John Steinbeck on the Political Capacities of Everyday Folk: Moms, Reds, and Ma Joad’s Revolt

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John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath—one of the most widely read books in U.S. history—argues that the emergence of corporate capitalism led to the starvation and homelessness of many thousands of citizens, as well as to the suspension of their political rights of assembly and speech. Steinbeck in addition describes what he considers to be the capacities of American folk to redirect history, and predicts the evolution of a more collectively oriented nation. This article analyzes Steinbeck’s line of argument about popular action, and looks closely at the argument’s philosophic starting points and its historical backdrop. One conclusion is that Steinbeck’s political vision, although obviously anti-big business, is not “communist,” despite some of his conservative critics’ comments. Steinbeck’s book instead (1) warns readers about the power of interest groups in government, (2) predicts widespread, spontaneous, and small-scale social experimentation by impoverished and recently dispossessed Americans, and (3) encourages women to embrace their traditional roles as family and community caretakers.

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Many scholars, including political scientists Murray Edelman, Michael Paul Rogen, and Judith Shklar and literary critics David Herberger and Edward Said, have commented on the effectiveness of novels in communicating political ideas.1

Novels—for our purposes, defined as written narratives about individuals’ pro-
longed struggles against social obstacles—offer embedded lessons about the world
that are not anonymous or impersonal but are rooted in small-scale, face-to-face
encounters. To borrow from Shklar, novels “illustrate and illuminate philosophic
propositions,” and thereby make general propositions more concrete and visible.
Even tongue-in-cheek satirical novels bring “experience closer to us than does the
depersonalized discourse of philosophy.”

In a typical novel, such as The Color Purple or Oliver Twist, a surprising (and
often seemingly undeserved) turn of events stuns the protagonist or protagonists. Rather
than acquiescing to fate, the protagonist marshals previously unknown emo-
tional resources and reconsiders previously “normal” routines of behaving and think-
ing. At one point, the protagonist may have been content with and, perhaps, even
benefited from the status quo. During the novel, however, she or he begins to criti-
cize widely accepted roles, norms, and institutions. The unorthodox thinking, in turn,
prompts extraordinary actions and efforts to reform the world. Defenders of the
status quo usually frown on the rebellion and oppose its instigator with different
amounts of malevolence and patience. The struggle between the quixotic rebel and
the more powerful forces and authorities generates the novel’s dramatic appeal.

Novels have the potential to undermine readers’ orthodox social and political
beliefs in at least three ways (or as Edelman puts it, “art can be a corrective”). First,
the protagonist’s daring re-examination of his or her social and political environ-
ment encourages readers to reflect upon the costs, benefits, and relative perma-
nence of their own. Second, by its focus on individual rebels’ perceptions, persist-
ence, and choices, a novel conjures thoughts within the minds of readers about
their own capacity to shape their environments and the course of events. Third, the
outcomes of the protagonist’s strategic and tactical choices prompt readers to play
with ideas about wise forms of rebellion against the odds—topics that are taboo
under most circumstances.

A novel, however, only partly subverts habits of thought. None is critical of every
social fact. Even dystopias romanticize (and in such fashion legitimate) some cur-
current arrangement, role, or set of norms. Consider the representation of the
oppressed “prols” in George Orwell’s otherwise bleak 1984. In addition, novelists
many times are equivocal, if not openly hostile, toward particular paths of rebellion.
Examples include the tragic fates of strong-willed radicals in Emile Zola’s Germinal,

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3. Obviously, the following statement about the prominent characteristics of novels simplifies the com-
plex evolution of this genre. For a useful introduction to how scholars today view novels, see Karl Beckson
and Arthur Ganz, Literary Terms: A Dictionary, 3d Ed., Revised and Enlarged (New York: Farrar, Straus and
Giroux, 1989), 180-82.
5. Said, Culture and Imperialism, is particularly perceptive about the complex interaction of subversive
and conservative ideas in novels.
Miguel Asturias's *El Señor Presidente*, and Jack London's *The Iron Heel*. Although these novelists render their protagonists' desires for rebellion understandable, they do not indiscriminately praise rebellious behavior. Warnings about the consequences of reckless and thoughtless action abound. Novels thus combine subversive and conservative modes of thought. They legitimize some social arrangements and courses of defiant action, even as they denounce others.

In 1939, John Steinbeck finished *The Grapes of Wrath*, his sixth novel. In it, the Joads, a family of heavily indebted tenant farmers, are suddenly evicted from the land that their ancestors had seized from Indians and Mexicans and then proudly cultivated. Rather than remain in Oklahoma and become servile tenders, the family decides to purchase a used jalopy and head for California. The men envision the West as a pristine Eden, with abundant fertile land and without bankers who bedevil small farmers. The women fear that even in California "lobos" roam.

The women's worries prove well founded. In California the family confronts a modern, industrialized, impersonal economy that treats wage laborers as expendable pack animals. The family also discovers a political system that openly sides with the wealthy and that denies the rural have-nots of their right of free speech and assembly. Police and middle-class vigilantes harass the Joads and thousands of other transient harvesters who have little food and clothing and no permanent dwelling place.

Owners of large farms, needing pickers quickly for very brief harvesting seasons, lure the wandering homeless to fields with promises of lucrative wages. Then, when the number of workers exceeds the number of jobs, the owners pay less-than-subsistence wages and impose harsh working conditions. Once the harvest is over, local police and health inspectors expel the migrant workers from the locale to preserve order and maintain cleanliness for the area's population. Having helped big businesses protect their profit margins, the itinerant families find themselves "on the road" again, homeless, hungry, and out of jobs.

During its trek, the Joad family grows smaller. The grandparents die of age and heartbreak. Frustrated, three adult males individually abandon the family. One, desiring vengeance on the forces of public order that have killed a kindly former preacher, joins an illegal union. Another, having read popular magazine ads about career opportunities, deserts his pregnant young wife in order to find his fortune. The third, finding life outside Oklahoma too bewildering, simply leaves the family at the roadside and vanishes in the forest.

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By the novel’s closing, only the indefatigable altruism of Ma Joad and her daughter, Rose of Sharon, hold the family together. Malnourished, Rose delivers a stillborn baby in an unused railcar, which the family soon must abandon because of a drenching rain and coming flood. To escape the gullywasher, the family members climb a hill. But the waters continue to rise. Atop the hill, the Joads discover a frightened, hungry child and father in a dilapidated barn. Spurred by a tacit sense of responsibility to humankind, Rose overcomes her adolescent bashfulness and breastfeeds the man, who lacks strength enough even to raise his head. Cradling the stranger, Rose gazes into the air and “smiles mysteriously.” And then the story ends.

Steinbeck’s descriptions of the sufferings endured by the dispossessed at the hands of owners of large farms and what are now called agribusinesses immediately generated controversy. On the floor of the House of Representatives, the Honorable Lyle Boren of Oklahoma declared, “I cannot find it possible to let this dirty, lying, filthy manuscript go heralded before the public without a word of challenge or protest.” On the wireless, both the president and the first lady defended the accuracy and value of Steinbeck’s depictions. Many local officials in California, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Kansas denounced the novel for its fueling of class hatred and undermining of respect for private property and property owners. In some farming communities in the Midwest and on the West Coast, citizens either compelled municipal governments to remove the book from public libraries or destroyed copies in bonfires. Lobbied heavily by California’s big businesses, the Federal Bureau of Investigation gathered information on Steinbeck’s political activities and potentially subversive beliefs. Business associations also urged politically conservative artists to write responses. It wasn’t long before saccharine novels with romantic depictions of rural life on California farms were published, with such titles as *Grapes of Gladness.*

The controversy never ended. *The Grapes of Wrath* continues to be one of the most commonly banned books in U.S. public schools and libraries. During the 1940s, Eric Johnston, who served as president of both the Motion Picture Producers Association and the United States Chamber of Commerce, denounced the novel and its film adaptation before screenwriters: “We’ll have no more ‘Grapes of Wrath,’ we’ll have no more ‘Tobacco Roads,’ we’ll have no more films that deal

with the seamy side of American life. We'll have no more films that treat the banker as a villain.”

Despite the many efforts to steer readers away from *The Grapes of Wrath*, large portions of the reading public were, and remain, fascinated by it. The book sat at the very top of the best-seller lists of 1939 and 1940. Sales tapered off during the Cold War decades, but only moderately. More than two million hardbacks and paperbacks had been sold by 1975. By the end of the twentieth century, Steinbeck’s story, in terms of total sales, had become one of the most widely read novels in U.S. history.

Although the novel’s impact on Americans’ imaginations has never been measured through surveys, ad hoc observations attest to its fecundity. It has inspired three generations of screen and playwrights, theater troupes, composers (from Woody Guthrie to Bruce Springsteen), and muralists. The widely read radical historian and magazine columnist Howard Zinn has argued that it was a primary source of his understanding of class conflict in the United States because it gave his working-class experiences theoretical coherence. Playwright Arthur Miller—himself a political writer of considerable influence—maintains that “there was a time” when Steinbeck’s novel “would rouse Congress to pass legislation to ameliorate conditions in the transient labor camps of the West.” Thousands of educators still regularly assign *The Grapes of Wrath* to high school, college, and graduate students. When at the close of the twentieth century panels of American artists and literary critics were asked to list the one-hundred most important and influential “novels of the century,” *The Grapes of Wrath* repeatedly appeared near the top, alongside such works as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and George Orwell’s 1984.

If we look at *The Grapes of Wrath* as a widely read story of heroic resistance to unwanted social circumstances, what ideas about rebellion and defiance did Steinbeck communicate? The text itself is a rich source of information. But deciphering a book that is almost seven decades old poses a challenge. If we casually impute our latter-day political experiences and beliefs to the author, we can misread the intended message (and some unintended messages). Hence, let us first recall some of Steinbeck’s circumstances, experiences, and philosophic beliefs prior to the composition of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Then we will examine the political argument of the story itself.

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17. *The Grapes of Wrath* ranked tenth on the Modern Library list “100 Best Novels of the 20th Century” and third on the Radcliffe Publishing Program’s “100 Best Novels of the 20th Century.”
I. Political Education of John Steinbeck

Biographers and historians agree that three sets of experiences and circumstances shaped Steinbeck's vision of the United States: his pre-adult life in Salinas (where he observed his parents' indefatigable efforts to climb its social ladder); his courtship and ten-year marriage to the radical activist Carol Henning; and his earliest journalistic assignments. Each set drew Steinbeck toward a slightly different political orientation. Together, they fostered an ambivalence within him about the trajectory of the country's history.

Steinbeck was born in 1902 to a former schoolmarm and a hard-working yet financially unlucky small shopkeeper who, after losing his store (and subsequently becoming acutely depressed), found employment as a middle-level manager for a large sugar corporation. The business failure emotionally scarred Steinbeck's father, whose suffering Steinbeck vividly remembered. Steinbeck received a more positive image of property ownership from his two pairs of grandparents, who had immigrated from Europe in the late nineteenth century and then cleared land, raised cash crops and cattle, and helped found small towns in the then new state of California. As a child, Steinbeck eagerly visited the grandparents' ranches and avidly listened to tales about crossing the continent and confronting Indians and wild beasts.

Steinbeck's parents liked gardening and other outdoor activities but did not fully share their son's admiration of sodbusting. Both, having been raised on farms, had fled the fields for the opportunities and challenges of what at the time was urban life. Shortly after they married, they bought a home in Salinas, one of the more bustling small towns in central California, with a permanent population of roughly 4,000. They promptly opened a feed and grain store that soon went out of business (partly because mechanical farm equipment replaced the horse-drawn buggies and mule-pulled plows).

Devastated by his business loss, the elder Steinbeck sat quietly for long hours in the dark. Friends helped the proud and deeply embarrassed man land an office job in the sugar-processing plant in Spreckels, a town that abuts Salinas. At the time Spreckels was a company town designed and managed by the Spreckels Sugar Company, one of the world's wealthiest agricultural firms. The company provided family housing, public transportation, and places of worship and recreation for its work force. Its mechanized irrigation systems and electrified trolley system were

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considered among of the technological marvels of international capitalism. Steinbeck's father commuted to Spreckels from the family-owned, mildly upscale Victorian home in Salinas.

Although Steinbeck's parents originally sought the pleasures of town life, they were hardly libertines. Steinbeck's grandparents were deeply religious (one pair had been missionaries in Palestine). They passed their beliefs to Steinbeck's parents, who sincerely believed in the virtues of hard work and self-discipline, feared temptations of the flesh, and held that success in secular labor was a reflection of the quality of one's soul and a portent of ascension to heaven. The parents assiduously read from the Bible, took John and his sisters to church (where John served as an altar boy), and during the summers vacationed in the Episcopalian enclave of Pacific Grove on the Monterey Bay coast. To nurture more refined tastes in their children, the parents played operatic music on the phonograph and enrolled young John in dancing classes. The flip side of Steinbeck's spiritual upbringing was the crass materialism of his hometown. Steinbeck later recalled that Salinas "had misers, lots of misers. . . . One of our rich men used to sweat with nervousness when he had to pay a bill in gold. Paper saved him considerable painful emotion because it didn't really seem like money to him."19

Town boosters hoped that one day soon Salinas would rival San Francisco and cited Chicago as their model of urban growth.20 They advocated the development of transportation infrastructure that would attract investors, and the promotion of mass entertainment, such as the town's yearly rodeo, to attract tourists. Local merchants sold manufactured and nondurable goods to the farmers scattered throughout the hundred-mile valley. The rail station allowed both small entrepreneurs and larger agribusinesses to transport perishable crops via refrigerated cars to cities across North America. Many of the town's property owners soon became wealthy thanks to the tonnage it exported in grain, potatoes, sugar beets, lettuce, artichokes, and other "green gold." Meanwhile, the town's saloons and bordellos entertained weekend visitors from as far away as San Francisco.

The wealthier folks in Salinas often looked down on the ethnic enclaves on the city's outskirts because non-Caucasian residents reportedly indulged in exotic cultural practices, including the smoking of opium. In memoirs and autobiographical accounts, Steinbeck describes having ridden his bike through Salinas' red-light district and Chinatown in hopes of observing scandalous goings-on. He maintains that the practices he observed were indeed deliciously untamed: "I wonder

whether all towns have the blackness—the feeling of violence just below the surface."²¹ Although his memories probably contain a touch of "tall tales," they probably also have some basis in reality, especially if we recall that one of Salinas's claims to fame in the 1920s was a widely reported shoot-out between federal agents and local bootleggers.

During Steinbeck's youth, the Democratic Party ran Salinas through patronage and favors. According to oral histories, the party machine was in cahoots with owners of bars and bordelloS. The party's commitment to long-term material prosperity satisfied the town's many churchgoers, who frowned upon (but seldom actively opposed) the town's rough-and-tumble side. The leaders of the town's Democratic party also met with Republican leaders from nearby communities, and the two parties jointly oversaw Monterey County through a system of prearranged election competitions that assured each party plenty of offices.

Steinbeck's parents were active in the town's political affairs and social organizations. When the elder Steinbeck was getting back on his feet after losing the store, the Democratic leaders appointed him to the paid office of Monterey County treasurer (the previous officeholder had been accused of embezzlement and resigned in ignominy). Information on his subsequent political history is slender. In one letter, Steinbeck brags that his father carried substantial sums of public money at least twice a year ("It amounts to something over a million dollars this time.")²² and periodically drove with hired gunmen to protect him and the unregistered bonds from "highwaymen." Biographers thus far have not explored the roles of Steinbeck's father within the Salinas Democratic machine. Newspapers of the time suggest that he was considered a person of moderate political weight.²³ Although a few residents recall in recorded oral histories questioning the propriety of his hiring family members to do the local government's clerical work, it appears that he was generally above reproach.²⁴

Mrs. Steinbeck was civic-minded before the days of female suffrage. Her behavior strikingly fits stereotypes of early twentieth-century Progressives.²⁵ She participated in innumerable community organizations and projects, including campaigns to beautify the streets and to develop a municipal opera company. She considered it government's job to nurture civilization and to deter slovenly, savage, and selfish behavior. She pressured the local government to put in place ordinances that would

²³ Salinas Daily Index, February 26, 1933, 1.
²⁴ Pauline Pearson's interviews with Josephine Dorneidon Cahill on November 7, 1974 and with William Pellissier on May 19, 1975.
²⁵ For an introduction to the topic of women's public roles during the Progressive period, see Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), chap. 6.
punish homeowners who did not maintain tidy yards. Steinbeck’s mother was highly sensitive about the family’s status among the town’s well-to-do families and was also a tad prudish (which occasionally led to her to question her son’s artistic career—although, in fairness, it must be noted that she came to his defense when neighbors expressed outrage at his “filthy” writings). Strong-willed and outspoken, Mrs. Steinbeck often violated Victorian norms of female decorum. For example, she flew with a stunt pilot during a daredevil air show—an unprecedented act for a woman that drew the attention of the town newspaper.26

Steinbeck was not politically involved in his teenage and early adult years. He apparently found local politics uninteresting—perhaps even dangerous and distasteful. In his later years, he would portray the Salinas government ranks as a home for scoundrels: “There were whispers of murders, covered up and only hinted at, of raids on the county funds. When the old courthouse burned down it was hinted that the records would have been dangerous to certain officeholders.”27 There is no record of his working on election campaigns or talking at length about politics with his father. He did not, according to biographers, join the political clubs in his high school and college despite the many exciting events of his day, from the entry of the United States into World War I, to the Russian and Mexican revolutions, to the rise and fall of California’s Progressive movement. Later, when he could not secure a steady income early in his writing career, his mother urged him to enter local politics as his father’s assistant. The younger Steinbeck refused. No ambitious politician was he.

Steinbeck might have remained an apolitical offspring of small-town bourgeois parents if not for Carol Henning, who hailed from the San Francisco Bay region and who sympathized with myriad left-wing movements and causes, including feminism, trade unionism, and socialism. Steinbeck met Henning by chance in his early twenties. At first, he was smitten by Henning’s beauty, humor, and vitality—certainly not her political beliefs. As they became romantically involved, she pressured him to attend political gatherings and study circles. At these events she exuberantly spoke with other activists and sympathizers, while her beau, according to observers’ reports, alternately moped and scowled in the corners.28

Thanks to Henning’s persevering and outgoing personality, Steinbeck eventually met Marxist propagandists, union organizers hiding from the law, and radical muckrakers, among them Lincoln Steffens. Steffens took an interest in the younger, withdrawn, and thus far unsuccessful writer, and encouraged him to use his literary talents to write about the conditions of the dispossessed. He also helped Steinbeck, during those lean years, to land a paying job, writing about the rural poor for the left-leaning San Francisco News. This assignment provided Steinbeck with an unex-

26. Salinas Daily Index, April 25, 1919, 1.
pected set of experiences that became the subject matter of several so-called "proletarian" stories that he wrote in the late 1930s, including *The Grapes of Wrath.*

In the course of gathering information for the news stories, Steinbeck became more familiar with the class structure of California. Steinbeck had never been ignorant of the nonbourgeois world. As a child, he had sometimes roamed the poorer neighborhoods of Salinas, and during high school and his aborted college career, he had worked part-time for Spreckels. In the company’s fields, canneries, and bunkhouses, he had carefully observed how its manual workers—generally unmarried males from Mexico, the Philippines, Japan, and China—lived, talked, and thought. Steinbeck, however, was largely ignorant of a new wave of transient laborers whom property owners derogatorily called "Okies." These dispossessed family farmers began arriving in California during the 1930s from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and other farm-belt states. The "Okies" were a new breed of worker in terms of social habits and backgrounds. They were born and raised in the United States, were Northern European in moral beliefs and cultural habits, traveled with families, and were hungry to own land again.

Steinbeck contacted the government agencies responsible for helping seasonal field hands and visited the new camps for the rural unemployed. There, he talked to residents, watched government officials make rounds, read officials’ dossiers about conditions and activities, and visited the migrant workers in nearby shantytowns to compare the lives of the two groups. While gathering information for his news stories, he saw firsthand the difficulty of finding even short-term jobs. He was dismayed by watching the once-proud property owners slowly but surely lose their confidence, health, and will to live. He watched them valiantly fend off floods, endure oppressive heat, and fight illnesses in rickety, unsanitary shacks. Recalling the workers’ defining traits, he notes in a later autobiographical essay,

I liked these people. They had qualities of humor and courage and inventiveness and energy that appealed to me. I thought that if we had a national character and a national genius, these people, who were beginning to be called Okies, were it. With all the odds against them, their goodness and strength survived.

Steinbeck was stunned, but not surprised, when strikes and shootouts broke out in the California countryside in the late 1930s. He had sincerely believed that the social order was about change, and he lay blame for the unrest at the feet of California’s peculiar system of production that, in his opinion, depended on the ruthless exploitation of the have-nots: "I don’t know whether you know what a bomb California is right now or not... There are riots in Salinas and killings in the streets of that dear little town where I was born. I shouldn’t wonder if the thing had begun. I

29. Steinbeck’s other "proletarian" novels about California’s rural poor are *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *Of Mice and Men* (1937).
don't mean any general revolt but an active beginning aimed toward it, the smouldering."31 In another letter:

I must go over into the interior valleys. There are about five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry but actually starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them with the fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line and yelling for a balanced budget. . . . I'm pretty mad about it. No word of this outside because when I have finished my job the jolly old associated farmers will be after my scalp again.32

II. Philosphic Orientations

By the time that Steinbeck had begun to write in earnest about the farmer workers from Arkansas and Oklahoma, he had been married for roughly five years. Because of Henning's various jobs and an allowance from his father, Steinbeck had the financial resources to be a full-time author. Each day, he spent his first waking hours carefully composing letters, some of which recorded his most private speculations about human nature, psychology, and history. After those hours, he turned to writing for publication.

We know from his letters33 and also from his lively conversations with mostly male friends that Steinbeck viewed himself as an economically marginalized, avant-garde intellectual. In the evenings, he frequented a local oceanographic laboratory where young scientists, artists, and scholars living around Monterey met for sociability over drinks. There, he immersed himself in discussions and debates with the likes of cultural anthropologist Joseph Campbell, about the basis of knowledge, the nature of human beings, the logic of history, and the status of moral judgments.

As early as 1933, Steinbeck confided to close friends that he wanted his fiction to express a new, ambitious understanding of America—a theoretical outlook that at times he called "group-man theory" and at other times the "phalanx theory."34 He thought that his vision synthesized his contemporaries' best insights into the nature of human beings and society and also offered an alternative to most Americans' cheery optimism, which he personally disliked. For the remainder of the decade,

32. Steinbeck to Elizabeth Otis, February 1938, in Steinbeck: A Life in Letters, 158.
33. Steinbeck took great pleasure in writing letters. A small sample of his correspondence can be found in Steinbeck: A Life in Letters. Many letters remain in university collections or in the private possession of Steinbeck's friends.
Steinbeck emphasized in correspondence his intention to incorporate his theoretical outlook into both his fiction and nonfiction. He contended that he wished not to become a popular and well-paid writer but a writer whose philosophic vision would puncture fashionable but misleading myths about the world and provide an unadorned view of reality. Referring specifically to *The Grapes of Wrath*, he wrote, "I tried to write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written." And in another letter he wrote:

This book wasn't written for delicate ladies. If they read it all they're messing in something not their business. I've never changed a word to fit the prejudices of a group and I never will . . . I've never wanted to be a popular writer—you know that. And those readers who are insulted by normal events or language mean nothing to me.

Steinbeck's group-man theory rested on what one might call a bifurcated (or perhaps a two-story) view of human psychology and on a Darwinian understanding of cultural evolution. Both components reflected Steinbeck's exposure to currents of European thought that had arrived in the United States around the turn of the century.

According to Steinbeck's letters, our minds have two analytically separable sides that are engaged in different activities. One side calculates how best to achieve a given goal. We often privately feel that we control this side's workings—for example, when we talk about the reasons for our decisions and choices, in such quotidian sentences as "I decided to buy groceries at this store because the vegetables are fresher than in the other store." But there is another part of our minds—something like a second, locked room in an apartment, or the lower floor of a two-story house—that we feel that we do not consciously control. Instead, we feel driven by powerful physical urges and haunting voices of the past. This side of our mind provides us with the aims and goals that privately seem compelling and imperative.

Our goals and aims are partly a set of universal biological demands—such as urges to rest, eat, and mate—that are required for our individual survival and for the reproduction of the species. But we also are driven by worries and warnings that we inherit from our ancestors and that we experience as mysterious preferences and arbitrary values and directives thrust upon us. Even though the original conditions that prompted our forebears to embrace these ideas no longer exist and no longer are remembered, their judgments about right and wrong conduct, good and evil cir-

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37. Steinbeck to Carlton A. Sheffield, June 21, 1933; to George Albee, 1933; and to George Albee, 1934, in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, 74-77, 79-82, 92-94.
cumstances, and wise and foolish actions retain their emotive power across generations and, in some cases, over centuries.\textsuperscript{38}

Steinbeck perceived the relationship between our biological needs and our inherited normative codes as complex and, sometimes, discordant. If we always give higher priority to biological needs and dismiss our inherited norms, we suffer guilt and pay the social price of neglecting the wisdom of ages. One alternative is to revere the voices from the past and obey without equivocation our inherited values and priorities—say, those of a self-reliant farmer, a devoted mother, or an enterprising banker. But, Steinbeck argues, a heavy psychological price is paid for this ability to control our biological drives. The suppressed desires for food, sleep, shelter, and sex never fully disappear. They quietly percolate in the corners of our minds and then unexpectedly swamp our minds with passion, especially when we feel either physically exhausted or overly giddy about a pleasant turn of events. At such moments, the internalized norms feel like heavy chains that we yearn to throw off; and we are tempted to engage in what our inherited normative voice normally considers reckless, sinful, and criminal conduct—such as infidelity, blasphemy, and even mob violence.\textsuperscript{39}

Steinbeck derived his understandings about divided minds, the socialization of traditional norms, and the repression of physical drives from the ideas of Freud, Jung, and their followers. He found modern psychological speculations (especially the Jungian tradition) inspiring and illuminating. Conversely, he found implausible the so-called realistic view, popular in the United States, that humans act simply according to personal calculations of pleasure and pain, and that they can apprehend the world without preconceptions and the mediation of cultural baggage from previous generations. Steinbeck believed that we seldom clearly see either ourselves or our circumstances because our minds are the repositories of inherited norms and beliefs, which Steinbeck sometimes calls our "fantasies," and our values are constantly warring with our repressed desires. Whenever we try to think rationally about our goals and to choose our aims, our minds confront the waxing and waning of biological needs and the demands of inherited norms and beliefs, some of which no longer make sense in present circumstances. In Steinbeck's words:

I don't think you will like my late work. It leaves realism farther and farther behind. I never had much ability for nor faith nor belief in realism. It is just a form

\textsuperscript{38} For Steinbeck's fictional depictions of the painful process of childhood socialization and indoctrination, see chapters 5, 8, and 10 of \textit{The Pastures of Heaven}, which is included in John Steinbeck, \textit{Steinbeck: Novels and Stories 1932-1937} (New York: Library of America, 1994). For a fictional illustration of the mysterious voices of our ancestors that we hear and that control our priorities, see \textit{To a God Unknown}, which is also included in \textit{Steinbeck: Novels and Stories 1932-1937}.

\textsuperscript{39} See, for instance, the short stories entitled "The Harness," "The Vigilante" and "Johnny Bear" in \textit{The Long Valley} (which is included in \textit{Steinbeck: The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings}) and \textit{The Pastures of Heaven}, chap. 5. The topic of psychological repression and biological resistance also appears in \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}, when Al Joad, Jim Casy, and Uncle John describe the anxiety and guilt that they suffer as they try to reconcile their biological drives with normative demands.
of fantasy as nearly as I could figure. Boileau was a wiser man than Mencken. . . . There are streams in man more profound and dark and strong than the libido of Freud. Jung’s libido is closer but still inadequate.40

In pondering the social origins of our ancestrally transmitted fantasies, Steinbeck applied elements of Darwinian social thought—another avant-garde fashion that he had first discovered in college and then in the 1930s revisited with his artistic and scientific friends.41 Members of his Darwinist--leaning circle denied the existence of eternal and universal principles of right and wrong. They instead believed that every local human community devises a unique code of conduct for biological reasons, as a way to cope with immediate, visible threats. The local environment (and the multiple threats that it poses to human existence) inevitably changes over time. To avoid extinction, human groups endlessly tinker with their cultural inheritances, without totally jettisoning their pasts. Humans always retain some of the beliefs and prescriptions of their forebears, for these provide time-tested moorings from which to face the world.

Steinbeck called this understanding of the local origins of morals “non-teleological thinking” because it refuses to assume the existence of a human “telos”—a single, eternal, and objectively correct set of moral rules and social arrangements that all human societies ought to move toward. Non-teleological thinking, instead, celebrates normative diversity and views revisions of normative beliefs as natural and healthy.42

Steinbeck and his circle were not so-called Lamarckians in their thinking about cultural evolution.43 That is, they did not believe that all local groups are successful in their efforts to adapt their cultures to changing environments. Over time, some die because their gradual accumulation of cultural traits becomes inappropriate. Extinction of human communities is as much part of the natural cycle of change as is continued cultural diversity.44

Steinbeck’s attraction to non-teleological thinking casts light on his constant diatribes against morally self-righteous and ideological thinking—regardless whether expressed by partisans of the political Left or of the political Right. In his opinion, too

41. For more on Steinbeck’s use of Darwinian theories, see Brian E. Railsback, Parallel Expeditions: Charles Darwin and the Art of John Steinbeck (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1995).
42. Steinbeck’s most sustained discussion of non-teleological thinking appears in The Log of the Sea of Cortez, which can be found in Steinbeck: The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings, 820-23, 858-75, 886-87, 948-52, 963-64.
44. The death of human communities fascinated Steinbeck during the 1930s and was a central theme in several of his pre-The Grapes of Wrath books, including Pastures of Heaven (published in 1932), To a God Unknown (1933), and Tortilla Flat (1935).
many people who wish to improve the world begin with unshakable faith in an abstract, utopian blueprint. Instead, they should patiently and carefully study local communities, the threats to the communities’ survival that the local environments pose, and the communities’ experiments with incremental cultural change as a way to alleviate suffering. Steinbeck concedes that he has come across flexible, pragmatic, nonauthoritarian members of almost every political persuasion, including Communists.45 But many reformers are morally self-righteous, dismiss locally accumulated wisdom, and adopt a dictatorial approach to remaking the world. They are fanatics who behave almost hysterically when their prescriptions are not adopted. In a letter concerning some dogmatic Communists whom he has met, Steinbeck rails:

I don’t like communists either, I mean I dislike them as people. I rather imagine the apostles had the same waspish qualities and the New Testament is proof that they had equally bad manners. . . . Some of these communist field workers are strong, pure, inhumanly virtuous men. Maybe that’s another reason I personally dislike them and that does not rebound to my credit.46

III. Images of Rebellion in The Grapes of Wrath

With the above sketch of Steinbeck’s life and philosophic beliefs in mind, let us turn to The Grapes of Wrath and explicate the embedded arguments about resistance to unwanted social conditions. In extracting a Steinbeckian vision of rebellion, we first will look at some details involving the setting of the story, and then will examine particular actors and events.

One of the striking features of Steinbeck’s book is the multiple cultures that co-exist in North America. Unlike some twentieth-century writings about a so-called American way of life, Steinbeck’s novel does not assume the existence of a single national culture. Nor does it portray American society in terms of a coherent class war between a self-conscious nationwide bourgeoisie and a self-conscious nationwide proletariat. Instead, the novel presents the United States as a collectivity of local settlements and meeting places—such as roadside coffee shops, used car lots, and family farms. Each reflects and produces distinctive values and habits. United States culture resembles a quilt, with an amazing variety of hues, patterns, and textures. In the novel, the wife of a small businessman living in a small Midwest town has habits of thinking and of organizing her waking hours different from those of the waitress at a roadside diner. Likewise, a temporary gas station attendant and a dispossessed family farmer—regardless of comparable wealth and similar alienation from the instruments of production—see the world differently and therefore approach it differently.

The various cultures have a common biological basis. In the novel, Steinbeck (often in the role of the omniscient narrator) repeatedly reinterprets behavior—including the seemingly antisocial behavior by the rich—as expressions of acquired habits of survival. A vignette about a visit by a brusque small business owner and his wife to a roadside diner illustrates the novelist’s style of analysis. The waitress and the truckers sitting at the counter despise the arrogant, close-fisted, rude bourgeois couple. The pair’s effronteries include grimacing at the products displayed and refusing to give the tired waitress a reasonable tip. After the couple leaves, the waitress and the patrons call them “shitheels,” but the reader is given special insight into the origins of the bourgeois pair’s behavior. The narrator explains that years of dog-eat-dog competition for sales and customers had turned the pair into people who, despite their relative wealth, mistrust hired help, instinctively pinch pennies, and readily see scams where none exists. Their excessive frugality and suspicion are the by-products of years of trying to avoid bankruptcy and want—not a sign of mere rudeness that the other patrons in the diner mistakenly assume it was.

Steinbeck’s story relies on the local cultural diversity within the United States to explain both why rebellions do not happen and why they will. He is far from an immiseration theorist who contends that suffering, if intense enough, will automatically spawn rebellious behavior. The novel describes in detail the material suffering of many kinds of non-wealthy people, including truckers, clerks, gas-station attendants, and Native Americans who have been forcibly expelled from their lands. In the story, most nonwealthy Americans live in misery but suffer in silence. Only one social group refuses to accept its fate: recently evicted small farmers.

The capacity for rebellion of the dispossessed small farmers has two equally important sources: yeoman farmer backgrounds and the threat of imminent death. Having worked their own property without supervision or orders from outsiders, and having lived on the former frontier without public services and government directives, the so-called Okies have acquired a self-reliant, willful outlook lacking among other poor people. These are families which had lived on a little piece of land, who had lived and died on forty acres, had eaten or starved on the produce of forty acres. . . . There in the Middle and Southwest had lived a simple agrarian folk who had not changed with industry, who had not farmed with machines or known the power and danger of

machines in private hands. They had not grown up in the paradoxes of industry. Their senses were still sharp to the ridiculousness of the industrial life.⁵⁰

According to the book’s narrator, the country’s much-vaunted “Jeffersonian” democratic culture of widespread confidence, open-mindedness, and versatility is not found among all classes and in all places. Wealthy Americans are too greedy, satiated, and fearful of loss of privileges to want to share power with the propertyless and less well off. They become closed-minded and hard-hearted. Members of the proletariat suffer from mechanized production and habits of obedience and fear. They tend to be timorous—at least in Steinbeck’s story. Small farmers alone acquire a spirit of initiative and self-reliance derived from years of self-directed production with hand tools. The daily challenges of taming the soil produce lifestyles that lack hierarchy, diffidence, or conformity. The resultant mind-set, according to Steinbeck, can be seen in the family meetings of small farmers, where all adults—male and female, elders and young folks—confidently express their opinions and vote on proposals.⁵¹

Penniless and starving, the former farming families in the novel meet serendipitously on roadsides and in makeshift camps. In such settings and without any appointed leader or organizer, they talk about their similar problems and gradually acquire a new outlook on social institutions. “[B]ecause they were all going to a new mysterious place, they huddled together; they talked together; they shared their lives, their food, and the things they hoped for in the new country.”⁵² Over time, the small acts of kindness become habitual, and social thought and affection stretch accordingly: “In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all.”⁵³

Steinbeck (again, in the role of the narrator) tells us that as they struggle to survive, families quietly jettison some of their older notions of right and wrong, which no longer seem appropriate, and, conversely, experiment with novel moral values and social duties: “And the families learned, although no one told them, what rights are monstrous and must be destroyed. . . . And as the worlds moved westward, rules became laws, although no one told the families.”⁵⁴ The threat of starvation unleashes the migrants’ imaginations. The yearning onetime farmers sometimes contemplate sharing property and collectively owning machinery in the future: “If this tractor were ours it would be good—not mine, but ours. . . . We could love that tractor then as we have loved this land when it was ours.”⁵⁵ They occasionally even wonder about seizing land from absentee landlords.⁵⁶

⁵⁰. The Grapes of Wrath, 510.
⁵². The Grapes of Wrath, 416.
⁵³. The Grapes of Wrath, 416.
⁵⁴. The Grapes of Wrath, 417.
⁵⁵. The Grapes of Wrath, 370.
⁵⁶. The Grapes of Wrath, 458-64.
Alongside these grass-roots changes in popular ideas about right and wrong behavior, moral outrage over the broader organization of society mounts. The personal feelings of disappointment and worry turn into a collective anger at current social arrangements. Former farmers look at corporate-owned land, which is kept fallow to keep prices high, as "a sin and the unused land a crime against the thin children."57 The narrator contends that the fermentation of righteous wrath among the small farmers is spontaneously communicated and inevitably leads to a willingness to challenge authorities and to seize property. In the coming battle, large landowners must lose, partly because of their small numbers: "Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote."58

In the novel, Steinbeck predicts that big businesses will continue to try to intimidate the poor, but the repression against the dispossessed farmers must backfire because it reinforces collective anger rather than breeding timidity. Vigilante attacks and police raids are neither helpful to nor productive for the wealthy, but are the "means that in the long run would destroy them. Every little means, every violence, every raid on a Hooverville, every fat-assed deputy swaggering through a ragged camp put off the day a little and cemented the inevitability of the day."59

Steinbeck, as narrator, seems to accept (and perhaps even approve) the coming violence between the former farmers and the agribusiness, for he declares that there is no point in attempting to reason with rich folks and to build reform alliances across classes. The plutocracy of California foolishly believes that radicals from abroad plant seditious ideas in the otherwise patient and grateful American workers. The rich cannot comprehend that their incomes and status depend upon the suffering of others: "If you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin, were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know."60 Decades of inordinate comfort and privilege preclude appreciation of the sufferings and sacrifices of wage earners.

The narrator's periodic prophecies of capitalism's inevitable doom at times resemble the grave-digging passages of Marx and Engels's Communist Manifesto—for instance, when Steinbeck writes that "the companies, the banks worked at their own doom and they did not know it."61 This may explain why some scholars and commentators believe that The Grapes of Wrath resembles old-fashioned commu-

57. The Grapes of Wrath, 459.
58. The Grapes of Wrath, 370.
59. The Grapes of Wrath, 464.
60. The Grapes of Wrath, 371.
61. The Grapes of Wrath, 512.
nist art. Leslie Fiedler, for instance, contends that the novel's vision would please “the Cultural Commissars in Moscow.”⁶²

Steinbeck's tack, however, is different from those of theorists of vanguard parties and proletarian revolutions. He insists that desires to reform American society arise, in the last analysis, from biological need, not political organization by outsiders. As the narrator puts it, “Need is the stimulus to concept, concept to action.”⁶³ In the novel, political education by “bolshevisky” organizers is marginal to the former farmers' propensity toward activism.⁶⁴ The need to survive provides sufficient motivation to question authority, and frontier-based norms provide a sufficiently strong cognitive and emotional foundation for imagining a new social order. On their own, the farmers have the ability to imagine and experiment with new institutions and norms.

One reason that the former farmers can rebel against corporate capitalism involves the evolution of local gender roles. Mother figures abound in *The Grapes of Wrath* and dominate its final scenes; fathers and sons become less salient.⁶⁵ The prominence of maternal figures relates to their capacity to imagine what Ma Joad calls the human “fambly.”⁶⁶ Having been raised to be tenacious, self-directing, and self-reliant, the males are infatuated with the opportunities that they believe a market economy offers enterprising individuals. Only after repeated failures to find employment do some men dare to alter their thinking. Mothers and grandmothers on family farms, on the other hand, toil day in and day out from an ethic of service and without monetary compensation. They see themselves as patient nurturers of helpless children and bruised and tired men. This outlook, inherited from past generations and refined over time, inoculates rural women from the grandiose dreams of personal success within a market economy. The eager, risk-taking ethos, bubbling within an ambitious “man on the make,” is absent from the women's consciousness. They are cautious, protective of others, and value social interdependence. In the words of Ma Joad, “Man, he lives in jerks—baby born an' a man dies,

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⁶⁴. *The Grapes of Wrath*, 415. In the novel, a former minister—Jim Casy—teaches one of the Joad men the value of union organizing, but Casy's political insights are derived neither from a formal Christian nor communist ideology but from living alongside and observing the Joads (Ma Joad, in particular). Casy is less an outside agitator than a mouthpiece for the people. For different perspectives on Steinbeck’s views of labor organizing, see Helen Lojek, “Jim Casy: Politico of the New Jerusalem,” *Steinbeck Quarterly* 15 (winter/spring 1982): 30-37; Richard S. Pressman, “‘Them’s Horses—We’re Men’: Social Tendency and Counter-Tendency in *The Grapes of Wrath*,” *Steinbeck Quarterly* 19 (summer/fall 1986): 71-79.
⁶⁶. The promotion of non-individualist thinking is not women's only cultural function in Steinbeck's pre-1940s short stories and novels. Strong wives and mothers also help men stay focused on laboring and earning money (and not spending it on bodily pleasure). See, for example, Steinbeck's “The Harness” and “Johnny Bear” in *The Long Valley*. 
an' that's a jerk—gets a farm an' loses his farm, an' that's a jerk. Woman, its all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. Woman looks at it like that."67

The significance of this maternal culture perhaps is best illustrated in Ma Joad's refusal to allow the men of the family to leave in small numbers in search for lucrative jobs and then reassemble in a few months with high wages in hand. Steinbeck as the narrator, perhaps to highlight the political lessons of the incident, twice calls Ma Joad's defiance of the males' wishes a "revolt."68 Ma, finding the money-gathering strategy destructive of the family's collective identity, seizes a jackhammer and threatens to kill her husband if he and the others go through with their plan. The men in the novel find her intense distrust of market opportunities irrational, akin to the seemingly thoughtless motions of a wild jackrabbit. They nonetheless believe that she is sincere in her decision to use the potential murder weapon, and hence defer in exasperation.

Steinbeck's vision of the impending death of capitalist agriculture and the emergence of a new social order is in a sense apolitical, because the book says very little about the function of government in facilitating the transformation. With the partial exception of Weedpatch camp, no government initiative is presented in a positive light.69 Rather, government is portrayed overwhelmingly as a corrupted tool of powerful, self-interested, and well-organized business groups. Officials—from police officers to health inspectors—throw derogatory language at the migrants and other desperately poor people. When large landowners request police support, it is available at a moment's notice. If, however, seasonal workers are starving or have no shelter, government officials do little, citing bureaucratic regulations and red tape as their justification for inaction.70

According to the story, to prevent the poor from settling, sharing resources, and acquiring power, the "respectable" classes erect such barriers as antiloitering laws and health codes, deploy armed sheriffs and deputies, and fund illegal violence (including the tarring and feathering of suspected union organizers). After repeatedly being ignored and rebuffed by public officials, the migrants begin to distrust the political system. They see it as a tool of organized interests and only superficially democratic. The migrants conclude that they can trust only themselves. In the words of Ma Joad, "I'm learnin' one thing good. . . . Learnin' it all a time, ever'day. If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll

67. The Grapes of Wrath, 660.
68. The Grapes of Wrath, 389.
69. Weedpatch camp provides a temporary refuge for the Joads and other migrant farm workers. The camp is run democratically, with the families ruling themselves through a system of elections, committees, and assemblies. The camp, however, owns neither fields nor farm machinery and therefore does not have the power to provide work and jobs for the rural poor. Ma Joad quickly recognizes the inadequacy of the camp. At her behest, the family leaves. The Grapes of Wrath, 513-94.
70. The Grapes of Wrath, 437-38, 463, 469, 670.
help—the only ones." For Steinbeck, the rebellion against corporate capitalism will emerge in shantytowns and temporary roadside gatherings—not in conventional hallways of power—and onetime farmers alone will launch it, without help from government institutions.

IV. Steinbeck's Legacy

The Grapes of Wrath was, among other things, Steinbeck's effort to understand a revolution that he believed was already taking place. He thought that his group-man approach—with its social-psychological and Darwinist logic—gave him insight that academics and other political commentators lacked. Shortly after the novel's publication, he wrote to a friend:

I have too a conviction that a new world is growing under the old, the way a new finger nail grows under a bruised one. I think all the economists and sociologists will be surprised some day to find that they did not foresee nor understand it... Communist, Fascist, Democrat may find that the real origin of the future lies on the microscope plates of obscure young men, who, puzzled with order and disorder in quantum and neutron, build gradually a picture which will seep down until it is the fibre of the future.

Steinbeck believed that he had uncovered a new, non-romantic method of analyzing American history, and his scientific starting points and field observations told him that a new world was already emerging. The Grapes of Wrath was his public forecast.

A geographically dispersed revolution led by innovative yeoman farmers and dutiful mothers never occurred, however. Steinbeck's non-teleological reasoning missed something. Perhaps his interest in biological determinism had led him to underestimate the roles of utopian visions and of deliberative bodies in the construction of new institutions and goals? Perhaps his admiration for the independent traditions of small-property owners in the United States and for the self-effacing culture of their wives had led him to misjudge both the political capacities of non-agrarian folk and the actual dreams and nightmares of America's rural men and women? As a scientific account (albeit in fictional guise) of upcoming social upheaval and political change in the United States, the story is wanting.

But the book's embedded political lessons also can be approached in terms of its genre, independently of our awareness of Steinbeck's scientific principles and aspirations. The book, after all, is a novel; and like many novels, The Grapes of Wrath

71. The Grapes of Wrath, 610.
has a subversive side. The book openly questions the purported benefits of America's new economic order. It predicts (and implicitly endorses) rebellion against the status quo by the recently dispossessed small farmers. Its celebration of a non-individualist, antimarket ethic is conveyed through the words and deeds of its female protagonists, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon. The novel challenges readers' trust in the fairness of the government and maintains that political democracy in the United States is an illusion. It insists that in the near future, the economically and politically last shall be first. In all these ways, the book culturally challenges the status quo, provoking critics and pundits to make statements in this vein: "If only a couple of million uncomfortable people can be brought to read it, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* may actually effect something like a revolution in their minds and hearts."73 Or as an editorial in *Collier's* put it, *The Grapes of Wrath* "is propaganda for the idea that we ought to trade our system for the Russian system."74

Even so, Steinbeck's novel also carries some conservative messages. First of all, it obscures the ways that rural gender roles might oppress women, and depicts domestic housekeeping and maternal self-sacrifice as intrinsically rewarding. Ma Joad's countenance is "controlled, kindly" and Rose "smiles mysteriously" after they complete exhausting chores and endure intense physical trials.75 The book says nothing about the potentially liberating effects of working outside the home or about the value of developing identities independent of maternal status. Early on, Steinbeck portrays Rose's early desires for physical pleasure, for a suburban house with labor-saving appliances, and for urban entertainment and excitement as the silly dreams of an immature girl; she triumphantly outgrows the fantasies by the book's conclusion. But might she have had a point in seeing the traditional life of an altruistic farm mother as stultifying, tiring, and constractive?

The novel devalues participation in conventional politics. Not many would question the thesis that interest-group politics in the United States has an upper-class bias.76 But the episodes in Steinbeck's novel cumulatively advance a more extreme position—that local and state governments are responsive only to business interests. Might the novel's cynicism dissuade readers from participating in conventional politics and thereby tend to further entrench interest-group power?

Finally, the book's celebration of preindustrial farming culture, when combined with its negative portrayal of the cultural habits of the industrial and urban poor, leads to potentially paternalistic conclusions. In the story, only one class (the former yeomen farmers) appears worthy of political power; other groups of poor folk evoke pity from readers but do not appear deserving of political power. Consider

73. Quoted in Parini, *John Steinbeck*, 220.
Tom Joad’s impatient outburst toward an introspective and fragile gas-station attendant, which is not seriously criticized by anyone in the book (including the narrator), but, to the contrary, appears to be praiseworthy tough love. 77 Throughout the book, truck and tractor drivers and other machine tenders are depicted as drugged into despondency by their dependency on distant bosses and by their monotonous, repetitive labor. Steinbeck writes of an anonymous machine handler on a large corporate farm: “the driver’s hands could not twitch because the monster that built the tractor, the monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow got into the driver’s hands, into his brain and muscle, had goggled him and muzzled him—goggled his mind, muzzled his speech, goggled his perception, muzzled his protest.” 78 The book implies that industrial culture has imposed a natural limit to the number of poor people who have the self-esteem and abilities necessary to act for themselves. Those who are not of small-farm backgrounds are, for better or worse, doomed to be the playthings of their time. They can be helped, but it is presumed that they should not be expected to be the agents of their own liberation. 79

*The Grapes of Wrath*, in sum, fosters cultural ambivalence within readers. The book is sacrilegious about some common ethical and political beliefs that Americans hold dear (such as the democratic workings of local government and the beneficence of a free-market economy). Yet it is reverential about other conventional beliefs (such as the proper social duties of women, and the many cultural benefits of freely laboring on one’s own soil 80). This perennially popular novel, while relentlessly attacking the ideological defenses of laissez-faire industrialization and growing concentrations of capital, reaffirms a nostalgic view of preindustrial

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80. Stephen Railton holds a different interpretation of Steinbeck’s view of private property and maintains that “Steinbeck’s antagonist in the novel is not the group of large owners, but rather the idea of ownership itself.” Railton cites several passages in *The Grapes of Wrath* where characters express longing for a vaguely communal existence. Railton’s interpretation of Steinbeck as a sentimental socialist contains at least a grain of truth but, in my opinion, fails to appreciate Steinbeck’s repeated celebration of the salutary effects of small holdings on farmers. Stephen Railton, “Pilgrims’ Politics: Steinbeck’s Art of Conversion,” in Wyatt, *New Essays on The Grapes of Wrath*, 31; Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 248-49.
America and contributes to negative stereotypes of industrial wage earners. Its defense of female domesticity, its celebration of small plots of private property, its attack on municipal and state government, and its distinctions among the political capacities of poor folk not only constitute important parts of a complex argument about the need for social change but also reflect and reinforce some long-standing American predilections that impinge upon how we govern ourselves.