

Rereading “Grapes of Wrath”. The History of Capitalism in America, “Disaster Capitalism”

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“The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects....They crawled over the ground, laying the track and rolling on it and picking it up. Diesel tractors, puttering while they stood idle; they thundered when they moved, and then settled down to a droning roar. Snub nosed monsters, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it... across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines. They did not run on the ground but on their own roadbeds. They ignored hills and gulches, water courses, fences, houses.

“The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man: gloved, goggled, masked he was part of the monster, a robot in the seat... ...the tenant stared after it ...his wife... beside him, and the quiet children behind. And all of them stared after the tractor...”

This merciless machine might belong to Israeli militants preparing another Jewish colony- a common scenario on Palestinian lands. The watching silent family could be the indigenous peoples of Brazil’s disappearing forests. Or farmers of Gujarat, India, relocated by the [Sardar Sarovar dam](#). Just as [First Nations’ livelihoods and wildlife inhabitants](#) of Canada’s boreal forests were invaded to make way for [Alberta’s massive oil extraction operatio](#).

That opening passage some will recognize from *Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel — perhaps the most powerful portrayal of a people uprooted, forced into poverty- internally displaced refugees. It’s a process newly identified by Canadian researcher and author [Naomi Klein as “disaster capitalism”](#). Klein brilliantly and poignantly defines the occurrence in her 2007 *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. *Shock Doctrine* describes in unequivocal terms how corporations and companies – I would include “non-profit” NGO institutions and human rights agencies among them-have learnt to respond with rapid-fire corporate re-engineering of societies still reeling from shock to profit from a multitude of disasters:- man-made catastrophes, wars, reckless economic policies, economic embargoes, climate-induced disasters, or other world changing crises.

[Grapes of Wrath](#), written following droughts in the American West, recalls the removal of farmers from their homes and livelihoods across Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico. Those droughts arrived in waves between 1934 and 1940, precipitating a series of bad harvests, with wind erosion aggravated by an absence of dryland farming methods. After farmers’ credit was exhausted, banks foreclosed on family properties and turned over much of that ‘dust bowl’ to agribusiness which capitalized investments with the timely rapid mechanization of farm equipment. Tens of thousands of dispossessed families become migrants, moving westward with whatever they can carry atop their old vehicle, to answer a fraudulent promise of abundant jobs in California. As they move, many perishing on the way, they are confronted by distrust and contempt. They find themselves derided as

'Okies' by those met along their trek —“Keep moving; we don't want your kind here”, they are warned.

Steinbeck paints a poignant image of commercial bankers in league with those machines:

“Some of them hated the mathematics that drove them, and some were afraid, and some worshipped the mathematics, because it provided a refuge from thought and from feeling. If a bank or a finance company owned the land, the owner man said The Bank- or the Company—needs- wants—insists- must have— as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling which had ensnared them. These lasts would take no responsibility ...” ...“the bank— the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die.”

Standing with the bosses, ready to enforce the corporate plan, are vigilantes and mean-spirited police wherever the migrants stop. Anyone daring to dissent is threatened with jail, blackmailed, 'disappeared'.

The poor press silently on.

At the end of their journey, desperate surviving refugees arrive in the green orchards of California eager to regain their dignity and family cohesion only to face new company men, also finding themselves competing with other hungry job seekers for lower and lower wages. Here too they are met by bosses allied with police authorities to maximize their own gains, driving the uprooted families to greater degrees of desperation.

Are those 1930 'Okies' not ancestors of our estimated 25 million refugees now wandering over our globe? Not only are today's 'Okies' viewed with suspicion; their homelands are occupied by one kind of disaster capital complex or another, diverting national resources into foreign assets, fishing coves into tourist resorts, mixed farmlands into single cash crop ventures, and bankrupting their governments with US-made defense imports.

Grapes of Wrath is perhaps the earliest dramatization in English of what we now recognize as “disaster capitalism” (although [none of that is indicated](#) in summaries of the story.) The epic journey of Steinbeck's Joad family began with a climate disaster—droughts that turned vast farmlands into what became known as the dust bowl, invoked in Woody Guthrie's 1940 collection [Dust Bowl Ballads](#).

Some may recall, as I did, a passionate story of the Joad family, with the noble Tom Joad striving to keep hope alive; and Ma Joad, the optimistic matriarch directing her forlorn, dwindling family forward. What I remembered from the novel and the film are beautifully crafted characters with their personal hardships and disparate responses to misfortune. In the character of Tom Joad, artists have found inspiration: there was singer-songwriter Woody Guthrie, himself a dust bowl refugee from Oklahoma; two generations later, [Steppenwolf Theatre Company](#) produced [a stage version of Grapes of Wrath](#); and in his 1995 album “The Ghost of Tom Joad”, Bruce Springsteen draws comparisons between the [dust bowl](#) and modern times.

Today, immobilized by an accident, I'm rereading *Grapes of Wrath* after a 40 year hiatus. Now Steinbeck's political message moves into the forefront. This is not the history of a climate refugee family. It is the history of capitalism in America—disaster capitalism-- with

an alliance of police force and wealth, where machinery is supreme, where honest labor is not enough, and where the family is secondary—a worthy reread in modern American times.

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