

Culture and Politics in the Great Depression

by
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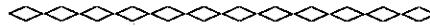
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Foreword

In 1975 Dr. E. Bud Edmondson of Longview, Texas, began an endowment fund at Baylor University to honor his father, Mr. Charles S. B. Edmondson. Dr. Edmondson's intent was to have the proceeds from the fund used to bring to the University outstanding historians who could synthesize, interpret, and communicate history in such a way as to make the past relevant to the present generation.

Baylor University and the Waco community are grateful to Dr. Edmondson for his generosity in establishing the CHARLES EDMONDSON HISTORICAL LECTURES.

Professor Brinkley, the twentieth Edmondson Lecturer, looks at the time in American history when the idea of the American dream first emerged—the Great Depression. To illustrate the variety of ways in which the American people have defined the dream, Brinkley discusses four interpretations of the Great Depression, described as persistence, empathy, rebellion, and community.



The views expressed in these lectures are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Baylor University or of the Markham Press Fund.



Although the Charles Edmondson Historical Lectures have been presented annually at Baylor University since 1978, they have not always been available for publication by the Markham Press Fund. A list of previous lectures appears at the end of this work.

Lecture I

Persistence and Empathy

In the 1930s, when the United States was experiencing the most serious economic and social crisis in its history, a group of American scholars and intellectuals launched a new movement that has been an important part of the nation's academic life ever since. It came to be known as American Studies. And for much of its now long history, it was committed to defining what many of its proponents like to call the "American character." That has meant, on the whole, identifying a set of values, commitments, and goals that have shaped the "American experience" throughout its history.

It was also in the 1930s that the idea of an "American dream" entered the nation's popular culture. And while scholars of American studies have long since given up the effort to define a single vision of the American character, there is still in American popular culture a relatively uniform image of the American dream. It is the same image that emerged during the Great Depression, when the "dream" must have seemed, to many of those who embraced it, all the more alluring because it was so unattainable. The American dream, as it appears in popular culture and political rhetoric, is a vision of middle-class prosperity and stability—a healthy nuclear family, a life of material contentment and financial security, a career characterized by success and upward mobility. It is a dream of personal achievement and fulfillment—an individual, not a social, dream.

This essay will consider, briefly, our present scholarly understanding of the idea of the American dream—an understanding that is very different from the way that concept is understood in popular culture. Most scholars of American culture today would agree that there are many American dreams. Different communities, and different people, have defined visions

and dreams in highly various ways. To illustrate that, it is helpful to look at the time in American history when the idea of an American dream first emerged: the Great Depression; and to look at four very different ways in which different groups of Americans chose to interpret the Depression and understand their nation. Those interpretations might be described as persistence, empathy, rebellion, and community.

Persistence

When the sociologists Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd visited Muncie, Indiana, in the mid-1920s to do research for what became their celebrated book *Middletown*, they found a community that had been transformed in the space of a generation. In the 1890s, the people of Muncie had lived by a largely Victorian code; their lives had been governed by work, religion, family, and the established expectations of a close-knit, hierarchical society. By the 1920s, Muncie had entered the age of abundance and consumption and had embraced a new set of values and assumptions that were in accord with the broad (if highly uneven) prosperity of their time.

Ten years later in 1935, the Lynds went back to Muncie to prepare a sequel to *Middletown*, a book they eventually entitled *Middletown in Transition*. And they began their book by describing how the Great Depression had affected the community:

The city had been shaken for nearly six years by a catastrophe involving not only people's values but, in the case of many, their very existence. Unlike most socially generated catastrophes, in this case virtually nobody in the community had been cushioned against the blow; the great knife of the depression had cut down impartially through the entire population, cleaving open the lives and hopes of rich as well as poor. The experience had been more nearly universal than any prolonged recent emotional experience in the city's his-

tory; it had approached in its elemental shock the primary experiences of birth and death.

What, they wondered, were the effects of this catastrophe on the culture and values of the community? Did Middletown now question its commitments to free enterprise, private property, individual initiative and opportunity? Had it developed a less acquisitive, less consumerist culture? Or was the Depression simply a temporary aberration, with the community ready as soon as it was over to spring back to its old ways, as the Lynds put it, "like a compressed rubber ball"?

And the answer they found—to their surprise and disappointment, because they were socialists, because they were deeply critical of the consumer culture, and because they wanted and expected change—was that "basically, the texture of Middletown's culture has not changed. "Some of the researchers, they wrote (in what was probably a reference to themselves), "had expected to find sharp differences in group alignments within the city, in ways of thinking, or feeling, or carrying on the multifarious daily necessities of life." But they "found little to support their hypotheses." Middletown, they concluded, "is overwhelmingly living by the values by which it lived in 1925."

Their conclusion seems, on the surface at least, startling. How could a people struck by a catastrophe that, as the Lynds put it, "approached in its elemental shock the primary experiences of birth and death," a people struck by a catastrophe that destroyed the very thing — prosperity—that was the principal underpinning of their values and their culture, endure a crisis of such enormous magnitude without any significant change in their values? How could they reconcile their beliefs in individualism, material success, opportunity, consumerism with a world in which those beliefs no longer found material support? They did it, apparently, in a number of ways.

One was to lay the blame for their problems not on their society, not on the economy, not on the culture, but on themselves. To assume that if they were no longer able to live the kind of life that they had been taught to expect, the reason must

be some personal failing. At one level, of course, people knew that they were not personally to blame for the Depression. But on another level, they seemed unable to escape feelings of guilt and shame and failure.

Studs Terkel, the Chicago radio personality who has written a series of highly regarded oral histories, published one in the 1970s entitled *Hard Times*, for which he interviewed survivors of the Depression, forty years after the fact, and asked them to describe their experiences and their feelings. Terkel encountered, and recorded, one response, one feeling, repeatedly: the sense of personal failure, the sense of shame:

He found a woman who remembered a childhood when her parents could not afford to send her to boarding school any longer. Her principal reaction was not anger, not a sense of injustice. It was embarrassment. "I was mortified past belief," she recalled.

He spoke with a middle-class suburbanite, who described the reactions of his neighbors to the crisis: "Lotta people committed suicide . . . 'cause they couldn't face the disgrace."

He encountered a small businessman, who had spent part of the 1930s on relief and who recalled: "Shame? You tellin' me? I would go stand on that relief line. I would look this way and that and see if there's nobody around that knows me: I would bend my head low so nobody would recognize me. The only scar that is left on me (from the depression) is my pride, my pride."

Over and over again, in accounts of everyday life in the 1930s, in Terkel's book, and in many other places, we find the same image: not outrage, not defiance, not an inclination to reassess values and challenge prevailing norms, but humiliation, self-doubt, shame. Some unemployed men joined Unemployment Leagues, or the Bonus March, or some other form of protest. But many more simply went out, day after day, looking for work, even though they knew there was no work to be found. Or, if they couldn't bear the futility any longer, they hid themselves at home, silent, broken, unable to face the world, or even their own families.

This is one of the reasons why the 1930s contributed in important, if largely unnoticed, ways to a redefinition of gender roles, both within the family and ultimately in the larger society. Women were less likely than men to lose their jobs in

the 1930s, since they tended to work in jobs that were not as immediately vulnerable to recession: teaching, nursing, laundry. (There was one important exception—domestic service, which made the Depression a particularly severe experience for black women.) But many women, of course, did not do paid work at all either before or during the Depression, and as a result did not define their own worth through their employment. Within families, therefore, many women came in the 1930s to play a more important economic and psychological role. In some cases, it was a woman who was the family's principal breadwinner—either because she had a job, or because she found other ways to make money (taking in boarders, growing and selling food, or other kinds of home work). In many cases, too, women provided the emotional foundations of family life as the males descended into various forms of helplessness and dependency.

The response to the Depression of many unemployed men—the humiliation, the attempt to hide the shame—may have been one reason why many people whose lives were not shattered by the Depression, who continued to work and to live more or less as they always had, commented at the time and after that the Depression was often hard to see. They knew there was suffering. They knew there were unemployed people, poor people, starving people. But they seldom saw them. New York, people often commented, looked in 1935 very much as it had looked in 1925. The stores were not as crowded; some businesses had closed; but there was little visible evidence of distress (less such evidence than there is today, with legions of homeless fanning out through the city). Many of the poor and unemployed were hiding themselves, unwilling to display to the world what they considered their own, personal failure.

Another way many Americans managed to experience the depression without experiencing a radical transformation in their values was through escapism. And they were helped to do so, encouraged to do so, by the principal institutions of mass culture: magazines, radio, and above all movies. In *Life* magazine in the 1930s, when it began publishing and quickly became an enormous popular success, most of the pictures give

no indication that there was such a thing as a depression; most of the pictures are of bathing beauties and ship launchings and building projects and sports heroes—of almost anything but poverty or unemployment. In the radio schedules of the 1930s, most of the programming was pure, escapist entertainment: music, variety shows, adventures, comedies. And the movies of the 1930s, with a few notable exceptions, were films that consciously, deliberately set out to divert people from their problems.

Leaders of the movie industry, in fact, claimed at the end of the 1930s that it had been they who had staved off revolution, because they had worked to make people happy. They had achieved a careful, artful transformation of social anger and distress into laughter and shared experience. They were probably exaggerating their influence, but there is, I think, at least some validity to their claim. Movies remained enormously popular in the 1930s. Attendance declined from the 1920s, because people couldn't afford to go to the movies as often. But most people still went sometimes. And they went most of all to comedies.

Hollywood, in fact, was quite deliberate about its decision to produce mainly comedies. At times it went out of its way to justify that decision. For example, toward the end of the Depression, the famous director Preston Sturges made a film called *Sullivan's Travels*, in which a famous fictional director of film comedies (a man named Sullivan, who was in some ways like Sturges himself) decides to make a serious film, a film more suitable for hard times, a film about poverty and suffering and social distress. To prepare himself, he disguises himself as a hobo and goes out on the road to experience life—with a retinue of assistants and hangers on following close behind in a van. But then, through a series of accidents, Sullivan gets separated from his assistants and gets into some real trouble and ends up in jail—a terrible jail filled with miserably poor (and mostly black) people. While he is there, he and his fellow prisoners are entertained one night by a film—a Mickey Mouse cartoon. Sullivan sits in the audience watching the poor black men around him smiling and laughing and escaping their troubles (as he himself is doing); and he experiences a cathar-

sis. How foolish and vain and self-indulgent of him to want to make a film about suffering. Audiences don't want to see that; they want an escape, they want laughter, they want comedy. That was his (and Hollywood's) real social mission—to provide a diversion from hard times.

The most successful comedies were ones that provided an outlet for some of the frustrations of the 1930s by turning them into farce, comedies about money and the effort to get it. The Marx Brothers often portrayed themselves as people who don't have any money but who want to get it and who try to wheedle it out of wealthy people. One of the most popular comedies of the 1930s, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, is an extravaganza that portrays ordinary people suddenly coming into money. This Hollywood preoccupation—people looking for money—reflected economic anxieties. But it channeled those anxieties not into new values, but into traditional ones. They were much like the Horatio Alger stories of the late nineteenth century—or the famous inspirational lecture of Russell Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds*, of the same era—in their suggestion that the escape from suffering and poverty lies in the individual plugging away, searching for a break, and walking away a millionaire..

Another aspect of Depression culture that helps explain the persistence of traditional values, or at least helps to illustrate that persistence, was the increasing appeal, even the vice-grip, of conformity in many areas of society. Like the movie industry's emphasis on escapism, this was in some respects a deliberate tactic by elites eager to suppress radicalism and preserve the existing order. The Lynds, for example, discovered that in Muncie in the 1930s, many of the most important institutions of the community were engaged in a deliberate and concerted effort to reinforce old values and to pressure individuals to conform to them. Ministers were preaching the value of respecting "community standards." The schools were making special efforts to "insure that 'only the right things' were being taught." Business groups, civic organizations, and others emphasized in their meetings and publications the value and importance of "pitching in," being part of the group, reasserting the commitment to traditional values and goals.

But this leaning toward conformity was not simply an artificial imposition from above. It was also a spontaneous impulse from below. It was a way of coping with the fear and anxiety and the shame that the Depression had created. If failure was, as many people believed, a result of their own personal inadequacy, what better way to compensate for those inadequacies than by hewing more tightly than ever to the values of the group, conforming. Conformity was a way of escaping from the self— from the demands and reproaches of the ego, from the humiliation and guilt and fear of failure.

Evidence of the importance of conformity was the best selling book of the 1930s. It was not a political book or an economic book, not a portrayal of the Depression or a discussion of possible solutions to it. In fact, very few such books sold many copies in the 1930s. The bestsellers were more often books like *Gone With the Wind*, and *Anthony Adverse*, and other novels of escape. But the one book that sold more copies than any other, that became in fact a milestone in publishing history, was Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, a book that was a paean to the positive value of conformity. The way to get ahead, Carnegie argued, the way to make something of yourself, was to adapt yourself to the world as it is; to understand the values and expectations of others and mold yourself to them. It is to make other people feel important; to smile, to flatter, to fit in, to behave. It is to develop skills and talents that "interest and serve other people." This, of course, had been one of the most conspicuous prescriptions for success in the 1920s. It was the feature of American culture that Sinclair Lewis satirized in the character Babbitt, whose conformity was complete and pathetic. The 1930s, if the popularity of people like Dale Carnegie is any indication, didn't challenge the preoccupation With conformity; it strengthened it.

Empathy

Yet to argue that the American people—or even the people of Muncie, Indiana—passed through the greatest economic crisis in their history with their culture and values intact is to underestimate both the severity of the Depression and the di-

iversity of American culture. Clinging to received values was, certainly, one response to the crisis of the 1930s, perhaps even the most common response. But it was not the only one. The American people responded to hard times in many different ways—radically and conservatively, adaptively and rebelliously, hopefully and pessimistically. No set of categories, no matter how vast, could describe the full range of these responses. The Great Depression both reinforced and challenged the values of acquisitive individualism and consumerism that, while never uncontested, had become so hardy in the 1920s. And so, in addition to the culture of conformity and confirmation that the Lynds noticed, there were also thriving cultures of dissent— among workers, farmers, women, African Americans, and other groups whose experiences in the 1930s were particularly desperate. There were also now many writers and intellectuals who in the course of the 1930s began to identify with the suffering of ordinary people and who attempted to speak for them and their plight, even though some of those same intellectuals had spent much of the 1920s dismissing the "people" as what H. L. Mencken liked to call the "boobeisie." And from a few of them came not just an acknowledgement of the worthiness of the people, but a challenge to one of the most powerful and fundamental beliefs of modern western history.

Central to mainstream American culture throughout the nation's history has been the belief in progress—in the desirability of progress, the inevitability of progress, the importance of pursuing and promoting progress. Progress has meant different things to different people. To many radicals, progress meant the movement toward a radical transformation of the economic and social order. To many others, it meant promoting a great deal more of what had come before: industrial growth, material abundance, scientific knowledge, technological advances, consumer comforts—the things that had, many people believed, come to define America and that would ensure its greatness. But the gospel of progress was not without its challengers in the age of the Great Depression. The 1930s became a time in which a new cultural vision skeptical of industrial progress struggled to gain a foothold in the culture and to challenge the

stranglehold of the faith in modernization. (That effort found a contemporary counterpart in the 1970s, and in the idea of an "age of limits" that became briefly popular in those years.)

Critiques of the traditional idea of progress were not, of course, entirely new to the 1930s. Such critiques had emerged among intellectuals in the 1920s. The Southern agrarians' repudiation of the industrial world and the machine age in *I'll Take My Stand* and other works is one example. So is the related disenchantment with progress among many of the so-called "Lost Generation" intellectuals. Those artists and intellectuals generally gave voice to their disenchantment with American culture by withdrawing from that culture—withdrawing from it intellectually, politically, and at times even physically, by living abroad. The problems of American culture, they believed, were the problems of the American masses—the "boobeoisie," as Mencken called them, with their mindless commitment to material progress. America offered nothing of value, nothing redeeming, nothing capable of reform (or worth reforming).

But in the 1930s, the response was different. It was no longer possible to look at America as a smug, complacent nation of prosperous, middle-class Babbitts. America was a society reeling from the failures of the industrial world. In the 1920s, many intellectuals had believed that they alone were suffering from the ravages of progress. Now, in the 1930s, they came to believe that others in society—the great mass of common people—were victims of those ravages as well. And the result was a new appreciation for, and even romanticization of, the American people—a revelling in the nobility of the masses, in their patient suffering, their courage and dignity, their eternal values. Carl Sandburg's *The People, Yes!*, published in 1936, was a celebration of the common man. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, similarly venerated the common folk—particularly through its portrayal of Ma Joad, who, with her world and her family crumbling around her, says with pride, "We are the people, and the people always go on." The cretinous masses, the "boobeoisie," of the 1920s had become "the people."

But what was it about the American people that made them fit for this veneration? It was not the old notion that Americans were go-getters and doers and achievers; It was a new notion that the real America was not the machine civilization of the industrial age, but an older folk culture, based on enduring values of community and sharing and commitment; rooted in the land and uninterested in crass material things. The true America, many now came to believe, was rural America—a simpler world, more in conformity with nature, more beautiful and genuine than the urban, industrial world. What was most valuable about America, in other words, was what was least conventionally progressive.

That message appeared in many forms. One was in documentary films, among the most famous of which was Pare Lorentz's, *The River*. The film is heavyhanded and bombastic and, by contemporary standards, almost ridiculous. But in the context of the 1930s, it made an important and powerful point. The film and the script are deliberately redundant. There is a long, belabored series of pictures and descriptions of the booming economy along the Mississippi River—the lumbering, the shipping, the cotton farming, the industry—with music that suggests strength and energy and triumph, and with a narrator naming the great ports of the river in upbeat, even triumphal tones. And then there is a change in tone. The narration presents the same words, the same repetitious litany of place names and descriptions; but instead of pictures of bustle and prosperity, there are now pictures of soil erosion, of denuded forests, of destitute sharecroppers, of poverty and waste and degradation, accompanied this time by wailing, mournful, slightly discordant music. It is a careful, deliberate, overt mockery, in other words, of the business culture, the progressive culture; of the 1920s. (*The Plow That Broke the Plains*, another film by Lorentz, is a similar indictment of the effects of advanced agricultural techniques, reminiscent of the more recent critique of 1930s agriculture by Donald Worster, in *Dust Bowl*.)

Perhaps the best—and certainly the most famous—of such critiques emerged from the documentary photography of the 1930s. This was, in fact, one of the first golden ages of photog-

raphy in America. That was partly because of technological advances that made cameras more portable and more versatile. It was partly because government programs commissioned photographers to chronicle the lives of ordinary people and the poor, and partly because new picture-oriented magazines (such as *Life* and *Fortune*) commissioned some of the same photographers to do the same thing. But it was partly, too, because of the emergence of a group of brilliant photographers who were committed to using photography to document the social conditions of their time, among them Roy Stryker, Ben Shahn, Arthur Rothstein, Margaret Bourke White, and Dorothea Lange.

Photography, they believed, could be and should be not just an artistic device, but a social tool. It should document the conditions of American life, reveal the suffering and injustice afflicting the common man. It should show what the industrial world had done to the real America—rural America. And so these photographers embarked on an effort—the results of which have become among the most important artistic legacies of the 1930s—to document the agrarian world. They traveled through rural regions, through the South in particular, and photographed sharecroppers and tenant farmers, blacks as well as whites. They photographed the land—and, in particular, the ravaged land of the Dust Bowl and the eroded land of the Mississippi delta. They photographed housing conditions and malnutrition and poverty. This, they seemed to be saying, is what industrial society, with its emphasis on growth and expansion and individualism, has done to the people. This is the result of the god of progress.

And yet this disenchantment with the industrial world, this romanticization of folk culture, this celebration of the common people, did not usually represent a genuine break with the idea of progress that had become so central to American (and western) civilization. It was, certainly, a challenge to the conventional form of that idea, an important reconsideration of what progress means. But it was not repudiation of progress itself. If we look again at this evidence of disenchantment with industrial growth, we can see an effort to replace one concept of progress with another, equally powerful one.

Pare Lorentz, in his films *The River* and *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, was not only attacking the ravages of unchecked industrial growth; he was—implicitly in *The River* and explicitly in *The Plow*—attempting to legitimize the new social correctives that the 1930s had produced. The TVA, a concerted social effort, had solved the problems of erosion and devastation in the Tennessee Valley; the message of *The River* was that similar programs could do the same for the Mississippi. New Deal agricultural programs of soil conservation could help rebuild the Plains that the heedless expansion of agriculture had destroyed.

Many of the photographs of Rothstein, Shahn, Lange, and others were taken under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration of the New Deal; and their purpose, too, was not just to document, but to exhort. They were pictures meant to evoke outrage, to shock, to induce social action, to legitimize New Deal programs. They were pictures of people oppressed by a hostile environment but, the photographs seem to imply, capable of being saved by removing the sources of their oppression. They are photographs that appear unassailably objective. What, after all, could be more real, less biased, than a photograph. But in reality, they are deeply polemical, highly subjective, and designed to persuade. Many of them were carefully posed. Some of them quite deliberately distorted reality. Dorothea Lange's famous photograph of a people standing in a breadline beneath a billboard advertising automobiles and trumpeting the "American Dream" was, in fact, entirely artificial—a scene created and posed by the photographer. Pare Lorentz's famous image of a cow's skull on the baked, parched earth of the Dust Bowl was carefully, artfully arranged.

These images were not, in short, a repudiation of the idea of progress itself. They were exhortations to make still more progress, even if progress of a different sort. They were not tributes to the heedless, material, industrial progress of the past, but to a different, more collective social progress, dedicated to elevating the common people and redressing the ills of society. And in that, ironically, many intellectuals were finding in the America of the Depression something they had been unable to

find in the America of the 1920s—a belief that it might be possible, after all, to build a society worth living in and believing in; a belief that America might not be beyond redemption after all; a belief that a new and better world could be created through social action. The reconsideration of the traditional notion of progress had led many American intellectuals to a renewed faith in a different vision of progress—as redefined, now, to fit their own needs and hopes.

But almost lost among these progressive reconsiderations of society was another reconsideration—a very different one—expressed most powerfully by two men who, very late in the Depression and after terrible difficulties, published a book that many years later came to be regarded as one of the great artistic achievements of the decade. They were the photographer Walker Evans and the writer James Agee. And their book, published finally in 1941, was *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Agee and Evans had, in 1936, travelled to rural Alabama on an assignment for *Fortune* magazine, which wanted them to prepare a photo essay on the economy of the sharecropping system. They were supposed to spend only a few days in Alabama. But both men were so moved by what they found there, so captivated by the poor farmers they encountered, that they spent two months, observing, photographing, interviewing, writing. They produced, finally, a group of pictures and a manuscript so massive and so unorthodox that *Fortune*, perhaps understandably, refused to publish it. They then began looking for a publisher willing to turn the manuscript into a book. In 1937, they signed a contract with Harper Brothers; but Harper began demanding major changes in the manuscript, which Agee and Evans refused to make, so they withdrew it. Finally, several years later, they found another publisher—Houghton, Mifflin—which was willing to take the book as it stood. It came out early in 1941 and attracted no attention whatsoever. It sold about 300 copies. It was barely reviewed. It quickly went out of print. And it was almost completely forgotten until it was rediscovered and reissued in the early 1960s.

What made this book so unacceptable to editors and publishers and—at the time—the public? It was partly the timing.

It was published too late. In 1941, the Depression was over, Americans were focusing on the war; there was much less interest in the problems of poverty and distress than there had been in the 1930s. The book suffered as well from its length; its excessive detail; its lush, dense, and at times almost impenetrable prose. It has always been a difficult book to read—with its long, rambling descriptions of tables and chairs and small physical details; its discursive philosophical meditations; its almost total lack of structure or narrative line. But the resistance to the book in the 1930s and early 1940s was a result too of its message, a message so out of keeping with the values of the time, so out of keeping even with the values of other intellectuals, that even many of the relatively few people who read it found it baffling. On the surface, it was conventional enough. It was a description—in prose and pictures—of the lives of three families of tenant farmers; and in that, it was much like many other collections of photographs and many other books and articles examining the plight of rural America. But unlike these other works, it was not a call to arms. It made no judgments. It supported no reforms. It conveyed no outrage. It expressed the usual reverence for the common people. But it did not portray them as the pathetic victims of a cruel social system, or as the proper targets for reform efforts.

Walker Evans's photographs, for example, were not like Dorothea Lange's. They depicted poor tenant farmers, just as she often did. But they do not seem designed to provoke pity or outrage or action; they are gentler, more classical and timeless, as if they are recording an essential element of human existence rather than a temporary problem crying out for solution. Agee's text expresses the same message more explicitly. The problems of these people, he argues, are not the accidental result of social circumstances; they are eternal elements of the human condition. As Agee put it in his introduction:

The nominal subject (of this book) is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families.

Actually, the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity.

The phrase "normal predicaments of human divinity" conveys the essence of Agee's message in this book. On the one hand, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a work of doom, of resignation. These are not transitory difficulties that the onward march of history will remove. These are "normal predicaments," permanent, immutable. But the book is also a work of respect, of empathy; it is an effort to "recognize the stature" of the people it describes. These are men and women whose lives contain, as Agee puts it, a "human divinity." They are people for whom it is possible to feel a respect and, Agee claims, a love completely apart from outrage against the social conditions that oppress them or the vision of their salvation and elevation.

This was a message unlike almost any other in the culture of the 1930s. It was, clearly, unlike the prevailing message of mainstream popular culture, with its reaffirmation of traditional values, its escapism, its exhortations toward conformity, its evocation of consumer dreams. It was also unlike the message of socially committed intellectuals, who celebrated and romanticized the common people in order to exhort society to improve their lives. Those Americans wanted to believe that all problems could be solved, that progressive social improvement was attainable, that the difficulties of the poor were evils capable of being remedied. Evans and Agee were saying something different: not that society should abandon efforts at reform; not that Americans should simply resign themselves to the existence of poverty and hardship (although some critics— among them Lionel Trilling—charged them with that "moral failing" at the time); but that society should look as well for the beauty and joy that already exists even in the most troubled

and difficult lives. The poor were not just objects toward which society must direct its energies at reform. They were also men and women whose lives had an inherent dignity. Life, Agee and Evans were suggesting, is not simply a ceaseless search for progress and improvement. There is also value in celebrating the divinity of men and women as they are. Redemption for such people, when it comes, will not be through programs and reforms and ordinary human effort, although such things might be of value. It will come, in the end, through some almost divine intervention, as one of the most ecstatic sections of the book suggests. It is a passage that suggests something of the passion, the almost religious intensity with which Agee wrote about his subjects (and one that also suggests something of the difficulty the book presents to readers, some of whom find it mawkish or incomprehensible or both); a passage that has something of the tone of millennial prophecies, suggesting a promise of some great, unknowable salvation to come, a salvation beyond the capacity of human society to provide:

... On the stone of this planet there is a marching and resonance of rescuing feet which shall at length all dangers braved, all armies cut through, past, deliver you freedom, joy, health, knowledge like an enduring sunlight: and not to you alone, whose helpless hearts have been waiting and listening since the human world began, but to us all, those lovable and hateful all alike. . . that it shall come at length there can be no question: for this I know in my own soul through that regard of love we bear one another. for there it was proved me in the meeting of the extremes of the race.

Among other things, this passage may offer some explanation for why this book—a book so completely ignored and even repudiated in its own time—found recognition as one of the classics of our literature in the age of the counterculture and continues to receive attention, although admittedly less atten-

tion, today. In our world, a world that has experienced the terrible results of efforts to force societies to conform to an abstract vision of a better future, a world that has learned to live with the knowledge that it can be destroyed in an instant, in that world a summons to celebrate humanity not just as it might someday become, but as it is—now—is perhaps a message that at least a few people are willing to contemplate. But the Great Depression, as traumatic and frightening and disruptive as it was, produced no comparable willingness among any large group of Americans. It produced reconsiderations and redefinitions of the idea of progress; but it did not shake its grip.

Lecture II

Rebellion and Community

Rebellion

Persistence and empathy were not, of course, the only cultural responses to the Great Depression. There was also rebellion. And one place to begin looking for that is an article published in *The New Republic* in 1933 by Edmund Wilson, a man who might reasonably be described as the dean of American intellectuals in the first half of this century. In March 1933, Wilson accepted an assignment from the magazine to go to Washington and cover the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt. And the piece he submitted suggested that Wilson, at least, was no more impressed with the American political system, or with its social system, than he had been ten years before, when many intellectuals had left the United States for Europe.

The scene, as he described it, was unreal, depressing, ominous. The Capitol building, he said, looked like "a replica of itself in white rubber." "The people seem dreary and they are curiously apathetic." Someone asks, "What are those things that look like little cages?" And someone else answers, with an idiotic giggle, "Machine guns." Of Roosevelt's Inaugural Address, which was widely acclaimed at the time as an oratorical triumph, Wilson had this to say:

... the phrases of the speech seem shadowy—the echoes of Woodrow Wilson's eloquence without Wilson's exaltation behind them. The old unctuousness, the old pulpit vagueness. . . The old Wilsonian professions of plain-speaking followed by the old abstractions: 'I am certain that on this day my fellow Americans expect . . . that I will address them

with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our people impels . . . etc., etc.' So what? So in finance we must 'restore to the ancient truths' the temple from which the money-changers have fled; so in the field of foreign affairs, he would 'dedicate this nation to the policy of a good neighbor.'

There is a warning, itself rather vague, of a possible dictatorship.

Wilson's description of Roosevelt's inaugural parade suggests that his view of American society and culture is as cynical and jaundiced as his view of American politics:

. . . as the weather grows darker and more ominous, the parade becomes more fantastic. . . Comic lodges and marching clubs go by. Men appear in curled-up shoes and fezzes, dressed in hideous greens, purples and reds. Indians, terribly fat, with terribly made-up squaws. A very large loose old Negro in a purple fez and yellow-edged cloak, carrying the prong of an antler as if it were the Golden Bough. The airplanes overhead have been replaced by an insect-like autogyro, which trails a big advertising banner. 'Re-Tire with Lee's Tires! . . .

If the parade went on any longer, it would be too dark to see, too cold to stay out. And you are glad when it is over, anyway. The America it represented has burst, and as you watched the marchers, you realized that it had been getting sillier and sillier all the time.

On the surface at least, this passage could as easily be a document of the 1920s as of the 1930s. It expresses the same contempt; the same detachment; the same cynical view of the

irrelevance of American politics and the banality of American culture that had characterized much of American intellectual life in the 1920s. But, in fact, by 1933 Edmund Wilson had allied himself with the American Communist Party, and his harsh view of the events in Washington were not simply an expression of detachment, but also of Wilson's transitory commitment to a political alternative. Wilson was not alone. A great many of America's leading writers and intellectuals were forming some kind of relationship to the Communist Party in these same years: John Dos Passos, Lincoln Steffens, Lewis Mumford, Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Malcolm Cowley. There were some important writers who did not become politicized in the 1930s; Nathanael West and William Faulkner are among them. But the list is not a long one. Most important intellectuals succumbed in one way or another to the allure, the romance of the left. Intellectuals were only a small part of the Party in the 1930s, of course; many more of its members came from the labor movement, from African American communities, from landless farmers, from the unemployed. But intellectuals gave the Party much of its public rationale and, in the process, illustrated how the Great Depression had transformed their view of the world.

One of those was the literary critic Malcolm Cowley, not the most important intellectual, or the most important Communist, of the 1930s, certainly, but unusually interesting because he published two important memoirs (well after the fact) of his own life and the life of his literary compatriots in both the 1920s and the 1930s. These reveal something of the change that the Great Depression produced in American intellectual life. The first, *Exile's Return*, described the expatriate literary world of the 1920s, a world in which Cowley himself and many other intellectuals withdrew from engagement with American society and politics, regarded the nation's bourgeois culture with disdain, and devoted themselves to art—art not as an avenue of social change or even real social criticism, but as a route to self-understanding and fulfillment. To Cowley, the emblematic figure of the 1920s—the figure whose dramatic, tragic story closed his book—was the tragic, romantic poet and dilettante.

Harry Crosby. Crosby, the scion of a wealthy and aristocratic New England family, lived a hedonistic life among the other emigres in Paris in the 1920s, published some of their work, and dabbled in writing himself. But he also developed a strange (and probably psychotic) infatuation with the sun, which became to him a religious and sexual symbol of overwhelming power and which ultimately became a beacon leading him to his own death—a "sun-death," as he described it in his diary, a great explosion of the soul "into the frenzied fury of the Sun, into the madness of the Sun, into the hot gold arms and hot gold eyes of the Sorceress of the Sun." Ultimately, Crosby and his lover (a young Boston Brahmin he liked to call the "Fire Princess") killed themselves in a hotel room in New York.

Crosby was symbolic of the 1920s, Cowley believed, because he suggested something of the frenetic, even desperate search for fulfillment and happiness in which so many of his literary contemporaries were engaged; their detachment from their own culture; and the loneliness and futility that their disconnected-ness could create—a disconnectedness, in Crosby's case, not only from society, but from life. Few writers and artists were as radically disconnected from the world as Harry Crosby, but many came to share at least something of his sense of a permanent separation from the society in which they had grown up; a belief in the essential irrelevance of American politics and the fundamental banality of American culture.

Some years later, Cowley wrote a second memoir, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains*, describing the life he and many of the intellectuals and writers he knew led in the 1930s as members of or at least sympathizers with the Communist Party. In it, he tried to explain what had caused this commitment to radical politics and revolution—a commitment that many intellectuals, Cowley among them, later repudiated. In the 1920s, Cowley suggested, disaffected intellectuals had tended to look on the failures of American society not just with contempt, but with resignation. Nothing, they believed, was likely to challenge the primacy of capitalism, consumerism, and Babbitry. But in the 1930s, everything seemed to be coming unravelled, and change suddenly seemed possible. And at that very mo-

ment, they believed, a model had emerged to give substance to their hopes for a transformed America: the Soviet Union. It was, they believed, rising up before their eyes from its feudal past into a bright industrial future, and it was doing so without the inequalities and divisions and depressions that seemed now to characterize the capitalist order. "Under capitalism," Cowley wrote:

everything had been going downhill; less and less of every vital commodity was being distributed each year. Under communism, everything was climbing dizzily upward; each year there was more wheat, more steel, more machinery, more electric power, and there was an unfailing market for everything that could be produced. Nobody walked the streets looking for a job. Under communism, it seemed that the epic of American pioneerism was being repeated, not for the profit of a few robber barons, but for the people as a whole.

Cowley liked to talk about a Soviet documentary film that he, and many other intellectuals, saw and admired in the early 1930s: *The Old and the New*, by the great Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, which depicted, among other things, the building of a railroad. A group of Soviet workers in an isolated Russian community decide they need a railroad. And so they rise up spontaneously, and build it—their picks and hammers rising and falling in unison as they go about their work. That combination of comradeship, public purpose, and good will is what communism might bring to America.

Another reason for the appeal of communism to intellectuals was a more personal one: the peculiar burden that their cultural stance in the 1920s, a stance now known as "modern-ism," had placed on them. Modernism (a term with varied meanings, but in this sense a term for a particular artistic stance) stressed withdrawal from and a critical stance toward the dominant culture of American society. It combined a revulsion from

the boorishness, crassness, and kitschiness of popular culture with a commitment to remaining an outsider, a commitment to art for its own sake. It imposed on its adherents an insulation from the mainstream, the "masses."

But this stance, modernism, carried with it a heavy burden of loneliness. It was not easy living in a society with which one felt no connection. It was difficult to live without faith or commitment, except to one's own artistic sensibility. It was hard to be, as artistic modernism seemed to require, a completely autonomous individual. The Communist Party offered an appealing escape. It combined a rigid detachment from the dominant society with an intense commitment to a social milieu of its own. It offered intellectuals an outlet for their desire to belong to something, to escape from loneliness and detachment

One of the best examples of this is the particular appeal the Spanish Civil War had for American intellectuals. A substantial group of young Americans, many of them intellectuals, many (perhaps most) of them communists, formed a battalion of their own—the Abraham Lincoln brigade—and sailed off to Spain to fight the fascists. There were about 450 of them, almost none with any experience, poorly equipped, filled with idealism and enthusiasm. A quarter of them died, and more than half were seriously injured. There with them, writing and reporting, was Ernest Hemingway, who explained in his novel about the war, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, what the Spanish Civil War meant to him and other intellectuals. It provided:

a part in something which you could believe in wholly and completely and in which you felt an absolute brotherhood with others who were engaged in it. . . Your own death seemed of complete unimportance; only a thing to be avoided because it would interfere with the performance of your duty. But the best thing was that here was something you could do about this feeling and this necessity too, you could fight.

The Spanish Civil War, like the larger commitment to radical politics in the 1930s, offered something "you could do about this feeling," a way to escape the loneliness and disconnected-ness of the 1920s. It offered a route to commitment.

Another reason for the appeal of the Communist Party to intellectuals in the 1930s was the special role it seemed to ask them to play within it. In the 1920s, the party had had no use for American intellectuals and had, in fact, usually spurned those few who attempted to join it. But by the early 1930s, things had changed. Earl Browder, the head of the Party, said in 1932: "We are very glad to see that in these committees (of writers) we have the very cream of the intellectual life of this country." Intellectuals, the party now believed, would be among its most important cadres. They would provide it with something the party had long lacked: a channel into mainstream culture. In the past, the Party had been a largely immigrant organization, many of whose members had no understanding or knowledge of American culture, some of whose members did not speak English. It had been criticized by Moscow in 1929 as having been "for many years an organization of foreign workers not much connected with the political life of the country." And partly as a result of that, the party's membership had not only been small, but had steadily declined: from a peak of about 30,000 in 1919 to somewhere around 7,000 late in the 1920s. Now, with the aid of American intellectuals, the party could hope to communicate with the American people. That is why intellectuals were appealing to the party, but it is also why the party was appealing to them. It offered them a chance not only to believe in the future, but to help shape it; to play a special role in the reconstruction of society that they believed was now inevitable. Richard Wright's *Native Son* contains a long description of a dialogue between the protagonist, Bigger Thomas (a young black man accused of murder), and a lawyer from the communist party named Max (an intellectual). Max sits for hours with Bigger and explains to him all the structural problems in American society and how those problems were responsible for Bigger's problems. And Bigger, listening to him, suddenly understands his plight, and the world around them.

That is what the many writers and intellectuals believed the Party offered to them: a chance to explain the world to the masses; a chance to shape the future.

Whatever the reasons, a large and important group of American writers and intellectuals (and, of course, many others) spent a number of years in the 1930s working directly and indirectly on behalf of communism: attending party meetings and writers' congresses; waiting for the revolution that never came. In the 1920s, they had set themselves outside of American life, with no hope of re-entering it, with little hope of having any impact on it. Now, in the 1930s, they had set themselves apart again—but this time with an explicit hope of returning, returning to a new, restructured America that they would help to create.

And yet once again, in the end, they found themselves—somewhat to their surprise—left behind, in a society that seemed deaf to their calls for revolution. The American left in the 1930s was larger, more vigorous, more influential than at any other time in its history (with the possible exception of the 1960s). But except at a few strategic points (such as areas of the labor movement, in which intellectuals were not much involved in any case) it was a marginal force in American life. Even at its peak, it attracted negligible popular support and enormous popular opposition. The Communist Party never had more than about 100,000 members; and that was at the peak of the Popular Front, when the Party was suppressing its most radical beliefs. And that raises another important question about the left in the 1930s: not why intellectuals gravitated toward the left, but why so few other people did.

Community

One answer lies in the persistence of traditional values and beliefs in much of American culture, the slowness of ideas and assumptions to change. Americans were not discontented enough; they were not angry enough; they believed too much in the system; they blamed themselves for their failures. But that is not a sufficient answer to the question, because not everyone believed in the system in the 1930s. There were many

people who were discontented, who were angry, who did challenge the assumptions of the past. This was, after all, the decade of the Bonus March, of bitter strikes, of violent farm protests, of food riots. It was the decade in which large dissident political movements outside the mainstream of the major parties—movements like those of Hue, Long and Father Coughlin and Francis Townsend; movements like the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota and the Progressive Party in Wisconsin and many others—gained broad support and had considerable strength. It was the decade in which the CIO took shape, in which the sitdown strikes occurred.

The reason for the relative weakness of the radical left was not because no one was angry at the system; it was not because no one hoped for a new and different society. It was because that anger and hope were being channeled in directions different from the ones the Communists were charting. One vision in particular attracted the gaze of many disenchanted Americans in the 1930s. It was in some respects similar to the communist vision of a great collective future. But unlike communism, it was not revolutionary and not really ideological. It might better be described as a folk vision. It harkened back to an imagined American past: a past characterized by the bonds of community, by an informal, spontaneous neighborliness. It was a vision in which the competitive, striving, individualistic modern world might give way to a simpler and happier society, in which ordinary people would pitch in to help each other out.

There were many expressions of that dream in the popular culture of the 1930s. There were Frank Capra's films, in which decent people always seem to rally together against the grasping demands of wealthy plutocrats and learn to help themselves out of trouble. In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, for example, a simple, decent American from a small town in New England unexpectedly inherits a huge fortune, moves to the big city, gets pushed around by a lot of powerful, self-serving men, and then decides just to give his money away to other simple, decent Americans like himself.

This dream of community, neighborliness, is also clear in one of the more obscure films of the 1930s: King Vidor's *Our*

Daily Bread of 1933. This was one of the few films of the thirties to deal explicitly with the Depression. It is a film about a desperate, unemployed young couple, traveling around the country looking for work and not finding it. They visit a rich uncle, who won't give them any money but who turns over to them a piece of farm land he owns and that has been sitting vacant. And so they move to the farm, set up house, and try to make a go of farming.

Then a Swedish family, like them unemployed and looking for work, arrives on their doorstep; and the young couple takes them in. The two families join forces to work the farm; the Swedes are real farmers, and—unlike John and Mary—they know what to do. They then get the idea of asking other unemployed people to join them and contribute their skills to the farm. They erect a billboard on the highway advertising the farm, which they call Arcadia. More and more people begin to arrive—Swedes, and Germans, and Irish, and others—and organize themselves into a great collective family. John, the young husband in the original couple, is chosen the boss. The crops grow. The community flourishes. Everyone is happy.

But there is, of course, a crisis. And in this film, the crisis is the intrusion into this world, a world of neighborly cooperation, of the conventional American dream of individual success. It arrives in the form of a sultry blond temptress, apparently a prostitute. Slowly but surely, she woos John away from Arcadia, tempting him with the vision of good times, of making it big in the wicked city. Finally one night, they drive off together toward the city—leaving Arcadia, and John's good, loving wife behind. But as they drive along, in the rain, John can't help thinking about what he has left behind; about the work still to be done; about his responsibilities to his wife and to his community. Finally he breaks away and rushes back to Arcadia, which by the time he returns is on the verge of collapse because of the flooding that the heavy rains have produced. John marshalls the energies of the residents to save the community, and they all pitch in and start working, together, building a drainage ditch to thwart the floods. Their picks and shovels rise and fall more or less in unison as they go about

their task. It is a scene very similar to the scene in the Eisenstein film *The Old and the New* that Malcolm Cowley so admired, and that King Vidor admired as well: the scene of Soviet workers building a railroad. But the message of Vidor's film was not the same as the message of Eisenstein's. The vision of Arcadia was not a vision of revolution or ideology or a great socialist restructuring of America. It was a vision of neighborliness, of community, of the essential decency of ordinary Americans acting in the way Americans liked to believe that at their best they always do. It evoked the image of barn raisings, quilting bees, communal harvests, and the collective life of pioneers on the nineteenth-century "frontier."

In American literature of the 1930s, this communitarian vision found its most notable expression in John Steinbeck's celebrated novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, and in the film adaptation of it by John Ford. To modern readers and viewers, *The Grapes of Wrath* has become an unusually vivid historical document: a portrait of an aspect of American life in the Great Depression, and of a political sensibility that continues to resonate (if only barely at times) in the contemporary world. But to Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* was an effort to reveal an aspect of contemporary life that they considered morally and dramatically compelling: the great Dust Bowl migration. And it was an attempt to reveal a social vision lodged in the lives of the insecure and often desperate people they portrayed.

More than a million people, most of them dispossessed farmers, uprooted themselves from the barren lands of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s and moved west to California. They were known as "Okies," even though as many came from Texas, Arkansas, and western Missouri as from Oklahoma. They were victims of the long slide of much of the American agrarian economy into depression—and the even longer process by which small farmers lost their place in agriculture to larger, more corporate organizations. They were also victims of the great drought that prostrated the Great Plains of the United States in the 1930s. The drought itself was beyond human control. But the devastation it caused was not. Most of the agricultural lands that constituted the Dust Bowl (a roughly 150,000 square mile region that

included western Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, and parts of Colorado, New Mexico, and Kansas) had been relatively recently settled—in the late nineteenth century or later. The newly arrived farmers had torn up the natural, deeply rooted sod that had protected the soil from drought for many centuries (hence the term "sodbusters"), cultivated the land, and left it unprotected against aridity and wind. The great dust storms of the 1930s—storms so terrible that they blotted out the sun and suffocated any animals and people unable to take protection from them—were the result. So, of course, were the great "Dust Bowl migrations," which drove thousands, perhaps millions, of farmers off their lands—many of them to the West. In one sense, the Dust Bowl crisis—as the historian Donald Worster has vividly argued—was a rebuke to conventional ideas of progress, a sign of the failure of the American drive for economic growth at any cost. But Steinbeck's concerns lay elsewhere—in what he considered the human tragedy the Dust Bowl had created.

Steinbeck became aware of the migrants in the mid-1930s as they poured into the agricultural areas surrounding his home in northern California. Their story possessed him, and he distilled it into his account of the Joad family's troubled journey from drought-stricken Oklahoma to the false promise of the West. The novel had a sensational impact, greatly strengthened by the strikingly faithful 1940 film adaptation, directed by John Ford (a conservative Catholic better known as a maker of westerns). Both the book and the film are among a relatively small number of popular works of the Great Depression centrally concerned with issues of social and economic justice.

For Steinbeck, publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 was the culmination of a long and at times tortured search to answer the question of what Americans really valued. The Great Depression, he believed, had exposed the hollowness of the conventional "American Dream" of individualism and material success. He wanted there to be something more, but it took him most of the 1930s to find it. *The Grapes of Wrath* was, in fact, his third attempt to tell the story of the migrant workers in California, and to discern some meaning in it. His 1936 novel *In Dubious Battle* was bleak, cynical, and almost hopeless in

its portrayal of a failed strike by migrant farm workers in the Salinas valley (and of the futile, heartless efforts of Communist organizers to harness the strike to the Party's purposes). Individuals, he seemed to say, were incapable of mastering their own destinies in the face of oppression; but they were incapable of effective collective action either. A second novel on the plight of the migrants, a vicious attack on growers inelegantly titled "L'Affaire Lettuceberg," was bitter, angry, and so unsatisfying to him he burned the manuscript. He later described it as a "mean, nasty book."

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, he found at last what he considered a proper balance between outrage and faith. There were signs of hopelessness, to be sure. The main characters, the Joads, come to the end of their long ordeal in worse shape than when they began it—the family dispersing, their possessions washed away in a flood, their prospects bleak. There were signs too of anger—in the unvarying harshness of Steinbeck's portrait of bankers, landowners, local sheriffs, and other capitalist flunkies; in the bitter commentary on the human costs of industrial "progress"; and in the radicalization of Tom Joad, who, having killed a policeman (justifiably, Steinbeck suggests), leaves the family late in the novel to join an undefined movement committed to social struggle. He promises his mother: "Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there."

Both the novel and the film are notable, too, for their frequent portraits of cruelty, prejudice, and evil. A gas station operator, for example, casually observes that "them Okies got no sense and no feelings. They ain't human"; a brutish policeman shoots and kills a mother in a transient camp in a bungled effort to stop a fleeing "agitator," and then comments, "Boy what a mess those '45s make"; landowners and the tame local officials they control in California use any pretext to exploit and degrade the migrant workers. "They're working away on our spirits . . . our decency," Tom Joad tells his mother. Both the film and the novel make clear that it is not just impersonal social forces, but human selfishness and cruelty that are responsible for that assault. But unrelenting attacks on cruelty

and selfishness, Steinbeck had come to believe after writing "L'Affaire Lettuceburg," were not enough. Neither despair nor rage could adequately convey the real meaning of the Great Depression. Instead, the novel and film suggest, the true lesson of the times was the importance of community.

At times, Steinbeck suggests a model of community based on enlightened national action. One of the few happy moments in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the Joad family's arrival at a federally-run camp for migrants, which appears almost Utopian compared to the grim campsites depicted elsewhere in the film. It was clearly meant to represent the string of camps established in California by the New Deal's Farm Security Administration, the most important government agency concerned with the plight of the "Okies." The FSA camps were created both to provide at least a temporary solution to the problems of the migrants and to serve as a symbol of enlightened Social planning. The novel and the film portray, largely accurately, their self-conscious efforts to promote a sense of cooperation and mutual obligation—the collective self-government, the shared tasks, the camp-wide social events, even the common washrooms. In the novel and the film, a benevolent manager presides over the community—a symbol, one assumes, of the benevolence of the New Deal and a stark contrast to the harsh, beefy, bigoted political leaders and law-enforcement officials of the surrounding community. Here, *The Grapes of Wrath* seems to celebrate the idea of a tolerant, generous national community as opposed to the casual brutality and prejudice that localism seemed to produce.

But Steinbeck portrays the FSA camp only in passing. The real image of community in *The Grapes of Wrath* is not a national, or even a geographical one. It is a community of the human spirit, for which the only real model was the family. The apostate preacher Jim Casy (an allegorical figure whose principal function is to convey Steinbeck's spiritual yearnings) expresses something of this idea in his diffident way. "Maybe it's all men an' all women we love," he says in the novel. "Maybe all men got one big soul ever'bodys a part of." In the film, he wears the perpetual, gentle smile of a secular saint and says at

one point, "All that lives is holy," as if to suggest that real religion is a love of humanity and a respect for the decency of all people.

But while the men in *The Grapes of Wrath* may talk occasionally about a transcendent vision of community, they seem unable to do much to help achieve it. The male characters die, run away from responsibility, get into trouble and disappear, or descend into helplessness and paralysis. It is the women who have the strength to endure and to lay the foundations of a new human community based on universal love. Ma Joad, the center of both the family and the story, gradually redefines her own notion of "fambly" to include "anybody." "It used to be the fambly was first," she says. "It ain't so now. Worse off we get, the more we got to do." In the novel's closing scene, her daughter, Rose of Sharon, helps a starving stranger by allowing him to nurse at her breasts. (Ford omitted the scene from his film.) When Pa Joad despairs late in the story, admitting "I ain't no good no more," Ma replies, "A woman can change better than a man. Man, he lives in fits and jerks. Woman, it's all one flow, like a stream."

To their many critics, both the novel and the film are hopelessly romantic. The treacly hopefulness and boundless generosity of its beleaguered characters often strain credulity. The political message seems muddled and at times naive. But the occasional bathos is part of what makes *The Grapes of Wrath* such an important document of the Great Depression. Historians of the 1930s have long struggled to understand why in the face of such misery and distress the United States experienced so little genuine upheaval—such relatively limited radicalism, such modest violence. The most frequent answer has been the power of individualism—the tendency of desperate people to blame themselves for their problems, America's cultural inability to think in collective terms. But *The Grapes of Wrath* suggests another answer to that question.

Steinbeck embraced a social vision no less deeply rooted in American culture than the individualistic ethos with which it competed. It rested on an almost romantic notion of the natural goodness of "the people." It imagined a culture in which a

simple, folkish patience and warmheartedness—a spontaneous generosity—would compensate for, and eventually overcome, the cruelty and oppressiveness of the economic system. The story of *The Grapes of Wrath* is a harsh one, to be sure; but in many ways the message was as comforting to Americans of the 1930s as that of Frank Capra's warm, hopeful, populist comedies—and not, in the end, very different from it.

That was one reason American intellectuals failed to attract wide popular support as they promoted the ideas and goals of the Communist Party. But it was also one reason why so many of them began themselves, as time passed, to drift away from the Party; to put aside their own revolutionary dreams and embrace instead this simple folk vision of community. Americans were not likely to become revolutionaries, many of them finally decided. But they were not all cretinous Babbitts either. They were diverse; they were realistic; and they were—when given the chance—decent. The answer to America's problems, therefore, lay not in the Party, not in ideology, not in communism. It lay in the simple strength and honesty and generosity of the American people.

And so, as the decade wore on, more and more writers stopped castigating the system and promoting revolution and began to celebrate the people. By the late 1930s, they were immersed in a new kind of radicalism—folksy, unthreatening, American. That radicalism helped produce the great communitarian novels of John Steinbeck; the populist films of Frank Capra; the documentary photographs of Roy Stryker, Arthur Rothstein, and Dorothea Lange; and the folkish poems and writings of Carl Sandburg.

John Steinbeck, then, was saying essentially the same thing as many other writers and artists were saying. More importantly, perhaps, he, and they, were expressing a vision that had tremendous resonance with the ideals and yearnings, if not always the realities, of millions of other Americans. He was expressing an alternative American dream—a dream that from the people could emerge a gentle alternative to the harsh world of powerful institutions, entrenched elites, and acquisitive individualism. "We keep a comin'," Ma Joad says both in the

novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and in the closing lines of the film. "We're the people that live." And so for all its occasional clumsiness and sentimentality, *The Grapes of Wrath* served as a powerful challenge to the received culture of the 1930s (and remains to some a powerful challenge to the culture of today) because it evokes one of the most consistently cherished American faiths. It suggests that running like a river beneath the surface of the nation's cold, hard, individualistic culture lies the spirit of Ma Joad, a spirit of "fambly" and community that, once tapped, might redeem us all.

Bibliographical Note

The extended essay published here is thematic and, to some degree, impressionistic, and so any list of sources will necessarily be selective and somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless, I list below the works that I have cited in this work or that were directly useful to it.

Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd: *Middletown* (1927) and *Middletown in Transition* (1935) are classic sociological studies of an American city, which attempt to assess, among other things, the culture and values of the citizens of Muncie, Indiana during two different periods in the city's history. Studs Terkel: *Hard Times* (1970), is a collection of powerful oral histories of men and women recalling in the 1960s their experiences in the 1930s. Dale Carnegie: *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) was a major publishing event of the 1930s and suggests the power of conformity in Depression culture. Sinclair Lewis: *Babbitt* (1922) suggests the power of the same force in the 1920s. Twelve Southerners: *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) is the manifesto of the agrarian poets, who defended the culture of the American South against the acquisitive, industrial culture of the North. James Agee and Walker Evans: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1940) is a classic work, which provides an empathetic re-creation of the lives of several families of white tenant farmers in the 1930s.

Malcolm Cowley: *Exile's Return* (1951) and *The Dream of the Golden Mountains* (1980) are two memoirs by a major literary critic recalling the cultural and political passions of writers and intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s. Harry Crosby: *Shadows of the Sun* (1977) is a collection of writings by the doomed patron of expatriate writers in the 1920s, whose life forms a coda to Cowley's *Exile's Return*. Richard Wright: *Native Son* (1940) portrays, among many other things, the efforts of Com-

munist lawyers to explain social conditions to its African-American protagonist. Ernest Hemingway: *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) suggests the importance of the Spanish Civil War to writers and intellectuals of the 1930s. Carl Sandburg: *The People, Yes!* (1936) is an example of the populist impulses coursing through American letters during the Great Depression. John Steinbeck: *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) are, in different ways, commentaries on the plight of migrant workers and on the character of American culture and values.

Among the films of the period that I have cited in this work is Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), a commentary on Hollywood, emphasizing the value of comedy. Pare Lorentz: *The River* (1937) and *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) are classic documentaries of the Depression, commenting on the costs of material progress. King Vidor: *Our Daily Bread* (1933) trumpets the values of community and rural life. Frank Capra's great populist comedies—*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941)—were powerful and popular evocations of a simpler and more generous America. John Ford: *the Grapes of Wrath* (1940) is a faithful, if abridged and somewhat softened, version of Steinbeck's novel.

Anyone interested in the culture of the 1930s is indebted to Warren Susman's pathbreaking essays in the field, collected in *Culture as History* (1984). Lawrence Levine: *The Unpredictable Past* (1993) contains several seminal essays on 1930s culture. Richard Pells: *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (1973) is an indispensable study of a wide range of cultural figures and products of the Great Depression. David Peeler: *Hope Among Us Yet* (1987) considers the social and political content of the art and literature of the 1930s. William Stott: *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973) is a thoughtful discussion of the documentary impulse in film, photography, and literature. Christopher Lasch: *The True and Only Heaven* (1991) is an ambitious study of critiques of progress throughout American history. Donald Worster: *Dust Bowl* (1979) is both a history of and a commentary on the degradation of the Plains.

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