INTRODUCTION

The Dangerous Ambivalence of John Steinbeck

Simon Stow

AT A TIME WHEN the United States is enduring a severe economic crisis caused by the unregulated lending practices of major financial institutions, decades of antilabor policies, and rampant globalization; when that crisis has driven families from their homes; and when the gap between the rich and poor in America is, by some measures, larger than at any point in its history, a volume on the political work of John Steinbeck could not, perhaps, be more apropos. Steinbeck will be forever known as the author of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the 1939 novel in which he chronicled in fiction what had occurred in fact: the devastation of the American way of life by a faceless economic system in which empathy, pity, and understanding were seen as market failures rather than the basis of a decent human society. It is therefore unsurprising that many commentators have turned to Steinbeck as a lens through which to view the contemporary crisis.¹

In the popular imagination, Steinbeck’s Joad family has become shorthand for the consequences of economic downturn, faceless corporate capitalism, and social and political inequality. In this, perhaps, the book has become the specter that haunts Steinbeck scholarship.

Clearly *The Grapes of Wrath* is Steinbeck’s most important and most influential novel, and the great majority of essays in this volume reference the text in one way or another. It is, nevertheless, but one text from a lifetime of writing and activism largely committed to political critique and social change. John Steinbeck was, as Rick Wartzman reminds us in his prologue, a dangerous writer. Part of what made Steinbeck so dangerous—and such a threat to capital, communists, school boards, and library patrons up and
down the country—was the coexistence within both him and his writings of contradictory attitudes toward a multitude of modern phenomena, including, but not limited to, his nation. Steinbeck was a staunch critic of capitalism but despised its state-centered alternatives; he championed community but feared the mob; he embraced his nation’s wars but mourned their cost; he celebrated American ingenuity but criticized the society it created; he advocated for humanitarian intervention but recognized its costs to indigenous peoples; he sought solace and insights in nature but lamented the cruelties it inflicted on humanity. Steinbeck was, and remains, dangerous precisely because it is impossible to pin him down to any single position. Capitalists called him a communist, communists a capitulator. Critics do not like to be confounded in their attempts to compartmentalize.

For if John Steinbeck was ambivalent about America, it is also clear that America has been ambivalent about John Steinbeck. The decision of the Nobel Committee to award Steinbeck the 1962 prize for literature crystallized the vapors of disapproval that had swirled around his work from the very beginning of his career. Many suggested that while Steinbeck had achieved something of note in his most famous novel, this success was more a product of the times than of his artistry; many dismissed his subsequent work as either didacticism or folly. Yet Steinbeck remains remarkably popular among the reading public, both nationally and internationally. All of his novels remain in print, and *East of Eden* received perhaps the highest imprimatur in modern American publishing when it was chosen as an Oprah’s Book Club selection in 2003, with the host declaring that it was possibly the best novel she had ever read.³

Writing about his own simultaneously loved and reviled position within American letters, Richard Rorty once observed that “if there is anything to the idea that the best intellectual position is one that is attacked with equal vigor from the political right and the political left, then I am in good shape.”³ As in Rorty’s case, some see in Steinbeck’s work only a contrarian streak or confusion rather than a coherent position or complex philosophy. The notion that what some perceive as a productive ambivalence is merely inconsistency and sloppiness is a persistent meme among Steinbeck’s critics. The essays in this volume attempt to block that meme’s transmission. Their very variety is a testament to the depth and breadth of interests Steinbeck expounded in his political work and activism. Indeed, the volume draws on expertise from a multiplicity of disciplines—political theorists, literary
critics, and scholars of theater, film, music, and photography—to capture
the many, frequently overlapping, layers of Steinbeck’s politics. Unlike, per-
haps, other volumes in this series of political companions to great American
authors, *A Political Companion to John Steinbeck* seeks to address not only
Steinbeck’s writing but also his influence and activism, both artistic and
political. While we might talk about Melville’s or Whitman’s art, it is per-
haps more fitting to refer to Steinbeck’s “work.” For Steinbeck—to borrow
a phrase from Ishmael Reed—“writin’ is fightin’.”

The volume is divided into four parts. The first situates Steinbeck
within his most familiar role as social critic. Locating Steinbeck within his
personal and historical context, the opening essay by Cyrus Ernesto Zi-
rakzadeh tackles *The Grapes of Wrath* head on. Zirakzadeh identifies both
the ambivalent picture of America that Steinbeck offers in the novel and the
ambivalent response it generated, disliked as it was by both communists and
conservatives. The essay offers an account of the radicalism of Steinbeck’s
political vision and his commitment to collective action while simultane-
ously noting the ways in which this vision was predicated on a conservative
understanding of the role of women and the family. The essay exposes and
explores the tensions in Steinbeck’s approach to the politics of social protest
to argue that these very ambivalences invite the reader into the political
debates that the novel depicts.

In the second essay in this section, Zoe Trodd situates Steinbeck
firmly within a tradition of American protest literature that includes Harriet
Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and the
hortatory writings of Ida B. Wells. Identifying the persistent disparity in
enthusiasm for Steinbeck’s work between critics and readers, Trodd takes
on and transforms this binary. She—like Zirakzadeh—shows that by invit-
ing the reader into his work and “demanding a responsibility that extends
beyond the page,” Steinbeck provokes a deep reflection in his audience.
The supposed weaknesses that many literary critics identify in his work are,
trodd suggests, strengths when that work is understood as part of a tradi-
tion concerned with provoking debate and dialogue.

Donna Kornhaber also situates Steinbeck within a distinct literary
tradition complementary to that identified by Trodd, not least because it
too demands the active participation of its audience in political dialogue
and social change. Kornhaber broadens our understanding of Steinbeck’s
role as social critic by highlighting his often-overlooked role as playwright. She situates Steinbeck within an American theatrical tradition that not only included such contemporaries as Eugene O’Neill, Elmer Rice, and Hallie Flanagan of the Federal Theater Project but also stretched back to Michael Gold, James A. Hearne, and the agitprop plays of the suffrage and temperance movements. Kornhaber notes that although Steinbeck was a capable playwright and much respected by his peers, critics were typically backhanded in their praise. In Kornhaber’s account, however, Steinbeck was concerned more about the response of his audience than that of his critics. Indeed, she suggests that Steinbeck’s genre-expanding innovation of the playable novel confounded even the most trenchant artistic critiques of his work.

The final essay in the opening section explores Steinbeck’s ambivalences about his self-assumed role as a social critic and the role’s impact on the world beyond the page. Offering a reading of The Pearl—an important but frequently ignored text in the Steinbeck canon—Adrienne Akins Warfield details the dialogue that Steinbeck had both with his friend Ed Ricketts and with himself about the nature and costs of social progress for ostensibly primitive societies. Unlike Ricketts, who seemed to idealize the primitive, Akins Warfield argues, Steinbeck embraced many of the social and technological changes of modernity while remaining acutely aware of modernity’s considerable costs. In this, Akins Warfield suggests, The Pearl expresses a tragic worldview that underpinned Steinbeck’s literary activism, confounding those who would see him as a mere literary didact.

The second section of the book examines the cultural roots of Steinbeck’s political vision and highlights the ways in which he drew on the conflicts and complexities of nature as well as traditional American myths to identify and express his social critique. In the first essay, Charles Williams interrogates the political ramifications of Steinbeck’s phalanx theory. Williams demonstrates the ways in which the theory, drawn from Steinbeck’s observations about nature, embodies many of the tensions in Steinbeck’s political work. He discerns a conflict between Steinbeck’s awareness of the need for a political group and his fear of the mass man of fascism and communism. Likewise, while noting the importance of the theory to Steinbeck’s embrace of New Deal liberalism, Williams shows how the theory nevertheless led the author to reject excessive state power both at home and abroad.
Although his argument is predicated on a reading of *In Dubious Battle*, Williams traces how the theory of the phalanx shaped Steinbeck’s political sympathies throughout his career.

In his essay Michael T. Gibbons notes Steinbeck’s depiction of nature’s inhospitality to humanity in two very different literary worlds: those of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*. Steinbeck’s view, Gibbons argues, is not that nature precludes what Gibbons calls an “authentic” life—that is, one in which social relations are largely transparent, the causes of injustice and inequality are understood, and progress is possible. Rather, humanity creates institutions to cope with nature that then inadvertently make an authentic life difficult to achieve. Depicting the dark side of capitalism in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck enmeshed the Joads in a world over which they had no control, while in *Cannery Row* the good life promised in post–World War II America came at the expense of one’s safety, health, and control over one’s own existence. Gibbons connects Steinbeck’s ideas about the economic crisis of the 1930s and the false promise of the postwar boom to today’s crises of capitalism and contemporary challenges to fashioning an authentic existence.

In the final essay in this section Roxanne Harde explores the importance of the story of Exodus to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Detailing the myriad ways in which Steinbeck fashioned his novel around one of the central stories of the American founding, Harde shows how Steinbeck embraced an American literary tradition of borrowing from, refashioning, and extending the nation’s myths for political purposes. Her close reading of the novel and its literary forebear shows, furthermore, that Steinbeck not only drew on this American literary tradition but added to it, thereby providing opportunities for other artists, including Woody Guthrie and Bruce Springsteen, to do the same.

Fittingly, the third section of the book discusses Steinbeck’s considerable influence on other American artists working in diverse media. James R. Swensen describes how Dorothea Lange—whose black-and-white images of the great westward migration from the Dust Bowl later become synonymous with Steinbeck’s early work—recorded the political impact of Steinbeck’s name on working-class protests against the inequalities of capitalism. Examining Lange’s photographs of the John Steinbeck Committee to Aid Agricultural Organization, Swensen establishes Steinbeck’s influence on mass political action during the late 1930s and provides further evidence
of the ways in which the American protest literature tradition identified by Trodd emboldened its readers to seek social change.

Marijane Osborn, in calling Steinbeck’s work “participatory parables,” coins a phrase that succinctly captures a common theme across many of the essays in this volume: the demand that the reader, or the viewer, do something to alleviate the conditions depicted by the artist’s work. Her chapter on the cinematic adaptations of Steinbeck’s Mexican trilogy—The Forgotten Village, The Pearl, and Zapata—discusses how these films, and the books they either spawned or drew on, anticipate questions of colonialism and intervention that would inspire later postcolonial thought and writing. Addressing some of the concerns raised by Adrienne Akins Warfield in her essay, Osborn shows how Steinbeck’s struggles with the complexities surrounding modernity provided opportunities and impetus for other artists to struggle with the same questions in different media.

In her essay on John Steinbeck and Bruce Springsteen, Lauren Onkey shows how Steinbeck provided the musician with a model as he struggled with the issues of mass popularity and its potentially negative effect on his work. After describing several similarities between Steinbeck and Springsteen, which, as she notes, Springsteen has deliberately cultivated, Onkey argues that Springsteen endeavors, as did Steinbeck, to create a community committed to social justice. Moreover, Onkey argues that Springsteen’s music constitutes what she calls a “gospel response” to Steinbeck’s work that both engages and expands the political community Springsteen is seeking. Similar to the cultural borrowing described by Roxanne Harde in her essay, Springsteen borrowed from, reformulated, and extended the political lessons in Steinbeck’s literature. Onkey contends that Springsteen in particular addressed a relative lacuna in Steinbeck’s work: the treatment of migrant workers.

Combining discussions of literature, film, and music, Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh’s second essay in the volume explores the ways in which Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath has been employed by different artists to advance different political agendas. Zirakzadeh observes that the cinematic version of The Grapes of Wrath portrays a constructive role for government in reestablishing the conditions under which social justice and capitalism can flourish simultaneously. This is quite different from the more ambiguous depiction of government action in the novel. The novel questions both the viability of America’s capitalist economy and the possibilities for a state
responsive to the dispossessed, whereas the film places its faith in the New Deal liberalism identified and discussed by Charles Williams earlier in the volume. Looking at one of Bruce Springsteen’s performances and his retelling of the story of the Joads, Zirakzadeh shows how the ongoing conflict between these two visions of social change continues to resonate in contemporary politics and culture.

In the last section of the volume the authors consider Steinbeck’s relationship to his country—both real and imagined. That topic raises the always vexed question of what it means to love one’s country. Mimi R. Gladstein and James H. Meredith’s essay notes the ironies of Steinbeck’s attempts to serve his country during World War II. His efforts to serve were frequently rebuffed because of suspicions about his political sympathies arising from his novels’ depictions of America. As did Wartzman in his essay, Gladstein and Meredith discuss the fears that Steinbeck’s writings generated in others, in this case the FBI and other government agencies. The authors argue that by struggling—and later managing—to serve his country as a wartime correspondent, Steinbeck displayed a love for his nation that transcended the narrowly political concerns of his government. The essay thereby suggests ways in which love of country can move beyond nationalistic sentiments and embrace both service and critique.

Robert S. Hughes’s essay on Steinbeck’s final two books—Travels with Charley and America and Americans—recounts Steinbeck’s last attempts to understand a nation from which, in many ways, he had become alienated. Hughes notes that the two volumes—published only four years apart—differ in tone. Travels with Charley depicts a nation populated by malcontents and the complacent, he argues. The most redeeming character is, perhaps, the eponymous dog Charley. The disappointments and scolding tone of Travels, Hughes suggests, are tempered in America and Americans by a recognition of the nation’s virtues, not least of which are the ongoing dissatisfaction and restlessness that move the country forward despite its many faults. In both the juxtaposition of the two works and his account of paradoxes of American life in America and the Americans, Hughes uncovers Steinbeck’s ambivalence about the country of his birth. He concludes, however, that Steinbeck’s final vision of the nation’s future was, overall, a positive one.

In the concluding essay of the volume, Simon Stow tackles Steinbeck’s final literary work, The Winter of Our Discontent, and finds in it evidence
that supports Gladstein and Meredith’s and Hughes’s claims about Steinbeck’s patriotism. Stow, however, suggests that Steinbeck is hopeful rather than optimistic about his nation. Moreover, the novel’s final act—which is widely seen as redemptive of humanity and nation—is actually more ambiguous than many critics have suggested. In the final act Stow sees a tragic, ambivalent sensibility. Steinbeck recognizes that even as a nation aspires to greatness, it may fail, and even if it were to succeed, such success would come with significant costs. Stow employs Steinbeck’s tragic vision to address a recent debate among political theorists about the efficacy and dangers of patriotism in a democratic community.

In March 2011 Paul LePage, the Republican governor of Maine, ordered the removal of a mural depicting the history of workers in the state—including colonial-era shoemakers, lumberjacks, Rosie the Riveter, and a 1986 paper mill strike—from the Department of Labor Building in the state capital of Augusta. The mural, LePage declared, was too prounion and, as such, contrary to the probusiness goals of his administration. In the middle of a battle about austerity measures, workers’ rights, and the role of unions in the economies of both the state and nation, when the mere depiction of workers is considered hostile to businesses interests, John Steinbeck could not be more important. He remains a dangerous writer, hostile to political cant on both the Left and the Right, and therefore an author whose political vision remains worthy of our attention.

Notes


