

buggies. Once
new thoughts,
merican dispos-
months.' Lard-
n them huddle
heir season of
iolent through
new rifles; and
, and then dis-
or the migrant
merica are few.

'The Grapes of
d the arrival of
as spectacular.
ih-Jongg of the
ay Adverse' or
nerica's collec-
Even this asso-
in the end the
al changes as a
with which we
as, what 'won-
should fetch as

Jeffersonian Agrarianism in *The Grapes of Wrath*

CHESTER E. EISINGER

In a brilliant and provocative essay written in 1941,¹ Frederic I. Carpenter found three significant American ideas running through John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*: the transcendentalism of Emerson, the democracy of Whitman, and the pragmatic instrumentalism of James and Dewey. To this distinguished company of thinkers and doctrines that molded Steinbeck's thought and attitudes I should like to add the agrarianism of Jefferson. The philosophic ideas considered by Carpenter are conveyed to the reader through Jim Casy's talk and the Joads' actions. Casy, however, has nothing to do with the agrarianism in the novel. It emanates from the Joads and other dispossessed farmers, from the people. It is theirs and Steinbeck's; and it is a noble, traditionally popular ideal, standing as an anachronism in the midst of the machine-made culture of twentieth century America—a culture sick and foundering in depression when Steinbeck wrote this novel.

A discussion of the agrarianism in *The Grapes of Wrath* does not pretend to serve as an interpretation of the entire novel. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that this doctrine is no less important than the other ideologies dramatized in the novel. As a matter of fact, agrarianism is closely associated with what was apparently one of the primary motives for writing the book, the desire to protest against the harsh inequities of the financial-industrial system that had brought chaos to America in the thirties. At times Steinbeck, with his curious combination of humanism and mysticism, seems to

¹ "The Philosophical Joads," *College English*, II (Jan., 1941), 315-325.

SOURCE: *The University of Kansas City Review*, XIV (Winter, 1947), 149-54.
Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

propose the substitution of agrarianism for industrialism as an antidote for what ailed the country.

During the disastrous thirties there were others who saw flaws in our economic system and had a similar solution. The manner, almost purposefulness, with which a financial-industrial society had encouraged moral and cultural aridity, even when successful in terms of production, prompted twelve Southerners to publish in 1930 *I'll Take My Stand*, a clarion call issued on a shepherd's pipe, summoning us back to the land and the somewhat feudal and gentlemanly traditions of the plantation days. In short, the Southern Agrarians were offering a positive program to place over against finance capitalism even before the full effects of the depression had been felt, and they continued their agitation in *The American Review*, a journal that flourished in this decade. This period saw also the growth of the back-to-the-farm movement and the proliferation of books guaranteeing independence, and even security, on five acres.

I am not suggesting that Steinbeck was influenced by the Southerners [149] or anyone else, but only that in this period of crumbling faiths many men turned to agrarianism as others turned to the Townsend Plan or Huey Long. Naturally, the men in the agrarian group had much in common, and certainly all of them drew upon Jeffersonian agrarianism. Because he had faith in the common man and thus gave his thinking a broad popular basis, Steinbeck was closer to Jeffersonianism than were the Southern Agrarians, who sought to resurrect not only an agricultural way of life but also the traditional cultural values of Europe. Steinbeck was concerned with democracy, and looked upon agrarianism as a way of life that would enable us to realize the full potentialities of the creed. Jefferson, of course, held the same belief.

In order to clarify the full impact of Jeffersonian thought on Steinbeck, it is necessary at least to adumbrate the nature of eighteenth century agrarianism in America. This was a doctrine informed by the spirit and principles of Jefferson. Basic to it is the belief that landed property held in freehold must be available to everyone. Jefferson took seriously his middle class heritage from Locke, placing great faith in property and the property holder. To him, equalitarian democracy meant a country made up of small farmers, and in fighting for the abolition of entail and primogeniture in Virginia he tried to achieve a commonwealth dominated by precisely this group. Al-

though J
agreed th
could cla
natural r
trol of th
could be
man, he
would ma
lowed th
as no one
his secur
freehold
myth goe
and rose
was a mo
substanti
tion of a
sprinklin
makes an
Immorali
latter rob
and destr
state. Jef
insisted c
economic
which ev
thing mo

Seven bo
do we ha
True, in
Valley he
these boo

² What has
agrariani
hold Co
Mary Qu

though Jefferson himself never went so far, many Jeffersonians agreed that if a man could not get legal title to landed property, he could claim ownership to land he occupied and tilled by virtue of a natural right. Possession of his own land gave the small farmer control of the means of production. It followed therefore that such a man could be economically independent, for he would be obligated to no man, he could reap what he sowed, and his agricultural way of life would make for a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency. It also followed that such a man would be politically independent, inasmuch as no one held a coercive power over him; no part of his way of life or his security was threatened by an outside force. The independent freehold farmer was a complete individualist, so the Jeffersonian myth goes, who acted in accordance with his own instincts or desires and rose or fell by virtue of his own efforts. Mostly he rose because he was a moral man; God had made his breast "His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." History does not record the corruption of an agricultural people. In other words, agrarianism has a sprinkling of primitivism. Close contact with nature and with God makes and keeps men pure. By contrast the city is a cesspool of evil. Immorality thrives there, alongside of business and finance. These latter rob the common man of economic and political independence and destroy the dominant position of the farmer in the affairs of the state. Jeffersonian agrarianism, then, was essentially democratic: it insisted on the widespread ownership of property, on political and economic independence, on individualism; it created a society in which every individual had status; it made the dignity of man something more [150] than a political slogan.²

II

Seven books preceded *The Grapes of Wrath*, but in only one of them do we have any foretaste of Steinbeck's predilection for agrarianism. True, in *The Pastures of Heaven*, *To a God Unknown*, and *The Long Valley* he had dealt with tillers of the soil and with ranchers, but in these books he was preoccupied with psychological analysis, and the

² What has been summarized here as the Jeffersonian myth and Jeffersonian agrarianism has been dealt with more thoroughly in the author's "The Freehold Concept in Eighteenth-Century American Letters," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., IV (Jan., 1947), 42-59.

tone was mystical and nostalgic. Although dealing with agricultural workers, *In Dubious Battle* is concerned essentially with a strike and a scientist. But *Of Mice and Men* shows clearly Steinbeck's interest in agrarianism, even though he is still haunted by psychological abnormality.

In this latter book we have the disenchanting and disinherited if not the dispossessed of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Lennie and George, migratory workers in the California fields, cherish the dream of a little farm of their own where, as Lennie's refrain has it, they can "live off the fatta the lan'." George yearns for his own place where he could bring in his own crops, where he could get what comes up out of the ground. He wants the full reward of his own labor. He wants the independence that ownership can give him. Nobody could fire him if the farm were his. If someone came he didn't like, he could say, "Get the hell out, and by God he's got to do it." They would produce all they could eat, and then: "We'd jus' live there. We'd belong there. . . . We'd have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunk house." A stake in society and status in society—these give men the dignity that is rightfully theirs in a democracy. Productive property, Steinbeck seems to suggest, is a real restorative. Even Candy, the used up sweeper, and Crooks, the misshapen Negro, are reinvigorated by the prospect of ownership and stability.

Of Mice and Men, however, was a sentimental and slight book. Three years later, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck was able to present a fuller exposition of his agrarian views. Early in the novel he introduces the conflict between the farmer and the financial-industrial interests of the city. The truck driver remarks to Tom that the tractors are pushing the croppers off the land. The full significance of this observation is not apparent until we come to the fifth chapter. Here Steinbeck makes clear that the tractors are the instruments of a mysterious financial system, just as some men represent that system. These men are deprived of will and personality by the system and its machine. When they must tell the croppers to get off the land, they shed their humanity and take refuge in the cold mathematics of the system. From now on there will be a tractor and a superintendent on the land, not the people. And the land will be raped methodically, without passion. It will be productive because it yields a crop, but it will be sterile too because no one loves or hates it and because it will bear under iron and die under iron. The sterility of machine culture is emphasized by [151] Steinbeck's comment, much later in the

book
who
anim
busi
with
he t
sour
farm
can
tual
Ste
mer
that
the
rich
and
P
ing
of t
did
bor
and
it. I
bei
a p
occ
ow
res
ura
nat
nat
tag
tw
lyn
squ
hel
rai
V
no
life

book, on the languid, heat-raddled ladies, parasites on that culture, whose sexual intercourse is safe, odorless, and unproductive. The animosity to the city is emphasized in the bitter attitude toward business ethics, summed up best perhaps in the incident of the tire with the broken casing. "You go steal that tire an' you're a thief, but he tried to steal your four dollars for a busted tire. They call that sound business." Finally, Steinbeck remarks how the business men farmers, those who keep books but never follow the plow, buy up the canneries in California, cut off the small farmer's market, and eventually take the property away from him. Chiefly in negative terms Steinbeck is showing us that the farmer is the productive, healthy member of society. He suggests a primitivistic conception of nature: that the farmer draws spiritual strength as well as sustenance from the soil. Antithetical to these notions is the aridity of the city-bred rich woman, the dishonesty of business, and the essentially inhuman and unproductive nature of the machine age.

Precisely what was it that this sick business culture was destroying? Very briefly it was a way of life that was based on the retention of the land. The Okies had their roots deep in the land, and they didn't want to be shoved off it. Grampa took up the land, and Pa was born here, and we were born here. It's our land. "We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it." The Okies argue, in other words, that occupying the land and devoting one's labor to it are the criteria of ownership, and that these transcend the legal right to the land represented by the title. These two criteria are the backbone of the natural right argument current in the eighteenth century: men had a natural right to as much land as they could profitably use. This natural right assumption gave sanction to the squatter whose heritage passed down into the nineteenth century, and even into the twentieth. For when the Okies want to work a little patch of ground lying fallow, the California police chase them off. "You goddamned squatters. Pretty soon you'd think you owned it. You'd be sore as hell. Think you owned it. Get off now . . . the cop was right. A crop raised—why, that makes ownership."

When you are shoved off the land and can exercise neither a legal nor a natural right to possess land, then you have lost status and your life has lost meaning. There is a kind of mystic exaltation in the

ownership of property which the farmer experiences. Crèvecoeur called it "the bright idea of property." Steinbeck's anonymous tenant knows it too. "If a man owns a little property, that property is him, it's part of him, and it's like him. If he owns property only so he can walk on it and handle it and be sad when it isn't doing well, and feel fine when the rain falls on it, that property is him, and some way he's bigger because he owns it." So, then, is he smaller when he loses it. When the tractor [152] knocked over the elder Tom's house and drove him from the land, it took something out of him; he was never the same. Grampa can't survive the loss of the homestead. At the last moment he refuses to leave. "This country ain't no good, but it's my country." When he dies en route to California, Casy says shrewdly, "An' Grampa didn' die tonight. He died the minute you took 'im off the place'." If Grampa could not survive being torn up by the roots, at least he escaped the indignities that the others must endure because they are landless. They are called bums by the proprietor of a camping ground; Pa mildly protests. "It's dirt hard for folks to tear up an' go. Folks like us that had our place. We ain't shif'less. Till we got tractored off, we was people with a farm'." We were cropping, but we used to own the land. Pa must remind himself and the others that nobody calls a freehold farmer a shiftless bum. He is a broken man who must find solace in the past. Ma, too, recalls the dignity of the Joad heritage. "We don't look up to nobody. Grampa's grampa, he fit in the Revolution. We was farm people till the debt. And then—them people. They done somepin to us . . . made me feel mean. Made me feel ashamed'." They—the California police, the owners of the orchards—had worked on the spirit of the Okies and worn it down. The pride of the freeholder withers after dispossession, and his function in life disappears.

The way of life normal to the farmer is the productive life. Fallow land, when men are starving, is a sin. The uniform impulse among the Okies is to get hold of an acre and make something grow on it. In this way they hope to gain some slight measure of security. Unfortunately, the California land has all been "stolen" by the early American settlers who took it from the Mexicans. "They put up houses and barns, they turned the earth and planted crops. And these things were possession, and possession was ownership." Those who were now the great owners had exercised a natural right to get the land, and now they held it, aware that "when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away." In a dynamic American society, the

feve
land
radi
the
tion
effo
yiel
that
wor
refle
orde
juris
Thr
own
der
abo
fallo
thou
got
the
ach
that
will

It is
soni
he l
It r
part
we
den
ach
ties
tem
bur
thei
autl

feverish Americans who had utilized a radical doctrine to gain the land had now become the conservative, stable element while a new radical group arose, the dispossessed Okies. Now these latter wanted the land. The Okies are Steinbeck's protagonists in a kind of revolutionary social action which is as American as Jefferson's successful efforts to abolish entail and primogeniture; and this action would yield the same results—a wider distribution of property. Thus it is that when Tom takes his last leave of Ma, going forth to carry on the work of Casy, who has died a martyr to the cause of social justice, he reflects on the Okie-run government camp where there was better order than the police had ever been able to establish in areas of their jurisdiction. "I been awonderin' why we can't do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain't our people. All work together for our own thing—all farm our own lan'." But what are you going to do? demands the practical Ma. "I been thinkin' a hell of a lot, thinkin' about our people livin' like pigs, an' the good rich [153] lan' layin' fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hundred thousan' good farmers is starvin'. An' I been wonderin' if all our folks got together an' yelled, like them fellas yelled, only a few of 'em at the Hooper ranch . . ." The democratic way for Steinbeck is to achieve through collective action the individual security on the land that Jefferson prized so highly. When men farm their own land they will run their own society.

III

It is clear, I think, that Steinbeck has much in common with Jeffersonian agrarianism and that he is attracted to the doctrine because he has the same humanistic interest in democracy that Jefferson had. It remains to inquire if agrarianism, its form and substance, is the part of the Jeffersonian tradition that we should preserve. Certainly we could use today many of the virtues attributed to the independent yeoman by Jefferson. But I fear that we cannot use and cannot achieve agrarianism as a formal way of life. Its champions of the thirties have apparently realized the futility of running counter to the temper of the times. *The American Review* is dead, and pretty well buried in the libraries. Many of the Southern Agrarians have turned their backs on social problems and have become engrossed in an authoritarian kind of æsthetics.

Steinbeck himself, if we are to judge by *Cannery Row* and *The Wayward Bus*, has abandoned any serious consideration of the problems of political economy.

The bankruptcy of Jefferson's ideal is only too well illustrated in the fact that the family size farm continues to disappear from the American scene. It would seem that the survival of an idea, or even its resurrection in troubled times, is no proof of its validity. In the great war just passed we have seen the triumph of American capitalism (Louis Hacker's phrase) and of American industrial strength. The machine age, or the atomic age, is fastened upon us and growing apace. Almost alone now, Louis Bromfield is repeating the axioms of the Physiocrats and calling us back to the land. Nobody listens.

We must seek another road to the independence and security and dignity that we expect from democracy. [154]

Joh
self
exp
mo:
rec:
the
A
wel
ten
tion
duc
vie
a f
Co
Of
toc
no:
sto
we
Th
anc
Th
wo
dif
y
co:
Ste
So