

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND LITERARY TRENDS IN AMERICA (1930s-1940s) AND CAMEROON (1960s-1970s)**

The Great Depression, colonization and the fight for independence are historical events that triggered the works of John Steinbeck and René Philombe. This chapter therefore establishes connections between history, politics, economics, and the authors' radical vision.

### **The Great Depression in the United States of America**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, American diplomacy, warfare, politics and economy fared well. The First World War, which was a catastrophe for Europe, gave a tremendous impetus to the American economy. The dependence of Europe on the United States fostered both agriculture and industry. In the 1920s, the development of the economy, flourishing business and the soaring farm prices led to an increased use of machines. Many farmers contracted debts from banks to buy more machines and land. The intensive use of machines on farms increased production tenfold, tipping the agricultural sector into recession as overproduction caused prices to fall dramatically. This aroused discontent among the heavily indebted small farmers whose interests were jeopardized. Europe was facing the bloody World War and the Bolshevik Revolution that led to the seizure of power by a small group of people in Russia. This revolution was the spark that kindled labor movements in America, thus engendering the strike of four million workers in 1919 (United States Information Agency 248).

Around 1927, Henry Ford was the uncontested master in the automobile industry. His policy of high wages for hard work was the bait

that attracted an important influx of workers to Detroit where mass-produced cars stood for welfare and economic power. At Ford's River Rouge Factory, 50,000 workers produced 6,000 cars a day (Blackside, Inc. 6). Low prices and easy credit boosted consumption. High demand for cars fostered development in automobile industries, steel mills, oil refineries, and rubber and glass plants, leading to a high employment rate. The workers' lives seemed blissful and Ford was a celebrated incarnation of the American Dream. Yet the private police that were hired to spy on the workers (in order to increase speed in production) made working conditions unbearable.

Elected in 1928, Herbert Hoover the Republican and thirty-first President of the United States of America, had to confront the worst economic crisis America had ever experienced. A result of the imbalance between the country's great productive capacity and the low level of consumption, the crisis was first viewed as part of the normal variable economic cycle. Yet it paralyzed the American economy for a decade, widening the gap between the big farm owners and sharecroppers. The stock market crash in October 1929 gave rise to a deep economic depression that generated great social discontent. After 1929, Ford's empire was shaken; low consumption slowed down production, jeopardizing the automobile industry. When Ford stopped production in August 1931, as many as 60,000 employees lost their jobs. Hoover's policy of generating new jobs through state loans to business and public works could not meet the jobless men's urgent demand for food and lodgings. Hoover thought he could eradicate the crisis if big industries and financial institutions were financially empowered to produce more jobs and incomes to revive the dying economy. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation, founded in 1932, targeted its action at big corporations to the detriment of the individuals since Hoover was

convinced that help at the level of the individual resembled charity and loss of self respect for the citizen (Horton and Edwards 439). The states, deprived of federal aid, managed to install soup kitchens and housing facilities only for some of the thousands of homeless people. Hoovervilles that hosted hundreds of desperate families in tumbledown shacks came into existence.

Contrary to the President's estimations, business corporations and banks, more interested in profit-making, refused to assist the federal government in solving the crisis. To protect their interests, they resorted to massive lay-offs which only aggravated the crisis. From 81 billion dollars in 1929, the national income of the country decreased to 68 billion in 1930. It continued its downward movement, dropping to 53 billion in 1931 to reach the historically low level of 41 in 1932 despite the colossal sums (more than two billion dollars) allocated to banks, insurance companies and railroads (Horton and Edwards 427). The economic rock bottom and the inefficient federal policy of lending funds to big companies and banks attracted criticism. The Republican Fiorello H. La Guardia named these federal funds "millionaires' dole" (Horton and Edwards 434). Acknowledging the government inability to curb the malaise, many of the hungry, jobless and homeless men joined the Communist party and participated in protest demonstrations which bred tension between the protesters and the police. In March 1932, the police at Ford's River Rouge Factory shot twenty-five protesters. Similar clashes opposed rioters to the federal army in Washington (Blackside, Inc. 1. 6).

In agriculture, President Hoover's struggle to get the Red Cross to assist the dispossessed tenant farmers and sharecroppers could not alleviate hunger and misery. The belated seed distribution did not improve the tenant

farmers' lot. Unable to service their debts, these farmers lost their land which the creditor banks seized. Poverty and economic recession led to moral disintegration and a rise in crimes. The notorious robber Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd robbed Oklahoman banks and helped needy farmers who accorded him protection. Hailed as a hero, he enjoyed the small farmers' complicity until the day he murdered a village sheriff. Having lost the protection of his accomplices, he was shot in a cornfield at Ohio. In addition to the crisis in agriculture and armed robbery in banks, the federal administration had to face the veterans' claims to a bonus after they had served in the American Army during World War I. The veterans' cohesion in the "Bonus Army" led to the march in Washington and to the clash between the "Bonus Army" and the federal Army in 1932. The methods Hoover used to curb the crisis made him unpopular. This unpopularity brought the Democrat Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt to power in 1932.

When Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to the presidency in November 1932, all the economic sectors of the country were deep into depression. For many Americans, the new president elect represented hope. Roosevelt sided with the common man, seeking his participation in his economic program:

Let us unite in banishing fear. We have provided the machinery to restore our financial system and it is up to you to support and make it work. It is your problem, my friends, no less than mine is. [...] Together we can't fail.

(Blackside, Inc. 3 10)

To tackle the crisis, Roosevelt directed his first decision toward the banks, which he subjected to a four days' holiday to stop the financial hemorrhage

caused by massive withdrawals of deposits. The speech and the temporary closure of the financial institutions restored confidence in the system by lessening the depositors' fear.

In his second inaugural speech, the President reasserted his concern for commonplace problems that were plaguing the citizens' lives:

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished. It is not in despair that I paint for you this picture. I paint it for you in hope, because the nation, seeing and understanding the injustice of it, proposes to paint it out. We are determined to make every American citizen the subject of his country's interest and concern, and we will never regard any faithful, law-abiding group within our borders as superfluous. The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little. (Horton and Edwards 436-437)

Roosevelt's observation set an end to the time when big corporations were Hoover's main interest. The era of the forgotten man dawned with the New Deal, establishing the government as the citizens' provider. The Federal Administration not only stood for security and law, it represented the employer, the feeder and the social equalizer. To put it in economic terms, American capitalism imbibed a dose of socialism. Central planning held together the government, the businessman, the industrial worker, the farmer and the unemployed. "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little," implied that the small worker, farmer and the

dispossessed would benefit from the government's aid. Unlike Hoover, Roosevelt centered his action on individuals rather than on corporations in the fight against the recession.

President Roosevelt's distrust of big business made him espouse some ideas of President Thomas Jefferson, as Horton and Edwards note:

At no time since the Civil War had the clash between the industrial and agrarian minds been so apparent as in the conflicting personalities of Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Against Hoover's sturdy Hamiltonianism, Roosevelt's Jeffersonian distrust of big business and his concept of individual rather than corporate well-being as the cornerstone of our welfare brought back into our national thinking an agrarian point of view that had been moribund since the triumph of northern capital in 1865. Like Jefferson, a lawyer and gentleman farmer with a wealthy patrician background and a flair for politics, Roosevelt also resembled our third president in his penchant for going outside of the interests of his own class to view our national well-being in terms of the security of the common man, rather than in terms of the untrammelled operations of large landholders and corporate enterprise. Defining himself as a liberator who stood "a little to the left of center," Roosevelt advocated a "New Deal" in which the Forgotten Man would be the focal point of governmental activity. (Horton and Edwards 435- 436)

To understand this statement, one needs to go back to the basic principles that shaped the American Constitution. Three men influenced this

Constitution one way or the other. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1532-1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) provided the masonry of the American political thought. They reinforced the puritan notion of freedom from dictatorial governments and sustained the right to private property. Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1650) arguing for man's inclination to self-preservation, selfishness and acquisition of power, prescribed Absolute Monarchy as the best form of control over man's innate depravation and greed. Yet Hobbes advised that this type of control should seek justice and guarantee the common good. Locke, the second and most determinant influence, preached in favor of a government that would protect the citizens' interests and rights. *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) stipulated that the people had to choose the government and the latter's duty was to procure welfare, ensure and protect private property. Although Rousseau appeared refractory to private property, which he blamed for engendering social inequity, he approved of Locke's form of government. In *The Social Contract* (1762), he showed that a democratic state would "function only as servant of the people and [would] derive its authority from the consent of the governed" (Horton and Edwards 87). In contrast to Hobbes, the French philosopher subdued the political executive to the will of the masses, making it clear that every government that failed to serve its people should be deposed. Locke and Rousseau empowered the masses, making their participation inevitable in the state's affairs.

American politicians, who gathered in Philadelphia in May 1787 to examine the Federal Convention, were influenced by the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. They unanimously conferred taxing power and military authority on the Federal government. These statesmen also agreed to maintain and strengthen the right to private property. From its budding stage,

the American Constitution had to distinguish between industry and agriculture, two economic systems apparently complementary, but antagonistic in the eighteenth-century American economy. The proponents of industry rallied around Alexander Hamilton whereas Thomas Jefferson headed the agrarian group.

Hamilton was not an aristocrat by birth, yet he supported an aristocratic powerful central government. He believed that only a strong federal body guided by propertied men could discipline the masses. In economy, he thought of a National Bank that could centralize the financial power of the country. The bank, he believed, would achieve industrial revolution by granting loans to manufacturing industries. Hamilton and Hoover's economic policies seemed to favor only the propertied classes. Opposed to Hamiltonian principles, Jefferson, though from a wealthy family, firmly argued in favor of agriculture and a decentralized administration. He founded his democracy on individual freedom that land ownership and farm labor ensured. Jefferson, like Roosevelt later, defended the interests of the common man. He disliked big industries which he accused of fostering social disparities. He ardently believed in man's goodness and thought that a good democracy should seek the masses' participation. Nevertheless, he held that the common man must be educated in order to understand and fully participate in the decisions of the government.

In *Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XIV*, he argued that: "The influence over government must be shared among all the people. If every individual which composes their mass participates of the ultimate authority, the government will be safe" (qtd. in Horton and Edwards 103). Jefferson therefore sought the participation and acquiescence of the masses in the government's decisions. As the masses could exercise sanction and control



over the executives, they could check the authority of the government. In his message to Congress about Farm Tenancy, Roosevelt acclaimed Jeffersonian agrarianism as he declared:

The attack on the problem of farm tenancy and farm security is a logical continuation of the agricultural program this administration has been developing since March 4, 1933. Necessarily, whatever programs the Congress devises will have to be closely integrated with existing activities for maintaining farm income and for conserving and improving our agricultural resources.

(Inge 212)<sup>1</sup>

Roosevelt opposed Hoover's Hamiltonianism that rationalized investments in industries and banks. He thus aroused interest in agriculture and farm tenancy. If one places Steinbeck's works of the 1930s within the framework of the New Deal, it becomes clear that the ideology that Roosevelt propounded at that time was in harmony with the writer's worldview, sensitivity, and penchant for agrarianism. Both Steinbeck and Roosevelt were agrarians and they shared the essential principles of American agrarianism.

In his introduction to *Agrarianism in American Literature*, M. Thomas Inge lists five tenets of the agrarian tradition. He names the cultivation of land, which represents virtue, honor, courage and hospitality. Agrarians support the idea that the success of an economic system depends more on its ability to encourage freedom, individuality, and morality than on the amount of wealth it produces. Roosevelt's remark: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little" is analogous to this principle. To the President and the agrarians, agricultural

economy promotes economic equity by narrowing the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Jefferson and his disciples strongly advocate a landholding economy because the farmer embodies a historical and religious tradition. Having a strong sense of belonging to a family, or a region, the farmer symbolizes harmony, and order. Distrustful of industry, capitalism and manufactures, the agrarian identifies industry with corruption and vice. He/She finds that agricultural communities that encourage brotherhood of labor may contribute to the building of a good social structure (Inge XIV).

Steinbeck's critique of the 1930s was not therefore directed at the New Deal Program that reinstated agriculture and the place of the common man in American democracy. His works did not challenge the ideology of the New Deal, but the deviations that impeded the smooth running of the program. The big landowners and the banks that expropriated the small farmers were deviations from the established ideology. They were anti-Jeffersonian as they violated the law of land ownership. To the agrarians, "land was the common stock of society and man's right to title and ownership could result only from occupancy and use" (Inge 108). Since working on the land guaranteed ownership, it underpinned the right to private property, one of the capital issues of the American Constitution. During the Depression, the small farmers lost their lands because they defaulted in servicing their debts. This caused a great displacement of tenants and sharecroppers whose situation worsened with the long drought that dried up the soil in the Great Plains.

From 1930 to 1938, big tides of migrants left the Dust Bowl. From Arkansas, Texas, Missouri and Oklahoma, people migrated to California that did not come up to the migrants' expectations. Before the recession, California was the land of plenty, happiness and joy. Yet when the Depression struck, it spared no state. By 1933, millions of American workers had lost their jobs, and

this increased workers' strikes. In 1934, the San Francisco longshoremen's strike paralyzed the San Francisco port for two months, rallying more than 100,000 union workers. The same year, the socialist writer Upton Sinclair decided to run for gubernatorial elections on the democratic ticket. He was convinced that "there is no excuse for poverty in a state as rich as California" (Blackside, Inc.4.14). His EPIC (End Poverty in California) Program founded numerous clubs and gained the support of innumerable sympathizers who joined the Democratic Party. However, Sinclair's resounding victory in the primary could not influence the final stage of the election that consecrated the Republican Frank Merriam governor of California.

Upton Sinclair wanted the unused farms and factories to be transformed into co-operatives for unemployed men and women. His radical program sowed panic and anger among Californian industrialists, merchants, and Hollywood film directors. To secure their privileges, they mounted an anti-Sinclair campaign empowered by a hired advertising agency, an unprecedented fact in American elections. Sinclair was defeated yet his ideas and EPIC initiative had a far-reaching effect on American government and paved the way for the Democrats' victory in 1934. The party "won more than 70 percent of the House, Senate and Governor's races." This overwhelming victory represented a go ahead for the New Deal reform program which laid emphasis on social security that was unknown to American citizens.

President Roosevelt's Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) encouraged reduction in production by giving subsidies to farmers who would take their land out of production. This measure aimed at forcing production down in order to raise farm prices (United States Information Agency 260). The federal government offered \$120 million to farm and

plantation owners to compensate for the loss of cotton production. The share of money allocated to tenants and sharecroppers never reached the latter. This flaw led to bitter indictment against Roosevelt's administration that was accused of siding with the big and rich planters against the poor tenants and sharecroppers. Norman Thomas, the leader of the Socialist Party and main critic of the New Deal, encouraged the formation and incorporation of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) in 1934. The 35,000 members of the Union were subjected to the landowners' threats and reprisals. Some unionists were laid off as the STFU gained no support from the government. The Union was not included in the 1935 Wagner Act that guaranteed federal backing to labor unions. Although the government directly paid compensation allowances to the tenants and sharecroppers in 1938, the farmers' union was unwelcome in the South and utterly neglected by the federal government.

While the STFU was struggling to gain recognition in the south, the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) that John L. Lewis (the President of the United Mine Workers) initiated in 1935 was striving to set up a sound basis for the steel workers' claims. After the CIO, Lewis created the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) in 1936. He carried out negotiations with Myron Taylor, the United States Steel chairman, to have the Committee act as mediator between the employers and the employees of the steel industries. The workers' strike at the Jones & Laughlin mill encountered a favorable reaction from the executives, and the workers were given the right to elect the union they desired. In contrast, the managers at the Little Steel and the Republic were hostile to the SWOC. Tom Girdler, the Republic executive bought weapons for a total amount of \$50,000 and resorted to pamphlets (40,000) to counteract the action of the SWOC. He

associated Lewis with communism to tarnish his (Lewis's) image and to discredit the Committee. To respond to the hostility of the decision makers at the Little Steel and the Republic, the SWOC launched a nationwide strike in both companies. The latter turned down the strikers' demands and called in the Chicago police to crush the strikers. The police intervention caused ten deaths and wounded thirty persons among the rioters. Although Little Steel and Republic defeated and forced the workers to resume work in the mills, they were later compelled by the National Labor Relations Board to recognize the workers' right to vote and participate in union organizations (Blackside, Inc. 5. 16).

The 1930s, a period of labor movements in the United States, was also a decade of protest for the American Blacks. This was the time when Walter White and Charles Houston, the heads of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), deployed tremendous efforts to achieve abolition of lynching and racial discrimination in American universities. These two men were strongly backed by the American First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. White paid particular attention to the lynching of the Blacks and committed himself to the fight against this practice. In 1934 with Eleanor Roosevelt's support, he exposed to the Congress the results of his investigations on lynching and requested that heavy penalties be imposed on communities that were reluctant to solve the problem.

While Walter White tackled the problem of lynching, his African American collaborator Charles Houston opposed segregation in schools. He took a bold step by suing the University of Maryland for refusing Donald Gaines Murray admission into the Maryland Law School. Houston won the case and his victory, coupled with the great success of the black boxer Joe Louis, instilled pride and confidence in the black populations. Blacks also

found in Eleanor Roosevelt the backing that made them “be somebody.” The First Lady withdrew from the Daughters of the American Revolution Association (DAR) that prevented Marian Anderson (a black contralto) from singing at Constitutional Hall at Washington. Eleanor Roosevelt allowed Anderson to perform at the Lincoln Memorial in front of 75,000 spectators. Walter White’s action led to the adoption of the anti-lynching bill in 1937 after a mob had chained and lynched two black men. However, because the federal government did not enact the bill into a law, it was withdrawn at the beginning of 1938.

The black communities were not the sole victims of racial segregation. Anti-Semitism, in vogue in Hitler’s Germany, gained impetus in the United States as the Jews were held responsible for the Depression. During the Kristallnacht<sup>2</sup> in November 1938, German and Austrian Jews were persecuted: 36 of them were killed, 20,000 were detained in detention camps and others looked for safe haven in the United States of America. Pleading for the Jewish orphans, Eleanor Roosevelt supported the passing of the Child Refugee Bill and felt frustrated when the American Congress delayed it because of a fierce anti-Semitic feeling that prevailed in the country (Blackside, Inc. 6. 18).

The New Deal Depression program bore some positive results. As the economy picked up in 1937, President Roosevelt reduced federal spending in order to diminish the national debt. But this decision was disastrous to the fragile American economy as it forced the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to decrease the rate of employment. Production and trade dropped, causing the stock market to crash anew on 19 October 1937. The new economic decline (The Roosevelt Recession)<sup>3</sup> once more dispatched

desperate people to California to search for jobs. Waves of migrant workers (6,000 migrants per month) poured into the west but were denied access to the rich and beautiful Californian State. They lodged in poor camps along the roads. Investigating on the living conditions of these homeless folks, Dorothea Lange came across Florence Thompson, a widow of 32. Mrs. Thompson was pictured with a baby in her left hand and her right hand on the right cheek (Blackside, Inc. 7. 20). Her attitude and face mirrored despair and misery that neither the statistics of California nor those of the federal government could express accurately. Thompson's photograph "spoke" to the New Deal administration that reacted by sending food aid to the starving migrants.

At the time Hitler was invading Austria and Czechoslovakia, The United States of America hosted two fairs: "The World of Tomorrow" in New York and the "Golden Gate International Exposition" in San Francisco. These exhibitions and the numerous jobs available in the west projected the image of regained prosperity and happiness. Western landowners and planters had recovered from the crisis. Yet thousands of migrants and unemployed men were living below the threshold of poverty. The Depression thus provided John Steinbeck with material for *The Grapes of Wrath*. In 1939, this novel expressed in words what Thompson's face showed earlier on Lange's photograph. As a witness of the Depression in the west, Steinbeck felt deeply concerned with the migrants' plight. His revolt is evident in the following statement: "When property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. When a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need" (*The Grapes* 324). The author thus bemoans man's individualism and craze for material wealth which breed social injustice and hatred.