

John Steinbeck's America : *America and Americans* (1966), the Neglected Work

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This essay will examine John Steinbeck's last work, *America and Americans* (1966), as a cultural product which symbolizes the social milieu of America in the 1960s. First, it will clarify that *America and Americans* represents both critical and optimistic views on America shared by the public. Second, comparing it with his American travelogue *Travels with Charley* (1962), we will discuss the transformation of his views on America during the sixties from pessimistic to optimistic. In this discussion, we will pay attention to his involvement to the public sphere in the sixties. Finally, we will consider four main reasons for which *America and Americans* has been ignored in academia in contrast with its public popularity.

John Steinbeck starts his last work, *America and Americans* (1966), with the following notice :

In text and pictures, this is a book of opinions, unashamed and individual... It cannot even pretend to be objective truth. Of course it is opinion, conjecture, and speculation. What else could it be? But at least it is informed by America, and inspired by curiosity, impatience, some anger, and a passionate love of America and the Americans. (7)

It is clear that this book is entirely different from standard scholarly books usually hiding authors' personal feelings respecting "objective truths." However, some scholars measured it by scholarly standard. One of the leading Steinbeck scholar, Warren French, for instance, says in his recent book on Steinbeck's non-fiction writings :

... The more serious structural weakness ... is his concluding with generalized and often stereotyped discussions of trends and tendencies in "American" development, with quite unrepresentative examples drawn from his own

experiences. (110)

The above criticism is true. For example, he says, the Japanese in America is "taller than their parents," (17) but so are the Japanese in Japan. He even says, The Nisei are "spotted immediately as Americans" (17) in Japan, but actually they are usually misunderstood as Japanese. While he also claims that "Paedotrophy" (over-protection of child) is a phenomenon unique to America (93), Japan shares the same problem as well. Surely, this is the book of sweeping generalization. However, it seems too easy and unproductive to make such monolithic criticisms against it.

It seems more productive to examine Steinbeck and his works as cultural products of twentieth century America. In his introduction of *The Steinbeck Question* (1993), Donald Noble writes :

By the end of the 1930s Steinbeck had done beyond being the author of best-sellers such as *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and become, in fact, a national figure. With the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 and the success of the movie in 1940, Steinbeck was a celebrity, one of those authors, like Hemingway or Fitzgerald. (Introduction xi)

Although many of literary critics severely denounces his works in 40s and 50s, he became a Nobel laureate in 1962 and gained extraordinary reputation as a significant writer. In addition, in 1960s, he was personally acquainted with political leaders like JFK and LBJ and had immediate connection with public matters in America. Thus, John Steinbeck was not only as the private individual but also as the public character representing a certain value shared by popular public in America.

All through his career as a writer, Steinbeck seemed to embody two dimensions of public mind in America. First, he represented the people's critical mind against injustice in American society, like monopoly capitalism and racism in America. This dimension clearly appears in his realistic depiction of severe lives of the lower classes in his early novels in 30s, like, for instance, Californian farm labors on strike in *In Dubious Battle* (1936), poor migrant harvesters in *Of Mice and Men* (1937), or "Okies" in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Although Steinbeck does not clearly show his political ideology in these novels, as a number of critics claim, they surely echo people's minds shown in social welfare and labor movements arose in 1930s.¹⁾ Second, although quite opposite to the first dimension, he also shared people's naive and optimistic belief in

"America and Americans." His naive belief in America seemed to be shown in his support for Lyndon Johnson's policy to the Vietnam War. Debating with Russian poet Yevtushenko, Steinbeck says:

If you could persuade North Vietnam to agree in good faith to negotiate, the bombing would stop instantly. The guns would fall silent and our dear sons could come home. It is simple as that, my friend, as simple as that, I promise you." (Benson 993)

As shown in his letters, he believed America was fighting for the protection of Vietnamese people's liberty. We may say that his patriotic claims reflected hawkish Americans' simplistic beliefs in so called "American values."²⁾

These two somewhat contradictory dimensions are clearly shown in *America and Americans*. For instance, we can find a variety of criticisms against American society, that is, his reproach against the racial prejudice, the destruction of the environment, the excessive consumer culture, and the lack of morality. Steinbeck devotes separate chapters especially to the issue of race and environment. In each chapter, he starts his discussions by introducing the history of racial injustice and the destruction of environment in America. He, however, does not limit the scope of his arguments only to the history. He concludes the chapter of race as follows:

Any attempt to describe the America of today must take into account the issue of racial equality, around which much of our thinking and our present day attitudes turn. We will not have overcome the trauma that slavery has left on our society, North and South, until we cannot remember whether the man we just spoke to in the street was Negro or white. (66)

As shown above, Steinbeck's main concern in this book is contemporary issue. He pays his attention to the history (of slavery) in order to clarify his contemporary issues (of civil rights movement). For Steinbeck, history is a means to clarify "the America of today." Consequently, *America and Americans* is greatly influenced by the contemporary issues in 1960s, that is, problems of, race, environment, abundance, and the change of ethics. It was in the 60s that the race riots became the serious problems, the civil rights movement was spread, Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962) was published, a variety of conservation movements were conducted, the counter culture rejected the life of abundance and traditional ethics.

Although we cannot fully discuss the connection between this book and each one

of contemporary issues above in the 60s, concerning the race problem, Steinbeck often shows his great interest in this issue. For instance, in his travelogue of America, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962), a kind of field work for *The America and Americans*, Steinbeck shows his interest in "the matriculation of a couple of tiny Negro children in a New Orleans school." He actually visits a New Orleans public school and writes his disgusting feeling against a group of middle aged women called "Cheerleaders" who "gathered everyday to scream invectives at [black] children [going to school]" (249). Then at last he says, "my body churned with weary nausea." It seems possible to say these firsthand experiences of civil rights movement made him write the following words three years later in *America and Americans*: "In the constant pressure of the Negro causes, some thoughtless people ask, 'What are they after? What do they want?' It's very simple. They want exactly the same things other Americans want—peace, comfort, security, and love" (66).

He, however, never concludes this book with a pessimistic tone. On the contrary, in the last chapter, "Americans and the Future," he shows his optimistic belief in America. He says :

It is in the American negation of these symptoms of extinction that my hope and confidence lie. We are not satisfied. . . . The energy pours out in rumbles, in strikes and causes, even in crimes ; but it is energy. Wasted energy is only a little problem, compared to its lack. (143)

His claims above solve all the problems of inconsistency in this book between severe criticisms against America and his sincere admiration for America. He denounces destruction of nature, racial prejudice, greediness, and so on, but he can accept these problems as evidences to prove the fiery energy of Americans which, he believes, will save America at last. Thus, *America and Americans* ends with a tone of breezy optimism.³⁾

Steinbeck seems to intensify his optimism during the early 60s, the period between his second last book *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962) and *America and Americans* (1966). Some critics claim that there are the differences between these two books. Hughes says :

The sometimes irreverent, yet underlying positive tone of *America and Americans* differs from the recurrent pessimism of *Travels with Charley*. Steinbeck's disillusionment over the nation that surfaces in *Travels* diminishes

with his more deliberate and reasoned approach in the later volume. (84)

It is too difficult to simplistically label *Travels with Charley* as pessimistic and *America and Americans* as optimistic since each book shows both characteristics. For instance, as I quoted, he says that the trauma of the slavery will not be overcome until we become completely unconscious about the difference between blacks and whites, but here he seems to somewhat pessimistically imply that it is almost impossible to have such kind of equal society. On the other hand, *Travels with Charley* is not always pessimistic. For example, he wrote about his wild enthusiasm created by his travel plan, and he greatly applauds some people he met during his journey.

However, the different tone of voice between these books is obvious. One of the largest differences is their conclusions. In *Travels with Charley*, the place Steinbeck visited at last is the South filled with racial prejudice represented by "Cheerleaders." After seeing the disgusting scene at the public school in New Orleans, his depressed feeling is intensified by talking with a scared black old man who doesn't trust him at all and a Southern white supremacist who finally abuses him a "nigger lover." In the concluding chapter, he finally loses his interest in his travel and just hurries back home. Then, the book ends with an episode symbolizing his confusion "in search of America." He gets lost in his hometown, New York.⁴⁾ We can never find in *Travels with Charley* his optimistic belief in America claimed in his concluding remarks in *America and Americans*: "I believe that our history, our experience in America, has endowed us for the change that is coming" (143). Where does this difference between these books come from? Why did Steinbeck change his view on America from 1961 to 1965? ⁵⁾ What happened to America during this period?

Usually, the early 60s is regarded as one of the most challenging periods in American history. During this period, the Cuba Crisis happened; serious race riots broke out all over America; the civil rights movement spread; JFK was assassinated; America was deeply involved in the Vietnam War; and the counter culture rejected the traditional ethics. In contrast to his low reputation in academia in the 60s, Steinbeck became a representative figure of America as both a Nobel laureate and a close friend of presidents. Moreover, Steinbeck was involved in American politics in the early 60s and saw America suffering with his own eyes. In spite of the suffering America experienced in the 60s, why did he show optimistic views on America in 1966?

His strong optimistic view on America seems to be the reaction against these serious problems America faced in the early 60s. Although he seldom names certain incidents in sixties, Steinbeck clearly recognizes that America is facing the most challenging period in its history :

Revolt against what is in the air—in the violence of the long, hot summer ; in the resentment against injustice and inequality, and against imperceptible or cynical cruelty. There is blind anger against delay, against the long preparation for the long journey—perhaps the longest darkest journey of all, with the greatest light at the end of it. (143)

It is likely that the more serious the problems are, the stronger he has to claim his optimism. The contrast between his severe criticism and his optimistic belief in America is very clear in *America and Americans*. As I quoted before, he thinks that future of America depends on the great energy and vitality of Americans. He claims what will destroy America is “a bored and slothful cynicism” (143) which will extinguish the fire of American people’s energy. He knows that Americans needed tremendous energy to overcome the problems they are facing. Therefore, he cannot run away to the pessimism or cynicism and say “There is no hope in America.”

Moreover, we may say that Steinbeck, as an important public figure in the 60s, must have felt great responsibility for his own country, and he performed his responsibility by encouraging Americans to believe in “America and Americans.” He claimed the significance of each individual American’s sense of responsibility toward their own country, quoting president Kennedy’s well-known remark, ““Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country”” [sic] (140). At the same time, his belief in Americans was based on his belief in human beings, and he regarded it as a writer’s responsibility. In 1962, in his Nobel prize acceptance speech, he says, “I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectability of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature.”⁶⁾

America and Americans was completely ignored in academia, and there seems to be four main reasons for that. First, *The America and Americans* was disregarded as a mere commercialized picture book. It contains nearly a hundred pictures by “some of the most famous American cameramen” (TLS 1120).⁷⁾ As some critics suggest, many of the pictures are not directly related to his text accompanying them. However,

pictures seem to symbolize at least two ideal American images Steinbeck shows in his text, that is, the beautiful and energetic America. It has a variety of pictures of beautiful American monuments, such as, Monument Valley, Liberty Bell, Statue of Lincoln, Washington Monument, Yellow Stone National Park, etc. On the other hand, it also contains lots of pictures showing the vitality of America, such as, Italian Festival, JFK and LBJ applauded by crowds, Civil-rights demonstration, a female president of a big department-store, The New York Stock Exchange, traffic jam, and Black baseball pitcher. There are only two pictures (out of nearly one hundred) which show gloomy America: one is a picture of weary faces of the New York subway, and the other one is a picture of young black man looking out through a broken window in Harlem. As one reviewer says, most of the pictures seem "too beautiful" (TLS 1120). There is no picture of race riot, garbage, assassination, poverty, destruction of nature, or the dirty America Steinbeck mentioned in his text. It is no wonder the book was published as a Christmas gift book. The combination of the beautiful pictures and a Nobel laureate's name was surely based on the commercial strategy. One academic review complains, "To even the admirer of John Steinbeck, this latest 'book' must seem a commercial use of the Nobel Prize winner's name" (Hatley 111). In addition, these "too beautiful" pictures must have given scholars saccharine impressions on this book. It seems natural that academia has almost ignored this book as a "too beautiful" commercial work.

Second, Steinbeck's literary reputation stays relatively low in academia. As shown in R. W. B. Lewis' critical essay in 1959 against Steinbeck's optimism, his reputation among critics declined in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, and many critics felt inadequate for him to receive a Nobel prize. The Steinbeck Scholar, Donald Noble, asks a question, "in an average year his contemporaries and fellow Nobel Laureates, Faulkner and Hemingway, are each treated in perhaps 120 or 130 scholarly books and articles, why is Steinbeck the subject of only fifteen or twenty?" (2). Steinbeck biographer, Jackson Benson, also says, "Your chances of reading Steinbeck in a major university are very low and in the Ivy League, practically zero" (11). We may say that because of this indifferent atmosphere in academia, scholars have a tendency not to take any of Steinbeck's works seriously including his last book, *America and Americans*.

Third, its optimistic, somewhat conservative, and broad arguments do not seem to fit to the New Left scholars who formed a dominant school in the academia of

American history from the late 60s to the early 80s. In its last chapter and conclusion, Steinbeck predicts that America will make some mistakes in its future, but he optimistically approves them as a result of America's excessive energy. However, the New Leftists were not optimistic in the future of America. As represented by Howard Zinn's anti-Vietnam War book, *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal* (1967), many of the New Leftists tried to reform America not to "make mistakes." In addition, Steinbeck somewhat nostalgically emphasizes the significance of "Ethics, morals, codes of conduct." (141). On the contrary, however, what New Leftists criticized are those traditional morals and codes of conduct. Steinbeck's broad and unfocused arguments without practical solutions for the problems facing America are distinct from the New Leftists' practical and focused arguments, represented by their studies of social history.

Fourth, *America and Americans* has a tendency to emphasize unified nature of America, but his unified image of America is not acceptable for scholars of multiculturalism in the 80s and 90s. Steinbeck starts his first chapter, "E Pluribus Unum," as follows :

Our land is of every kind geologically and climatically, and our people are of every kind also—of every race, of every ethnic category—and yet our land is one nation, and our people are Americans. Mottoes have a way of being compounded of wishes and dreams. The motto of the United States, "E Pluribus Unum," is a fact. This is the strange and almost unbelievable truth ; ... (13)

Sometimes, Steinbeck implies that the Americanization means Westernization. For instance, as quoted at the beginning of this essay, he suggests Nisei Japanese-Americans are usually taller and have lighter skin than their parents, but here he seems to imply that his image of Americanization is in fact an assimilation of non-whites into whites. He, however, does not romantically believe in the melting-pot theory. Introducing the severe history of racial and ethnic prejudice in America, he pays much attention to the differences and conflicts between each ethnic group. However, in terms of multiculturalism, his unified image of America does not seem to be acceptable. He says :

The Pilgrims Fathers took out after the Catholics, and both clobbered the Jews. The Irish had their turn running the gantlet, and after them the Germans, the Poles, the Slovaks, the Italians, the Hindus, the Chinese, the

Japanese, the Filipinos, the Mexicans. To all these people we gave disparaging names: Mucks, Sheenies, Krauts, Dagos, Wops, Raghead, Yellowbellies, and so forth. The turn against each group continued until it became sound, solvent, self-defensive, and economically anonymous—whereupon each group joined the other boys and charged down on the newest ones. It occurs to me that this very cruelty toward newcomers might go far to explain the speed with which the ethnic and national strangers merged with the “Americans.” (15)

Although here he recognizes the rejection, prejudice, and violence against minorities in American history, his view on the history of minorities seems too optimistic for multiculturalists. In fact, the turn against each group continues “after” a minority group became sound, solvent, and economically anonymous. Take the relocation of Japanese-Americans during the WWII for instance. While they were not self-defensive, most of them were “sound, solvent, and economically independent.” However, they were called “Jap,” forced to sell their properties for a small fraction of their value, and made to move to the relocation camps in deserts. In addition, for multiculturalists, the ethnic and national strangers were NOT merged with the “Americans.” They are still “strangers” in America. In the beginning of his book, Ronald Takaki, one of the leading historians of multiculturalism, introduces his experience in a taxi in the South. He writes:

The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. “How long have you been in this country?” he asked. “All my life,” I replied, wincing. “I was born in the United States.” With a strong southern drawl, he remarked: “I was wondering because your English is excellent!” Then as I had many times before, I explained: “My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880 s. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years.” He glanced at me in the mirror. Somehow I did not look “American” to him; my eyes and complexion looked foreign. (1)

Thus, it is no wonder that, in the recent academia, where the multiculturalism become somewhat “majority,” Steinbeck’s *America and Americans* is totally ignored.

However, as Steinbeck claims, the power of assimilation of American culture also seems very strong. As a Japanese scholar who studied in the South, I had different experience from Takaki’s. In America, how many times was I asked directions by Americans? Most of them seemed to ask me since they thought I am an American. It

is sure that Japanese people never ask directions from people other than yellow races. When I was asked directions, I felt that America was a country consisting of a variety of races. Thus, the answer for the question "Is America unified or separated?" will be different according to what part of America the critics put their emphasis on. Therefore, it seems one-sided point of view to ignore *America and Americans* just because it presents a unified image of America.

Steinbeck's *America and Americans* has been widely shared among a variety of readers.⁸⁾ As I suggested, however, it has been almost completely neglected in academia. Its arguments are surely too broad and too optimistic, lead to oversimplification, and put too much emphasis on a unified America. It is not a real America but Steinbeck's America. However, his America is true to the America culturally constructed in many people's minds. For that reason, *America and Americans* is worth studying as a significant cultural product of the 20th century America.

Notes

- 1) See Jackson J. Benson and Anne Loftis, "John Steinbeck and Farm Labor Unionization." *American Literature*, 52 (May 1980), 194–223. Peter Lisca, "A Historical Introduction to *Of Mice and Men*," in *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck*, ed. Jackson Benson, 39–47. Peter Lisca, ed., *John Steinbeck, "The Grapes of Wrath": Text and Criticism*.
- 2) See Tetsumaro Hayashi, *John Steinbeck and the Vietnam War* (Muncie, Indiana: Steinbeck Research Institute, 1986).
- 3) While in the novel he never makes critical comment openly, this is the same rhetoric he used in his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Although almost all through his narrative, he introduces somewhat hopeless lives of "Okies," he ends it with a hopeful scenes filled with power of life, that is, a tableau of Rose of Sharnon breast-feeding a starving stranger. Thus, as one scholar claims, it seems reasonable to say that *America and Americans* is work of "pastiche of John Steinbeck" (Hughes 81).
- 4) In his letter, he shows his confusion and pessimism in his writing of this travelogue: "It's formless, shapeless, aimless thing and it is even pointless. . . . I'm speaking of this completed Journey now. And outside of its geographical design and its unity of time, it's such a haphazard thing. The mountain has labored and not even a mouse has come forth. Thinking and thinking for a word to describe decay. Not disruption, not explosion but simple rotting. I seemed to carry on with a weary inertia. No one was for anything and nearly everyone was against many things. Negro hating white. White hating negroes. Republicans hating Democrats although there is little difference." (*A Life in Letters* 702).
- 5) Steinbeck worked on his writing of *Travels with Charley* from February to July 1961, and finished writing *America and Americans* in December 1965. See Jackson Benson, *The True*

- Adventures of John Steinbeck (New York : Viking Press, 1984) 892-8, 964, 968.
- 6) This book was originally planned to be published as a picture book with Steinbeck's introduction and captions for a collection of photographs. Steinbeck, however, was intrigued by with the theme and wrote a series of essays instead. See Barbara Heavillin, "John Steinbeck's *America and Americans* (1966)." *A New Study Guide to Steinbeck's Major Works, with Critical Explications*. Ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi (Metuchen, NJ : Scarecrow Press, 1993) 3-5.
- 7) 1962 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech <http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/steinbec/nobel.html> at The Web site of Center for Steinbeck. San Jose : San Jose State U, 1999.
- 8) Most of the reviews of *America and Americans* praised it. One review concludes, "It is honest, sincere, powerful piece of writing, better perhaps than most things he has done since the thirties. Not everyone will like everything Steinbeck says in this book, but very few will be able to resist reading it" (Moon, 5962). In addition, this book also seemed to be widely read in classrooms at high schools. One review in a journal for high school teachers of English highly recommended this book since "the recent television program based on it" and it gives "old concepts in a new light" (*English Journal*, 752). Moreover, this book was also highly esteemed and popular in other countries. One England review, for instance, applauds his keen insight and says, "Steinbeck's writing in this book indicates that he still has the perception and ability to write another good novel of social protest" (Hatley 112). In Japan, for example, this book had been one of the most popular books of America for almost thirty years. It was translated in 1969 just three years after the publication, and the twenty-ninth edition was published in 1995. In addition, surely the most popular Japanese book on American culture, Ryotaro Shiba's *Amerika Sobyō* (*The Sketch of America*) (1986), frequently quotes this book to explain the dynamism of American history. *Amerika Sobyō* is a travelogue based on his forty days travel in America. Shiba also writes his experience during his short visit to Steinbeck's hometown, Salinas California. In this book, he shows his fascination with Steinbeck's vigorous style and his realism, and he shares some idea with Steinbeck. For instance, he also emphasizes the vitality of America which assimilated a variety of ethnic groups in a short period. As well as Steinbeck and *America and Americans*, he became an important public figure of Japan in his later years, and *Amerika Sobyō* has been completely ignored in Japanese academia.

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