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Many contemporary problems in grasping the politics of US writers who came to maturity during the 1930s are an outgrowth of the terms in which their once-revolutionary commitments were sometimes quietly reformulated by themselves, critics, and scholars during and after the Cold War. John Steinbeck (1902-68) is an especially vexing case in point because, unlike John Dos Passos, Josephine Herbst, Jack Conroy, among others, his reputation and image are not just linked to the Depression decade. He continued to produce landmark works as he traversed a sequence of distinct eras, seeming to acquiesce in each step of what ultimately became a supersized serving of clever political revision. Many Steinbeck enthusiasts now see him as an enduring national icon of New Deal liberalism, more or less in the mold of John Ford’s still-admired 1940 film version of *The Grapes of Wrath* (in which events in the second half of the novel are willfully distorted to present a sugarcoated ending in a cheerful government-run camp). This brings the danger of writing backwards, through contemporary needs and definitions, inventing a literary past to justify a fable and refusing to explore matters that make us uncomfortable.

After achieving an initial popularity with *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and the novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937) along with its stage and film versions, Steinbeck was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939; authored many successful novels, plays, and films in the 1940s and 1950s; and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. Starting in the Cold War, he became the subject of numerous essays and then collections of academic literary criticism accentuating the myths and symbols in his books. He was eventually celebrated in an excellent 1,116-page biography hailed as “definitive,” Jackson J. Benson’s *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography* (1984; reprinted as *John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography*, 1990). Thus, it may seem perplexing that even today there are huge gaps in our knowledge of his personal and political life that render many efforts to make conclusive statements about his convictions little more than exercises in speculation. In politics, these primarily concern his thinking and activism as he moved far leftward after 1932, and again during the unraveling of many of his earlier convictions in the early 1940s. No one has satisfactorily explained Steinbeck’s complete silence about his 1937 trip to the Soviet Union at the time of the Moscow Purge Trials, nor the numerous
inaccurate and contradictory statements he offered to explain the origins of his rather soft antifascist novel *The Moon Is Down* (1942).

Zirakzadeh and Snow’s new collection of essays, devoted explicitly to Steinbeck’s politics as containing an “underlying message about citizenship and democracy” (ix), gives the impression at first that it will address such demanding issues dead-on. A rousing prologue by Rick Wartzman, author of *Obscene in the Extreme: The Burning and Banning of John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath* (2008), makes the critical point that during the Great Depression the author lived in fear for his life due to right-wing vigilantes; this justifies the evasive manner in which he identified his political allegiances in public, a strategy he redeployed as he adapted to events inaugurating World War II and the Cold War. Wartzman then states baldly what too many post-Cold War scholars are loathe to acknowledge: Steinbeck in the 1930s was “unabashedly what Yale University’s Michael Denning has characterized as a communist, ‘using the term with a small c’—a proud part of the Popular Front, in league with countless other artists and intellectuals” (4).

Although the volume has virtues in other areas, it fails to follow through in clarifying these dicey matters by providing us with more detail and shading, for all political categories are to some degree porous. Wartzman’s characterization is never repeated, while Benson’s classic post-Cold War description is explicitly embraced: “‘A fairly accurate way of describing Steinbeck, perhaps even more accurately than a New Deal Democrat with middle-class values, is as an independent who valued individuality. . . . he wanted to be an individualist; he admired individualists; yet he had a strong social conscience’” (134). Even worse, there is a tendency to imagine a purported consistency in Steinbeck’s “individualistic” views between the 1930s and the 1950s, overemphasizing his known criticisms of Communist party dogmatism (which he mostly attributed to Jewish party members in cities), and recurrently maintaining that he was equidistant from left and right, and thus equally under assault from both sides.

Stow’s introduction, for example, states that “Steinbeck was a staunch critic of capitalism but despised its state-centered alternatives [Communism, fascism]” (9). Zirakzadeh’s essay comparing the literary, cinematic, and musical versions of *The Grapes of Wrath*, claims that “Steinbeck . . . defended individualism against proponents of state socialism throughout his life and . . . resisted the romantic view of the Soviet Union some of his friends and neighbors held” (272). These interpretations accurately render the stance toward which Steinbeck drifted after the 1930s; there exist no public condemnations of the Stalin regime or its policies
during that decade. The editors of the volume are so anxious to celebrate Steinbeck’s corpus as “the natural locus of democratic political teaching” (ix) that they allow themselves to put a protective filter of bien pensant liberal pieties in place, steering readers away from what may be more enigmatic, threatening, and, of course, interesting. As I always warn my students: “Writers and Communism—it’s complicated!”

The fourteen essays comprising the body of this volume are to be admired for impressively expanding Steinbeck studies in many new directions. Mostly we encounter thoughtful reexaminations of the major novels seen as “political”: In Dubious Battle (1936), The Grapes of Wrath, The Moon Is Down (1942), and The Winter of Our Discontent (1961). Yet we are treated to some astute observations about others, such as Cannery Row (1945), and new considerations of Steinbeck’s work in relation to the photography of Dorothea Lange and the music of Bruce Springsteen. Then there are wonderfully fresh discussions of “The Novelist as Playwright” as well as his writing regarding themes of nature, progress, and nation formation. Steinbeck’s wartime services, the importance of Mexico in his films, and the shift in his views about the US between Travels With Charley (1962) and America and the Americans (1966) are topics that also benefit from examination through a political prism.

The handling of Steinbeck’s politics does vary from contributor to contributor, and the apt terms of “ambivalence,” “contradictory,” and “ambiguous” are effectively invoked a number of times in connection with his opinions. One of the signal contributions to the volume that expresses such nuance is Charles Williams’s “Group Man and the Limits of Working Class Politics: The Political Vision of Steinbeck’s In Dubious Battle.” This is a credible, vivid account of the ways in which Steinbeck’s “phalanx” theory shaped his political narrative, yet it shortchanges the reader in its conclusion that “Steinbeck’s analysis lies squarely in the liberal tradition” (136). Such a facile stereotype is based on familiar select sources as well as a failure to recognize that a writer’s belief in the Soviet Union and support of the Communists’ central political strategy were by no means incompatible with crudely determinist theories of social evolution, troubling racial notions, a fear of mob behavior, and other peculiarities. (Check out the philosophies of Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Nathanael West, and scores of other members of the League of American Writers.) A writer can be part of a political movement yet unique at the same time.

What is missed for literary comprehension in this interpretation is that the story of Tom Joad is by no means that of the making of a liberal individualist; it is
about the formation of a committed revolutionary, an activist likely en route to joining a Communist-led union, the Party itself, and then departing for the battlefields of Spain (as did Joad’s real-life model, Cicil McKiddy, also a crucial source for material used in In Dubious Battle). Williams seems to be mistaken as well in his sympathy for the claims of book reviewers in the 1930s that in In Dubious Battle “‘Steinbeck keeps himself out of the book’” (110). It is more likely that Steinbeck is all over it, fragmented among Doc, Jim, Mac, and others. No one should doubt that an author’s psychology and experience are suffused in his or her writing, life spilling over into art at every turn. The trick is knowing what to do with this information. What students and scholars may learn from critically appraising this volume is the necessity of confronting the underlying problems in Steinbeck research more directly. A book like In Dubious Battle is less a philosophical or political manifesto than a palimpsest revealing the artist’s anguished efforts to work out troubling issues on many levels.

If we are to understand the particular writings expressive of Steinbeck’s messy transition phases, which are more or less from a mystical agrarianism to the revolutionary left and then to Cold War liberalism, we really have to pay closer attention to the person concealed behind the writer. After all, plots in fiction and drama reenact and sometimes help resolve political conundrums, but these may be imbricated with psychosexual conflicts, nagging family resentments, and fears about the limitations of one’s talent. A fine example of what should be the next stage of Steinbeck scholarship appears in Susan Shillshaw’s Carol and John Steinbeck: Portrait of a Marriage (2013), where she revivifies Steinbeck’s unappreciated, often misread To a God Unknown (1933) by incorporating details about his recent marital crisis into the mystical narrative of faith and belief. On the matter of Steinbeck’s politics, the literary scholar needs to be less interested in finding a label than evoking the tremendous complexities that are always bound to resist such an attempt. The real point at issue in A Political Companion to John Steinbeck is whether or not a full comprehension of a writer’s politics necessitates a passion for seeing what is on the other side of a closed door.