonly, indeed, they encourage such calculations, and the anti-solidaristic strategies they express.

Such considerations of local rationality and collective defeat inform the essays Mike Davis has collected in Prisoners of the American Dream, which may be read as a set of meditations on the accumulating madness of American politics.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first, Davis attempts to explain "American exceptionalism"—the composite of the varied political failures of American workers noted above. Focusing on the history of American workers' struggles, and the recent politics of the AFL-CIO, the overriding aim of the discussion is to sort out the "paradoxical disparities between economic militancy and political passivity" (x) characteristic of the American labor movement.

Davis then builds on and extends this analysis in part two of the collection, which explores the recent right turn in American public policy, the correlate collapse of the New Deal as the organizing principle of American politics, and the transition to a new, more conservative, party system.

While all of Prisoners is offered as "first and foremost, an intervention in recent debates about the direction of the U.S. left" (x), its polemical thrust is most evident in these latter essays. They aim both to dislodge non-materialist analyses of the conservative shift, and to vanquish the argument that the left "must" pursue an alliance with the Democratic Party. Finally, in a brief epilogue, Davis offers some remarks on the possibility of building an internationalist left in the United States.

Prisoners is an ambitious and exceptionally wide-ranging discussion of fundamental problems in American culture and political economy. It is consistently informative, often illuminating, and occasionally in wanting.

Full of data and rich detail, bristling with arguments, and somewhat inconsistent in focus and strategy (perhaps understandably, it should be noted, given its genesis as a series of distinct essays, written on different occasions, over at least five years), the book also defies easy summary. There is no substitute for exposure to the real thing, and none should be sought. This said, here is what I take to be the gist of Davis' central arguments, beginning with his account of American exceptionalism.

Cycles of Struggle

Why is the U.S. working class different from its West European counterparts?
Davis identifies two species of answers to this perennial question, and finds both of them unsatisfying.

On the first sort of account, identified with the Marxist classics, the political “immaturity” of the American working class was seen as a temporary aberration. It resulted from transient, conjunctural constraints (the open frontier, continuous and massive immigration, the international hegemony of American production) on workers’ realization of collective interest, whose passing would accelerate workers down the “normal” path of escalating class consciousness and insurgency.

It is apparent now that this “normal” path is not normal at all. Defeats and reversals of worker insurgency are nearly as common as those insurgencies themselves, the path of “reform” is notably rocky and uneven, and even successful worker struggles do not usually escalate to radical action. More commonly, as Adam Przeworski and others have recently emphasized, gains won in such struggles serve to elicit worker consent to continued capitalist exploitation.

Even putting such objections to the side, however, in the U.S. case the removal of each of a succession of transient constraints failed to precipitate an upsurge. At a minimum, this suggests that there is something intransient, or embedded, about American workers’ weakness.

Put otherwise, it underscores the familiar observation that at any given point the range of strategic options available to individuals or classes is shaped and limited by existing institutions; the constraints of those institutions, forged at one point in time, operate later as well.

On the second sort of account, Davis argues, emphasis is placed on “the relative permanence of the decisive sociological or cultural features that have historically differentiated the United States.” (6) Most representative here are explanations centering on critical events in early nation-building (the absence of feudalism in the U.S., the widespread ownership of land in the early republic, the concomitant early extension of the suffrage), but he includes other explanations devolving from a “clockwork of simple, interacting causes (upward mobility plus ethnicity plus . . .).” (7) for critical notice as well.

The basic criticism is that these “historical” explanations really lack historical specificity, and are essentially positivist. To do any serious work in explanation, the factors they invoke need to be operationalized in particular contexts, and understood not merely as inert constraints upon, but also as products of, “class struggle and collective life.” (7)

Thus while individuals are constrained by existing institutions, they can also act on and change those institutions. Men and women do make history, albeit not under circumstances of their own choosing.

Davis’ way out of this familiar impasse of “struggle” accounts that ignore history, and “historical” accounts that ignore struggle, is energetic, if not novel. On such a view, the history of particular capitalist democracies (including the United States) can be meaningfully periodicized by reference to successive regimes of accumulation, or institutionalized patterns of production, consumption, and the organization of claims on the social surplus.

The transition from one regime to another is typically seen to be precipitated by economic crises, although the sources and nature of such crises are understood to vary in important ways—from demand side problems in internal markets to supply side pressures in international ones, and from destructive competition between different sectors of capital to pressures on profits imposed by a mobilized working class.

Such crises scramble expectations, and open up new coalitional possibilities within particular systems. How they are resolved is, pre-eminently, a matter of politics, and as such depends critically on the balance of power among contending forces in the society, the degree of class cohesion and mobilization, the willfulness of individuals and groups to take risks and seek new allies, and so on.

Out of such resolution emerges a new set of institutional forms and economic relations, which serve to regulate behavior until they are themselves disturbed by another crisis.

This is roughly the approach Davis takes, with heavy emphasis on the political struggles attending points of crisis:

Each major cycle of class struggle, economic crisis, and social restructuring in American history has finally been resolved through epochal tests of strength between capital and labor. The results of these historical collisions have been new structural forms that regulated the objective conditions for accumulation in the next period, as well as the subjective capacities for class organization and consciousness. (7)

More specifically, labor lost each of these “epochal tests of strength,” and “each generational defeat of the American labor movement disarmed it in the same vital respect before the challenges and battles of the following period.” (7) In short, weakness begot weakness.

Missed Opportunities

Again following convention, Davis periodizes American history into four (or, as we will see later, perhaps five) major economic eras. These are the periods of 1) antebellum accumulation, culminating in the establishment of capitalism as the exclusive mode of production in the U.S.; 2) competitive capitalism, lasting from the Civil War to the crisis of the 1890s; 3) unorganized corporate or monopoly capitalism, running from roughly 1900 to 1935-40; and 4) “Fordism,” or state organized corporate capitalism, extending from 1940 to 1975.

He then examines the major working class struggles during the first three of these periods, concentrating on the critical battles of 1856-57, 1892-96, 1912 and 1919-24, and, in particular detail (since its outcome set the outer boundaries of class relations for the past generation), the period 1933-1950.

Each case presented at least an apparent opportunity for the American working class to overcome its historic weakness, and emerge as an independent political actor. Davis’ question, in each case, is why that opportunity was not seized.

The answers are depressingly familiar. In the pre-Civil War struggles, sharp
variations in the pattern of economic growth (reflected in a shifting "urban-industrial frontier"), ethno-religious cleavages, and racism all served to divide workers from one another.

In the Populist period, northern worker nativism and racism, as well as the all-out assault of the Southern ruling class on interracial farm and worker coalitions, were most decisive. In the period of Debssian Socialism, ethnic and religious divisions, increasingly complicated by skill differentials, split workers apart.

During the New Deal and its immediate aftermath, ethnic, religious and racial divisions once again fractured working class solidarity, while the resurgent nationalism promoted during World War II, and the virulent anti-communism promoted immediately afterward, wrecked the promotion of an explicit class politics.

Finally, while the above factors were the most critical ones, throughout all these periods the opportunistic antics of the trade union bureaucracy—whose authority in dealing with business or government requires a plausible threat of mass action, but whose position is threatened by the fact of such action—did much to damage the possibilities of autonomous worker politics.

Davis' dissection of the successive peak moments in workers' struggle, it should be emphasized again, is rich in detail and shrewd in judgment, and the flat summary of its conclusions just offered does not do justice to these considerable virtues.

But it is also unsatisfying, if only because its initial promise seemed even greater. The idea that American politics can be meaningfully periodized by reference to a succession of accumulation regimes, while not new, could be useful in getting some "control" over the many variables one would want to consider in explaining political change.

Using such periodization to unravel the puzzle of American exceptionalism, moreover (in part by sorting through the relevance, during particular periods, of the "clockwork" factors Davis mentions), would be a major contribution, and Davis' implicit suggestion about how that might be done—by showing how each regime tended to codify the failure of labor immediately past, while disabling it in critical ways in face of future challenges (the weakness begetting weakness theme)—is at least plausible.

Unfortunately, this suggestion is not seriously pursued. Regimes are not tightly defined. The decisiveness of labor's defeats in determining them is not systematically defended. The relative weight to be accorded different variables (or, if one prefers, relations) is most commonly simply asserted. And the specific institutional designs that order "collective life" and give materiality to working class division are rarely pursued to the level of detail needed to make sense of strategic action.

Despite the invocation of the role of "sedimented historical experiences" (7), we rarely see the specific mechanisms that transmitted worker disorganization from one generation to the next.

This last omission is the most telling, because it pushes Davis' analysis uncomfortably close to the "metaphysics" (6) of conventional explanation that he rightly criticizes. It is also striking, since obvious use of the weakness begetting weakness theme could be made in analysis of specific institutional forms.

To take as only one example something noted at the outset, collective bargaining in the U.S. is extremely fragmented, and this contributes in important ways to workers' present incapacity. Such fragmentation, however, reflects the earlier distinctive absence of large scale employer associations in the U.S.

This absence may itself be best understood as a consequence of the comparatively early consolidation in the U.S. of large scale industrial enterprises with secure monopoly positions (and thus little need for cooperation with other firms), and sufficient individual resources (immensely supplemented, of course, by the state), to face down early 20th century labor challenges. This early consolidation, in turn, was facilitated by the repeated defeats of working class insurgency in the late 19th century. And so on.

Finally, Davis' historical discussion has almost nothing to say about the basic structure of American politics and party systems. He acknowledges this omission (9, fn. 6), and since he does there is no need to dwell on it. Clearly, however, it is difficult to make sense of the political failures of American workers without saying something about the political system in which they are falling. Again taking only one example, single member districts and winner-take-all election rules, especially in a non-parliamentary system, go a long way, all by themselves, to explain the absence of a labor party in the U.S.

A Sterile Alliance

The failure of the labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s to achieve either an economic or political unification of the American working class established the terms of the AFL-CIO's incorporation in the postwar "settlement" (a settlement, Davis correctly emphasizes, which was never fully accepted by all of capital, and which certain sectors strove repeatedly to disrupt).

Here the predominantly white, overwhelmingly male, and largely economic labor movement, claiming a small and steadily declining share of the working population as members, established a de facto alliance with the Democratic Party.

Davis argues that the alliance was a devil's bargain, most obviously because the conditions for maintaining labor's power within it, let alone those that would plausibly lead to a "social democratization" of the Democrats—labor unity, and alliance across racial and sexual divisions; class realignment of the electoral system; and the political mobilization of labor's existing base—were never present.

In a discussion of the "Fall of the House of Labor," he then details how the failure of the AFL-CIO to attend to its base, its internal divisions, and the vast and growing mass of unorganized workers (especially critical here was the failure to organize women workers, and perhaps most critical, and again raising the issue of race, the failure to organize the rapidly growing South) disabused it before shifting investment strategies of employers, and the vast assault on unionization evident since at least the late 1960s.

A central burden of this argument is to show the highly dependent character of the welfare gains won by union members. Unable to impose serious political constraints on the pattern of private accumulation, the labor movement was, as became evident in retrospect, ill prepared to respond strategically to the harsh stagnation of the 1970s.
While various quibbles may be entered, the basic thrust of all these arguments seems obviously correct, and Davis' support for them (which, it should be noted, includes much more detailed attention to the specific institutional forms regulating social relations, and is thus responsive to the criticisms of the earlier discussion noted above) is extensive and convincing.

This brings us, finally, to Davis' exploration of recent changes in American politics. Again heavily influenced by the French school of regulation, he posits an end of "Fordism," or the regime of intensive accumulation, running from the end of World War II to the early 1970s, in which rising mass consumption was happily coordinated (through collective bargaining, productivity based wage increases, and social insurance) with rising productivity.

To simplify a complicated argument, Davis argues that Fordism has finally come up against the limits of market expansion, both intensively and extensively. On the one hand, to confine ourselves to the U.S., the existing domestic mass market for familiar consumer durables (cars, household appliances, and so on) has approached relative saturation, while the disorganization of most of the working class, and the failure to lift the large, heavily Black, impoverished underclass out of poverty through a "Second Reconstruction" has blocked a rise in aggregate demand.

On the other hand, the extension of Fordism to the semi-periphery of the developed world has been stymied by the entrenched oligarchies of those systems, whose political power would be severely threatened by its generalization there.

A New Stage?

Emerging from this crisis of Fordism, which is emphatically an expression of political failure, is what Davis provisionally terms a regime of "overconsumptionism" (182). By this he means to denote, not the "sumptuary habits of the very rich" (211), but rather:

... an increasing political subsidization of a sub-bourgeois, mass layer of managers, professionals, new entrepreneurs and rentiers who, faced with rapidly declining organization among the working poor and minorities during the 1970s, have been overwhelmingly successful in profiting from both inflation and expanded state expenditures (211).

Davis' analysis of the right turn in recent American public policy is, essentially, a story of the emergence and mobilization of this sub-bourgeois strata, and their capture of both the Republican and Democratic parties. More specifically, his argument consists of demonstrating 1) that American class structure changed significantly in the 1970s, with a sharply pronounced diminution of the middle class, and the emergence of an "hourglass" economy, with the new strata proliferating on top; and 2) that the policies promoted by the major parties principally expressed the interests, and reflected the new dominance, of this emergent mass sub-bourgeoisie.

This is a provocative argument, and no doubt illuminates much of the wacky depravity of recent American politics. There are problems, however, with both parts of Davis' central claim, which weaken it as an explanation of America's right turn.

Regarding the first, while there may indeed be a long run trend toward increasing inequality in American incomes, the data for the 1970s are at very least ambiguous on this point. Early reports of a massive 1970s drop in the share of national income going to the middle quintile of American families, it turns out, relied on a series of estimation mistakes made by the Census Bureau when it switched its categorization of family income levels in the late 1970s.

Analysis of the raw data, since done by Frank Levy and Robert Michel, indicates considerable stability in the middle's share. As late as 1984, for example, the middle quintile claimed exactly the same share it did in 1947 (17 percent), while throughout the postwar period the share claimed by the middle three quintiles has varied only slightly (between 52 and 54 percent). A more nuanced measure of wage inequality developed by Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, on the other hand, does indicate increasing inequality in the very late 1970s. But this does not help classically low-paid service workers—would be the fastest growing job classification in absolute terms. This seems to support the "disappearing middle" hypothesis. But there are already a lot of building custodians in the American economy, and such absolute growth in numbers was necessary for them to retain their share. If the BLS projections turn out to be correct, the percentage of janitors in the American economy in 1995 will be exactly the same as it was in 1981 (2.8 percent). While hardly disconfirming of the "disappearing middle" theory, such stability in employment shares clearly does not offer that theory any support. Such objections could be multiplied, but their basic thrust should already be clear. While Davis may in fact be right about the long term trend toward inequality in the American economy, the
data he presents in support of that proposition do not make the case convincingly. And as an explanation of the shift in policies traceable to the late 1970s, they are particularly riddled with problems of timing.

The second central claim is also troublesome. There can be no question that changes in public policy in the last several years have helped the rich, and hurt the poor. But Davis needs to show more than that to sustain his argument that the mobilization of the (new?) sub-bourgeoisie is responsible for those policies.

At a minimum, if only to retain his relatively conventional view that electoral mobilization explains public policies, he needs to 1) define the dimensions, material status, and interests of this group much more sharply than he has (at times his references to these strata seem almost parsimoniously inclusive, at times he seems to have something more specific in mind); and then 2) show why and how the peculiar mix of policies pursued by the late Carter administration and the present administration, as against other available mixes, served their interests better than those of other elite actors.

So far as I can see, this is not shown. Until it is, more parsimonious explanations of the right turn—those centering more narrowly, for example, on an examination of strategic behavior within the American business community (the real bourgeoisie, and not the sub-one)—may retain their appeal.

Hemispheric Perspectives

Having analyzed the origin of the new party system, Davis examines its behavior during the 1984 presidential campaign.

This discussion is characteristically lucid and biting, and there is no quarreling with his central contentions that the campaign and its immediate aftermath demonstrate that 1) the Democratic Party has shifted significantly to the right over the past several years, and mounted an almost ludicrously conservative campaign in 1984; 2) the role of the AFL-CIO leadership within recent Democratic Party politics (rolling back the reforms of the early 1970s, continuing to boost militarism, buying into regressive schemes of "reindustrialization" that will hurt far more workers than they help, attacking the Jackson candidacy) has been widely destructive and self-serving; 3) absent a mobilization from below there is no reason to expect that things will get much better; 4) in particular, if only to underscore the point, there is no reason to believe that Democratic Party elites will promote a progressive program in the absence of popular pressure, and no reason to believe that another one-sided "alliance" with the Democrats will substitute for such pressure, or even substantially improve the conditions for creating it; and 5) overcoming internal divisions within the American workforce, in particular racism (as became pointedly evident during the Jackson campaign), is more urgent than ever as a key to popular mobilization.

Prisoners concludes with a final extension of this argument, directly addressed to the left. Davis argues that a Second Reconstruction should head the list of the left's concerns, that unions should be defended in solidaristic wage demands and linked to broader community struggles, and that, more than ever, democracy at home requires the contestation of American imperialism abroad.

Given the global crisis of (at least American) Fordism, the insanity of the arms race, and the amount of violence the U.S. daily promotes around the world, this last point deserves particular emphasis. There is, Davis concludes:

...never likely to be an "American revolution" as classically imagined by DeLeon, Debs or Cannon. If socialism is to arrive one day in North America, it is much more probable that it will be by virtue of a combined, hemispheric process of revolt that overlaps boundaries and overlaces movements. The long-term future of the US left will depend on its ability to become both more representative and self-organized among its own "natural" mass constituencies, and more integrally a wing of a new internationalism. It is necessary to begin to imagine more audacious projects of coordinated action and political cooperation among the popular lefts in all the countries of the Americas. We are all, finally, prisoners of the same malign "American dream."

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It is impossible to take issue with such sentiments, and impossible too, on closing this book, not to admire the cumulative force and conviction with which they are expressed.

Whatever the flaws and odd lacunae in Davis' argument, Prisoners of the American Dream does succeed powerfully in clarifying the requirements of such "audacious projects of coordinated action and political cooperation," the awful consequences of not pursuing them in the past, and the special urgency of their pursuit now. That is a considerable, and very welcome, achievement.

*In the past decade, roughly since the publication of Michel Aglietta's seminal Theory of Capitalist Regulation, much work has been done to specify distinct "regimes" of capitalist accumulation, and the broad "social structures of accumulation" which provide their political, as well as economic, coherence. To some degree, this work has converged with independent efforts to specify the conditions of "compromise" between workers and capitalists necessary to sustain social peace. Despite obvious divergence in methods and conclusions across different authors, it may not be too soon to posit (crudely) a synthetic view of political and economic change emerging from these efforts.

Joel Rogers is an Associate Professor of Law and Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His most recent book, coauthored with Thomas Ferguson, is Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986.)

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community will use the emotions generated by the Barbie trial to increase support for Israeli nationalism and expansionism. This approach is tantamount to responding to the plight of the Palestinians and chicavism by fomenting another. The immediate result will be to worsen the situation of oppressed people in the Middle East, South Africa and Central America. In the long run the situation of people of Jewish origin will be worse as well, especially if continued Israeli aggression precipitates international war.

In this regard, the life of Ben Linder presents an important alternative. Ben's choice was to combat nationalism and chicavism not with its mirror image but with internationalism.

It is precisely his decision to ally himself with the Nicaraguan people in their struggle for independence and economic justice that points the way toward a world of social justice—and social justice is the absolute prerequisite for international peace.

Not all of us have the talents, personal fortitude, and courage of Ben Linder. But I think Ben would never "guilt trip" us for this; he would have been happy for us each to do what we can in our own ways. Moreover, our motivation for following Ben's example should not be from a sense of charity or self-righteousness; I believe it is in our own self-interest to live a full life, as Ben did, in accord with our principles and at one with humanity.

Ben only lived 27 years—but it was a life truly worth living.

Note: It is evident from statements published by the contras that the murder of Linder was intended to frighten U.S. volunteers into leaving Nicaragua. In response, TecNica, a group that arranges work in Nicaragua for technical volunteers, has launched a Ben Linder Volunteer Campaign to double the number of U.S. delegations to Nicaragua this summer.

In addition, a memorial fund has been established to support the rural development project on which Ben was working at the time of his death. Contributions should be sent to: Ben Linder Memorial Fund, Portland CASC, P.O. Box 6443, Portland, Oregon 97228.

Alan Wald, an activist in the Latin American Solidarity Committee and Faculty for Human Rights (US and Central America in Ann Arbor, is a member of Solidarity. He is cultural editor of ATC.