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DOCUMENT A

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New York, Viking, 1939 – Chapter 19 –p.231 - 233

Once California belonged to Mexico and its land to Mexicans; and a horde of tattered feverish Americans poured in. And such was their hunger for land that they took the land— stole Sutter's land, Guerrero' s land, took the grants and broke them up and growled and quarreled over them, those frantic hungry men; and they guarded with guns the land they had stolen.
5 They put up houses and barns, they turned the earth and planted crops. And these things were possession, and possession was ownership.

The Mexicans were weak and fled. They could not resist, because they wanted nothing in the world as frantically as the Americans wanted land.

10 Then, with time, the squatters were no longer squatters, but owners; and their children grew up and had children on the land. And the hunger was gone from them, the feral hunger, the gnawing, tearing hunger for land, for water and earth and the good sky over it, for the green thrusting grass, for the swelling roots. They had these things so completely that they did not know about them any more. They had no more the stomach-tearing lust for a rich acre and a shining blade to plow it, for seed and a windmill beating its wings in the air. They arose in
15 the dark no more to hear the sleepy birds' first chittering, and the morning wind around the house while they waited for the first light to go out to the dear acres. These things were lost, and crops were reckoned in dollars, and land was valued by principal plus interest, and crops were bought and sold before they were planted. Then crop failure, drought, and flood were no longer little deaths within life, but simple losses of money. And all their love was thinned
20 with money, and all their fierceness dribbled away in interest until they were no longer farmers at all, but little shopkeepers of crops, little manufacturers who must sell before they can make. Then those farmers who were not good shopkeepers lost their land to good shopkeepers. No matter how clever, how loving a man might be with earth and growing things, he could not survive if he were not a good shopkeeper. And as time went on, the
25 business men had the farms, and the farms grew larger, but there were fewer of them.

Now farming became industry, and the owners followed Rome, although they did not know it. They imported slaves, although they did not call them slaves: Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos. They live on rice and beans, the business men said. They don't need much. They wouldn't know what to do with good wages. Why, look how they live. Why, look
30 what they eat. And if they get funny—deport them.

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And all the time the farms grew larger and the owners fewer. And there were pitifully few farmers on the land any more. And the imported serfs were beaten and frightened and starved until some went home again, and some grew fierce and were killed or driven from the country. And the farms grew larger and the owners fewer.

35 And the crops changed. Fruit trees took the place of grain fields, and vegetables to feed the world spread out on the bottoms: lettuce, cauliflower, artichokes, potatoes— stoop crops. A man may stand to use a scythe, a plow, a pitchfork; but he must crawl like a bug between the rows of lettuce, he must bend his back and pull his long bag between the cotton rows, he must go on his knees like a penitent across a cauliflower patch.

40 And it came about that the owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it, remembered only what they gained and lost by it. And some of the farms grew so large that one man could not even conceive of them any more, so large that it took batteries of bookkeepers to keep track of interest and gain and loss; chemists to test the soil, to replenish;
45 straw bosses to see that the stooping men were moving along the rows as swiftly as the material of their bodies could stand. Then such a farmer really became a storekeeper, and kept a store. He paid the men, and sold them food, and took the money back. And after a while he did not pay the men at all, and saved bookkeeping. These farms gave food on credit. A man might work and feed himself; and when the work was done, he might find that he owed
50 money to the company. And the owners not only did not work the farms any more, many of them had never seen the farms they owned.

And then the dispossessed were drawn west—from Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico; from Nevada and Arkansas families, tribes, dusted out, tractored out. Carloads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand
55 and two hundred thousand. They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless—restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do—to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut—anything, any burden to bear, for food. The kids are hungry. We got no place to live. Like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land.

We ain't foreign. Seven generations back Americans, and beyond that Irish, Scotch,
60 English, German. One of our folks in the Revolution, an' they was lots of our folks in the Civil War—both sides. Americans.

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DOCUMENT B

Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, New York, Viking 2016.

Americans' sketchy understanding of the nation's colonial beginnings reflects the larger cultural impulse to forget—or at least gloss over—centuries of dodgy decisions, dubious measures, and outright failures. The “Lost Colony” of Roanoke was just one of many unsuccessful colonial schemes. Ambitious-sounding plans for New World settlements were never more than ad hoc notions or overblown promotional tracts. The recruits for these projects did not necessarily share the beliefs of those principled leaders molded in bronze—the John Winthrops and William Penns—who are lionized for having projected the enlarged destinies of their respective colonies.

Most settlers in the seventeenth century did not envision their forced exile as the start of a “City upon a Hill.” They did not express undying confidence in Penn's “Holy Experiment.” Dreamers dreamt, but few settlers came to America to fulfill any divine plan. During the 1600s, far from being ranked as valued British subjects, the great majority of early colonists were classified as surplus population and expendable “rubbish,” a rude rather than robust population. The English subscribed to the idea that the poor dregs would be weeded out of English society in four ways. Either nature would reduce the burden of the poor through food shortages, starvation, and disease, or, drawn into crime, they might end up on the gallows. Finally, some would be impressed by force or lured by bounties to fight and die in foreign wars, or else be shipped off to the colonies. Such worthless drones as these could be removed to colonial outposts that were in short supply of able-bodied laborers and, lest we forget, young “fruitful” females. Once there, it was hoped, the drones would be energized as worker bees. The bee was the favorite insect of the English, a creature seen as chaste but, more important, highly productive.

The colonists were a mixed lot. On the bottom of the heap were men and women of the poor and criminal classes. Among these unheroic transplants were roguish highwaymen, mean vagrants, Irish rebels, known whores, and an assortment of convicts shipped to the colonies for grand larceny or other property crimes, as a reprieve of sorts, to escape the gallows. Not much better were those who filled the ranks of indentured servants, who ranged in class position from lowly street urchins to former artisans burdened with overwhelming debts. They had taken a chance in the colonies, having been impressed into service and then choosing exile over possible incarceration within the walls of an over-crowded, disease-ridden English prison. Labor shortages led some ship captains and agents to round up children from the streets of London and other towns to sell to planters across the ocean—this was known as “spiriting.” Young children were shipped off for petty crimes. One such case is that of Elizabeth “Little Bess” Armstrong, sent to Virginia for stealing two spoons. Large numbers

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35 of poor adults and fatherless boys gave up their freedom, selling themselves into indentured
servitude, whereby their passage was paid in return for contracting to anywhere from four to
nine years of labor. Their contracts might be sold, and often were, upon their arrival. Unable
to marry or choose another master, they could be punished or whipped at will. Owing to the
harsh working conditions they had to endure, one critic compared their lot to “Egyptian
40 bondage.”

Discharged soldiers, also of the lower classes, were shipped off to the colonies. For a variety
of reasons, single men and women, and families of the lower gentry, and those of artisan or
yeoman classes joined the mass migratory swarm. Some left their homes to evade debts that
might well have landed them in prison; others (a fair number coming from Germany and
45 France) viewed the colonies as an asylum from persecution for their religious faith; just as
often, resettlement was their escape from economic restrictions imposed upon their trades.
Still others ventured to America to leave tarnished reputations and economic failures behind.
As all students of history know, slaves eventually became one of the largest groups of unfree
laborers, transported from Africa and the Caribbean, and from there to the mainland British
50 American colonies. Their numbers grew to over six hundred thousand by the end of the
eighteenth century. Africans were found in every colony, especially after the British
government gave full encouragement to the slave trade when it granted an African monopoly
to the Company of Royal Adventurers in 1663. The slave trade grew even faster after the
monopoly ended, as the American colonists bargained for lower prices and purchased slaves
55 directly from foreign vendors.

To put class back into the story where it belongs, we have to imagine a very different kind of
landscape. Not a land of equal opportunity, but a much less appealing terrain where death and
harsh labor conditions awaited most migrants. A firmly entrenched British ideology
justified rigid class stations with no promise of social mobility. Certainly, Puritan religious
60 faith did not displace class hierarchy either; the early generations of New Englanders did
nothing to diminish, let alone condemn, the routine reliance on servants or slaves. Land was
the principal source of wealth, and those without any had little chance to escape servitude.
It was the stigma of landlessness that would leave its mark on white trash from this day
forward.

65 So, welcome to America as it was. The year 1776 is a false starting point for any
consideration of American conditions. Independence did not magically erase the British class
system, nor did it root out long-entrenched beliefs about poverty and the willful exploitation
of human labor. An unfavored population, widely thought of as waste or “rubbish,” remained
disposable indeed well into modern times.

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DOCUMENT C

President Lyndon Johnson listens to Tom Fletcher describe some of the problems of his town Inez in Kentucky (April 24, 1964).

Photo : Walter E. Bennett via Bettmann/CORBIS

https://media.npr.org/assets/img/2014/01/07/lbj-poverty_wide-fb1a43f68f65e228f2829ad735c78b0ce469dff6.jpg?s=1400

