

## **Critically evaluate a collection of Woody Guthrie's songs in relation to the themes of Marxism and social class**

The crucial distinction to establish before examining Woody Guthrie's work is in his understanding of Marxism as a theoretical concept. It is a tale of frustration as Guthrie lamented the complexities of the Marxist theory; he scribbled a wish that he could 'make all the thoughts of Marx and Engels and Lenin and Stalin and Wilkie and Roosevelt and Earl Browder fly down and roost in my brain.' (Kaufman, pp.19). Irrespective of internal nurture, the external pervasion of American patriotism leaves a residual aversion to socialist thoughts. Grandiose displays of patriotism mask divisions of class that define the American cultural system.

The eternal image of Woody Guthrie will always remain that of him with his beloved guitar, with bold dark text or a large sticker placarded on the front, reading the words 'This machine kills fascists.' His opposition to fascism and the music it inspired had a lasting influence on the folk music scene for decades. The struggle for political and ideological understanding is where we can delve deeper into Guthrie's beliefs. There is a reason why the American cultural machine is so intrinsically opposed to the Marxist ideals; the political economy of Marx and Engels shirk the American Dream. Succinctly put, the capitalist economic theory hinges on the capitalist system and its relationship to the subservient worker:

'Marx's theory of profit is, of course, that profit is produced by the surplus labor of workers. That is, it only takes a part of the working day for workers to produce value equal to their wages (the "necessary labor" portion of the working day). In the remainder of the working day, the value produced by workers becomes the profit of capitalists. Therefore, Marx's theory concludes that the profit of capitalists is the result of the

exploitation of workers, because the value produced by workers is greater than the wages they are paid.' (Moseley, pp. 3)

The falsehood of progress and achievement is the absolute cornerstone of American society. Fascism and Marxism fall on the opposite ends of the spectrum, but share common ground in certain socialist aspects, as outlined in the Marxist economic theory above. For Guthrie, understanding comes from pragmatism, not rigid orthodoxy. His initial opposition to the Second World War took an about-turn once Hitler and the Nazi war machine rolled into the USSR, and the collective effort was to support a war against Fascism. Guthrie begins to link that pragmatism and cooperation against the greater evil 'ism' to his songwriting:

'The world ain't all good or all bad, things happen fast, and change around....Wars break out and folks are first on one side, then on another, because they believe in something, because they hate something...and gradually, out of all our isms, new isms, and new songs grow like weeds and flowers' (Kaufman, Union War)

The immediate theme you gauge from Guthrie is his relationship with the folk aspect of American life. Equating the development and learning of ideals and 'isms,' as he describes them, is a growing phase, much like the growth that plants experience once they are supplied with the necessary nourishment. Coming from a middle-class upbringing in Oklahoma, with an ultimately ailing mother, Woody Guthrie would not strike one as a prototypical Marxist sympathiser. At this juncture, it is essential to understand life in between the World Wars in middle America. The 1920s brought about a boom that birthed the famous epithet 'Roaring Twenties.' Life was affluent and prosperous, as technological advancement and social upheaval

changed the landscape. More critically, the Bolshevik rise in Russia bred an enemy to the capitalist haven of the States. That heaven was poised for collapse, and the seeds of Guthrie's interest in the Communist movement were sown.

Woody Guthrie married at 19, but with the Dust Bowl period ravaging Oklahoma, he left his wife and kids, and went to seek work in California, along with thousands of other Okies. The cultural movement had a lasting impact on California, but there remained plentiful skepticism regarding the people who made the long trip West:

'Steinbeck seemed to think as well that the Dust Bowl migrants had a great deal to learn about the standards of modern life in California. For all the book's rural romanticism, its tremendous empathy for the simple, honest way of life represented by the Joads, *The Grapes of Wrath* casts them as backward, barely educated, even premodern [...] The migrants were going to have to learn how to live in an organised community and give up anachronistic attachments to enthusiastic religion.' (Gregory, pp. 2)

The anachronistic attachments to religion are solely aimed at the conventional description of faith, a faith-based following with a deity at its head. Whilst highly prevalent in the middle and Southern part of the United States, folk music and ballads are considered close to religion, as they detail and empathise with the trouble and strife of the every day, and work in conjunction with the devotion to a deity; in this case Jesus Christ and Christianity. We can begin to subject Steinbeck to criticism and short-sightedness, as the religion of music that these migrants brought to California transformed America to similar standards that religion has. The sentiments are echoed in Guthrie's ideas surrounding the topic; the songs growing like weeds and flowers are sown back in Oklahoma, and the modernity of life in California is one that nurtures the

growth. For Woody Guthrie, this growth undertook a socialist/Communist pretense. Guthrie would never forsake the migrant identity of the Okie;

‘Twice a day on radio station KFVD, singer-guitarist Woody Guthrie joined vocalist Maxine “Lefty Lou” Crissman for a program that featured “old-time hill country songs.” Both transplants from the Dust Bowl, a region of the southern Great Plains that had sent hundreds of thousands of displaced “Okies” to California, the two started out by singing nostalgically about their home states. Before long, they began criticizing the Los Angeles Police Department for its harassment’ (La Chapelle, pp. 1)

The germs of social change grew quickly between the displaced Okies, as thousands of migrants tuned into the *Woody and Lefty Lou Radio Show*, and despite only lasting a year on the air, the show was an unmitigated success. The platform it gave the Okies was unlike any other and allowed them to develop ideas of social activism. Being part of a displaced group, in an affluent area with many subscribing to the Steinbeck doctrine of the premodern migrant, would form bonds amongst the people more robust than before; ‘Okie country music emerged on a sour note in the mid to late 1930s: a time of privation, worrisome migration, and intense media scapegoating in California’ (La Chapelle, pp. 21) The migrants were not only seen as premodern, but as burdens on society that was already hit by the Great Depression. The parallels with the rise of Nazism and the ruling media finding scapegoats are self-evident. The social and cultural settings are the same; the current inhabitants are experiencing hardships, and an overarching power is offering a scapegoat to displace all frustrations and hate unto. It is not difficult to envision Guthrie making similar associations. He, amongst his fellow Okies, felt

shunned by the California people and hierarchy as they represented the antithesis to the prosperous and affluent preconceptions Californians had of themselves.

Any critical evaluation of Woody Guthrie's musical work will gravitate towards the so-called alternate national anthem 'This Land Is Your Land,' a song known to the vast majority of Americans, and carrying the same gravitas as the likes of the 'The Star-Spangled Banner' or 'America the Beautiful. Much like the conflict within Guthrie's understanding of Marxist theory and the conflict of the Okie migration in California, the verses within the songs portray the conflict within the American cultural and social system. The infamous chorus encompasses the whole land, as it is made for you and me;

This land is your land, this land is my land  
From California, to the New York Island  
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf Stream waters  
This land was made for you and me

The chorus is constructed explicitly by Guthrie to be memorable and anthemic. The overarching sense of togetherness and unity amongst all Americans is at the forefront of the chorus. However, verses four and five serve to paint an entirely different picture in the context of Guthrie's life travelling from Oklahoma to California;

As I was walkin' - I saw a sign there  
And that sign said "No trespassin'"  
But on the other side .... it didn't say nothin!  
Now that side was made for you and me!

[...]

In the squares of the city - In the shadow of the steeple

Near the relief office - I see my people

And some are grumblin' and some are wonderin'

If this land's still made for you and me

The original version of verse four reads as follows;

Was a big high wall that tried to stop me

A sign was painted said: Private Property,

But on the back side it didn't say nothing-

God blessed America for me.

The sentiments in the original and latter version are strikingly similar, but the dissenting tone is much quieter, reflecting the apprehensions of presenting to the song to the American people. Mark Allan Jackson summarises it as leaving 'behind a praising remnant, one that sings more like a national anthem than its intended purpose - a musical response to and protest against Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" (Jackson, pp. 250) The connotations are that America puts up a wall to repel the Okies, and other 'premodern' migrants from Middle and Southern America. This is precisely why they feel ostracised and like scapegoats in a society that is looking for the enemy within. Guthrie's political leanings offer a simple target to focus against the red wave that swept through Eastern Europe, and threatens to depose the American capitalist society as the premier societal option in the world. The double negative presented may well be a common folk dialect trope, but we may also choose to read it as the back of said Private Property sign

explicitly stating that the migrants should stay beyond the borders of California. The “golden valley”, “diamond desert”, and “wheat field waving” could all be perceived as references to places outside of California. The dissension is unapologetically forthright; as much as it is a protestation against Irving Berlin’s song, it is a direct protest against the social scapegoating the Okies received in California. Guthrie sees his people at the relief office, in times of privation, being ignored by their countrymen. If America is truly the bastion of patriotism, and the Christian ideal of helping your fellow man ring through in every true American, in the shadow of the steeple, why then do the controlling powers deny the ‘premodern’ fellow Americans their sustenance. Guthrie reiterates the conflict and dissension in the chorus, despite the patriotic perversions; the comma separating ‘This land is your land’ and ‘and this land is my land.’ portrays the divisions amongst the social classes in America. The wall separating the Dust Bowl people, and those living on the coasts is all too obvious to Guthrie, and despite the jingoistic tone of the folk tune, you can deduce that Guthrie is imploring the American to see their glorious country as being made for you and me.

Guthrie did travel to New York, and his political awareness only grew as he experienced the more lavish surroundings of the the Big Apple; ‘I Don’t Feel at Home on the Bowery No More’ was also written in the 1940s, and presents another example of the class struggle Guthrie witnessed between his fellow Americans, and more personally between himself and Berlin.

I like my good whiskey, I like my good wine,  
And good looking women to have a good time  
Cocktail parties and the big built in bar  
So I don’t feel at home on the Bowery no more.

I got disgusted and I wrote this song  
I may be right and I may be wrong  
But since I seen the difference 'tween rich and the poor  
I don't feel at home on the Bowery no more.

The Bowery meaning is two fold; it stands for an old Dutch plantation which contextualises the folk background of Guthrie, but it is also a decrepit old neighbourhood in New York, full of cheap dingy bars that migrants like Guthrie will have frequented if they had made the trip to New York. The overarching tone in the verses is that of want, that of desire, to reach a strata wherein the Bowery is far beneath oneself. The vast canyons of class division is what disgust Guthrie, but his experiences of the lavish help him fall into folk music;

'As the history of the American Left, especially the Communist Party, indicates, popular music was rejected and "folk music" style incorporated as a primary propaganda vehicle to create Folk Consciousness' (Denisoff, pp. 52)

Having influential figures like Guthrie associated with the Communist movement makes for a grandiose vehicle of propaganda. Guthrie certainly played his part, least of all with his infamous slogan on his guitar. Despite the conflict within his lyrics, Guthrie's convictions are concrete, and those convictions stem from the understanding of Folk Consciousness; his ballads and folk songs are vehicles for the Okie diaspora, as they are empathetic and understanding of the incongruous sentiments that rage within. Guthrie 'believed [his] work gave the people of America a voice that could speak, moan, or holler out their minds and feelings.' (Jackson, pp. 254) Not only was Guthrie a vessel for folk experiences of injustice and suffering, but a vessel



for political representation of the downtrodden vassals of the vast capitalist system. His Dust Bowl Ballads became synonymous with the Great Depression and the American Left. Let us examine extracts from “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You”, “Dust Storm Disaster”, and “All You Fascists”, in the given order;

‘I landed somewhere on a fighting shore

With ten million soldiers and ten million more’

The American soldier is sent across the world, to an unknown place, known only as a fighting shore; the young and disadvantaged would make up the ten million soldiers and ten million more, as America had no prospects for people like the Okies. Guthrie waves goodbye to the girls, and to his homeland, sent away by the system that suppresses him and his kin. The tone of distaste towards the American social system is palpable as they are dehumanised, numbers, lambs sent to defeat a supposedly greater evil. The Fascist machine may not differ so much from the one at home, as Guthrie states that they will come home once ‘And all of their likes are finished and done’. It would be remiss to ignore the suppression that the workers experienced in the USSR, as opposed to the Socialist Utopia that Marxism professed; yet Guthrie and believers in the theory would champion the social system above others due to the empowerment of the lower classes through soviets. Ultimately, it is as suppressive a system as any other, and Guthrie’s pragmatism falls short as he persisted with his associations to the American Communist Party. We should not criticise Guthrie for his idealism, as the crux of the failings of socialism is rooted in human nature; we are not built to be content with our lives as they would need to be in a utopia. Greed, ambition, and power are all required to be sacrificed for the benefit of all the people, but the people cannot be relied upon to give it back.

From "Dust Storm Disaster";

It fell across our city like a curtain of black rolled down

We thought it was our judgement, we thought it was our doom

[...]

We loaded our jalopies and piled our families in

We rattled down that highway to never come back again

Whilst describing a real dust storm from 1935, Guthrie projects a wave of repression in a curtain of black, forcing the folk people out of their 'premodern' lifestyle, and into supposedly civilised culture, further perpetuating the controlling aspect of the capitalist system. Lastly, from "All You Fascists";

Race hatred cannot stop us

This one thing we know

Your poll tax and Jim Crow

And greed has got to go

You're bound to lose

You fascists bound to lose.

The ballad is one of the more explicitly outspoken, as it not only addresses fascists across the world, but the fascistic influences in the American capitalist society. The greed of the poll tax, and the Jim Crow laws are all instruments of capitalist oppression that Guthrie has no issues opposing, as they are ultimately as destructive as the fascist agenda in Europe. The amalgamation of the horrors of European fascism with the American capitalist system is

shocking; however, it would be a disservice to say that Guthrie misses the mark with his stirring lyrics. He evokes the worldwide socialist revolution of Trotskyism, as a sweeping wave dispatched to rid the world of fascism. As a vehicle for the American Left and the ordinary working class folk 'Guthrie was a unique distillation of the cultural experiences of several groups possessing folk elements, at once a mirror in which they saw themselves and their most articulate and able chronicler.' (Reuss, pp. 275) The image of Guthrie as the medium between the inaccessible theories of Marx, and the common Okie are as everlasting as his guitar bearing the slogan 'This machine kills fascists.' Such was the celebration of Guthrie as a voice for the American Communists, Mike Quin euphorically pronounced 'Karl Marx wrote it and Lincoln said it and Lenin did it. You sing it, Woody. And we'll all laugh together yet.' (Quin, pp.5) Sung it he did (Roll On Columbia):

These mighty men labored by day and by night  
Matching their strength 'gainst the river's wild flight  
Through rapids and falls, they won the hard fight

The Workers colonised and overcame a raging torrent the same way they would overcome the machinations of capitalism.

The most taxing exercise is trying to place a number on the number of ballads Woody Guthrie wrote, sung on the spot in a dive bar, or uttered on the wagon into California. The universality of his appeal is rooted as much in his vocabulary as it is in his empathy. With his folksy locution, Guthrie delivered us "colder'n old Billyhell", "out like Lottie's eye", "Left wing, right wing, chicken wing." Idioms and phrases such as these have intrinsic meaning to the Okie,

as their suffering is given a voice, despite the supposed pretensions against folk speak. His internal conflict remains the most puzzling aspect of his life's work (from Do Re Mi);

'California is a garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see,  
But believe it or not, you won't find it so hot  
If you ain't got the do re mi'

The playground for the rich is heavenly, but for the displaced, it is a strange land they trespass on. Yet, Guthrie says "I'd give my life just to lay my head tonight on a bed of California stars." Once one experiences the lavish luxury of the capitalist system, detaching oneself is an existential issue.

Guthrie was America's balladeer; 'They may have lacked for bread, but he offered them something else: self esteem, hope, and a laugh or two along the way' (Terkel, pp. 6) Laughter and understanding is ultimately all the diaspora needed in a foreign land; as much as California was a part of America, it was not a part of America to the country folk of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Mississippi, and multiple other states. Guthrie internalised the struggle, and provided expression beyond their means, as their societal class dictated that they be exploited by the capitalist machine. Did he understand Marxism? In a pragmatic, realistic sense, more so than most scholars. Did he ultimately suffer the same struggles of human nature as all Communists do? Yes. The nature of greed is so pervasive to the human mind, constantly poisoning the morality, and encouraging jealousy and ambition; Woody Guthrie sung it, and laughed, as we all do listening to his idioms, and remained in conflict throughout his whole life; "I ain't a Communist necessarily, but I have been in the red all my life." (accessed at Goodreads) Dispel criticism of his misunderstandings, and savour his jingoism, folkyness, and endless humour.

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