Projecting Politics: *The Grapes of Wrath*

Les Raisins de la colère: *Une critique politique*

Stephen J. Whitfield
AUTHOR’S NOTE

The author appreciates the assistance and advice of Jack E. Davis, Morris Dickstein, Richard H. King, Cliff Lewis and Richard Stites.

1 Of the most bloodthirsty regimes of the twentieth century—or of any other century, two of them bear an eccentric connection to John Ford’s film, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). A movie that is famous for projecting sentiments of social justice and for offering a glimmer of democratic faith is oddly entwined in the coils of totalitarianism.

2 Adolf Hitler knew almost nothing of the United States, a country he never visited. Yet he was convinced that immigration had already corrupted and mongrelized the general populace, and the movie version of John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel enabled the *Führer* to observe how degenerate the “Okies” had become. If even farmers of Anglo-Saxon stock could succumb to such racial disintegration, he concluded, the American military would be a pushover for the *Wehrmacht*. This particular movie-goer was not acute enough to notice the resilience and endurance that the exodusters also exhibited on the screen; and it would be foolish to claim that his decision to declare war on the United States was based only upon a misinterpretation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, though he watched it several times. But since no treaty obligation compelled the Third Reich to make war, after Pearl Harbor, upon an industrial power of which Hitler was so ignorant, any analysis of his motives must remain speculative. It may have been an urge for apocalyptic destructiveness (and self-destructiveness), a madman’s *Götterdämmerung* imagined in subterranean depths more accessible to the psychobiographer than to the military or diplomatic historian. But anyone assessing the politics of Steinbeck’s novel and of its
Hollywood adaptation must reckon with the impact that *The Grapes of Wrath* might have exerted on Hitler’s mind, easing Franklin D. Roosevelt’s job in drawing America into the European conflict.\(^1\)

The political figure whom Hitler said he most admired was Joseph Stalin, whose regime could not ignore what John Ford had filmed for Twentieth Century-Fox. In 1948, *The Grapes of Wrath* was allowed to play in Soviet cinemas because of its propaganda value, which was presumably to heighten awareness of the desperate misery of the Okies under the most advanced system of capitalism on the planet. After several weeks, however, the film—given the unbiblical title of *The Road to Wrath*—had to be withdrawn. Soviet audiences were apparently extracting the wrong lesson, since they could see for themselves that even the most dispossessed of America’s rural proletariat were shown driving automobiles.\(^2\) The film can thus be understood as an early hint of the economic gap between the two most powerful victors in the Great Patriotic War. That gap would not be closed and would determine—less than half a century later—the outcome of the Cold War. Even though the Soviet Union stretched across eleven time zones, Stalin in particular was haunted by fears of capitalist encirclement that proved to be justified. Ineptitude and inefficiency permeated the command economy he established—so much so that, had the Kremlin ever gained control of the Sahara, Western analysts liked to quip, there would soon have been a shortage of sand. Economic backwardness was apparent in the Soviet response to *The Grapes of Wrath* under Stalin, so that this film may not only have accelerated the American involvement in one war but also adumbrated a subsequent victory in the cold war.\(^3\)

The totalitarian reactions to this movie are only the most striking instances of the political polysemousness that is the subject of this essay. Coming across as vaguely radical, Ford’s film—perhaps even more than the book that inspired it—nevertheless achieved an ambiguity that is more the signature of art than of politics, but effected a wide range of responses to the representation of the Okies’ plight. Because neither Steinbeck nor Ford was clear on the sources of their oppression, because no specific civic remedy was offered outside of the New Deal itself, *The Grapes of Wrath* deserves to be studied not only as a successful transfer from one medium to another but also as an example of how social criticism in the United States was taken to be more devastating than Ford’s indictment was meant to be.\(^4\)

There is no uncertainty about the influence of the book that he adapted to the screen. “No other [serious] novel of the thirties had anything like its national impact,” historian Donald Worster asserted. “It taught an entire reading public what to think about the Okies and exodusters, and it would endure, for all its aesthetic and analytical faults, as one of the great American works of literature.” More than a million residents of the southwest would become migrants by the end of the decade, the “dirty Thirties”; and the epic that Steinbeck composed to recount the trek westward was virtually without precedent in its impact. To be sure, nothing could match what was written by the little lady who started the great war of the mid-nineteenth century. But in the twentieth century, perhaps only one work of fiction can be compared to *The Grapes of Wrath*: Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) —or two, if *Roots* (1976) is classified as fiction, as it was when ABC announced that its television adaptation the following year was "based on the novel by Alex Haley." So searing and successful was Steinbeck’s book that the privileged could be put a little on the defensive. In 1941 Eudora Welty felt obliged to label Steinbeck a
A propagandist, even as she acknowledged that her life diverged from other young people’s experiences in that she had neither been jailed nor had trodden grapes.3

Influence was hardly synonymous with assent. In communities like Kansas City, Missouri and East St. Louis, Illinois, as well as in Kern County in California—at the heart of the region that Steinbeck described, his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel was vilified and suppressed. Its ceremonial burning in Kern County was photographed by Look magazine. Efforts at censorship in the public schools persisted, in one instance because the father of a tenth-grader noticed how often the novel “takes the Lord’s name in vain.” But blasphemy did not exhaust the list of objections. The Grapes of Wrath was banned “for its sexual frankness as well as for its political views,” Worster noted. Efforts at censorship were ineffectual, however; and even the allegation that the novel was an affront to regional pride did not stop the public library of Tulsa from acquiring twenty-eight copies to satisfy the demand.4 A U. S. Congressman from Oklahoma, Lyle Boren, was apoplectic: “I cannot find it possible to let this dirty, lying, filthy manuscript go heralded before the public without a word of challenge or protest.” He “resent[ed], for the great state of Oklahoma, the implications in that book.” Exulting in his own “tenant-farmer heritage,” Boren contributed to the nation’s rich legacy of yahoism—preserved for posterity in the Congressional Record—by calling this novel “a lie, a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind.” This critic’s son, David Lyle Boren, born two years later, would become a U. S. Senator and the president of the University of Oklahoma.

The FBI picked up the scent too. It was especially alert to potential disruptions to social order that might come up from below, though such a threat was hardly original to the 1930’s or indigenous to Depression-era America. After all, the first person to discern the socio-economic divide between “the have-nots” was Sancho Panza’s grandmother (chapter XX of Don Quixote), and the have-nots evidently enlisted Steinbeck’s own sympathies. His file eventually ran to 117 pages (plus another twenty from U. S. Army Intelligence). Was it accidental that The Grapes of Wrath showed up at a table at the May Day rally of the Communists’ Los Angeles chapter? The second-hand opinion of the American Legion Radical Research Bureau in San Francisco was that the novel had been called—by whom? —“Red propaganda.” Army G-2 was therefore bound to harbor “substantial doubt as to Subject’s loyalty and discretion.” Such was his reputation for radicalism that, as late as 1949, with the Cold War in full swing, the social democrat George Orwell secretly submitted a list of thirty-five “FT’s” (fellow travellers) to the Information Research Department of His Majesty’s government, drawn from his own notebook that contained 125 names. On that list was Steinbeck, whom Orwell also characterized as a “spurious writer, pseudo-naif.”5

The case for Steinbeck’s radicalism was thin, however, though he had been a member of the League of American Writers, founded in 1935 and sponsored by the Communists. At its peak it had about eight hundred members, and was the subject of Tom Wolfe’s 1956 dissertation in the American Studies program at Yale, which he subtitled “Communist Organizational Activity Among American Writers, 1929-1942.” One measure of the elusiveness of Steinbeck’s politics may be that, though Wolfe himself has come across as a conservative, he has retained a sweet tooth for the sort of realism that Steinbeck—more than any other major writer of the 1930’s—exemplified.7

His novel did seem to adopt a political stance that troubled leading critics, even those on the left. The combination of literary power and social concern aroused the suspicion that Steinbeck must somehow have hectored his readers, installing the Okies as historical
actors on a political stage. Philip Rahv objected to “the outright political preaching from the standpoint of a kind of homespun revolutionary populism.” The co-editor of the Partisan Review found the novel “far too didactic and long-winded.” Steinbeck had managed to compress into The Grapes of Wrath every mistake that “proletarian” writers had already made, Rahv complained, such as the romanticization of ordinary folk and the psychologically unconvincing conversion to labor militancy. Edmund Wilson dismissed The Grapes of Wrath as “a propaganda novel, full of preachments and sociological interludes.” But in behalf of what ideology did Steinbeck mount the soapbox? At whom were his preachments directed? Wilson was not specific. In his first book of literary history, Alfred Kazin claimed that Steinbeck “was aroused by the man-made evil the Okies had to suffer, and he knew it as something remediable by men.” But what exactly was that man-made evil, and what precisely was the remedy? The power of the novel, according to On Native Grounds, lay in Steinbeck’s gift for showing the plight of the Joads as “an event in history, to be understood by history, to be transformed and remembered and taught in history.” But exactly what had history done to the Joads? How should history instruct the rest of us about their suffering? Unfortunately Kazin offered no explicit answers.

But in a way neither did Steinbeck. He “was never able to put his finger firmly and accurately on the economic institutions responsible for the Joads’ exodus,” according to Worster, whose own parents had been evicted from western Kansas by the dust storms, and deposited in Needles, California. Not that novelists should be expected to brandish policy proposals, or to foresee more keenly than anyone else the historical consequences of plowing up grass cover. “More important than the precise pattern of private ownership was the widespread drive in American farming to maximize profits from the land and the increasing use of machinery to do just that. Those were among the major factors accounting for people like the Joads going west.” Steinbeck implied that “the ultimate explanation of the Dust Bowl [was] the alienation of man from the land, its commercialization, and its consequent abuse.” Commercial farming drawing upon technological advance—of which the tractor was emblematic—“dominated the rural landscape of America. Its approach to the land had never recognized any limits nor restrained the appetite for gain.” The drought had resulted from the rapacity had pushed families like the Joads off of their land and destroyed the Jeffersonian ideal of the self-reliant yeoman. Yet Steinbeck’s “radical sensibility,” it might be added, did not imply a radical solution, like collective ownership. Indeed the enhanced power granted to agribusiness has made the land so productive that the Great Plains has become a breadbasket to the world rather than a soul-destroying desert.

Though political controversy swirled around The Grapes of Wrath at the end of the Great Depression, though the novel is reputed to have confronted literary taste with leftist passion, the view of historian Charles J. Shindo is a useful corrective. This novel, he wrote, “sits uneasily between conservative representations of the California migrant farm worker problem as the result of the degenerate living habits of the backward Okies and the radical critique of the capitalist system of agribusiness for creating such a distressed and oppressed group.” The Grapes of Wrath “is less political than philosophical. Steinbeck did not teach the migrant workers how to reap the benefits of their labor. Rather, he taught them how to see life and their place in the universe.” His feelings for the migrants, Shindo added, were genuine. But Steinbeck believed “in the federal government’s ability to reshape the migrants into class-conscious democratic citizens.” The novelist “believed
the migrants did not have the capacity to understand their own situation; they needed assistance in learning to cope with modern industrial society.”

Sinclair’s novel is associated with a particular reform; both the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act were passed within half a year of the publication of The Jungle. Steinbeck likewise seemed to be asking no more of his readers than to support the programs of the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration of the New Deal. His In Dubious Battle (1936) can be classified as a proletarian novel; The Grapes of Wrath cannot. It does not focus upon a strike, nor does it end with one, but instead with a terrifying act of nature—as the flood waters envelop Rose of Sharon and the starving stranger whom she breast-feeds. The apparent aim is to promote sympathy for the dispossessed rather than to encourage them to revolt, to stimulate readers to expand their vision of democracy so as to include the rural underclass.

For progressives in 1939, nothing seemed more urgent than to upgrade the sort of protection they wanted the Roosevelt administration to offer. The victims of the Dust Bowl could not act on their own; the migrants who sought work and the restoration of their lives in California needed a government that felt social responsibility. Though Jim Casy is made a martyr for his militancy, there was nothing distinctly radical about joining a labor union in 1939. Four years earlier the National Labor Relations Act, introduced by Senator Robert F. Wagner (D-N. Y.), had been passed, though its provisions exempted agricultural labor. In the year that John Ford’s film was released, the Supreme Court ruled that peaceful picketing could be conducted under the umbrella of the First Amendment. The following year even the paternalistic septuagenarian Henry Ford would—under duress—recognize the United Auto Workers. He too would be talkin’ union.

Yet it says something about the politics of The Grapes of Wrath that even its urgent and compelling message failed to bring about the limited improvements that the novel seemed to be proposing. The efforts to realize these reforms failed. In December 1939 and January 1940, the La Follette Senate Civil Liberties Committee visited California and held hearings to expose the manifest abuses of the rights of workers in those “factories in the fields.” The Associated Farmers had been operating with such impunity, so fully had these employers determined the working conditions of the labor force, so closely had the constabulary conspired with the owners to prevent peaceful efforts to secure the rights of unions that the La Follette Committee labeled the result “local fascism.” But when the Committee introduced an oppressive labor practices bill, Congress refused to pass it. In 1937 the CIO had formed an agricultural union: the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). It was defeated in its organizing efforts in the fields, and was not recognized as having the right to represent the fruit and vegetable pickers. What would reduce such economic vulnerability was not the gallantry of the CIO but the recruitment of the Okies into the defense industries that became integral to the California economy, beginning with the Second World War and then during the Cold War. By then this single western state was becoming, according to Worster, “the most powerful agricultural region on the planet.”

The frustration of the political struggles of the 1930’s, despite the concerns that Steinbeck’s novel presumably aroused, is even more piquant because the objects of moral sympathy and public support were Caucasian. His friend John Kenneth Galbraith, who had chosen as his own professional specialty the relevant field of agricultural economics, noted the shrewdness with which Steinbeck made the Joads white, to maximize the empathy of the overwhelming majority of his readers. Hitler was not utterly wrong in his
racial interpretation of the film, insofar as Their Blood is Strong (1938), Steinbeck’s pamphlet about the desperate farm workers who had come to California, made a point of proclaiming that “they are of the best American stock.” Theirs were “strong, purposeful faces”; and “the names of the news migrants,” he added, “indicate that they are of English, German and Scandinavian descent.” Yet such reassurance to white readers was still not enough to push the appropriate legislation through Congress, even though Steinbeck had depicted the plight of the migrants in so appalling a fashion that one teacher of black students has reported that those assigned the novel assumed that the Okies were black.13

The novel thus elicited the admiration of the left even if the prescriptions that Steinbeck offered seem, especially in retrospect, so pallid. His book was praised “as a fiery document of protest and compassion” even by the militant young who sympathized with the Popular Front, like the eighteen-year-old Betty Goldstein.14 Writing in Focus, she acknowledged that The Grapes of Wrath was “profane and shocking.” But that was because the conditions which it deplored fit that description. Such conditions were exploitative rather than egalitarian. Eight years later the reviewer would marry Carl Friedan. Sixteen years after that she would publish a book of social analysis that would probably influence more readers than even The Grapes of Wrath did. Yet the radical spirit of the novel that Betty Goldstein praised would seem even more evident after Twentieth Century-Fox released the film version the following year.

Darryl F. Zanuck bought the film rights for $100,000, less than a month after the novel was published, and quickly gave Nunnally Johnson the task of making an epic novel into a scenario. When the filming began in the fall of 1939, the working title was Highway 66, in the hope of dampening any controversy that the novel might already have stirred. It was not filmed on location, because Chambers of Commerce in Oklahoma and Texas might object to shooting The Grapes of Wrath there. During the filming Zanuck was so secretive that only three full copies of Johnson’s screenplay existed. When the movie opened in New York in January, 1940, Steinbeck’s novel was still #1 on the best-seller list—hardly a warning sign that the popularity of the film might be imperiled.

Still the mogul took no chances. Having picked John Ford to direct the film, Zanuck had wanted Tom Joad to be played by either of the studio’s biggest stars—Don Ameche or Tyrone Power. But Ford had insisted on Henry Fonda, who signed an eight-picture contract with Zanuck and his studio. Ford had already cast Fonda as Young Mr. Lincoln (1939), enabling Twentieth Century-Fox to announce in a press release: “Abe Lincoln becomes an Okie.” Thanks in no small measure to Fonda and actress Jane Darwell, the pair became, according to Worster, “the most powerful mother-son match ever put on the screen”; and the film “became an instant classic.”15 Warned that he “couldn’t show The Grapes of Wrath in Oklahoma and Texas,” the Nebraska-born Zanuck recalled getting “scared as hell.” Such fright proved unwarranted, and Hollywood’s conventional fears of alienating any significant part of the mass audience were inflated. “All I won with that [film],” he clucked, “was an Oscar and a fortune.” Indeed the movie was the studio’s biggest box-office success in 1940.16 It was named Best Picture by both the National Board of Review and the New York Film Critics.

However pivotal the actors were to the success of The Grapes of Wrath, the three most important figures in the making of the film were behind the camera; and all of them did their best to depurate any impulse to politicize their efforts.
Nunnally Johnson, who also served as associate producer, insisted that his responsibility was merely to adapt the novel rather than to re-imagine it, so that his own personal imprint could scarcely be detected. (Richard Corliss’s canonization of Hollywood screenplays includes four assessments of Johnson’s œuvre—but not of *The Grapes of Wrath*.) “Nine-tenths of the dramatic action of the book is in the screenplay, and, to the best of my purpose and ability, the same sociological emphasis,” he claimed. “Ninety-five per cent of the dialogue is from the book[,] and the remainder, obligatory in instances of transition of sequences, is as shy and unpretentious as it should be.” In the novel the preacher is murdered, the strikers are beaten, the flood threatens the haven of the boxcar, and Rose of Sharon gives her milk to a starving stranger. The movie ends in a government camp; Keene Ranch, as it is called in the film, provides fantastic plumbing and wholesome recreation. Steinbeck has Tom deliver his final speech to his mother in a cave (“I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where...”); Johnson condenses the speech and has Tom address Ma on an empty dance floor. As the Joads drive off, she offers reassurance drawn from the novel: “We’re the people that live.”[1] Tom has gone into hiding, so that the film ends short of the novel.

The scenarist attributed the decision to end the movie there to Steinbeck, “before any word of the script had been set down on paper.” Johnson wanted audiences to leave the theaters in a hopeful mood—and claimed that the novelist agreed with him. Zanuck has also been credited with making Ma Joad’s famous speech the finale (“We’re the people. Can’t nobody wipe us out...”), which is a variant of what is in the novel: “Rich fellas come up, an’ they die, an’ their kids ain’t no good and they die out,” Steinbeck’s Ma Joad proclaims. “But... we keep a comin’.” She adds: “We’re the people that live. They ain’t gonna wipe us out... . We keep a-comin’.” This peroration therefore makes the case for resilience, not for revolution, and celebrates mere persistence rather than acts of collective will or the seizure of historic opportunities to alter the relations of power.[18] Yet by stopping short of the terrifying flood, the film-makers also minimized the natural disasters that befall the Joads and focused instead upon their social plight. In that way the movie is more radical in its implications than if its makers had attributed the pressures the migrants faced to acts of God as well.

Ford himself was so eager to distance himself from the vivid political aura of the novel that in one interview the director even denied having read it.[19] But his preferred stance was unideological rather than illiterate: “I just liked it, that’s all. I’d read the book—it was a good story—and Darryl Zanuck had a good script on it. The whole thing appealed to me—being about simple people—and the story was similar to the famine in Ireland.” (But that catastrophe was due more directly to social policy than was, say, the drought that the Okies experienced). Ford “liked the idea of this family going out and trying to find their way in the world.” Refusing to make the migrants into participants in the class struggle, he professed to be “only interested in the Joad family as characters. I was sympathetic to people like the Joads... but I was not interested in *Grapes* as a social study.” Having himself experienced childhood in an Irish-American ghetto in New England, Ford probably had an instinctive identification with the poor in their conflict with the rich. “I am of the proletariat,” he averred. “My people were peasants.” But then he presented his patriotic credentials: “I love America. I am apolitical,”[20] as though love of country might somehow be compromised by criticizing it.

No wonder. In that era political criticism often had to be disguised as something else—as comedy, for instance. The year that Steinbeck’s novel was published, MGM released...
Ninotchka, which was promoted as “The Picture that Kids the Commissars”—even as those very commissars were perpetrating a Walpurgisnacht that may have made twenty million comrades into corpses during the Soviets’ Great Terror. The year Ford’s film opened, United Artists released Charlie Chaplin’s first talkie, The Great Dictator. (Its shooting script had been slightly doctored by Steinbeck). The director-scenarist-star later said that he would not have done The Great Dictator had he known how utterly evil Nazism was and would become; and, at least according to apocrypha, Hitler watched Chaplin’s film twice, in private.21

But even when politics is unsheathed, the impact of works of art tends to be exaggerated. Neither Brecht’s The Private Life of the Master Race nor Picasso’s Guernica can be said to have accelerated the defeat of Nazism; and by the time Solzhenitsyn was able to publish The Gulag Archipelago abroad, the moral and historical case against Stalinism had already been clinched. “Poetry,” Auden acknowledged, “makes nothing happen.” In 1959, as the arms race escalated, Stanley Kramer released an apocalyptic film about nuclear war that elicited the following conjecture. “It may be that some years from now,” peace activist Linus Pauling speculated, “we can look back and say that On the Beach is the movie that saved the world.” Yet only six years later, film critic Pauline Kael wondered whether “anyone remember[ed] On the Beach as anything more than a lousy picture.”22

Darryl F. Zanuck considered himself one of FDR’s friends, though that may not be saying much, since the President was affable enough to have learned how to say “my old friend” in eleven languages. The mogul was a Republican and in 1940 campaigned for Wendell Willkie, the sort of Wall Street attorney whom a frustrated Muley might have wanted to pull a gun on. Perhaps such disjunctions can be defended as merely a way of avoiding the hobgoblin of little minds. Biographer Mel Gussow offered a different sort of vindication: Zanuck could take a social problem, and then “dramatize... it, making it palatable to a wide public, not by softening it but by humanizing it.” Yet such a claim is odd, since Steinbeck had already done that. Nor did it take “considerable daring and courage for Zanuck to film The Grapes of Wrath—while it was hot—and to do it so faithfully and movingly.”23 The heat generated by the popularity of the novel already served as a ratification of mainstream taste, and the sheer size of the readership constituted a built-in constituency at the box office.

That a Republican would produce The Grapes of Wrath is not inherently suspect, since ideological seamlessness is not what distinguished the era of the Great Depression. However conservative or even reactionary the sovereigns of the culture industry were in the 1930’s, the radio voice of Norman Thomas was familiar; and in New York City socialists even ran a radio station like WEVD (named for Eugene Victor Debs). Communists published novels as influential as The Maltese Falcon (1930), as powerful as Native Son (1940), as worthy of rediscovery as Call It Sleep (1934). They also wrote songs as indelible as “Strange Fruit” (1939). The spectrum of opinions to which the public was exposed had not shriveled to the parched dimensions of the 1950’s; and the two nations to which John Dos Passos referred in U. S. A. were partly reflected in the mass media. On the staff of Time, Inc. in the 1930’s and 1940’s were such forthright liberals as Archibald MacLeish, Theodore White and John Kenneth Galbraith, who were joined in the latter decade by socialists like Daniel Bell and Irving Howe (who denied that he was selling-out, since his book review stints were a part-time job). The founder of Time, Inc., Henry R. Luce, once offered a succinct explanation for such political latitude: “For some goddamn reason Republicans can’t write.”24 In his own way Zanuck might have discerned in
Steinbeck the sort of literary grandeur that could be used to good commercial effect, which conspicuous de-clawing on the screen would even hamper. Indeed the charge that the studio significantly blunted the force of the novel is easily overstated. Its author's initial reaction also deserves consideration: “Zanuck has more than kept his word... It looks and feels like a documentary film[;] and certainly it has a hard, truthful ring. No punches were pulled.” Indeed Steinbeck opined that “it is a harsher thing than the book, by far.” He found this sort of artistic integrity “unbelievable but it is true.”

Indeed, whatever humanizing or softening of the novel may have occurred, the strident Hearst press was undeterred in condemning the film as communist propaganda. Reviewing the film in *Time* (February 12, 1940), Whittaker Chambers praised the aesthetics of *The Grapes of Wrath* even as he detested its politics. What Twentieth Century-Fox had released “will be a red flag to bull-mad Californians, who may or may not boycott it. Others, who were merely annoyed at the exaggerations, propaganda and phony pathos of John Steinbeck’s best selling novel, may just stay away.” (For the record, the First Lady disagreed. “I never believed that *The Grapes of Wrath* was exaggerated,” Eleanor Roosevelt remarked, after on-site inspection of the labor conditions in California.) Chambers was put off by the maudlin pieties that he ascribed to the film as well as to the novel. “Pinkos who did not bat an eye when the Soviet Government exterminated three million peasants by famine will go for a good cry over the hardships of the Okies,” he sneered. “But people who go to pictures for the sake of seeing pictures will see a great one.” The film was a “great human story,” bereft of “the novel’s phony conclusions... It is the saga of an authentic U. S. farming family who lose their land.” How that happened was a socio-economic process that Chambers delicately elected not to mention.

He claimed that the California deputies are shown as merely defending their own turf, as Indians had earlier done against white invaders. His review does not allude to class conflict, which might have led readers to wonder what Californians might have been so “bull-mad” about that boycott was considered. Chambers hailed Jane Darwell’s character as “the important thing in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for Ma begins as one thing, ends as another”; she “is a great tragic character.” Even though both Tom Joad and Jim Casy are changed in the course of the plot, they grow by becoming somewhat politicized—unlike Ma Joad. The Preacher “has never understood religion.” In down-playing the social context of the Joads’ struggle, Chambers also eschewed the political lessons that might be drawn from it. *Time*’s movie reviews in 1940 were like the rest of the weekly: unsigned. Luce was so impressed by the anonymous assessment of *The Grapes of Wrath* (“It’s the best cinema review ever in *Time*”) that he asked to meet the reviewer. A friendship began, which did not stop the publisher from encouraging Chambers, whom Luce once claimed was the best writer *Time* had ever employed, to sever the connection with the magazine in 1948. Chambers’ former vocation, as a Soviet espionage agent, Luce deemed inconsistent with editing *Time* during the Cold War.

To be sure the Hearst press was off-target in dismissing the film as Communist propaganda. But at first the Soviet regime did try to incorporate *The Grapes of Wrath* into the Marxist case against capitalism; and Communist Party members in the United States, as well as fellow-travelers and Popular Front activists, do seem to have admired the movie. In that era “no films [were] made in Hollywood that had any real left-wing impact at all,” blacklisted director Joseph Losey recalled from exile, “with the possible exception of *The Grapes of Wrath.*” Yet what its exact impact was is still difficult to say, nor did Losey elaborate. Director Martin Ritt, another victim of the blacklist, also extolled...
The Grapes of Wrath as “a great film. A great liberal film. I love the film.” Scenarist Paul Jarrico, also blacklisted, recalled that “liberals... [had] written some of the best films ever made—Nunnally Johnson’s screenplay of The Grapes of Wrath, for instance.”\textsuperscript{31} The neo-Marxist critic Siegfried Kracauer hailed the film as “remarkable” —in large part because Steinbeck’s novel itself “deals in human groups rather than individuals... Through his very emphasis on collective misery, collective fears and hopes, Steinbeck meets the cinema more than halfway.”

Pauline Kael, herself a Californian, sharply disagreed with Kracauer, however—and indeed with a critical consensus that has hailed the high quality of The Grapes of Wrath. She reviled it as “phony,” a hokey-Okie epic marred by “pore-people talk,” and remembered the film “as a blur of embarrassing sentimental pseudo-biblical pseudo-documentary, a perfect representation of what Bertrand Russell called ‘the fallacy of the superior virtue of the oppressed.’”\textsuperscript{32} But this dismissal has problems too: for example, superior to whom? Ford barely depicts the capitalists, the bourgeoisie, the comfortable classes (such as Lord Russell’s own), and no such comparison with the lot of the poor is invited. Neither the novel nor the movie implies that the wretched of the earth are more noble than anyone else. But both versions The Grapes of Wrath dowant the oppressed to enjoy freedom from want and fear—the agenda that Franklin D. Roosevelt enunciated early in 1941. This is hardly a pidgin politics worthy of contempt. Herself a great admirer of musicals, Kael failed to indicate how the criterion of sincerity might have been satisfied, nor whether the diction that Nunnally Johnson’s characters use should have reminded audiences of Cary Grant.

Among recent scholars, the historian Michael Denning has advanced the most systematic case for the leftist authenticity of the culture of the Popular Front. Its aim “was to bring national attention to organizing campaigns, building solidarity through cultural representations.” Denning has conceded that the film version of The Grapes of Wrath “was not a product of the Popular Front.” But he has argued that “Popular Front cultural politics” made the movie possible. “And despite the sentimental framing of the film—it opens with a title announcing the Joads’ ‘great journey in search of peace, security and another home’ and ends with a vision of peace, security and home—the performances of Henry Fonda, Jane Darwell, and John Carradine (as Preacher Casy) and Gregg Toland’s cinematography combine to embody the radical social-democratic vision of the Popular Front.”\textsuperscript{33}

This claim is something of a stretch, however. To make it the name of John Ford is virtually omitted, undoubtedly because that self-proclaimed lover of America is often categorized as a conservative. In seriously minimizing the role of the director, Denning echoed Edmund Wilson, who opined that Steinbeck had learned so much from movies that “The Grapes of Wrath has poured itself on to the screen as easily as if it had been written in the studios,” so “that it is probably the sole serious story on record that seems almost equally effective as a book and as a film.”\textsuperscript{34} In both the film and the novel, however, it is not the working class that is vouchsafed a glimpse of a “radical social-democratic” future. It is the people who go on—perhaps the same species whom the ex-radical Carl Sandburg invoked in The People, Yes! (1936). Perhaps they are reminiscent of the first-person-plural drafters of the Constitution’s preamble, which announces an intention to form a more perfect union, but not a more perfect labor union. But neither are the people who can’t be wiped out quite the same as das Volk—the harsher and more
exclusive term that Hitler would have encountered in the German version of Ma Joad’s speech.

33 To be sure, as film critic Andrew Sarris noted, “The Grapes of Wrath does not seem conservative at all,” compared to other films released that year. But that does not mean that Ford’s movie should be called radical. Like the novel, the cinematic horizon does not extend beyond the line of the New Deal itself. For example, the scenario lacks a loaded word like “capitalism”; the system of oppression is neither directly named nor explicitly denounced. Indeed, insofar as the film identifies with the fate of the displaced yeomen, The Grapes of Wrath is far less equivocal toward them than is the tradition of Marxism. For its founder’s Communist Manifesto had praised the historical achievement of the bourgeoisie in having “rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life,” which in their isolation and backwardness the Joads exemplify. Help for them need not come from any source beyond the nation’s capital. In the year Twentieth Century-Fox released the film, a prominent advocate of land reclamation in the western states told a national radio audience: “I have read a book recently; it is called The Grapes of Wrath,” President Roosevelt revealed. “There are 500,000 Americans that live in the covers of that book. I would like to see the Columbia Basin devoted to the care of the 500,000 people represented in The Grapes of Wrath.” Though deliberately locating himself “a little left of center,” FDR was not conscripting the vision imparted in Steinbeck’s novel beyond the limits of the New Deal itself.

34 The faith that is conveyed is directed toward “the family, the land, and the working people, a message of longing for the past and despair for the present,” according to political scientist Terry Christensen. “The Joads slowly figure out that they are victims of the system, but they don’t know what to do about it. Even Tom’s action is ambiguous. Like the Joads, the movie seems to long to return to the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal of small farms even as it concedes that this is no longer possible. Only the federal government, as represented by the clean, happy co-op camp, offers salvation. Stronger national government seems to be the film’s solution of last resort if not first preference.” But that more powerful government is not an expression of the will of the working class but simply of a more enlightened administration in Washington, D. C. “Survival, not change, is the theme,” Christensen has argued. “The book demands action,” though he does not make clear what precisely readers are expected to do. But “the film reassures.” According to Charles J. Shindo, “Steinbeck championed progressive ideas about reform and relief, while Ford reinforced more traditional beliefs in moral values and the family.” The novel “provokes its readers to act, while the film does not.” This distinction makes little sense. Did Steinbeck’s readers act? What were they provoked to do? To which cause did they subscribe? Of both novel and film, historian Alan Brinkley therefore rightly concluded, “the political message seems muddled and naive.”

35 That is a retrospective judgment. One year after the film was released, however, the Senate Subcommittee on Interstate Commerce held hearings on “Moving Picture Screen and Radio Propaganda.” Gerald Nye of North Dakota, the Republican isolationist who had investigated the munitions manufacturers held responsible for American involvement in the First World War, feared that a Jewish-dominated film industry might be promoting interventionism, drawing the republic into the Second World War. To defend itself the MPPDA brought on board no less a champion than Wendell Willkie, a member of Zanuck’s board of directors. The mogul himself testified in September, 1941, and displayed some of the feistiness of Ma Joad: “I look back and I recall picture after picture, pictures so strong
and powerful that they sold the American way of life not only to America but to the entire world. They sold it so strongly that when dictators took over Italy and Germany, what did Hitler and his flunky, Mussolini, do?" He answered: “The first thing they did was ban our pictures, throw us out. They wanted no part of the American way of life.” According to film historian Thomas Doherty, “the Senate gallery erupted in applause. Sen. Ernest McFarland (D-Ariz.) called Zanuck’s speech ‘the best I have ever heard,’ and chairman Bennett C. Clark (D-Mo.) adjourned the hearings later that day—permanently as it turned out.”

Zanuck’s oratory was stronger on bluster than on accuracy, since neither the Duce nor the Führer elevated the need to keep Hollywood at bay above other priorities in consolidating dictatorial power.

Nye’s efforts to keep the United States out of the global conflict failed, though not—it can safely be asserted—because of the eloquence of Darryl F. Zanuck. Only three months after the mogul’s testimony, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. In the years immediately following V-J Day, the government that blocked The Grapes of Wrath from susceptible foreign audiences was often Zanuck’s own. In Austria, for instance, it was not the Red Army that kept the film out of the Soviet zone of occupation; it was the U. S. Army. Those responsible for the making of The Grapes of Wrath at least had the consolation that American military censors in Austria were obtuse enough to keep out Casablanca as well. A World War II veteran who served on the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Congressman Richard M. Nixon, expressed concern that The Grapes of Wrath was being screened in Communist Yugoslavia; this cultural artifact might reinforce negative views of the United States (and especially his own state of California).

In other words this was one Hollywood film that spelled trouble, as one foe of censorship explained. Philosopher Sidney Hook was often worried about the eventual score in the cultural Cold War, and warned in 1953 that “films like The Grapes of Wrath have been exploited by Communist propaganda abroad.” Yet “to silence our critical or dissenting writers, even when they seize upon the bizarre and atypical, out of fear that our enemies will pick up what they say, is... to doom our cultural life to inanity” and “to deprive ourselves of stimulation, variety and possibly good counsel.” Other examples that the N. Y. U. professor cited were “the novels of [Upton] Sinclair and [John] Steinbeck, [and] plays [depicting political corruption] like Born Yesterday.” Reporting on an international conference in Paris in 1949, Hook had complained that “the French public, by and large, is shockingly ignorant of American life and culture. Its picture of America is a composite of impressions derived from the reading the novels of social protest and revolt (Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath is taken as a faithful and representative account),” from other novels by Sinclair Lewis and William Faulkner, from movies, “and from exposure to an incessant Communist barrage which seeps into the non-Communist press.”

But the adaptation of Steinbeck’s novel was bad news not only for American anti-Communists. Take the Falangists: Ford’s The Grapes of Wrath was banned in Spain until the death of Franco in 1975. What apparently disturbed the censors were the republican sentiments of solidarity and the hint of class struggle that the film projected, since—according to Ma Joad—the “famby” was no longer “fust.” The State Department asked the Motion Picture Export Association to block the showing of the movie in France, to deny its Communist Party an opportunity to heighten anti-American feelings. When French audiences finally got the opportunity to see Les Raisins de la colère, a preface had been inserted to reassure citizens of the Fourth Republic that the problem of the migrant farmers was subsequently rectified. The film was distributed in Italy on condition that an
exculpation be added about the superiority of democracy in America. Even then the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico advised that attendance be restricted to “morally mature adults,” because “the social problem of poverty, painted in such dark colors that its description is almost demagogic, and the tragic and bitter conclusion that leaves the problem unsolved, gives cause for reservations.” Despite such restraints, the impact of Ford’s movie in Europe was noteworthy. Shown behind the Iron Curtain, *The Grapes of Wrath* elicited the common reaction that “in America even the tramps have cars.”

Sotiris Koukios, the president of the Hellenic Association for International Development, has recalled that, after Andreas Papandreou took power in 1981, all sorts of leftist directions could be detected in the popular culture of Greece. It again became easy to see Czech, Polish and Hungarian films—plus a vaguely dissident American film like *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Immediately after the Second World War, Hollywood had produced a group of postwar films that confronted social issues. For a brief moment in the history of the studio system, a celluloid weapon was wheeled out and fired. It was aimed at racial bigotry (*Pinky*), at antisemitism (*Crossfire*), at the mistreatment of the insane (*The Snake Pit*), at political corruption (*All the King's Men*). Seven years after the release of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Zanuck himself made another foray into liberal politics with *Gentleman’s Agreement*, in which journalist Phil Green (Gregory Peck) decides to discover the sting of prejudice by becoming Jewish for six weeks, since he had already “been an Okie,” as Laura Z. Hobson’s novel put it more fully: “When he’d wanted to find out about a scared guy in a jalopy with his whole family behind him hoping for a living in California, he hadn’t stood on Route 66 and signaled one of them to stop so he could ask a lot of questions.” Phil Green had instead become *engagé*. He had “melted into the crowds moving from grove to grove, ranch to ranch, picking till he dropped.” Such involvement was proof of journalistic authenticity; the experience of having “been an Okie” verified the sense that the charges of democratic failure were not fabricated.

But this cycle of films that empathized with outsiders was mostly exhausted by the end of the 1940’s, as the primacy of anti-Communism deflected attention from the exposure of domestic defects. Most explicit in promoting this political shift was Eric Johnston, who had become president of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce in 1941, and served as president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) from 1945 until his death in 1963. Johnston assured Congress of Hollywood’s cooperation in the investigations of Communism among union leaders, and in 1946 told screenwriters: “We’ll have no more *Grapes of Wrath*, we’ll have no more *Tobacco Roads*” (which John Ford had also directed from Nunnally Johnson’s script). “We’ll have no more films that deal with the seamy side of American life.” Johnston thus fired among the first shots in the culture of the Cold War. At the very least, his ideological program would dash the hopes of a writer like Tillie Lerner Olsen, who in 1934 had cherished the hope that her child would grow up as a “citizen of Soviet America.”

The obloquy attached to films that hinted at the seamy side landed Ford’s film in excellent company. For example, Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), shown by the Soviets in a pirated version, was problematic because Jefferson Smith denounces Senators aligned with big business. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) was a criticism of war, not of democratic failure. But Lewis Milestone’s film was not to be reissued, the Department of Defense insisted, because “anti-war propaganda” would hamper the geopolitical struggle against the East. Or consider the fate of Universal’s *The Senator Was
Indiscreet (1947), a satire about a bumbling Senator (William Powell) who does not realize that a new income tax bill applies to him as well. The movie also dares to suggest that White House aspirants can be packaged with images designed to maximize their appeal to the electorate. Co-written and produced by Nunnally Johnson, The Senator Was Indiscreet was the only movie that George S. Kaufman ever directed. Both of these movie-makers were apolitical. They were also renowned for their wit, which was lost on Congresswoman Clare Boothe Luce (R-Conn.) when it was screened for her. "Was this picture made by an American?", she demanded to know. Life, which her husband published, retracted its own favorable film review in a column called "On Second Thought." Having approved the script, the M. P. A. A. had somehow missed its incendiary implications, leaving the trade organization with only the option of prohibiting the showing of The Senator Was Indiscreet overseas, which it did. And according to historian Lary May, "the Hollywood press condemned Norwegian theater owners who rejected a revised version of John Ford's classic film The Grapes of Wrath "because the American distributors insisted that the audience be told the conditions depicted are not normal at the opening... and that the show close with a statement that conditions recorded had been improved after being brought to the attention of the authorities."**46**

Nor was Steinbeck’s own novel very useful in the struggle against Communism. American "propagandists were uniformly wary of Steinbeck,” British documentarian Frances Stonor Saunders has observed, “and indeed that whole school of American literature deemed to carry loaded social data” that was politically inconvenient. In July 1955, a psychological warfare expert urged the government to withdraw its sponsorship of the Museum of Modern Art’s photographic exhibition, The Family of Man. The problem was that American democracy was shown, the expert argued, "in a Grapes of Wrath type of display,” which gave “the impression that all U. S. laborers are downtrodden or exploited."**47** But John Ford’s version of The Grapes of Wrath could also become a talisman of cinematic courage. In the independent One of the Hollywood 10 (2001), for example, actress Gale Sondergaard (Greta Scacchi) asserts the right of her husband, Herbert Biberman, to make a political film even in the wary atmosphere of the postwar era; and she invokes The Grapes of Wrath as proof of Hollywood’s earlier willingness to tackle what she calls “controversy.”**48**

But that was something that Ford himself seemed increasingly eager to avoid. In 1940 the director had virtually proclaimed: I make trouble. A decade later, he had famously assured the Directors Guild: “I make Westerns.” (Or so the legend has usually been printed.) Though the last Western he ever made, Cheyenne Autumn (1964), was based on a novel by Howard Fast, in the 1950’s Ford had joined with John Wayne in the militantly anti-Communist Liberty campaign. He was no longer “apolitical”—and in the following decade, he quietly favored Washington’s military involvement in Vietnam. There two of Steinbeck’s sons served simultaneously, though by then their father, who had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, was hardly a radical. He sympathized—albeit uneasily—with President Lyndon B. Johnson during the conflict in Indochina. In the 1950’s Steinbeck had supported Adlai Stevenson—among the most moderate and cautious of all the Democratic candidates in the postwar era—and remained predisposed to a continuation of the New Deal, an outlook which is consistent with The Grapes of Wrath.**48**

The very sympathies and sentiments that made Steinbeck’s novel and Ford’s film dubious in the fight against Communism made them both icons of radical protest. Before and after
the most intense phase of the Cold War, *The Grapes of Wrath* quickly became a vessel through which the cry of the oppressed might be expressed and amplified.

The most resonant voices belonged to troubadours. Pre-eminent among them was Woodrow Wilson Guthrie of Okemah, Oklahoma, where he was “born a shade pink,” he believed. To the *Daily Worker* he boasted of writing “songs [that] are liberal as the dickens and as progressive as the angels.” In 1940 he seemed to be one of the few citizens who had not read Steinbeck’s novel—or so he admitted to Pete Seeger. But Guthrie had seen the “good movie” that Twentieth Century-Fox had made. Indeed it was better than good. He informed the readers of the *People’s World* that *The Grapes of Wrath* was “the best cussed pitcher I ever seen.” It was a revelation: “Shows the dam bankers men that broke us and the dust that choked us and comes right out in plain old English and says what to do about it.” (What that action consisted of is again left tantalizingly unspecified). Guthrie could not offer enough praise of the film, which “had more thinkin’ in it than 99% of the celluloid that we’re tangled up in the moving pictures today.” RCA Victor had suggested that he compose a song about *The Grapes of Wrath*; and because Seeger had been staying with a friend in New York who happened to own a typewriter, Guthrie was able to come over with half a gallon of wine and to sit down and write “Tom Joad.”

This ballad about the “art and science of migratin’” had seventeen verses, which required both sides of a 78 rpm record for RCA Victor to put it all down, on May 3, 1940. The composer was extremely pleased with the result. So was the *Daily Worker*, which devoted much of one day’s entertainment page to reproducing the lyrics, leading Guthrie to boast that “the ballad of the Joads is the best thing I’ve done so far.” He added: “What I’m glad is working folks’ songs getting so popular, I’m sure Victor never did a more radical album” than *Dust Bowl Ballads*. It had been recorded so that RCA Victor could take advantage of the success of the movie, and Steinbeck himself offered the following praise of Guthrie: “He sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people.” *Dust Bowl Ballads* showed that Guthrie embodied “the will of the people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit.” The folk-singer replied in kind, calling the novelist “a feller that knew us Okies... because early in the deal, he threw a pack on his back and traipsed around amongst us.”

According to critic Josh Kun, “Guthrie had given birth to a new pop-music archetype, a sung icon of dispossession and drift who returns to us—in new guises, with new stories—whenever anybody is forced to hit the road, sweat in the sun for less than a living wage,” and find, as the folk-singer phrased it, that he (or she) is “busted, disgusted, down and out, and a-lookin’ for work.” “Tom Joad” converts a novel about a family of migrants “into an outlaw ballad,” Michael Denning has observed. The “lyric begins with Tom’s parole from prison—‘Tom Joad got out of the old McAlester pen’—and culminates in Tom and Preacher Casy’s battles with vigilantes and deputy sheriffs.” The song omits “both the novel’s ending—Rose of Sharon breast-feeding the stranger—and the film’s ending—the Joads leaving the government camp—and uses Tom’s parting words to his mother as the basis for the final stanzas: ‘Wherever little children are hungry and cry/Wherever people ain’t free/Wherever men are fightin’ for their rights/That’s where I’m gonna be, Ma/That’s where I’m gonna be.’” It is as though Tom Joad, the sleepless witness against oppression, were the stand-in for Guthrie himself. Left unsaid (as usual) is what Tom Joad was supposed to be doing in behalf of the deprived and the beleaguered.

Among the families that lost their farms during the Great Depression were the parents of Cesar Chavez, who died in 1993, at the age of 66. (The average farm worker lives to be 49,
and may well have been working in the fields since childhood). There are 2.25 million
farm workers. The United Farm Workers (UFW) was founded in 1962 (the year Steinbeck
got to Stockholm); and by the late 1970’s, union membership was over 100,000. When the
UFW urged Americans to boycott iceberg lettuce that was picked by non-union labor,
among those conspicuously championing the cause was the most flamboyantly political
and the most emphatically left-wing American movie star of the twentieth century. Jane
Fonda had been born three years before her father played Tom Joad, and there is no
evidence of any special impact that the film exerted upon her. Only in 1975 was the first
agricultural labor law passed by any state; that was in California. Only one farm worker in
five has benefitted from some form of medical insurance. Such families needed help not
only from the welfare state (Etat-Providence), and from a labor leader like Chavez. Farm
workers and their dependents may also have appreciated the support not only of an
actress like Jane Fonda, but perhaps also of other troubadours in the tradition of Guthrie.

In the fall of 1959, a freshman named Robert Zimmerman matriculated at the University
of Minnesota, but preferred to hang out in the bohemian section of Minneapolis under
the name of as Bob Dylan. There, in the following year, he was given a copy of Guthrie’s
autobiography Bound for Glory (1943); and very soon after reading it, Dylan was not only
an ardent devotee but was also singing ““Tom Joad.” It may have been the first Guthrie
song that his new acolyte ever learned. He would sing his own “Song to Woody” on Bob
Dylan (1962), his eponymous first album, and would be photographed to heighten the
resemblance to his predecessor for the album cover of The Times They Are A-Changin’
(1964). Dylan’s dedication to the radical stance that Guthrie took was quite abbreviated.
He nevertheless serves as a musical bridge to someone only eight years younger.

Bruce Springsteen turned to Guthrie after realizing that adult questions were not being
posed in rock music, and that the issues country music had been addressing “seemed to
stop. So I moved into listening to a lot of Woody Guthrie. He seemed to me to have a
bigger, broader canvas.” Springsteen’s song, “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” and the 1995
album of that name, which won a Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary Folk Album,
are an explicit homage not only to Guthrie but also to the novelist and film
director who inspired him. Twenty-six years old when he first saw Ford’s film,
Springsteen “remember[ed] thinking that that’s what I wanted my work to be. I wanted it
to have something to do with people’s lives, to be about how they fall back upon love, and
faith, and hope, and ultimately each other, even after the world reveals itself.” The Grapes
of Wrath became one of the two cinematic achievements that touched him most deeply.
(The other also happened to be a John Ford movie: The Searchers [1956]). Springsteen
knew the Twentieth Century-Fox work before having read the novel that the studio
adapted, but later acknowledged “the inspiration I’d gotten [as early as 1978] from
Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath.” What was admirable about its author was that “he risked
himself—he hung it all out there,” despite the complaints he endured of sentimentalizing and sermonizing.

To be sure the characters featured in The Grapes of Wrath were (as Hitler noted of the film
version) Anglo-Saxon. The songwriter’s own characters, he explained, had “darker [skin]
and their language had changed, but these people were trapped by the same brutal
circumstances.” These Mexican immigrants, Vietnam refugees and Vietnam veterans
have—in the words of critic Josh Kun—“barely made it to California, and already they’ve
been expelled from the Garden and left homeless or drug-addicted or dead or worse: in
love with things that will only hurt them.” The Ghost of Tom Joad was an album decrying
the ordeal of bigotry and discrimination, the poignancy of homelessness in the American Southwest. The context was “the new world order,” which Springsteen wanted to depict in terms of “the increasing economic division,” “the hard times,” and the daily burden upon the very people “whose work and sacrifice helped build the country we live in.” In other words there was still truth in Guthrie’s “Do Re Mi”: “California’s a Garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see/But believe it or not, you won’t find it so hot/If you ain’t got the do re mi.”

The echo from the past was not faint. Kun observed that “Springsteen sings Joad the way Guthrie sang Joad, with a guitar, a harmonica, and a voice made weary from the stories it’s had to tell, and in the same Walt Whitman-Carl Sandburg spirit of everyman troubadour populism.” The penultimate stanza of “The Ghost of Tom Joad” quotes and paraphrases him talking to “Mom,” a final speech that is modified in Springsteen’s version. Yet he is not very convincing as a vicarious Tom Joad, who pledges to be there—perhaps as a union organizer—whenever an act of social injustice occurs. In pretending to do that, a rock star is hardly credible. But another break from Guthrie should be noted as well. For a Communist living in the shadow of the Great Depression, there was the assurance of a future rendered more attractive after the destruction of capitalism. There was hope. That commodity is in much shorter supply by the end of the twentieth century: “The highway is alive tonight/But nobody’s kiddin’ nobody about where it goes/I’m sittin’ down here in the campfire light/With the ghost of old Tom Joad.” Happy days were not here again.

The Okies themselves had generally lifted themselves from extreme poverty in the decades immediately after the Great Depression; and by the end of the twentieth century, so few Americans remained farmers (under 2%) that agriculture was no longer listed among the enumerated occupations of the recent United States Census. The migrants from the Southwest and their progeny did not conspicuously align themselves with, say, Chavez’s United Farm Workers, but instead had often transformed themselves into Reagan Democrats. Thus had the plain people of the Dust Bowl, upon whom the activists of the Popular Front had expended such sympathy, repudiated the social vision ascribed to Steinbeck’s novel, which continues to sell about 50,000 copies annually—a extraordinarily high figure. That the migrants’ children were themselves often political conservative does not in itself mean, of course, that The Grapes of Wrath was. It wasn’t. But the claim of this essay is that the movie version wasn’t radical either, however open it was to such misinterpretation.

Smaller ironies might finally be mentioned, as imagined in a couple of New Yorker cartoons inspired by recent economic problems in California. During the power shortage that afflicted the state early in 2001, one cartoonist showed a pickup truck laden with appliances at night, with the driver yelling out to a pedestrian carrying a computer: “Get in, Tom—we’re goin’ to Oklahoma. Hear tell they got ‘lectricity.” Within a year the sudden economic downturn prompted another cartoon, depicting an auto laden on its roof with the clutter of an upper-middle-class lifestyle. The caption is: “The Joads of Silicon Valley in Kiwis of Wrath.”
NOTES


12. Jerold S. Auerbach, Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 177-96; Denning, Cultural Front, 261-62; Worster, Under Western Skies, 56.


26. Christensen, Reel Politics, 52.
29. Christensen, Reel Politics, 52.
30. Quoted in Michel Ciment, Conversations with Losey (London: Methuen, 1985), 70; Denning, Cultural Front, 152, 267.
33. Denning, Cultural Front, 268.
34. Wilson, Classics and Commercials, 49n.


42. Interview with Sotiris Koukios, March 30, 2001, Thessaloniki, Greece.


45. Quoted in Denning, Cultural Front, 152.

46. May, Big Tomorrow, 177-78; Nora Sayre, Running Time: Films of the Cold War (New York: Dial, 1982), 54-55.

47. Saunders, Who Paid the Piper?, 459n.


50. Quoted in Denning, Cultural Front, 270.

51. Klein, Woody Guthrie, 123, 158; Denning, Cultural Front, 270-71.

52. Quoted in Klein, Woody Guthrie, 159, 160, and in Denning, Cultural Front, 270; Shindo, Dust Bowl Migrants, 184-87.


ABSTRACTIONS

Publié en 1939 et adapté à l’écran l’année suivante, Les Raisins de la colère, roman de John Steinbeck, eut un impact immédiat et extraordinaire pour le portrait sans concession qu’il dressait d’un capitalisme américain qui semblait avoir abandonné sa progéniture la plus loyale, la plus assidue et la plus courageuse, celle qui labourait la terre en plein cœur de la république. Écrit à la toute fin de la « Décennie rouge », mais juste avant que les États-Unis entrent dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale, Les Raisins de la colère exprimaient, d’une certaine manière, la colère accumulée contre un système économique qui avait trahi le prolétariat rural. Le roman tout comme le film de John Ford (1940) furent compris par le grand public de l’époque, et bien des années plus tard, comme une protestation clairement gauchiste, voire radicale, contre une telle injustice. Mais cet essai montre combien les idées politiques de ces œuvres jumelées sont en réalité difficiles à saisir et combien il est hasardeux de définir, quel que soit l’effort rétrospectif, la critique que Steinbeck et Ford ont proposée dans leur version des Raisins de la colère, une œuvre inoubliable, déchirante mais ambiguë sur le plan politique.

INDEX

Chronological index: 20th century, XXe siècle
Subjects: culture, États-Unis, société, society, United States

AUTHOR

STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

Prof., (Brandeis, Boston, USA)Stephen J. Whitfield holds the Max Richter Chair in American Civilization at Brandeis University, where he currently chairs the Department of American Studies. He is the author of eight books, most recently The Culture of the Cold War (1991, rev. and expanded ed. 1996) and In Search of American Jewish Culture (1999). He is also the editor of A Companion to 20th-Century America (2004). Professor Whitfield has twice served as a visiting professor of American Studies at the University of Paris IV and served, most recently, as Allianz Visiting Professor at the Ludwig-Maximilians University of Munich.